

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Perfect Project Manager

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# About the Author

Peter Bartram is a very experienced business journalist and writer, and is the author of *The Perfect Report* and *Perfect Business Writing*.

# THE PERFECT PROJECT MANAGER

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Making it happen

### ACCEPTING A NEW CHALLENGE

‘WE WERE WONDERING whether you would be able to ...’

These words – or some very much like them – signal that you are about to be asked to take on a new project. You may hear those words at your place of work. Perhaps you are being asked to organize the company’s annual sales conference, prepare the launch programme for a new product or plan the move to new offices.

Or, perhaps, you may hear those words away from the conventional work place in the fast-growing world of voluntary work. Perhaps you are a member of a parent-teacher association and are being asked to organize the school fête. Or you’re tasked by a fund-raising organization with setting up a charity shop. Or you’re invited to organize the annual Christmas lunch and entertainment for a senior citizens’ club.

In whatever sphere, those words could signal a new challenge. You are being asked to do something that you’ve never done before. You are entering new and uncharted territory, and perhaps you do so with a mix of feelings. On the one hand, you’re excited by the fact that other people believe you are the right person to head this important project. You’re pleased that your talents are being recognized and that you’re getting an opportunity to demonstrate your true worth. On the other hand, perhaps

you have a secret fear – can I really do this? You're uncertain whether you can rise to the occasion and worry whether you have all the skills needed to make a success of the project.

If so, this book is for you. It sets out to show how to assemble the people and resources you need and manage the tasks you must complete to carry out an effective project. It shows how to be a perfect project manager – even if you're asked to do something you've never done before. Let's start by posing three fundamental questions.

First: *what do we mean by a 'project'?*

A project is a self-contained piece of work with a definite beginning and a definite end. Every project starts with 'aims' or 'objectives' – what you're setting out to achieve – and ends with 'outcomes' or 'deliverables', which can best be described as what you produce if you successfully complete the project. Generally, a project has clear boundaries – which define the scope of the work – and a timetable, which sets out the period during which the work will take place. However, as we shall see, the boundaries and timetable are not always as clear as they might be.

Of course, projects come in all sizes. There are giant projects such as building the Channel Tunnel or designing and building a new jet aircraft. Such projects take years and absorb billions of pounds. There are plenty of other very large projects in areas as diverse as construction, engineering, pharmaceuticals, information technology and financial services. They may take months and carry million- or multi-million-pound price tags. Such projects will invariably be run by teams that include professional project managers using a range of planning, statistical and other specialist project management techniques. These projects do not concern us greatly in this book.

Instead, we focus on a range of small and medium-sized projects which, although they are run in a professional manner, are not managed by full-time specially trained project management professionals. It is just these kinds of projects that are likely to be headed by people who have no or little previous experience of taking on such tasks.

At the other end of the spectrum are small one-off jobs which, though they have a beginning and an end, do not warrant being described as a 'project'. Usually, these are small self-contained jobs that are carried out by one or two people. Although the jobs might need some planning, this takes place informally and the task is generally completed in a short time. We need to distinguish between these one-off tasks and a 'project' as we describe it in this book. For example, shifting two managers between different offices is a task, moving the whole company to new offices is a project. Placing an advertisement in the local newspaper is a task, developing and implementing a full-scale advertising campaign is a project.

So, the kinds of projects we'll be talking about in this book are those that fall between a small task and a large project staffed with project management professionals.

Second: *why might you be asked to take on more projects?*

Of course, everybody's own circumstances are completely different, but there are a few reasons why more people are going to be asked to carry out more of the small to medium-sized projects we are talking about in this book.

The first reason is to do with the changing nature of work. The old idea of a 'job for life' is gradually disappearing in all but a few industries and professions. Even in those where it seems to be assured, the nature of work changes more rapidly than it ever has before. Both these trends mean more people will find themselves working in project-based environments where they will be

asked to undertake a specific task with a group of other people, some of whom they may previously never have met.

This is tied in with another key business trend. Companies are increasingly concerned to measure their performance on the basis of their 'outputs' - what's actually produced - rather than their 'inputs', such as the amount of money invested. In other words, they are less concerned with the number of hours somebody spends sitting at a desk or working a lathe, than with what's achieved as the result of those activities. This means people are given more freedom about the way they organize their work - 'empowerment' is the management term - and more work is organized around projects designed to achieve specific objectives.

Finally, one of the fastest areas of growth in work is voluntary work. Because more people retire earlier or work more flexible hours, they can take on voluntary tasks. There is no shortage of voluntary work to do. Again, much, but not all, voluntary work is project based - for example, organizing a fund-raising ball, opening a charity shop or holding a flag day. So, for all these reasons, there is more project work to do. Which means that it's more likely you'll be called in to work on a project - even lead a project. Which brings us to our final question.

*Third: why should you accept the challenge of project work?*

Part of the answer is that more work will be project work anyway, but that's a rather negative answer. There's a more positive and challenging answer: that taking on project work, especially leading a project, stretches your working experience, enables you to learn new skills, and develops your leadership abilities.

On one level, doing all those things increases your value to the company or organization you work for. It's a way of



expanding your career horizons, taking charge of your working life and moving towards the kind of future you've always hoped for yourself. It's a way of getting you out of a working rut by presenting you with new challenges, and it's a way of showing others – perhaps your bosses – just what you're capable of.

However, there's more to it than that. If you accept the challenge of a project in the right spirit – determined to succeed – you'll find the work immensely satisfying. At the outset, the task may seem challenging, even daunting. You may have some doubts about whether you've the ability to achieve it (you must be sure in your own mind that it *is* achievable), but as you tackle the tasks with your new-found colleagues, you will discover things about yourself that you never realized were there – new skills that lay dormant. When the project is finished you will have achieved more than meeting the original objectives. You will have expanded your own career or life-style horizons. It will be as though you are standing on top of a new and higher mountain, seeing far into a country that you've never previously glimpsed, and realizing that you can travel further than you ever previously imagined.

### **MOVERS AND SHAKERS**

Before you embark on your first job as a perfect project manager, what special skills and training will you require? Probably none. In the terms in which we are defining projects in this book, you will not be called on to dip into wells of specialist knowledge. (There are plenty of projects that call for specialists – in engineering or construction, for example – but that's a different world.) In your projects, you will often need to access specialist knowledge, but that will be available from professionals and specialists and seeking it out and using the results will be one of the skills