



Project Controls

10 Ways Not to Stuff up your Project Planning

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Project Controls: In this eBook

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Project Controls: Introduction

10 Ways Not to Stuff Up your Project Planning

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Lessons learnt the hard way from over 25 years of making mistakes, causing others to encounter them and being on the receiving end, have developed a well-honed understanding that there is a better way.

Having spent my career in the project world, including managing the occasional project, advising some of Australia's largest delivery organisations, and even handling rogue shipyards and construction sites, I have gained valuable experience.

This knowledge, combined with becoming an auditor and instructor on how to avoid repeating these errors, has further enhanced my expertise. It has created a wisdom that needs to be shared.

The Schedule: A great piece of fiction

The Schedule, produced by writers of fiction, maintained by historians and used by archaeologists.

The project schedule is often treated like a sacred relic, created with ceremony, admired for its complexity, and then promptly ignored. It's a beautiful tapestry of tasks, dependencies, and milestones that assumes everything will go exactly as planned. Spoiler Alert: It won't.

But the real kick in the guts? Many project controls teams spend more time looking backward than forward. They become project historians, lovingly documenting what went wrong, when it went wrong, and who was responsible, all in glorious detail. There are reports, charts, graphs, and timelines showing how the project fell off a cliff... but not a single clue about how to avoid the next one.

This obsession with forensic analysis means the schedule becomes a post-mortem tool used by organisational archaeologists digging up the past rather than a living, breathing guide. Teams are so busy explaining last month's delays that they forget to forecast next month's disasters. Blockers often go unnoticed until they become full-blown crises. Trends are ignored because "we'll deal with that in the next period."

The common errors that turn our forward-looking truth-sayers into historians:

- Updating the schedule only to reflect what has happened, never what might happen.
- Ignoring early warning signs like slipping tasks, resource bottlenecks, or supplier delays.
- Treating the schedule as a compliance document rather than a strategic tool.



Fix it by:

- Shifting the mindset from historian to strategist. Use the schedule to forecast risks, identify blockers, and model scenarios.
- Regularly reviewing the critical path and near-critical tasks to spot trouble before it hits.
- Using trend analysis and predictive metrics (like SPI and CPI) to guide decisions, not just explain failures.
- Adopt Earned Value Management principles and reporting
- Simplify, Simplify, Simplify. The schedule is not a micro task list. Elevate out of the weeds

The Budget: Is a Fantasy Novel



You don't want to have the reviews say, "the budget was so optimistic, it made Disney movies look gritty."

If the Schedule was a work of fiction, the Budget is a Fantasy Novel.

Once upon a time, in a land far far away, someone created a project budget. It was beautiful. It was optimistic. It was completely disconnected from reality. The budget assumed everything would go right, nothing would change, and suppliers would offer discounts out of sheer goodwill. Spoiler alert: they didn't.



The classic error here is building a budget with rose-coloured glasses and no contingency. It's like going camping with no tent because "it probably won't rain." Then the client changes their mind, the scope doubles, and suddenly you're trying to fund a moon landing with the budget for a lemonade stand.

It assumes that the estimator is an all-seeing, all-knowing oracle of project costs, somehow able to look into the future with precision accuracy, and that all of the lesser project functions will bow down and follow their financial decree



Fix it by:

- Budgeting like a pessimist.
- Add contingency and not just a wild guess at 10%, engineer the contingency, base it on risk and evidence.
- Expect delays. Assume someone will ask for a gold-plated widget halfway through.
- Track actuals religiously and forecast like your career depends on it (because it does), and remember
- Finance people are lovely, but they think "project delivery" is a theoretical concept. Keep them close, but don't let them write the budget alone.

Scope Creep: The Silent Killer



**How many versions or changes to the scope do you have?
Is it more than the number of times you have had to change your Netflix
password?**

Scope Creep: The silent killer that sneaks up in the night and steals your time and budget.

Scope creep is like that one friend who says, “Can I crash on your couch for a night?” and three months later, they’re still there, emptying your fridge and using your Netflix account. It starts innocently: “Can we just add this one little thing?” Then it’s “Oh, and this too.” Before you know it, your project is twice the size, three times the cost, and no one remembers what the original scope even was.

The mistake? No formal change control. Everyone’s saying yes to everything because they want to be helpful, and now the project is a Frankenstein monster of half-baked ideas and last-minute additions. The PM is crying in the corner, and the client is wondering why it’s taking so long.



Fix it by:

- Locking down the scope like it’s the last doughnut in the office.
- Implement a change control process that’s just painful enough to make people think twice.
- Educate stakeholders: changes cost time, money, and sanity. And if someone says, “It’s just a small change,” smile politely and hand them the change request form.



Scope creep is a shapeshifter.

*If the work expands but the budget
doesn't – it's a trick, not a treat.*



Reporting: Death by Dashboard



If your dashboard needs a legend, glossary, and a decoder ring, it's not a dashboard—it's a puzzle.

Project reporting should be simple: tell people what's going well, what's going badly, and what's about to explode. Instead, we get dashboards that resemble the cockpit of a spaceship, featuring 47 charts and 12 colours, yet no clear message. Stakeholders nod politely while secretly wondering if they're looking at a weather map, a financial forecast or their 3-year-olds latest finger painting masterpiece.

The common mistake? Reporting becomes a performance art. Teams spend hours crafting beautiful visuals that say absolutely nothing. Data is outdated, inconsistent, or pulled from five different systems that don't talk to each other. And let's not forget the weekly status report that's copy-pasted from last week's status report, which was copy-pasted from the week before.



Fix it by:

- Embracing clarity over complexity. One good report that tells the story is worth more than a dozen dashboards that require a PhD to interpret.
- Automate what you can, validate your data, and make sure your reports answer the only question that matters: "Are we on track, and if not, why?" If your dashboard needs a legend, a glossary, and a decoder ring, it's time to simplify.



Risk Management: The Forgotten Child



Was your Risk Register created with passion then buried with indifference?

Risk management is like flossing; everyone agrees it's important, but few actually do it. The risk register is created with great enthusiasm during the kick-off, then promptly buried under a pile of meeting minutes and forgotten until something catches fire. At that point, someone dusts it off and says, "Oh yeah, we did say this might happen."

The classic error is risks that are vague ("something might go wrong") and not tied to actual project activities, mitigation plans are non-existent ("we'll deal with it"), and ownership is unclear ("Bob was supposed to look into that"). Risks are never updated, and agreed-upon mitigations are never planned, costed, and added to the schedule or budget. The Risk Register becomes another historical document used to tick a compliance box, rather than a living tool helping to forecast the future



Fix it by:

- Treating risk management like a gym membership — use it regularly or cancel it.
- Be specific with risks, assign clear owners, and review them often.
- Mitigation plans are good, but mitigation actions are better. Schedule them, budget them and implement them.
- Don't just focus on the scary stuff, look for opportunities too.
- If your risk register hasn't changed in three months, either your project is perfect or you're not paying attention. Yes, that's you I'm talking to

Change Control: Chaos in a Spreadsheet



Does every change feel like a surprise party—full of clowns, no cake?

Change control should be a structured process. Instead, it's often a chaotic mess of emails, spreadsheets, and hallway conversations. Changes are implemented before approval, impacts are estimated (or ignored), and no one knows what has been agreed upon.

The result of no agreement is that changes have not been re-engineered or planned

The project must move on, so those highlighted changes are either not implemented, done according to outdated plans and drawings, or made up as they go, leading to a project that's constantly shifting, with no clear direction and a trail of undocumented decisions.

The mistake here is treating change control like a casual suggestion box. "Can we just tweak this?" becomes "Why is the budget double and the timeline in ruins?" Without a formal process, every change feels like a surprise party, full of clowns, except no one's happy, and someone forgot the cake.



Fix it by:

- Building a proper change control system.
- Use tools that track requests, approvals, and impacts.
- Require analysis before action – time, cost, scope, and sanity.
- Make approvals formal and transparent, and
- Educate your team: change isn't bad, but unmanaged change is a disaster. If your change log looks like a wish list of un-actioned items, it's time to clean house.



Resource Planning: The Unicorn Hunt

Chapter 7



If your plan includes Bob, who retired last year, maybe update it!

Resource planning is the art of assigning the right people to the right tasks at the right time. In theory.

In practice, it's like hunting unicorns. Resources are "available" until you actually need them, then they vanish into other projects, annual leave, or mysterious "strategic initiatives." You end up with a welder doing data entry and a business analyst trying to operate a forklift.

The error? No real-time visibility, no skill matching, and no coordination across teams. People are double-booked, underutilised, or completely misaligned. And let's not forget the magical thinking: "We'll just borrow someone from another team." Sure. That always works.

Tie this into a schedule that is unrealistic and progress that is building a bow wave of unachievable effort requiring more resources than can possibly be found, and we have no hope. Worse still, the PM believes that his workforce will magically become 1000% more efficient overnight and deliver productivity that has never been achieved before



Fix it by:

- Use a central resource management tool that actually reflects reality.
- Plan ahead, match skills to tasks, and communicate across teams.
- Don't assume availability, confirm it.
- Plan for real-world, achievable productivity. Just because the team is on a 10-hour shift doesn't mean they complete 10 hours of direct project effort. (remember crib, toolbox meetings, smoke breaks etc.)
- People are not interchangeable Lego blocks. If your resource plan includes someone who left the company last year, maybe update it.



Data Quality: Garbage In, Garbage Out



***Do you have Progress reports claiming 112% completion?
... either you've discovered time travel or someone's badly mistaken.***

Project controls rely on data. Unfortunately, that data often comes from spreadsheets last updated during the Jurassic period. Numbers are wrong, dates are off, and progress reports claim tasks are 112% complete. The result? Reports that mislead, forecasts that confuse, and decisions based on pure fiction.

The mistake? Manual data entry, no validation, and multiple sources of truth that all disagree. Teams spend more time reconciling numbers than managing the project. And when someone asks, "Where did this data come from?" the answer is usually, "No idea."

Organisations are unwilling to invest in good tools, but happy to bear the costs of errors, staff inefficiency and rework.



Fix it by:

- Automating data collection, validating inputs, and creating a single source of truth.
- STOP USING EXCEL, invest in your future and your project
- Use tools that integrate, not isolate.
- Train your team to enter data correctly and check it regularly. I
- If your dashboard says the project is both ahead of schedule and 3 months late, it's time to clean up your data.

Stakeholder Engagement: Herding Cats



***Should you have a stakeholder map template?
Do your Stakeholders appear like ghosts? ... just in time to haunt your
decisions.***

Stakeholders are essential. They fund the project, set the direction, and ask the awkward questions. But engaging them? That's like herding cats.

They appear randomly, demand updates, suggest changes, then vanish into the ether. Some want daily reports, others want none. And just when you think you've got alignment, someone new joins the project and wants to "rethink everything."

The error? No stakeholder map, no communication plan, and no consistency. Stakeholders are either over-informed or completely uninformed. And when things go wrong, they're the first to say, "Why wasn't I told?"



Fix it by:

- Identifying stakeholders early, mapping their influence and interest, and communicating regularly.
- Tailor your updates; not everyone needs a 20-page report.
- Involve them in decisions, not just presentations, and
- Remember: stakeholders are people, not obstacles. If your stakeholder strategy is "hope they don't notice," you're already in trouble



Lessons Learned: The Lost Scrolls of Project Delivery

The project ends. Everyone celebrates (or escapes). Someone schedules a “lessons learned” session. Three people show up. One brings snacks. The rest of the team is already on the next project, making the same mistakes. The lessons are documented, filed away, and never seen again, like ancient scrolls buried in a forgotten SharePoint folder.

The mistake? Treating lessons learned as a checkbox, not a learning opportunity. No one reads them, no one applies them, and the same issues repeat like a bad sequel. “Didn’t we have this problem last time?” Yes. Yes, you did.



Fix it by:

- Making lessons learned part of the culture, not just the closeout.
- Capture insights throughout the project, not just at the end.
- Share them widely, make them accessible, and apply them.
- Review them during the kick-off of the next project
- Celebrate improvements, not just mistakes. If your lessons learned are stored in a folder called “Archive – Do Not Open,” you’ve missed the point.



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