



Proven Time Management Tips for Project Managers

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Introduction

Time consumes most of our lives and in some form or degree is an essential part of life: past, present and future. It brings a sense of order into our lives via structured routine and a common way of interacting with our fellow humans for planning of activities, events, travel, working life, and much more. Time also contributes to a certain element of stress, inter alia via deadlines for activities to be completed, sporting performances to be bettered, and projects to be delivered satisfactorily. Although it is frequently stated that time is money, it is the only resource that money cannot buy. This sums up just how important time is to us.

We spend a lot of that valuable time worrying about not having enough time to reach goals, get tasks done, and meet deadlines for our projects. Time management is the act of consciously planning and using your time in order to work more efficiently on your tasks and be more productive in your projects, both in the workplace and your personal life. The importance of time management in effectively managing and completing all your projects cannot be understated. We as parents, are forced to become adept at planning and time management. Getting our kids ready to go to school every morning of their school careers, irrespective of how we feel and the circumstances we are going through, is indeed an achievement.

Over several years, it has consistently been shown in surveys that all is not well in large capital projects. KPMG's Global Construction Survey 2015 shows that only 25% of construction projects were concluded on time and within budget over the three years preceding the study (KPMG, 2015). Some key factors causing construction time overruns were financial problems, unrealistic contract durations imposed by clients, poorly defined project scope, client-initiated scope changes, and ineffective site management (Famiyeh, Amoatey, Adaku & Agbenohevi, 2017). Key factors causing project cost overruns included unrealistic cost estimates, client-initiated scope changes, underestimating the project complexity, unplanned time delays, and material price changes (Wroblewski, 2018). We posit that time management is also a factor for both time and cost overruns, as it is an element of each of the activities mentioned.

In this article, we focus on what we consider to be proven time management tips for project managers and project teams. We illustrate how improved time management leads to improved project performance, better productivity, reduced stress, and improved well-being.

We will not discuss the time management process as described in the Project Management Institute's *Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMI, 2013) or the American Association of Cost Engineering's *Total Cost Management (TCM) Framework* (Stephenson, 2015), as these are well documented in many books, articles and training programmes. It also goes without saying that these should be standard practices on projects. We rather concentrate on those time management practices that experience has shown to work.

Time management best practices

Opening comments

As indicated in the introduction, time management best practices can lead to improved project performance and other benefits. The pertinent project benefits improved time management are listed in Figure 1.

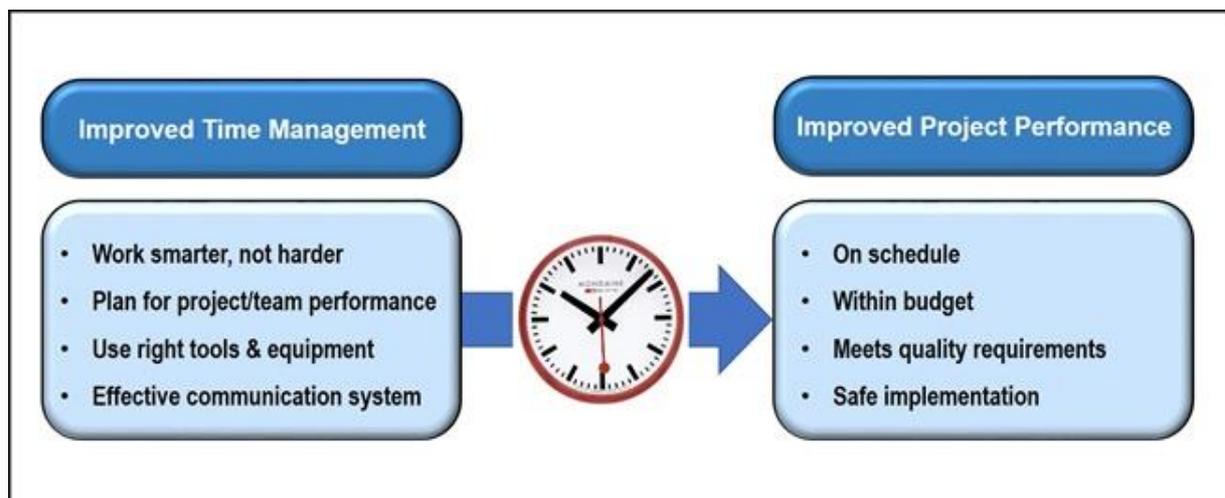


Figure 1: Improved time management improves project performance

In this section, we provide more detail into the four categories of time-management practices listed in the left-hand column in Figure 1. Although this section is primarily based on personal experience, we also draw on the work of Brown (2011) and Haughey (2014).

Work smarter, not harder

When you manage your time more effectively, you are working smarter rather than harder. In other words, you become more efficient. You will be able to get more done

in less time, which frees up even more time to get a head start on other tasks or focus on other things that matter to you outside of the workplace.

A simple way of doing this is to follow the little man in Figure 2 (Sicinski, undated), and prioritise, prioritise, prioritise... Prioritisation seems simple enough until you start doing it, but the sooner you start the sooner you get into the habit.



Figure 2: Priority Pyramid (Sicinski, undated)

Some other techniques to be aware of include:

- **Daily to-do lists:** E-mail fixation is a modern-day problem that can distract you from doing the tasks you need or plan to do. Creating a daily to-do list keeps you focused on achieving your objectives. Scratching tasks from your list creates a real sense of achievement and drives further productivity;
- **Take control of your time:** Taking control of your time will help you manage your workload in order to complete your projects more efficiently and on time. When you set a certain amount of time to complete each task, and focus only on that task, your brain will adjust to accomplish the task within the allocated time slot. This allows you to get all your tasks done on time and successfully complete your projects by their deadlines;
- **Pareto Principle:** Another technique that can be utilised is the 80/20 rule (or the Pareto Principle) which is the idea that by doing 20% of the work, you can generate 80% of the benefit of doing the whole job. The value of this for a project manager is that it reminds you to focus on the 20% of activities that matter. Of the activities you do during your project, only 20% are important. Those 20% produce 80% of your results. Identify and focus on those activities. Figure 3 is an example of a

Pareto chart with the most important issues shown from left to right. This principle is extremely helpful on large projects. The secret though is to have the systems and tools in place to alert the project manager on activities that need attention on a proactive basis in the 20% range;

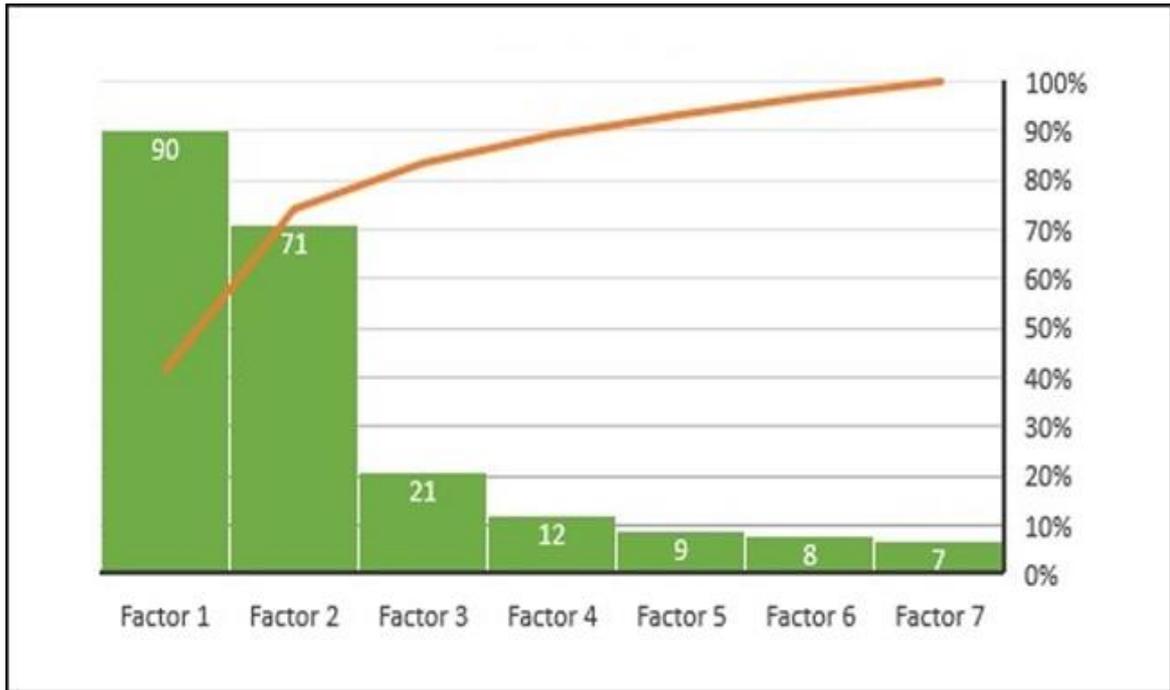


Figure 3: Pareto chart (Cheusheva, 2018)

- **Refrain from doing-the-work:** Many project managers make the mistake of getting involved in "doing the work." Avoid this at all costs. Managing projects is a full-time job and taking your eye off the ball (even for a short period) can lead to problems. It may be tempting to carry out a few tasks when a deadline is looming, but leave this to others while you get on with managing the project;
- **Delegation:** One of the biggest pitfalls in project management is insufficient delegation of responsibilities. Project managers must be available to oversee the various elements of the project and make key decisions. When they are being bogged down by tasks that can be done by others, then it compromises their ability to manage the project; and
- **Risk management:** Risk management is an essential part of time management. After all, if a risk manifests itself during the project and you have not planned for this eventuality, it can completely derail your project. However, if you had taken the time to invest in risk management as you should, you would have been able to plan for these problems and you would, therefore, be able to react to them quickly and effectively. The project risk register should include both preventive and contingency actions to firstly prevent incidents from occurring, as well as minimising the impact in the event of occurrence.

Plan for project and team performance

It is far too easy to look at the detail (seemingly important) stuff which most of us love, such as implementing a new costing or scheduling system, instead of the softer issues which are more difficult to address, such as labour and leadership. These softer skills are completely undervalued and the impact on project success is normally underestimated.

Techniques to be familiar with, include:

- **Project scoping and framing:** It cannot be overemphasized how important it is to have proper framing and alignment sessions to onboard the full project team and other role players. The value of clearly articulating the scope, goals and objectives of the project and the status thereof against planning at these forums will far outweigh the cost associated with hosting these events;
- **Setting the drum-beat:** It is important for the project manager to set the tone of the project at the outset. The sooner the team gets into a rhythm and knows exactly what is expected of them and by when, the sooner a rhythm sets in. Remember this may take some time and effort, specifically for new teams. All teams go through a transition through several stages after 'Forming' before they really start 'Performing', as shown in Figure 4. It is important to go through these transition phases, as people's needs, wants, expectations and fears are typically addressed leading to a culture of doing and teamwork. During this period, a lot of effort is also spent on optimally addressing the dynamics of the team.

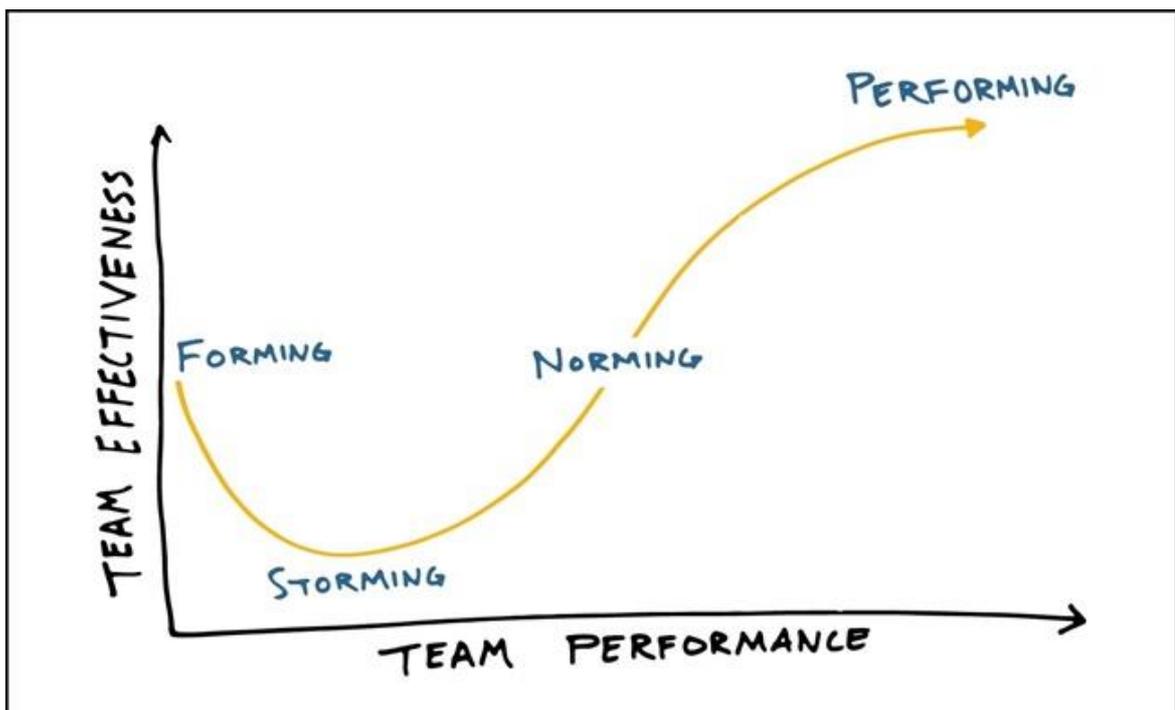


Figure 4 - Team Alignment Stages (Conner, 2018)

- **Contracting strategy and selection:** Any project, no matter how big or small or well defined, has the potential to develop problems in many areas. One of the areas, that the project manager and the team need to spend much time and effort on, is in defining the appropriate contracting strategy and bidder shortlist for the project. The shortlist should only include bidders with a reputation for safety, quality of work and the ability to complete projects in time. The preferred bidders who are best suited to execute the work should then be appointed, following a transparent selection process; and
- **Formalised change management:** Scope creep is one of the reasons that a project can start running late, although there are so many facets and interface points on a project that the project manager/team can easily be blind-sided. Any project manager knows that scope creep is one of the most difficult things to manage on any project. Scope creep often occurs because clients do not actually know what they want in the first place. Therefore, when the project commences, they request changes and extra things to be added to project scope. You need to make sure that you do not just agree to any change that is requested. There needs to be a formalised change management process in place. You need to ensure that the client is aware of the impact the change is going to have on the cost and schedule of the project. Any change can be implemented, but it is going to require time and money. It is also sometimes better to stop the project and replan/reframe the project before you make key decisions on how to proceed.

Use the right tools and equipment

In project management, a project manager's effectiveness will largely depend on the tools at his or her disposal. Even the most talented project manager will be limited if the right software and equipment are not available. Before taking on a project, project managers should thus assess their needs. Some areas to consider include: communications equipment, project tracking software, and collaboration software.

Another key element to consider these days, is the degree to which these management and collaboration systems can be integrated. Proper integration saves time and money. Ideally, there should only be one point of data entry. Remember also that different management levels in the organisation in the organisation structure require different levels of information. For senior executives, a one-page summary is more than enough, while at the operating level within the project team significantly more detail is required.

A sure-fire time saver would be if the systems used could 'roll up' the requisite information to the various management levels. This means that man-hours are not wasted in preparing reports manually, unless a special request is being handled.

Effective communication system

A project will never run smoothly if the right information does not reach the right people at the right time. A system for effective communication of project information among project personnel, as well as project clients and senior executives, is a must. Not only must the project manager ensure that he or she is presenting information in a clear, logical, and understandable way, but also that the right tools are in place, such as file-sharing programs, networks, and collaboration tools.

In our opinion, communication is the area on which the project manager should be spending the most time. The project managers primary duty is to keep project stakeholders informed about the project's status. Perhaps equally important are motivational talks to encourage team members to go the extra mile when it just seems a step too far.

Other time management techniques to be familiar with in the communication category, include:

- **Effective meetings:** When project personnel are brought together for a meeting, it is vital that there is a definitive objective for the meeting, and a clear and focused agenda. Meeting documentation should be distributed well in advance and attendees should be fully prepared for the meeting. Otherwise, the time of the project manager, as well as all those attending the meeting will be wasted. Experienced project managers are adept at determining which information must be discussed in a face-to-face meeting and which information can be disseminated via other media.
- **Recognition and reward:** When employees and their work are valued, their satisfaction and productivity rises, and they are motivated to maintain or improve their good work. Praise and recognition are essential in any workplace. People want to be respected and valued by others for their contribution. This is also true for project teams. Every project team member must understand the reward and recognition programmes tailored for the project. Recognition and reward must be fair, consistently applied, whilst remaining challenging to the project team. The recognition and reward programmes for the project must be documented in the project charter and signed off by the project sponsor. This will give a culture of ownership to the project team and will motivate the team to perform to meet the project objectives. This will automatically contribute to productivity and improved time management.

Benefits of effective time management

By following the tips above, which have been gleaned from very experienced project managers as well as others involved in large or small projects, you will start experiencing some of the benefits described below. It must be noted that this will not

be a sudden change, but rather a gradual one. As you improve on your time management techniques, the following areas of your life should improve:

- **Reduced stress and anxiety:** If you do not feel like you control your own time, and you are always rushing around to complete tasks, you will naturally end up feeling stressed and anxious. The importance of time management in reducing stress and making you feel less overwhelmed is something to remember not only for your success in the workplace, but for your overall health as well. Less stress leads to more energy and overall well-being, which in turn leads to higher productivity and higher personal satisfaction; and
- **Improved quality of life:** The importance of time management in improving your overall quality of life is high. When you are more efficient, productive, and less stressed in the workplace, it has a direct impact on your personal life as well. You have more free time to focus on personal activities, energy to put into relationships, and create a better work-life balance. Knowing that everything is going according to schedule in your projects at work, will help you feel calmer outside of the workplace, so you can disconnect, relax, and unwind properly. According to Britt (2019), extra time can make you happier than money...

Concluding comments

As you can see, time management skills are of the utmost importance to working more efficiently, improving your quality of work, delivering projects on time, reducing stress, and improving your work-life balance. All these results can lead to increased opportunities and productivity both in your career and your personal life. When you do not take control of your time and manage it efficiently, you can experience the opposite results.

Time management is an essential skill for project managers. If you cannot manage your own time, how can you expect to manage your teams? Ask each day what you did to move the project forward. Plan your next day, what will you do to ensure your project continues along the straight and narrow. Plan your time, manage your resources with a light touch and communicate effectively. With effective time management, project success should come easier.

Say you have familiarised yourself with these time management principles, but your project is still running late: what now? You can attempt fast-tracking some of the project activities to save some time on the schedule. Alternatively, you could use schedule 'crashing'. Crashing is the technique to use when fast-tracking has not saved enough time on the schedule. It is a technique in which resources are added to the project for the least cost possible. Cost and schedule trade-offs are analysed to determine how to obtain the greatest amount of schedule compression for the least incremental cost.

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