

Project Management Fundamentals for the Editorial Office

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A thorough definition of project management by moderator Emma Shumeyko, Managing Editor at PNAS, launched the “Project Management Fundamentals for the Editorial Office” session. It served as an appropriate lead in to a session filled with project management tools provided by an experienced project manager, Jennifer Arndt from the ACS, and a case study of a project that could have been managed better if such tools had been implemented by ASCO’s Emilie Gunn. Questions from the attendees rounded out the hour-long session.

Shumeyko clearly expressed the definition of a project from the Project Management Institute as a temporary endeavor that is undertaken to create a unique product or service or to implement a significant change. She explained that projects differ from regular work because they have a distinct beginning and end. Examples of projects that may be encountered by an editorial office can be of a large scale, such as launching a new journal or selecting a new platform vendor. They can also be smaller projects such as adding a podcast to the journal’s offerings or implementing a new workflow for the journal.

Why is it important to the success of a project to implement project management? Shumeyko said, “By breaking down a project into different phases, you can better put it into perspective, and force yourselves to establish goals from a 10,000-foot view.”

By following the 5 standard phases of project management, an editorial office can have that important view of their project. She explained each of the phases (Figure 1) and the basic reasons behind why each phase is important. For example, she said the planning stage is crucial for successful projects because it causes planners to think beyond the obvious, including “How could it go

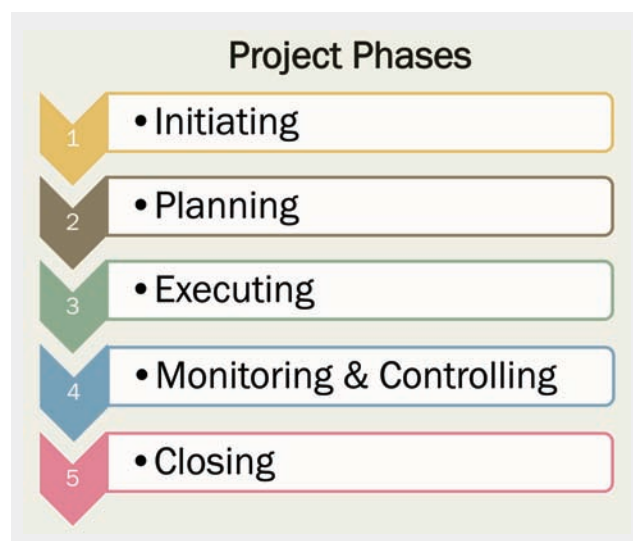


Figure 1. Five phases of project management.

off the rails and how would you course correct if it does,” Shumeyko said.

In launching her talk of a toolkit to use when managing a project, Arndt explained that project managers always keep in mind the Golden Triangle throughout the life of the project. She said, “If you change any aspect of these three elements—scope, time, and cost—the others will necessarily change as well.”

Each of the 5 tools within Arndt’s toolkit that she uses when managing projects are important in aiding her to manage change as it happens and to communicate with the team and all stakeholders. Her first tool to use for any project is to create a project site where all information related to a project is stored and is regularly updated so all stakeholders know what is going on with the project at any point. A key element of the site is developing a scope statement for the project, which is an explanation of what you are doing, why it is important to do it, what it is going to be accomplished, and what it is not going to be accomplished. She said it is important to have an exclusions section included in the scope. When stakeholders want to make changes over the course of the project, knowing what was purposefully not included in the original scope will enable you to better renegotiate when that happens because, “It is rare you can make a scope change without impacting those other aspects of the triangle,” Arndt said, referring to time and cost.

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Other important tools in her toolkit include: an activity plan, an action item log, a decision log, and a cost log. Arndt notes that project management is not a “one size fits all” endeavor and that not all tools need to be used, depending on the specific project or the company’s culture. She did she recently add the decision log to her toolkit because she learned over time that noting the decisions, who made them, in what context, and in what format they were made can help to save time when you are challenged or asked questions about how you arrived at where you are today. She said, “If you don’t record the decisions that are made all along the way, they end up getting revisited. The team can sometimes churn on this.”

Following the discussion of the tools one can use during project management, Gunn presented a case study of a change made at ASCO that had its fair number of challenges and missteps, which she thinks could have been avoided if they had used the tenets of project management prior to jumping in. The real-life project Gunn described was when the society chose to rename two of its journals to associate them more closely with their flagship journal. The changes were talked about for quite a while by society management, she said, but once a decision was made only a short email mandate to actualize the change was sent to some staff who should be involved—but not all.

The mandate delineated the specific results, the reason for the changes, and a deadline, but many of the finer details were not covered and thus proved challenging for the organization in implementing the name changes. In evaluating the problems encountered along the way, Gunn said much of it was due to little planning and no clear leader of the project, and that led to important details being missed in some situations and duplication of efforts in others. “There were so many little things that we just didn’t give a whole lot of thought to that led to people having some of the information but not all of it,” she said.

In conclusion, Gunn provided some sage advice about the process of project management not ending when the project ends. She said to be sure to celebrate and reflect when the project is completed. Taking time to note what went well and what did not go well will provide wisdom for future projects.

A virtual attendee helped end the session by asking if project management tools can be used in situations that do not necessarily meet the criteria of a project. Arndt responded that she does draw on her project management experiences and tools for regular operations work and to help keep staff on track but cautions against going too far when the situation doesn’t warrant it. She said, “I think you could take some elements of this and make it useful, but I think you really have to tailor it to the work.”

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