

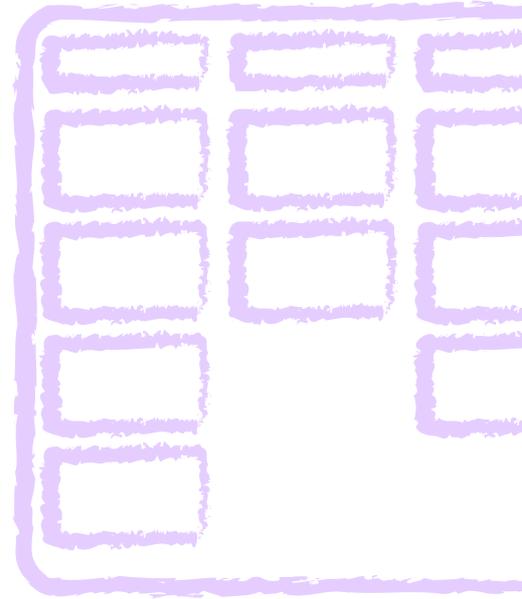


ResourceGuru

Confessions of a Project Manager

(And the lessons they
learned along the way.)

Everyone's a project manager



Being a project manager sure isn't easy. Most of us have multiple projects running at the same time. It can be stressful, overwhelming, and sometimes, let's be honest—a complete mess.

There's a lot of moving parts, from tasks and communication, to staying on top of schedules, people, and budgets. Phew!

No project comes without challenges. And whether it's internal or client-facing, there's a lot at stake. Client relationships, reputations, and revenue are all on the line.

We're here to talk about what happens when things don't go according to plan. Because we can all learn from our mistakes, course-correct, and make that next project even better.

That's why we've gathered stories from some of the best project managers out there, to share the lessons that made them the best in the game.

We hope you'll like it!



– Team Guru



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Workload woes

By Elizabeth Harrin, FAPM

Author of *Managing Multiple Projects*

I called my manager late at night after a particularly difficult conversation with a project sponsor. I burst into tears and couldn't hold my voice steady so I had to call her back.

The problem was this: my sponsor had asked me to do something that was virtually impossible for me to get done and also (in my opinion) not the best use of my time. It was an admin task that anyone could have done, including the support staff: copying handwritten lists of who had attended a training course into another format so they could be kept electronically.

I couldn't get that done and do everything else, and I was already working until late at night from a hotel. I came up with another plan: if it had to be done, get a temp admin assistant to do it. That came with the overhead of recruiting and hiring someone to sit and transcribe the list. Still, if he felt this work was valuable, then paying for it was going to be OK.

I explained all this to my manager and she said: "He probably doesn't know what else you're doing, so he thinks it's OK."

It was like a lightbulb going off in my head.

He literally had no idea how I was spending my time, and certainly wasn't aware I was on the phone crying to my boss at 10pm at night because of the need to type up lists of names.

I also thought: How can he not know? I speak to him every day.

But the truth is that he probably wasn't thinking about my workload (or that of anyone else in the team) that much at all.

We were all senior managers. We should have been able to manage our time and escalate, and have adult conversations about workload. Why wasn't I doing that?

Because I was burning out with trying to please everyone and hold this project together... but that was on me.

It was my choice to work that way, although I hadn't realized it until that moment.

My sponsor was also working long hours in a complex environment, where requirements were changing regularly as new information became available. He had his own challenges working the stakeholders who looked to him for guidance and updates. He was involved, engaged, knowledgeable and a confident decision-maker: in many respects, the perfect sponsor. He had enough on his mind without wondering whether I had time to type up some lists.

Lesson learned: Visibility is everything

Don't assume your boss or your project sponsor knows how you're spending your time. Your manager doesn't have the capacity to track what you're doing day-to-day. They probably only have a very high-level overview of what you're working on.

You might believe they know what you're doing every day and how much work you have, so your assumption is that they're only giving you what they feel you should be able to do.

In reality, they may be passing you more project work because they don't have complete visibility of what's on your plate.

The only one who knows how long your workload is taking is you.



Meet Elizabeth Harrin

Elizabeth Harrin teaches people how to juggle multiple projects so they can meet stakeholders' expectations without working extra hours. She's a project management practitioner, trainer, mentor and founder of [RebelsGuideToPM.com](https://rebelsguidetopm.com). An author of seven project management books, Elizabeth prides herself on her straight-talking, real-world advice for project managers. She uses her twenty years' experience doing the job to help people deliver better quality results whilst ditching the burnout through her community membership programme, Project Management Rebels.

Find Elizabeth on elizabeth-harrin.com or connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).

Workload planning: A complete guide

Workload planning (or "workload management") is your fast track to meeting project goals without causing team burnout. So let's look into planning workload in a way that creates balanced schedules for all your team members (yourself included).

[Read blog post](#)

Beware the big idea

By Brett Harned

Project Management Consultant and Coach



I was working with a team to redesign a Fortune 500 company's website. As a creative team, it was always our job to sort out business and user goals in order to propose ideas that would satisfy both. In this instance, we did just that—we did it with our clients during an interactive workshop.

The energy was high and the ideas were flowing. Nothing discussed in the workshop was positioned to be “set in stone,” so discussing blue sky ideas was fine for me as the PM, even if I was worried about scope.

As a project manager, I'd never get in the way of a good idea. But I'd definitely be sure that it was executable within our scope and timeline. Or, at least I'd try.

The ideas we came up with were the kind of design solutions that would change the way this company—and eventually the industry—presented its product.

Fast forward a week, and I'm with my team in a conference room discussing final solutions to present. The “big idea” was front and center, and it was exciting. We discussed how the feature would work, how it might be designed, and how we'd approach it.

The problem was, one of our developers—the one who would eventually build the front-end of the site—was out of the office for two weeks.

I questioned the effort vs. the scope. I took the word of the team, who said it was doable.

They were wrong.

When that developer returned to the office, she looked at the designs and said, “This is really cool. Did the client approve additional scope?”

My heart sank to my stomach. “No, we discussed the approach while you were away, and the team said we'd be okay.”

That did not make her happy—at all. And I couldn't blame her for that. I've seen plenty of website design projects fail when they hit the development stage, simply because the details hadn't been discussed. But I'd already learned that lesson and I got ahead of it.

Or at least I thought I did.

So I asked her to help me to estimate the effort. We sat down and it was more than double what we had scoped. I had to address it with the client before we went any further...

I prepared myself for the call, and was ready to give my client three options:

1. They pay for the additional scope
2. We revise the design and table the big new idea
3. We work with the client's talented development team to split the scope

I felt pretty good about these options and I was ready to present them.

I called the client, shared the news and apologized. He yelled at me. Actual yelling! I did my best to calm him down, and shared my solutions.

Lesson learned: Get input from the right person

Thankfully, sharing my solutions worked and we ended up building the feature together. But all I could think was that it could have been avoided if I didn't take the word of the team and waited for the person actually doing the work to weigh in.



Meet Brett Harned

Brett Harned is one of the founding voices in the digital project management community. He launched the Digital PM Summit in 2012, and over the past decade has hosted and spoken to audiences globally. His book [Project Management for Humans](#) was published in July 2017, and his podcast [Sprints and Milestones](#) launched in April 2018. He has created a wealth of successful online content that further underscores the work he does at [Digital PM Consulting](#), helping teams to improve process, culture, and PM practices.

Connect with Brett on [LinkedIn](#).

What's project scope? (Plus 7 steps to define your project scope statement)

As project managers, defining and planning projects is what we do. That means everything starts with creating a project scope. No matter how many times you've done similar projects, you can't afford to ignore the basics. So let's revisit them.

[Read blog post](#)

What's my role?

By Ordonna Sargeant

Director, Data Governance at American Express

Earlier in my career, I was a technical program manager working in a smaller company. This company didn't have experience with project managers and my project management experience didn't include coding skills.

The misalignment was this: my management team expected me to personally confirm both functional and non-functional requirements of a product build. While I was managing the client expectations, the budget, and the multiple work streams of a complex program.

My company was completely new to Agile development and there was an unspoken expectation that I would also fill the product manager role and the program manager role.

The truth was I was not equipped to be a product manager.

I decided to facilitate a workshop where we would discuss the roles in Agile development and identify who was currently filling these roles. I wanted to identify who had the skill set for these roles. I made the workshop interactive. We reviewed past projects. I had the team identify who managed specific features and who was responsible for the definition of done.

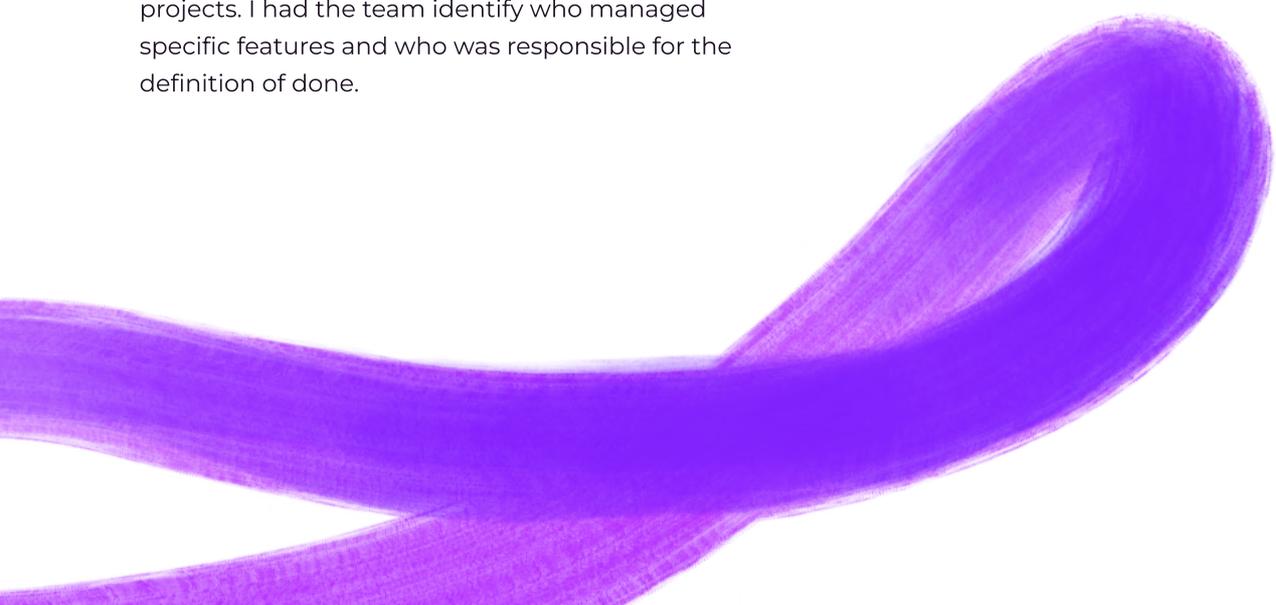
I also asked questions like who was responsible for outlining the quality attributes of our products and ensuring they happened. Were these shared responsibilities, and what was the process? While they spoke, I gladly documented everything.

I drafted a RACI (responsibility assignment matrix) and an onboarding document for my management team.

The company was unique in they wanted me to collaborate with the product manager on requirement gathering to ensure client expectations were met. I feared they wanted me to solely own that responsibility.

The dev team appreciated the workshop because they felt seen and valued. Before, their work had gone unnoticed and the lack of appreciation started to show up in their code.

The whole team had opportunity to grow. There were process changes and cultural changes that came from that meeting. Why? Because the company gave everyone the chance to learn something new and strengthen their skill set.



Lesson learned: Collaboration is key

If you see a gap or misalignment don't assume there's only one solution. Collaboration is key in project management. You're not alone. Bring your knowledge to the forefront. Technical project management will always evolve because technology is always evolving. Look at these moments as opportunities to learn.

You have more influence than you know.



Meet Ordonna Sargeant

Ordonna Sargeant has over 15 years of experience as a project and program manager for system/software implementations and product development.

She obtained her BA from Hampton University and her MPA from Metropolitan College of New York, where she is now an Adjunct Professor.

As a PMP and PMI-ACP, she finds joy creating reels about the life of Project Managers and finding new amazing restaurants to try in NYC.

Connect with Ordonna on [LinkedIn](#).

Project collaboration: the key to successful project management (and happy teams)

If you've ever tried to complete a project without the right tools, the right team, or the right resources, you know it can feel like an impossible task. But you don't have to go it alone. Project collaboration is the key to happier employees, project managers, businesses, and let's not forget—customers. Let's make sure we get it right.

[Read blog post](#)

Happy people make for great work

By Steph Dix

Director of Operations at DDB Sydney



I remember the first time I cried in my career.

It was during my early days of working in publishing at a fast-paced, weekly magazine house in London. It was the mid 2010s and my first proper client facing job.

I remember dealing with an especially tricky client—who looking back now I realize was as junior, and likely as stressed, as me—back and forth on a certain product's prevalence on a double page spread.

I didn't know it at the time, but the unique combination of dealing with paying clients, a vivacious editorial team, and an equally vivacious commercial team who would (and could) sell literally anything would eventually create my greatest skill.

I became someone who could find compromise where most would assume impossible.

What made me cry then, was not a person, but a situation.

I was sat with my art director, a brilliant, wildly talented woman, whom understandably let out her frustration at the document we all knew too well: "InsertClientHere_DoubleSpread_Final_v17." She was wearily staring at her screen for a solution we hadn't already tried—when out of nowhere, tears started rolling down my face.

She stared at me in shock. I felt like I stared back at her in shock. She leapt up and put her arms around me (which obviously made it worse) and I instantly felt embarrassed and laughed it off.

Until that day I had always thought showing emotion at work was equal to showing weakness. But those tears, that rip in the fabric of our day to day, caused me and my team to step back and look at the wider picture of what was happening from a process, and people perspective.

It was like a jolt woke us all up, and gave us a moment of "why the f*ck are we crying over a double page spread?"

It wasn't about where the product was on the page anymore, it was how we got to killing ourselves over it in the first place.

Lesson learned: People before projects

This experience, and the support of my wonderful mentor and manager drove me forwards to roll out post campaign wash ups with clients, encourage collaboration with editorial and commercial, finding ways to elevate what we were doing, how we were doing it, and most importantly, how we all felt doing it.

This experience led me to my mantra; “Happy people make for great work” and right now, this feels more important than ever.



Meet Steph Dix

Steph Dix has over a decade’s experience in the industry, cutting her teeth in e-commerce before moving to fashion, publishing, and finally into agency life. She has lead delivery for a wealth of global accounts, across all disciplines. Her human-first approach, tenacious drive for problem solving, and eye for numbers has earned her success in some of London’s most prolific agencies. In 2022, she moved to Sydney, Australia to head up Operations at DDB for one of the most iconic brands in the world—the golden arches, McDonald’s.

Connect with Steph on [LinkedIn](#).

Team burnout: 9 ways project managers can prevent it (before it’s too late)

A terrifying 68% of tech workers feel more burned out in a remote setting than they did in an office. And who can blame them? The “always-on” culture eats away at the most resilient of us. Yes, team burnout is more present than ever—but you can fight it.

[Read blog post](#)

When complacency creeps in

By Holly Davis

Delivery Manager at Torchbox

I was working with a competent Lead Developer on one of our biggest clients delivering a re-build for a platform that we'd been working on for 10+ years.

Our Technical Director had executed some high-level planning of how big the migration project was and how much it'd cost to rebuild their platform.

We had broken this massive project into many mini projects, taking one section of the site at a time.

Then the pandemic hit.

This client was affected particularly badly so we discussed putting the project on pause. We agreed, not knowing at that point quite how long we were going to pause for.

Fast forward to almost two years later, we were given the go-ahead to move forward with the project again. During that time, the Technical Director and Lead Developer had both moved on. We had another Lead Developer who had been working on the site since the very start, so fortunately the project had some continuity.

So, some team changes! That's just agency world, right? Right! Not thinking much more of it, we started delivering tickets again.

A couple of projects in, we were struggling to build momentum. New developers were struggling to get onboarded, sprint velocity wasn't great, we had the whole JIRA tennis situation going on where tickets kept getting pinged back. Tickets that looked "done" actually weren't anywhere close to done, giving us a false sense of progress.

To be frank, it was a mess.

I had the sense that we were experiencing some tech debt and a bit of a rocky onboarding, but in a couple of sprints everyone would get into their groove and we'd be alright.

Over the course of the next few sprints, we were tracking slightly behind, but not drastically. I felt like things were improving.

However, every time I spoke to the Lead Developer, I could tell he didn't share my confidence. When I dug deeper, he told me the budget wasn't realistic and he didn't have confidence in the approach.

I heard him.

But without any revised estimates or a proposed plan, I felt stuck. So we soldiered on once again, but as you can imagine, at this point there were red flags everywhere.

I was also this person's line manager, and it was actually during a 1:1 I could see how much this project was affecting him. He was visibly demotivated and he had a lot to prove on this project. The previous Lead Developer was very well-respected and he felt he had big shoes to fill.

I could see how disheartened he was feeling about the project—he was drowning.

I can't remember exactly what I said in that meeting, but it was along the lines of, "from now on we're going to treat this like it's a new project—not one you've inherited. I have complete trust in you. Let me know how you'd like to run this project and come back to me with a revised budget. It doesn't need to be exact, but it needs to be detailed enough where I can have a conversation with the client."

I kept checking in on how he was getting on and the answer was always vague, "yes, I'm getting there."

In the coming weeks, he revealed a mammoth spreadsheet. Not quite user story level, but a list of epics and components with the initial sizing and a revised sizing. I was half listening and half trying to work out how big the difference was in cost.

This wasn't the type of conversation where you're asking the client for a "bit of extra budget" for 1-2 sprints. It was an eye-watering amount, almost a quarter of the budget again.

I remained calm on the exterior and thanked him for all his hard work—but inside I was freaking out.

How have we only just got to this point?

Why didn't I stop the project earlier?

Why didn't we do this at the start?

Sure, those were good questions to ask. But not right now. Right now we needed to focus on an action plan. As this went from tech problem to team problem, ironically, this was the first time we came together as a multi-disciplinary team.

We did some amazing work in that time. We questioned and challenged ourselves. We re-used and re-reviewed analytics which hadn't been re-done since the project was started. Ultimately, we came up with revised approaches where we could cut the costs, but deliver a similar outcome.

I remember working on a script before the call with the client on which I was going to deliver the news. (Needless to say, I had a bit of a sleepless night before presenting the client with this big deficit in budget.)

To this day I don't know how the client was as understanding as they were. My guess in retrospect was that they too didn't have faith in the plan or the estimates. It was probably a relief to see a spreadsheet that articulated the actual size of the project in a way that they could engage with and understand.

Now, this story does have a relatively happy ending! We agreed on a revised plan where we'd postpone delivering some of the work to the following financial year, we de-prioritized some low-value features, found efficiencies, and undertook some work pro bono to make amends. With a revised plan that the whole team could buy into and with a renewed sense of "team" and purpose, we were back on our way.

Lesson learned: Every project needs ownership

So what's the point of the story? At this point in my career, I was in the most senior delivery role I had been in and complacency had crept in. I didn't take a moment to think about what had changed or to ensure the team we were bought into the plan we had inherited. There was a lack of ownership.

Hopefully, another pandemic isn't around the corner, but where you encounter team changes, projects pausing, or your team have inherited a budget or approach they don't believe in or feel they can't deliver on here's what to do: stop, assess the situation, and most importantly—take (or assign) ownership.

Meet Holly Davis

Holly Davis has been actively contributing to the delivery management community since 2014 when she co-founded DO PM, a meetup for delivery folk based in Oxford, out of that spun out the digital delivery Slack channel which has over 500 delivery/project managers who share knowledge and best practice. She regularly writes on topics of delivery management and team leadership and has been featured on a number of industry-recognized blogs and podcasts. She provides mentorship to nurture tomorrow's delivery leaders and is currently working as a Principal Delivery Manager at [Torchbox](#), an agency partner for socially progressive organizations.

Connect with Holly on [LinkedIn](#).



Project owner: How to take ownership of a project

Project owners exist to make sure project strategy and vision don't get lost between teams and tasks. In this article, we take a closer look at the role of a project owner, how it differs from a project manager, and how to (actually) take ownership of a project.

[Read blog post](#)

Outputs and outcomes

By Dr. Al Zeitoun

PgMP, PMI Fellow, Global Future of Work Executive,
Senior Director of Strategy at Siemens DISW

I was excited about the opportunity to be in Europe for a variety of reasons—both professionally and business related. So I thought I'd reach out to one of our key customers at the time to see if I could do a check-in visit.

Although it was short notice and most certainly didn't reflect what a good project manager would normally do—plan ahead and set a clear agenda—somehow the customer went for it.

They welcomed the opportunity to meet and dedicated the entire morning at their headquarters to discuss and reflect on the work one of our teams had done for them as well as looked at the possible path ahead.

Everything sounded promising.

I rearranged my travel plans so I could join the customer on-site where four of the key executives dedicated their time to meet with me that day. And what a meeting it was!

As a good project manager, I prepared for the meeting. I gathered some background info from the team and looked into a previous consulting engagement with the client to see what was assessed and what the recommendations were. I also asked if there were any red flags that I needed to be aware of. The answer was none. A great project manager would have gone a little bit deeper and checked if there was any additional feedback from the customer after they signed off on the work deliverables and paid for the services.

So what happened?

Well, it was one of the toughest meetings I've ever had. If you measure success by completion of deliverables and a customer paying for your services, or an internal team signing off—think again.

During the meeting, it turned out that the customer was actually very unhappy with our consulting engagement. Their reasoning was that the true outcome they had expected was to change the resistance they had been getting from the key stakeholders to the unified system they were implementing. Sure, our deliverables matched what we were contracted to do, yet the true value in the mind of the customer was a totally different outcome.

This was my first big aha moment about the delta between outputs and outcomes. Although I had experienced that a few times in my career, it wasn't until this meeting that I was forced to question my view of what success looked like.

Lesson learned: Always define what project success looks like

The key lesson is this: You have to have a joint view of what project success looks like. You need to create that early, and you need to revisit it often. You can call it agility, you can call it the Voice of Customer—whatever works. Regardless of what you call it, it's a truly fundamental and critical conversation that every project and program manager should not only welcome, but also ask for. It's vital in achieving the right outcomes, not just outputs.

Meet Dr. Zeitoun

Dr. Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting framework implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.



In his current role with Siemens, he is responsible for driving the program management practices, Masterplan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes.

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Project management tactics that drive project success

The success of your project depends on your ability as a Project Manager to define goals, use resources strategically, remove roadblocks, and move projects forward. Learn the tactics that will make you a better Project Manager, help you deliver successful projects, and keep your clients happy.

[Read blog post](#)



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About Resource Guru

Resource Guru is a blissfully simple team scheduling and leave management tool. Whether it's people, equipment, or meeting rooms, Resource Guru enables you to schedule the right resources on the right projects at the right time.

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