

Mitigating against the effects of Project Fatigue

Carl Bernie, Software Services Group (SSG) manager, DPS Group Global

INTRODUCTION

Project management is not easy! Pinto, Dawood and Pinto (2014, pp. 578) describe project-based work as being “frenetic, fast-paced, and dynamic”. Project managers must constantly manage the ever-present effects of conflict and stress.

There are a variety of project performance metrics - including schedule, quality and cost - which determine the success of a project in delivering to a client's expectations.

As one might expect, there is an extensive body of academic research, dating back to the 1950s, related to project success and project failure.

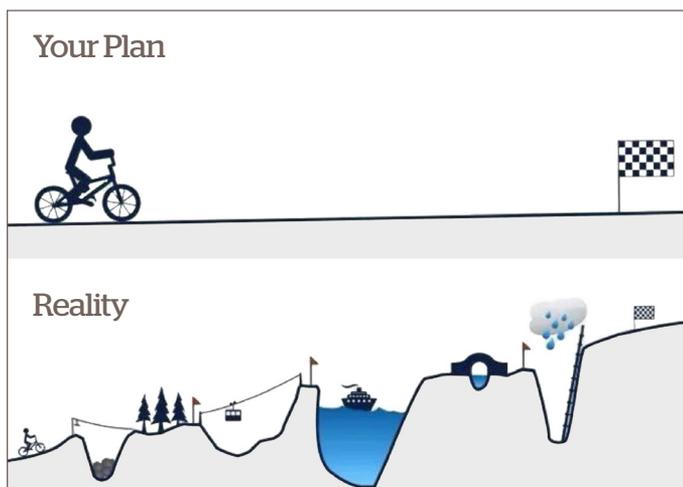
Throughout the academic literature and professional project management journals, there appears to be an obsession with project success and project failure.

The researcher of this paper has identified a gap in the literature which is related to the area of ‘project fatigue’. The author defines project fatigue as the effect, or damage inflicted, on a project management office (PMO), in achieving the client's project objectives.

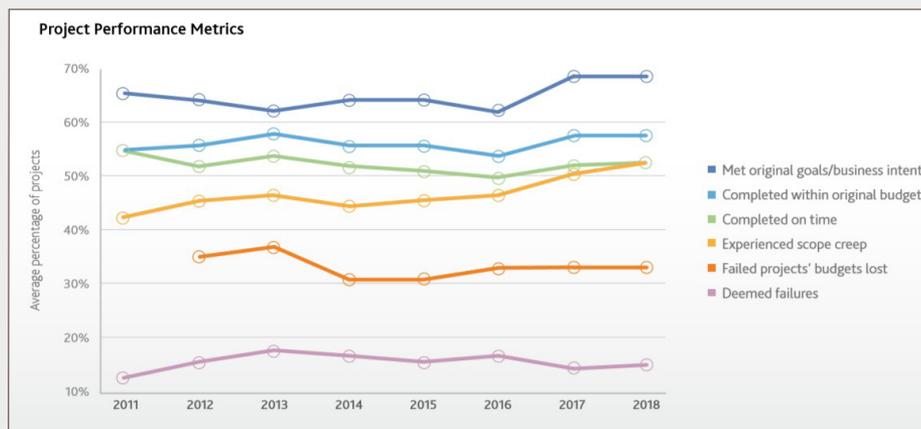
Numerous factors can have an impact on the level of project fatigue experienced by an organisation and its project teams. These include more tacit early warning signs such as employee stress, burnout, and motivational impacts, all of which can have a detrimental effect on a PMO's performance on a project.

Additionally, in the last decade, the Project Management Institute (PMI) has conducted extensive research with project management professionals across a broad spectrum of industries to determine project performance metrics and the overall rates of success.

In this article, Carl Bernie sets out how project management offices, PMO's, can effectively mitigate against the effects of project fatigue, while continuing to deliver successful projects to their clients. Reducing, or indeed eliminating project fatigue will help PMO's maintain the continual support and energised engagement of their project teams as they move from project to project.



Following a global survey of more than 4,455 project management practitioners and 800 PMO directors from a range of industries, PMI's Pulse of the Profession® (2018, pp. 14) survey findings make for interesting reading.



It is apparent that the annual trends for project success and failure rates remain quite consistent since the survey began in 2011. It is also noted that this data is primarily focused on project performance metrics from a client perspective. But what about the effect or damage inflicted on the PMO and its project management professionals in attaining these business goals?

ORGANISATIONAL PROBLEM

Pulse of the Profession® (2018) describes how the 'gig economy' has now become one of the largest transformative global economic trends. More than 68% of organisations are reporting that they have used outsourced or contract project managers to meet their business objectives.

While a client centric perspective is essential for PMOs to deliver successful projects to their clients, many PMOs have little regard for the attritional impacts on their own organisation in delivering to their client's needs and expectations.

It has become imperative for PMOs to critically assess how they plan, implement, execute and close out their projects. Failure to do so will result in PMOs experiencing a cumulative increase in the effects of project fatigue from project to project, ultimately affecting how PMOs and their workforce continue to perform in this competitive space.

To support this paper the author conducted extensive semi-structured interviews with three leading senior project managers with more than 40 years' experience between them. In addition, a HR expert with extensive experience as a career coach and outplacement specialist was also interviewed.

PROJECT FATIGUE

Numerous factors can have an impact on the level of project fatigue experienced by a PMO. I outline what I consider are the six most significant contributors to project fatigue.

To support this body of research I have developed a framework, called the 'project fatigue wheel of mitigation', which encapsulates my perspective on this area of research.

The intent of my research was to establish an understanding of how these six key drivers affected the individuals, their PMOs and their colleagues in the execution of their contracted projects.

The findings revealed a misalignment and disconnect between industry and best practice from relevant academic literature and professional project management journals and industry reports.

A greater understanding of the attrition, or damage inflicted by project fatigue on PMOs during the traditional project life cycle can help these organisations mitigate, or at a minimum reduce, these effects on future projects.

When we consider that project managers typically move from project to project this attritional damage can have a cumulated effect, which ultimately leads to 'project fatigue' in the PMO. This then begs the question, how can PMOs successfully complete projects while also effectively mitigating against the effects of project fatigue?

My key objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the main causes of project fatigue and to provide a practical framework - with recommendations - on how PMOs can effectively mitigate against the effects of project fatigue while also continuing to subsequently deliver successful projects to their clients, with the continual support and positive, energised engagement of their project management teams.

PROJECT FATIGUE WHEEL OF MITIGATION

Let's look closer at the project fatigue wheel of mitigation framework to gain an insight into how PMOs can successfully complete projects while also effectively mitigating against the effects of project fatigue.



1. The project manager

The project manager is a key project stakeholder and their leadership is considered critical to project success. During the various phases of the project life cycle the composition of the project teams may change to meet the needs of the skills required.

There are, however, many benefits associated with continuity of the project management leadership team for the entirety of a project. Project managers leaving a project early can have a destabilising effect on project momentum and continuity.

There can also be time and cost impacts associated with project manager pass-downs or handovers to their incumbents. Conversely, the relay approach, with project managers coming in at key stages or phases in the project life cycle also has many benefits, including renewed focus and content expertise.

My research considers the optimal approach for a PMO on large-cap, complex projects is to adapt a hybrid model. At programme level, the core leadership team should remain a constant for the entirety of the project life cycle while specialist project managers should also be brought on to projects for specific takes.

This approach will help ensure continuity and cohesiveness throughout the project life cycle and assist in maintaining the required expertise, energy levels, focus and motivation of a PMO's project teams.

2. Succession planning

Resource displacement on a project, whether through succession planning or natural turnover, can have a significant negative impact on organisational performance.

This in turn can impact project performance, not least in the project close-out phase. Project management turnover occurs primarily in the execution phase of a project's life cycle.

Changes in project team composition during the project life cycle is often expected and as such can be planned for. Examples include team changes to match the specific skills associated with certain tasks on a project. While such changes can decrease project stability, appropriate planning can help mitigate against the negative effects.

Structured succession planning for short- and long-term resource impacts is an important and effective strategy to reduce unnecessary stress and workload burden on PMOs and their remaining team members.

Succession planning will also mitigate against the risks associated with single points of failure on projects and enhance a PMO's ability to deliver a stable and successful project to the client. In some circumstances turnover has a positive effect, such as when the project manager is ineffective or not performing at the required level of competency.

Ineffective succession planning can negatively disrupt project performance and overall success at project close-out.

3. Risk management

Most projects cannot be delivered from initial planning through to project closure without encountering some issues or obstacles along the way. These issues or obstacles create uncertainty and often become risks.

The sources of uncertainty can be wide ranging and often have a significant effect on project execution. Managing uncertainty on projects is key to success. PMBOK® Guide (2017) point out that risk management is an important component of the overall project management plan and should be considered for each phase of a project's life cycle.

A risk register can be an effective tool to help manage risk. The main purpose of a risk register is to:

- Document and track project risk;
- Assign risk owners;
- Detail appropriate mitigation and/or contingency strategies to manage each risk item.

The perception of risk can vary significantly between parties. Employees of the same organisation often have similar perceptions of identified risks.

The authors explain how these organisations can share information, objectives and responsibilities, thus facilitating continuity of risk perception and assessment.

However, this is more challenging on projects with co-operative situations as different parties can have different perceptions of the risks due to their company's project objectives.

PMOs and their project teams should maintain more comprehensive risk logs on their projects. Risks associated with resources are typically not included on project risk registers.

Single point of failure and project manager stress due to excessive workload have a significant negative effect on project stability and success, so it is imperative to log these risks on project risk registers and address them accordingly.

Finally, it is important to note that a risk register is a key project document which should be regularly critiqued and reviewed by all key project stakeholders.

4. Knowledge harvesting

Pressure is increasing from clients in the public and private sectors to deliver projects faster with improved quality and lower cost. Such pressures require PMOs to adopt continuous improvement processes and techniques to assist how projects are managed.

Valuable lessons learned on projects often become 'buried' in project files and are rarely referenced. Such documented learnings should be living and breathing documents on a project with regular referencing and appropriate updating. Lessons learned activities have become a common means of identifying improvements and innovations on projects.

The introduction of a project learning roadmap can also assist PMOs in effectively managing the knowledge harvesting on their projects. It is important to note that knowledge harvesting is most effective when done from the early initiation phase right through to project close-out.

Cultivating a culture conducive with exploiting the benefits associated with knowledge harvesting should be a key focus area for PMOs and will only be successful with consistent engagement and support from senior PMO stakeholders.

Effective knowledge harvesting, in particular with documentation of lessons learned processes, can increase project success and help drive organisational learning.

5. Occupational stress

Occupational stress can significantly affect the health and wellbeing of project management professionals and is often associated with low levels of job performance.

Supporting and encouraging colleagues to create a more positive working environment can help reduce occupational stress. Another important consideration is that individuals have different perceptions of workload and associated pressures.

There is a responsibility on PMOs to hire experienced and skilled project managers who have a demonstrable ability to handle an appropriate level of occupation stress.

However, PMOs should also ensure to 'set their teams up for success' through appropriate resourcing and realistic expectations. In addition, PMOs must recognise the importance of supporting their project teams through employee welfare programmes and open-door policies.

The environment and culture cultivated by PMOs and their project teams is essential in the mitigation of excessive levels of occupational stress experienced on large-cap, complex projects.

Significant stress on project managers, can, in some cases, lead to project burnout. Mitigating against occupational stress and burnout in the early phases of a project can however prove very effective. Higher levels of job control coupled with co-worker support can help alleviate the onset of excessive levels of occupational stress.

6. Project closure

A common theme identified is that project closure is considered administratively bureaucratic, cumbersome and overly tedious. The excitement of a new project contains energy to get it started while at the end of a project that energy is reduced.

There can also be a perception that project closure is something that happens quite naturally and is, by its nature, uncomplicated. It is clear that project close-out can in fact be problematic, often leading to project failure. It is worth noting that the skills required to close a project can be different to those required to set up and run a project.

Project closure should be planned, budgeted and scheduled in the same way as the earlier phases in the project life cycle. A project termination checklist can be an effective way to ensure the important close out phase gets the appropriate level of attention. Effective project controls from project initiation, development and execution will also facilitate an effective project close-out phase.

PMOs should consider assigning a project close-out champion or specialist to effectively manage this phase of their project. In addition, improved planning, implementation and execution processes – including comprehensive documentation – will significantly reduce the challenges associated with closing a project.

CONCLUSION

Identifying and eliminating unnecessary sources of stress and ineffective work practices will enhance a PMO's ability to effectively manage the welfare and output of its most important resource, its workforce.



Mitigating against the effects of the six key drivers of project fatigue will help PMOs to create a positive working environment, with a culture of continual learning and development, thus promoting job satisfaction, coupled with a greater retention of staff. Achieving these objectives will help PMOs to remain effective and successful in the years ahead.

PMOs should adapt a model like the 'project fatigue wheel of mitigation' to enhance the wellbeing of their project managers and their teams on future projects.

This will result in optimised effectiveness and performance of the PMO in delivering, and perhaps exceeding, client expectations. Acknowledging, and mitigating against the effects of project fatigue will also significantly enhance a PMO's ability to continue delivering high-quality project management solutions to the ever-changing needs and expectations of their clients.

While this study was limited in its scope, the author suggests that the primary and secondary research in this paper presents a major finding which is worthy of further research. To learn more contact the author at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/carl-bernie-mba-c-eng-miei-11334022>.

Author:

Carl Bernie, is a Chartered Engineer who holds a BEng in Manufacturing Engineering and is a recent graduate of the TU Dublin MBA programme. He is an experienced lean practitioner, is the Software Services Group (SSG) manager at DPS Group Global. This group is responsible for the delivery of bespoke project management software solutions to a global leader in the semi-conductor sector. Previously he held several senior project management positions on the client's factory upgrade/Tool Install projects in Ireland, Israel and North America



Reference

- 1) Pinto, J. K., Dawood, S., & Pinto, M. (2014). Project management and burnout: Implications of the Demand-Control-Support model on project based work. *International Journal of Project Management*, 32, 578-589.
- 2.) PMBOK® Guide (Sixth ed.). (2017). Project Management Institute, Inc. PMI. (2018). Success in Disruptive Times. *Pulse of the Profession*, 1-32.