

When is a Programme not a Program?

The Question

Apart from the difference between British and United States spelling, client and professionals use both terms interchangeably and inappropriately adding to the confusion within the P3 domain.

In this paper P3 Management Services attempts to shine light on the topic to assist all involved to gain greater understanding and more educated use of these two terms.

Short Answer

Programme Management was defined, by the UK Office of Government Commerce, as *the coordinated organisation, direction and implementation of a portfolio of projects and activities that together achieve outcomes and realise benefits that are of strategic importance* (emphasis added)

Program Management is define³, by the Project Management Institute (PMI), as the management of *a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually.*

Whilst both programme and program management relate to the effective management of related projects, programme management goes further by defining that the projects combine to produce outcomes and benefits that are of strategic importance.

Away from the definitions, one practical difference between programme and program management is that the projects within a programme can be added or cancelled provided that the overall strategic objectives are maintained. Program management generally does not have this flexibility as each sub-project has been separately approved.

Long Answer

Were it that simple. As the project, program(me) and portfolio management disciplines have matured there distinctions between each layer and between programme and program have waxed and waned. For example, in 2003 the UK Office of Government

Commence (OGC) defined programme management as *the coordinated organisation, direction and implementation of a portfolio of projects...* whereas in 2011 OGC defined programme as *a temporary, flexible organization created to coordinate, direct and oversee the implementation of a set of related projects and activities in order to deliver outcomes and benefits related to the organization's strategic objectives.*

Whilst the OGC's current definition more closely approximates the one adopted by the PMI, some key distinction remain:

- ☞ programmes are time bound, whereas programs can be an open-ended management structure that continues even after the original set of projects have been completed and are replaced by new projects. As such a program can be the management of a rolling set of projects. That said, because programmes are aimed at a preset strategic objective, programme managers are often given the discretion to alter the scope of component projects, including adding and deleting projects, provided the overall strategic objective is maintained. Such flexibility is not often a feature of program management because its subprojects are individual approved, not approved in bulk as the case with programme management.
- ☞ projects within are programme are all related to the hosting organisation's strategic objectives, whereas programs are not so restricted. Projects within a program may be related solely because they
 - (i) involve the same resources/division of the host organisation (eg. ICT);
 - (ii) involve the same client group (eg. government clients); or
 - (iii) involve the same technology stack (eg. personnel computing vs mainframe)

In conclusion:

- ☞ programmes are time bound inwardly focussed to a host organisation;
- ☞ programs are not time bound nor necessarily inwardly focussed



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Post Script

Whilst the above describes the technical differences between programmes and programs, confusion will still rein whilst the following common practices exist:

- ☞ large, complex, multi-year projects were often called program(me)s if for no other reason to justify the size of the support team and/or the salary of the senior project manager;
- ☞ 'program' is also used in government circles to refer to business as usual activities to deliver government services and benefits (eg. 'health program' or 'literacy program');
- ☞ 'program(me)' refers to a series of television or radio events; and
- ☞ 'program' refers to a lines of computer code (aka application).

Accordingly, just because a person may have been a program(me) manager doesn't mean they will be good at managing your sort of program(me).