

# The importance of structure in project management — Greenlight CI

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As a project manager structure is everything... there should be no such thing as a project without structure.

If a project is a journey, the project plan is your map and the approach/framework is your compass. So sticking with the analogy... without structure you would just be lost! Plain & simple? Well, not really. To what extent you apply structure to your project is the key question here. How much is too much and vice versa... let's explore this.

## What is Structure?

Structure in projects can be considered in two main forms: Planning & Approach. Planning is concerned with the "What", "Who" and the "When".

- What needs to happen to complete this project?
- Who is responsible for completing what?
- When is each activity due?

The Approach is all about the "How" i.e. How do I execute the plan? For the purpose of this blog I will focus mainly on Planning.

Plans come in all different shapes & sizes, different levels of detail for different purposes. There are two types of plan in particular that can really help provide much needed structure to a project; Milestone plans & Detailed plans.

Milestone plans are quite simply plans which outline the high-level milestones of a project. They provide the skeleton of the project on which details can be built. Ultimately, a milestone plan shapes the project, sets stakeholder expectations and should highlight the critical path of the project. For these reasons and more this type of plan is especially effective at the start of a project. Milestone plans typically do not offer much detail so must be used with this in mind.

A milestone plan may look like this:

- **Milestone 1** – Sign-off Requirements
- **Milestone 2** – Select solution
- **Milestone 3** – Implement solution
- **Milestone 4** – Sign-off project closure
- **Milestone 5** – Embed solution

Detailed project plans, however, are all about the rich detail of a project. The more detail the better. A detailed plan will look more like this:

### **Milestone 1 – Sign-off Requirements**

- **Task 1** – Conduct a requirements workshop
- **Task 2** – Document business requirements specification

- **Task 3** – Prioritise business requirements
- **Task 4** – Sign-off business requirements specification

## Milestone 2 – Select solution

**Task 1** – Research solutions

**Task 2** – Shortlist solutions

**Task 3** – Agree final solution

You get the idea...

Planning at the right level is as important as the actual plan itself. Detailed plans are particularly useful for operating the plan, managing resources, identifying dependencies and drilling down on particular milestones. Always keep in mind what you need the plan to do.

## Planning vs. Doing

Is structure always needed? That is the question... How much is too much planning? When do you have to prioritise execution of the plan over planning itself?

Structure is always needed. Why? Well, planning is at the core of any and every project. The project plan serves as a point of reference for the project manager to monitor progress, the project team for managing their day-to-day activities and other stakeholders for understanding what's going on as well as what's to come (setting expectations!).

Perhaps the question is to what extent is structure needed...

PRINCE2, for example, is an industry standard project management framework used by project managers all over the world. Renowned for its particularly structured nature, PRINCE2 is favoured in particular industries such as Governmental and Pharmaceutical industries of which require such rigid planning and governance. Detailed planning, therefore, may be a good fit here.

However, for a relatively young, rapidly changing technological company, for example, PRINCE2 may not be the most suitable approach. Because of the ever-changing nature of such a company they may require a more agile approach to planning. Perhaps, in this case a milestone plan (developed from the strategic plan) could be suitable... with the option of adding further detail at a later stage.

Structure isn't the be all and end all (well, not to everyone), perhaps it isn't always needed but surely there should be a minimum level of planning required for a project. What is this though? If we strip this back to the ultimate purpose of a plan, it is to deliver a project in a controlled way by bringing order to chaos... essentially. So, at the very least a project manager should identify and map the critical path for a project.

| *“He who fails to plan, plans to fail”*

I came across this quote recently and although I do agree with what it is saying perhaps this is more fitting “He who fails to plan [appropriately], plans to fail”. At the end of the day, whilst structure is important in project management, selecting the appropriate level of planning and understanding when to stop planning and start doing is imperative.

What do you think... is structure always needed? What is the minimum structure you would apply to your project?



### **About the Author**

Kimberley was the first of our Graduates and boy has she excelled. She has become a true all round business analyst and project manager, delivering large scale change and handling complex business requirements.

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