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THE COMPARISON DESK 24

25 Essential Project Management Comparisons



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Use comparisons to make decisions

The useful difference is the one that changes what you do next.

Read the pair

Start with the question each term answers. Similar documents, measures or events can serve different purposes even when they share information.

Use the case

Each page gives a small project situation. Explain which concept applies, what evidence is missing and who needs to act before moving to the next pair.

Apply the desk check

The final page turns the distinctions into a decision checklist. Definitions help most when they improve an actual commitment, forecast or handoff.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose one pair you often hear used interchangeably.

01 / Project and operations

A temporary change and an ongoing service need connected but distinct ownership.

Project

A project creates a unique result through a temporary undertaking. It coordinates the change, delivery and transition within its authorised objectives.

Operations

Operations sustain continuing work and service. They need resources, controls and ownership after the project team finishes.

Work the difference

Installing a customer-service portal is a project. Running support and maintaining customer records are operating activities. Agree who accepts that ongoing responsibility before closure.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name the operating owner for one project result.

02 / Program and portfolio

Coordination for combined benefits differs from balancing investments for strategy.

Program

A program coordinates related projects and other relevant work to realise benefits that separate management would miss.

Portfolio

A portfolio selects and balances investments against strategic objectives and constraints. Its components need not all be related to one another.

Work the difference

Coordinate system rollout and staff redesign through a service program. Compare that investment with a factory upgrade through the organisation's portfolio decisions.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the decision that needs coordination and the one that needs prioritisation.

03 / Objective and deliverable

A produced result needs a purpose that guides choices.

Objective

An objective states what the project intends to achieve, including relevant measures and conditions. It helps assess trade-offs.

Deliverable

A deliverable is a specified result produced by the work. Its acceptance criteria make completion verifiable.

Work the difference

A scheduling tool is a deliverable. Reducing missed service visits is an objective or intended outcome to be measured. Producing the tool alone does not demonstrate the whole objective.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Link one deliverable to the objective it supports.

04 / Output and outcome

A released product and a change in its use require different evidence.

Output

An output is something produced or delivered, such as a configured tool, training material or completed installation.

Outcome

An outcome is a change resulting from use of the outputs, such as a different staff behaviour or improved service result.

Work the difference

The team produces a booking form. Users completing bookings without calls is an outcome. Track use and the relevant context before claiming that the output caused the improvement.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose an outcome measure beyond counting delivered features.

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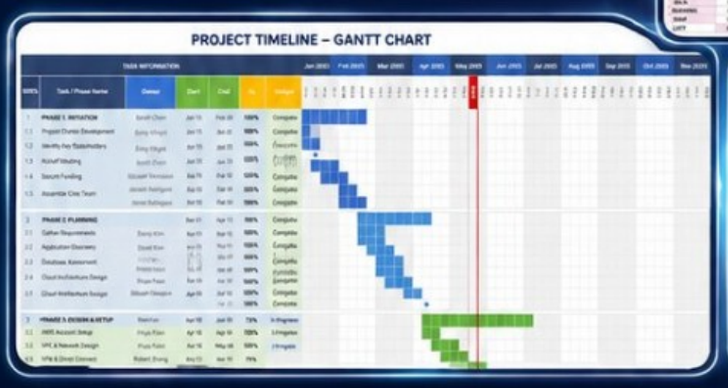
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05 / Requirement and acceptance criterion

A need and the condition used to verify it should stay connected.

Requirement

A requirement describes a capability, condition or characteristic needed to meet a stakeholder or business need.

Acceptance criterion

An acceptance criterion states an observable condition for determining whether the relevant result meets the need.

Work the difference

The requirement is cancellation of a class booking. A criterion says cancelling restores one available place and sends confirmation. The test now has a clear expected result.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write a testable criterion for one requirement.

06 / Product scope and project scope

The result's characteristics and the work to create it are related views.

Product scope

Product scope concerns features and functions of the result. It answers what the product or service must do or be.

Project scope

Project scope concerns the work required to produce the specified result, including delivery and transition activities where included.

Work the difference

A reporting dashboard needs filtering and export functions. The project also needs data preparation, testing, training and handover. Estimating the screen design alone misses required work.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify a delivery activity that is outside the product feature list.

07 / WBS and activity list

Decomposing scope and sequencing tasks serve different planning needs.

Work breakdown structure

A WBS organises the agreed project scope into progressively smaller components, supporting completeness, ownership and control.

Activity list

An activity list identifies the actions needed to create those components. Dependencies and durations can then support the schedule.

Work the difference

"Installed desks" is a scope component. Receiving, assembling and inspecting desks are activities. A neat task list can still omit a required deliverable.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Trace one scope component to its activities.

08 / Activity and milestone

Work takes time; a significant point marks progress or a decision.

Activity

An activity represents work to perform, with duration, dependencies and resources as appropriate to the schedule.

Milestone

A milestone marks a significant event or point. In conventional scheduling it has zero duration, though the work needed to reach it can be substantial.

Work the difference

"Run migration test" is an activity. "Migration accepted" is a milestone supported by evidence and authority. A planned date alone does not establish acceptance.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name the evidence behind one milestone.

09 / Effort and duration

Hours of work and elapsed working time do not automatically convert one-to-one.

Effort

Effort measures the labour needed for work, such as person-hours. It depends on the task and productivity assumptions.

Duration

Duration measures the span of working time needed under the schedule, calendar, dependencies and resource availability.

Work the difference

A task needs 24 person-hours. One person available 6 hours daily needs 4 working days under a simple model. Two people may not halve duration if the work cannot be split.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

State the capacity and divisibility assumptions in a duration estimate.

10 / Dependency and constraint

A relationship between work and a limit on choices need different records.

Dependency

A dependency links work or a needed result to something else. Record the provider, receiver, timing and readiness evidence.

Constraint

A constraint limits available choices, such as an access window, funding limit or technical condition. Identify its source and authority.

Work the difference

Testing depends on configured equipment. Site entry is constrained to staffed hours. A schedule must model both, rather than treating them as the same kind of link.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write one of each for your next handoff.

11 / Risk and issue

Uncertainty and a current matter call for different immediate actions.

Risk

A risk is uncertainty affecting an objective. It needs assessment, ownership, response and monitoring of relevant triggers.

Issue

An issue is a current matter requiring attention, decision or action. Record its impact, owner and decision timing.

Work the difference

A supplier may miss delivery: risk. The supplier confirms today that delivery is late: issue. Link the records and reassess the remaining uncertainty.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Update one item whose situation has changed.

12 / Assumption and verified fact

A planning belief should remain distinguishable from evidence.

Assumption

An assumption is treated as true for planning while confirmation is incomplete. Record why it is reasonable and when it must be checked.

Verified fact

A verified fact is supported by relevant evidence at the point of use. Its context and continuing validity can still matter.

Work the difference

Assume the room supports the equipment load, then obtain the relevant technical evidence before commitment. A copied note without a source does not establish confirmation.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify an important belief and the evidence needed to verify it.

13 / Quality assurance and control

A process review and an output check can address related quality needs.

Quality assurance

Assurance activities build confidence that the processes and arrangements can meet relevant quality requirements.

Quality control

Control activities examine results against requirements and identify nonconformity or corrective needs.

Work the difference

Review the installation procedure and tool controls, then inspect completed desks for stability. Repeated inspection failures may reveal a process that needs improvement.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name a process check and a result check for one deliverable.

14 / Verification and validation

Conformity with specified requirements and fitness for intended use need complementary evidence.

Verification

Verification examines whether specified requirements have been fulfilled, using suitable records, tests, reviews or inspections.

Validation

Validation examines whether the result supports its intended use or need in the relevant environment.

Work the difference

A booking tool may pass its specified field checks yet leave staff unable to resolve exceptions. Check both the specified behaviour and the real operating scenario.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose evidence for both questions on one deliverable.



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15 / Estimate and budget

A judgement about expected cost and an authorised cost basis are related but distinct.

Estimate

An estimate forecasts cost or effort using stated information, method, assumptions and uncertainty. It can change as knowledge improves.

Budget

A budget allocates or authorises a cost basis through the relevant process. Its control and change rules depend on the organisation.

Work the difference

A new estimate rises from $40k to $46k. That information needs a decision; it does not automatically authorise another $6k of spending.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the approval required when an estimate exceeds the budget.

16 / Budget and forecast

One shows the authorised basis; the other shows the expected result.

Budget

The budget is the agreed financial basis used for control, with relevant reserves and change rules defined.

Forecast

A forecast estimates the likely future position using actual progress, remaining work, risks and current assumptions.

Work the difference

An approved $120k budget remains the comparison point while the latest forecast is $135k. Report both and explain the cause and response options.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

State your current budget, forecast and main assumption.

17 / Cost variance and variance at completion

Performance so far and the forecast final gap answer different questions.

Cost variance

In earned value, CV = EV minus AC for the same scope and status date. It measures cost performance of work already performed.

Variance at completion

VAC = BAC minus EAC. It compares the baseline budget with the forecast final cost under the stated assumptions.

Work the difference

EV $48k and AC $54k give CV -$6k. BAC $120k and EAC $135k give VAC -$15k. The current gap and forecast gap are not interchangeable.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Explain which figure supports a remaining-funding decision.

18 / Crashing and fast tracking

Schedule compression changes either capacity or overlap under explicit assumptions.

Crashing

Crashing seeks shorter duration by adding or changing resources where feasible, typically with a cost trade-off.

Fast tracking

Fast tracking overlaps work that was planned more sequentially where logic permits, potentially increasing rework and coordination risk.

Work the difference

Add an extra qualified installation crew, or begin a stable part of testing before all configuration ends. Verify that the controlling path and physical conditions support the chosen option.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Compare one compression option's time saving, cost and risk.

19 / Levelling and smoothing

Resource availability and the permitted finish effect determine the scheduling choice.

Resource levelling

Levelling adjusts work to resolve resource constraints and can change the project's finish or controlling path.

Resource smoothing

Smoothing adjusts resource demand within available scheduling flexibility while preserving the relevant finish objective and constraints.

Work the difference

Two tasks require the same specialist. Delaying one beyond its float may move finish: levelling. Moving it within float to reduce a peak can be smoothing.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Check the available float before promising an unchanged finish.

20 / RACI and organisation chart

Reporting relationships do not define every work decision.

RACI

A RACI matrix identifies responsible, accountable, consulted and informed roles for specified work or decisions.

Organisation chart

An organisation chart shows a formal structural view, such as reporting relationships. It may not show deliverable acceptance or decision rights.

Work the difference

A designer reports to the engineering manager, while facilities owns acceptance of a room layout. Agree the work-specific responsibility rather than inferring it from reporting lines.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name the accountable role for one deliverable decision.

21 / Communication and engagement

Transmitting information is one way to support a wider relationship.

Communication

Communication concerns the exchange of information with an intended purpose, audience, timing and medium.

Stakeholder engagement

Engagement includes understanding interests, involvement, relationships and the way people influence or experience the change.

Work the difference

Emailing a portal update informs staff. Inviting staff to test an exception and changing the design from their feedback supports engagement.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose an interaction that can influence a project decision.

22 / Change request and corrective action

A response to performance can require a controlled decision.

Change request

A change request proposes an alteration to a controlled commitment or arrangement through the applicable process.

Corrective action

Corrective action addresses a deviation or problem to bring performance into an appropriate direction. It may itself require a change request depending on the effect and authority.

Work the difference

Resequence available team work within authority to recover a delay, or seek approval for a cost-increasing additional shift. Assess the action before deciding its route.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify whether a proposed recovery step changes a controlled baseline.

23 / Sprint Review and Retrospective

Inspecting the product outcome and improving teamwork serve different purposes.

Sprint Review

The Scrum Team and stakeholders inspect the outcome, progress toward the Product Goal and changed circumstances to inform next choices.

Sprint Retrospective

The Scrum Team inspects how it worked and plans improvements to effectiveness and quality.

Work the difference

Users test the new pickup flow during Review. The team later improves how it prepares test data during the Retrospective. Keep both conversations focused on their purpose.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write one useful question for each event.

24 / Release and Sprint end

Delivery timing and a learning cadence need not coincide.

Release

A release makes a product result available under the relevant technical, commercial and operating arrangements.

Sprint end

A Sprint boundary supports Scrum's regular inspection and adaptation. A usable Increment may be delivered before that boundary; the Review is not a mandatory release gate.

Work the difference

A verified security fix can be ready mid-Sprint. Apply actual release policies and readiness requirements rather than inventing a waiting rule from the calendar.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Find the policy that governs your team's release decision.

25 / Project closure and benefit review

Ending the change effort does not establish that all later value has been realised.

Project closure

Closure confirms delivery status, acceptance, handover, obligations, records and lessons under the relevant process.

Benefit review

A benefit review examines the intended valuable change using agreed measures, timing, ownership and context, potentially after the project ends.

Work the difference

The portal project closes after accepted delivery and operating handover. Operations measures reduced call volume over the next quarter. Assign that review before the team disbands.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name one post-project measure and its accountable owner.

Your comparison decision check

Use the distinctions to improve the next commitment.

Check the question

Are you asking about a need, a delivered result, a working method, a current fact, an uncertain event, a measure or an authority?

Check the evidence

Use the relevant definition, boundary, source and status date. A number or document can be correct yet answer a different question from the one being asked.

Check the action

State what happens next, who owns it and what would change the decision. Return to the worked comparison when two familiar terms lead to conflicting interpretations.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose one live decision and use two comparisons to clarify it.