How to Create a Practical Risk Register



Build a decision tool, not just a list

A risk register should connect uncertainty with ownership and action.

Start with the purpose

Record significant uncertainties affecting objectives, assess their importance, choose responses and track what happens. Include opportunities where uncertainty may help the project.

Learning-portal case

The project introduces a portal to several training teams. Data quality, supplier access and user adoption could affect readiness and intended value.

Use the register

The following pages build clear entries, an assessment convention and a review cycle. Tailor the fields and controls to the project's risk and decision needs.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the objective your first risk could affect.

Agree the objectives and boundaries

Assessment is difficult when the project result and control limits are unclear.

Define the context

Clarify scope, timing, budget, quality, benefits and relevant obligations. Identify who can accept exposure or authorise a response beyond the team's authority.

Portal case

A pilot must be usable by the agreed readiness point, with accurate learner records and trained administrators. Those objectives give the risks something specific to affect.

Choose a convention

Agree rating scales, escalation rules and review responsibilities before comparing scores. A colour alone does not establish what the team should do.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write one objective and the tolerance that matters to its owner.

Identify risks from several sources

Different perspectives reveal different uncertainties.

Use structured prompts

Review assumptions, dependencies, interfaces, estimates, suppliers, stakeholders, operating readiness and lessons. Ask what could happen and how the objective would be affected.

Portal case

A data specialist sees import-format uncertainty. The supplier owner sees an access dependency. Training leaders identify a possible low-adoption problem.

Capture opportunities

A champion network may accelerate learning and improve adoption. Explore beneficial uncertainty as well as threats, using an appropriate response and measure.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask three relevant people for one uncertainty each.

Write a clear risk statement

A cause, uncertain event and effect give the owner a starting point.

Use the chain

Describe the condition giving rise to uncertainty, the event that may occur and the consequence for a defined objective. Avoid recording only a broad category.

Portal case

Because legacy records use inconsistent identifiers, the import may reject valid learners, delaying pilot readiness and increasing correction effort.

Test the wording

Can someone tell what to investigate or influence? If the statement only says “data risk,” ask for the event and the objective affected.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Rewrite one vague risk using cause, event and effect.

Choose practical fields

Every field should support a decision or an action.

Core record

Use a unique ID, description, category, affected objective, owner, assessment, response, action owner, dates, triggers, status and links as appropriate.

Portal case

R-01 links the data-import risk with the sample-file test, the relevant schedule activity and any decision to change the migration approach.

Keep it maintainable

A small project may combine fields. A complex environment may need more detail. Avoid collecting ratings or dates that nobody reviews or uses.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose the smallest set of fields that supports your next risk decision.

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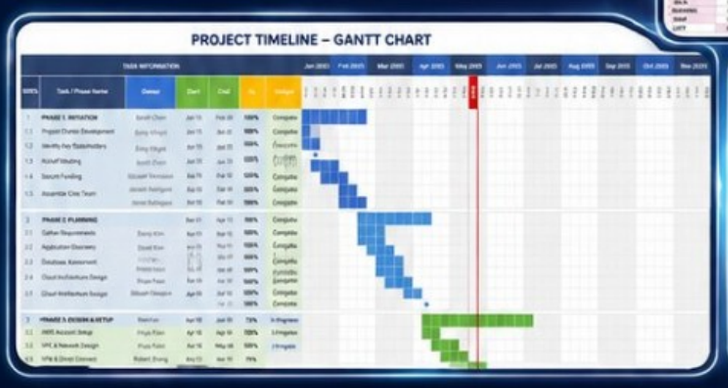
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Define the rating scales

Scores are interpretable only when people understand their meaning.

Use explicit descriptions

Set likelihood and impact levels with relevant evidence and thresholds. Define how different objectives are considered and how an overall priority is selected.

Portal case

Under the illustrative five-level convention, likelihood 3 and impact 4 give score 12. The team agrees that this priority needs review with the sponsor.

Use judgement

Multiplying ordinal levels can support a chosen prioritisation convention, but the score is not a precise monetary exposure or universal risk measure.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write the description of one rating so two reviewers can use it consistently.

Assess the initial exposure

Rate the risk before relying on the proposed response.

Use current evidence

Consider the cause, event, objective, available data and uncertainty in the assessment. Record why the owner chose the rating.

Portal case

A sample shows frequent identifier errors. R-01 is initially rated likelihood 3, impact 4 and score 12 under the agreed convention.

Prioritise attention

Use the rating alongside urgency, detectability, dependencies and authority. An important trigger tomorrow can matter more than a similar score months away.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Record the evidence supporting one initial rating.

Assign an accountable owner

A register needs someone who can manage the uncertainty and seek decisions.

Define the role

The risk owner monitors exposure and coordinates the response. Action owners may carry out specific tasks. Confirm their capability, capacity and authority.

Portal case

The migration lead owns R-01. The data analyst prepares a representative file, and the supplier tests the import. A material readiness trade-off goes through project governance.

Avoid nominal ownership

Naming the project manager for every risk can conceal the people best placed to act. Agree the responsibility with the actual owner.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Name a risk owner and a separate action owner where useful.

Select a response that changes the situation

A response needs a mechanism, not only a hopeful verb.

Choose the approach

Consider suitable avoidance, reduction, transfer or acceptance for threats and appropriate actions for opportunities. Include response cost and remaining responsibilities.

Portal case

For R-01, cleanse identifiers, test a sample early and agree a correction route. These actions reduce the chance and effect of rejected learners.

Check feasibility

Confirm resources, authority, timing and whether the response creates secondary risks. “Monitor” alone may not address a risk requiring preventive action.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Explain how your chosen response changes likelihood or impact.

Add triggers and contingency actions

The owner should know when the next response is required.

Define the signal

Use a measurable condition or decision point that tells the team to act. Connect it with a response owner and sufficient lead time.

Portal case

If the agreed sample import still fails by the readiness checkpoint, escalate the migration option and consider a smaller authorised pilot population.

Prepare the alternative

A fallback needs enough preparation to be credible. Decide what can be changed, by whom and with what effect on the objectives.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write a trigger, action and decision deadline for one risk.

Assess residual exposure

A planned response and a verified improvement are different states.

State the assumption

Estimate the remaining exposure after the response, making the basis clear. Reassess from evidence when actions are implemented.

Portal case

The team expects likelihood to fall from 3 to 2 while impact remains 4, giving a planned residual score of 8. A successful representative test is needed to support that expectation.

Track the evidence

Mark response implementation separately from closing the risk. The risk may remain relevant through the final migration even after the sample test passes.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the evidence required before reducing a rating.

Three worked register entries

Use short records that link the statement with a practical next step.

R-01 / Data import

Inconsistent identifiers may cause rejected learners and delay readiness. Owner: migration lead. Initial score: 12. Response: cleanse and test a representative file before the readiness decision.

R-02 / Supplier access

Late test credentials may block integration. Owner: supplier coordinator. Next action: confirm the access date and fallback contact. Link the expected handoff to the schedule.

R-03 / Adoption opportunity

A prepared champion network may speed staff adoption and reduce support demand. Owner: training lead. Next action: run a small champion trial and inspect the feedback.

ID	Owner	Next evidence
R-01	Migration lead	Representative import
R-02	Supplier coordinator	Access confirmation
R-03	Training lead	Champion trial

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Create a linked record with an owner, action and next review for each entry.

Run a useful risk review

Review should result in changed understanding, action or a decision.

Prepare the evidence

Ask owners for new facts, action progress, trigger status and changed exposure. Focus on material and time-sensitive items rather than reading every row aloud.

Portal case

The import test passed, but access credentials remain unconfirmed. R-01's assessment may change while R-02 needs an earlier escalation decision.

Record the outcome

Update ratings where justified, capture authorised actions and dates, and link current issues. Close the meeting with clear owners and required decisions.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose the three entries that most need discussion this week.

Handle realised risks and linked issues

When an event happens, the project needs a current response.

Update the state

Record what happened, the effect and immediate actions through issue management. Preserve the original risk history and reassess remaining uncertainty.

Portal case

Credentials do not arrive and integration is now blocked. Open the current issue, activate the agreed contact route and update the schedule forecast.

Avoid duplicate confusion

Link the issue and risk rather than leaving inconsistent versions. New uncertainties about the fallback may need their own assessment.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Trace a realised event to an issue owner and a current decision.

Report and escalate proportionately

Decision makers need the exposure and options relevant to their authority.

Use a focused summary

Explain the objective affected, current evidence, possible consequence, response options, owner and timing. Include the decision required rather than only a score.

Portal case

The pilot may need a smaller release if access remains late. Present the effect on benefits, readiness, costs and remaining risks to the relevant approver.

Keep status honest

A lower score should come from changed evidence or a justified assessment, not pressure to make the report greener. Keep the basis traceable.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write a short escalation that asks for a specific decision.



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Your risk-register desk check

A useful register connects the project objectives with active management.

Check the entry

Can the reader identify the uncertain event, effect, evidence, owner, response, action and trigger? Are ratings and units defined?

Check the cycle

Are actions reviewed, residual assumptions tested and realised events linked to issues? Are escalation and closure based on evidence and authority?

Use the portal case

The register helps the team test data, secure access and learn about adoption before major commitments. Its value is in those decisions and actions.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Review one entry from statement through response evidence and next decision.