

The History of Project Management

Project management, in its modern form, began to take root only a few decades ago. Starting in the early 1960s, businesses and other organizations began to see the benefit of organizing work around projects and to understand the critical need to communicate and integrate work across multiple departments and professions.

The Early Years: Late 19th Century

We can travel back further, though, to the latter half of the 19th century and to the rising complexities of the business world to see how project management evolved from management principles. Large-scale government projects were the impetus for making important decisions that became management decisions. In this country, the first large organization was the transcontinental railroad, which began construction in the early 1870s. Suddenly, business leaders found themselves faced with the daunting task of organizing the manual labor of thousands of workers and the manufacturing and assembly of unprecedented quantities of raw material.

Early 20th Century Efforts

Near the turn of the century, Frederick Taylor (1856–1915) began his detailed studies of work. He applied scientific reasoning to work by showing that labor can be analyzed and improved by focusing on its elementary parts. He applied his thinking to tasks found in steel mills, such as shoveling sand and lifting and moving parts. Before then, the only way to improve productivity was to demand harder and longer hours from workers. The inscription on Taylor's tomb in Philadelphia attests to his place in the history of management: "the father of scientific management."

Taylor's associate, Henry Gantt (1861–1919), studied in great detail the order of operations in work. His studies of management focused on Navy ship construction during WWI. His Gantt charts, complete with task bars and milestone markers, outline the sequence and duration of all tasks in a process. Gantt chart diagrams proved to be such a powerful analytical tool for managers that they remained virtually unchanged for nearly a hundred years. It wasn't until the early 1990s that link lines were added to these task bars depicting more precise dependencies between tasks.

Taylor, Gantt, and others helped evolve management into a distinct business function that requires study and discipline. In the decades leading up to WWII, marketing approaches, industrial psychology, and human relations began to take hold as integral parts of business management.

Mid-20th Century Efforts

After WWII, the complexities of projects and a shrinking war-time labor supply demanded new organizational structures. Complex network diagrams called PERT charts and the critical path method were introduced, giving managers greater control over massively engineered and extremely complex projects (such as military weapon systems with their huge variety of tasks and numerous interactions at many points in time).

Soon these techniques spread to all types of industries as business leaders sought new management strategies and tools to handle their growth in a quickly changing and competitive world. In the early 1960s, general system theories of science began to be applied to business interactions. Richard Johnson, Fremont Kast, and James Rosenzweig described in their book *The Theory and Management of Systems* how a modern business is like a human organism, with a skeletal system, a muscular system, circulatory system, nervous system, and so on.

Today

This view of business as a human organism implies that in order for a business to survive and prosper, all of its functional parts must work in concert toward specific goals, or projects. In the following decades, this approach toward project management began to take root in its modern forms. While various business models evolved during this period, they all shared a common underlying structure (especially for larger businesses): that the project is managed by a project manager, who puts together a team and ensures the integration and communication of the workflow horizontally across different departments.