

The Concept Research Program  
**Front-end Management of Major Projects**

# It is about winning or loosing, not only how to play the game

By Nils O.E. Olsson

*Front-end as key to project success*

The front-end phase of a project commences when the project idea is conceived—and it ends when the final decision to finance the project is made (Samsset 2001). The main aim of front-end management is to get the strategic perspective right. As shown by the figure, the potential to reduce possible additional and amendment costs during implementation and also to increase the projects long-term utility is higher in the front-end phase than during implementation.

*Winning or loosing—playing the right game, doing the right project*

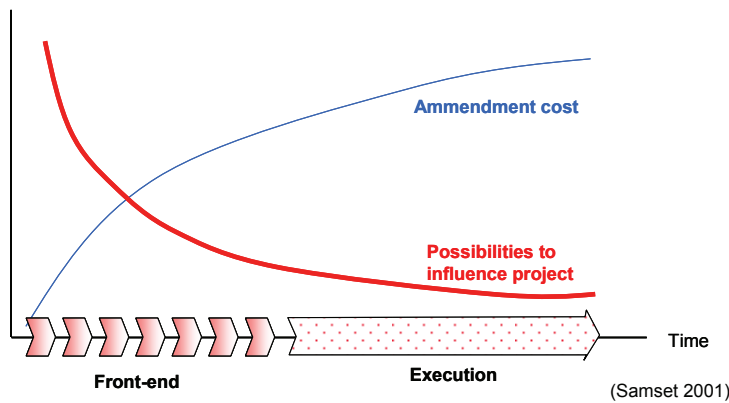
It is organizations that win or loose in the long run, not projects. Projects are means of achieving strategic goals of organizations. A strategic perspective on project management means to emphasize the link between projects and strategic objectives of the organization. Winning or loosing is as much about doing the right projects, as it is about doing them right, which has been the traditional focus in project management.

analyses of the consequences of an already given alternative, rather than “upstream” assessment of alternative concepts as seen in relation to needs and priorities.

*Is front-end project management?*

The discussion on focus in project management is also related to how “project management” is defined. PMI (2004) defines project management as “the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements” (PMI, 2004, p. 368). In this terminology, project management is aimed at meeting project requirements and project management does not include validating that project requirements are aligned with overall organizational objectives.

Front-end management issues have been largely left to other disciplines than project management. In doing so, project management as a both an academic and practitioners field leave a key success factor for projects in the hands of others.



**References**

Olsson, N.O.E. & Samsset, K. 2006. 'Front-End Management, Flexibility and Project Success'. PMI Research Conference, 17-19 July 2006, Montreal, Canada.

Project Management Institute. (2004). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge (PMBOK® guide)* (3rd ed.). Newtown Square, PA: Author.

Samsset, K. 2001. *Prosjektvurdering i tidligfasen - Fokus på konseptet*. Tapir akademisk forlag, Trondheim.

*How to do a project right— how to play the game*

As pointed out by Olsson and Samsset (2006), it is a paradox that textbooks in project management, as well as curricula in project management lectured in universities, tend to restrict their focus on the more detailed planning and implementation phase where the potential for major improvements are more marginal in relative terms. Project management is presented as the art of how to do a project right—how to play the game.

*Known but not always practiced*

It is well known that decisions made in the concept definition phase tend to have the largest impact on the final effect of the project. In spite of this, too little is done to ensure that these decisions are firmly based on analysis. Many projects are initiated based a preconceived idea of the technical solution to the problem at hand. Initial ideas remain largely unchallenged and turn out to become the selected project concept. A predominant tradition is to apply “down-stream”

**Project management leave a key success factor for projects to others**

The Concept Research Program

Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
 Dept. of Civil and Transport Engineering  
 NO-7491, Trondheim, Norway

Phone: +47 73594601  
 Fax: +47 73597021  
 E-mail: nils.olsson@ntnu.no  
 www.concept.ntnu.no