

**Development of a Method to Improve the Definition and Alignment
of Intangible Project Outcomes with Tangible Project Outputs**

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Kersti Nogeste

B.App.Sc., Dip.Ed., M.Bus.

Graduate School of Business
RMIT Business
RMIT University
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Summary

The research study described in this dissertation was prompted by a preliminary study comprising a literature review and interviews with a mixed sample of fifteen experienced project managers, program managers and project sponsors which identified two key points. Firstly, that the delivery (or even acknowledgement) of intangible project outcomes was considered a ‘point of difference’ between good and better project managers (and projects) and secondly, that intangible project outcomes could be directly related to tangible project outputs, despite the absence of a known clear method for doing so. This led to the research idea of *how to improve the way in which project stakeholders define and align intangible project outcomes, with tangible project outputs.*

A further detailed literature review identified that intangibles are of increasing strategic importance to organisations and therefore that it can be expected that the importance of intangibles will cascade from an organisation's strategy through to its projects, in terms of both outcomes and outputs. Therefore the delivery of an organisation's strategy and the benefits expected of intangibles will be dependent upon project stakeholders developing a consistent means of identifying, prioritising and defining intangible project outcomes and their aligned tangible project outputs. The literature review identified that no such method existed.

The author responded to the anticipated need for such a method by planning and conducting an action research study which addressed the dual imperatives of research and problem-solving via a series of five action research cycles, commencing with two exploratory action research cycles. During the course of the action research cycles, the method for identifying and defining intangible outcomes evolved from individual project stakeholders identifying and defining intangible project outcomes during structured interviews, through stakeholder groups identifying and defining intangible project outcomes during structured group interviews, to finally, a workshop based method for key project stakeholders to collaboratively identify and define intangible project outcomes. In parallel, the documentation of intangible project outcomes evolved from a set of individual/group interview records through to a set of collaboratively defined outcome profiles supplemented by a table cross-referencing intangible project outcomes to tangible outputs.

The first of the two exploratory action research cycles resulted in the problem being solved without satisfying the research interest. The second exploratory action research cycle resulted in the problem being partially solved without satisfying the research interest. Therefore, the

first two exploratory action research cycles resulted in the combined research and problem solving action steps being substantially revised prior to the start of action research cycle 3. These exploratory action research results are consistent with the action research literature, which suggests that action researchers should not expect immediate and substantial success from their initial stages of reflection.

Action research cycles 3, 4 and 5 resulted in both the research interest and problem solving projects being successfully addressed, with these qualitative results further validated by qualitative and quantitative validation exercises. The two qualitative validation exercises comprised the author being invited 1) to integrate the results action research cycle 4 into an existing health promotion planning approach and to conduct a half-day educational workshop for health service providers; and 2) to be a speaker at an Australian state police force senior management conference and to assist with the planning and delivery of conference workshops during which attendees applied the author's method for identifying, prioritising and defining intangible project outcomes. Quantitative validation was undertaken by conducting pre- and post-workshop surveys at the police force conference. Comparison of the pre- and post-workshop survey results indicated a statistically significant shift in workshop attendees' confidence of the author's original method for identifying, prioritising and defining intangible project outcomes; a result attributed to attendees' participation in the workshops. Other validation evidence is provided by the author having a number of peer-reviewed journal articles based on the research findings accepted for publication along with feedback from numerous conference and seminar papers presented in Australia and overseas.

The research study described in this dissertation will advance general management and project management research and practice by providing organisations with an improved method for delivering strategic outcomes aligned to intangible project outcomes and tangible project outputs; by making the intangible tangible, linking project stakeholders' outcomes based perspective with the project manager and project team's outputs based perspective. The dissertation in itself is a "how-to" guide.

Key limitations of the research study include:

- The sample of problem-solving projects comprising five public sector projects of similar complexity and pace conducted by Australian state government departments and agencies from late 2002 through to late 2003;

- The research study focusing on expected positive intangible outcomes, not including expected negative intangible outcomes or expected positive or negative tangible outcomes;
- No distinction being made between direct and indirect expected outcomes;
- The scope of the research study being limited to planning the delivery of intangible outcomes only, and not addressing the latter project stages of execution and close-out;
- The research study not including the definition of tangible project outcomes and their aligned tangible project outputs;
- The author being the sole facilitator and scribe for all action research cycle interviews, meetings and workshops; and
- The groups of problem solving project stakeholders primarily comprising people responsible for delivering project outcomes, rather than receiving project outcomes.

These limitations provide opportunities for further related research, including:

- Using the method developed by this research study to identify, prioritise and define combinations of expected positive and negative tangible and intangible outcomes;
- Applying the method to different types of projects – different in terms of how well project goals/methods are defined and/or in terms of project novelty, complexity, technological uncertainty and pace;
- Further refining the method to differentiate the definition of direct and indirect expected outcomes;
- Integrating the method developed by this research study with established evaluation practices;
- Repeating the research study with private sector projects; and
- Expanding the groups of problem solving project stakeholders to include both ‘outcome deliverers’ and outcome recipients.

Key words: Intangibles, Project Management, Outcomes, Outputs, Action Research