Project Management Process and Lifecycle

The **project management process** turns an idea into a finished project in five phases. This free guide covers the **project management lifecycle**, step-by-step **project planning steps** and proven **project management best practices**, with a **free PDF** checklist to download.

What is the project management process?

The **project management process** is the repeatable sequence of activities a team follows to take a piece of work from first request to formal sign-off. It answers practical questions in a fixed order: should we do this, how will we do it, who does what, are we on track, and is it truly finished?

Having a defined process matters more than the exact version you choose. When every project follows the same path, the team knows which documents to prepare, which approvals to seek and which numbers to report. New staff learn faster, clients see a consistent standard and managers can compare jobs fairly because they are measured the same way.

Most organisations describe the process as a lifecycle of five phases. The phases overlap in real life, and monitoring runs alongside execution rather than after it, but the structure gives everyone a shared language for where a project stands.

Who runs the process? On a small team it is often the owner or a senior engineer wearing a project manager hat. The role is less about authority and more about keeping the plan current, making sure decisions are recorded and raising problems early. The process gives that person a routine to follow, so the job does not depend on heroics.

The project management lifecycle: 5 phases

The **project management lifecycle** groups the work into five phases. Each ends with a clear output that the next phase depends on, which is why skipping a phase almost always causes problems later.

Small projects pass through the same five phases, just faster. A two-week installation job may finish initiation in a single phone call and planning in an afternoon, but the questions are identical: is the job worth taking, what exactly is included, who will do it, how will we know it is slipping and when is it truly done? Treat the phases as a thinking checklist rather than a heavy set of forms, and scale the paperwork to the size and risk of the job.

□ **1. Initiation** – confirm the business need, outline the goal, estimate value and rough cost, identify the client and sponsor, and get approval to proceed. Output: a project charter or an approved project record.

□ **2. Planning** – define scope in detail, build the work breakdown, set milestones and dates, estimate costs and margin, assign roles, and agree how risks and changes will be handled. Output: a baselined project plan.

□ **3. Execution** – the team does the work: purchasing materials, building, designing, coding or delivering services, while the manager coordinates people and keeps the client informed. Output: completed deliverables.

□ **4. Monitoring and control** – compare actual progress, dates and costs with the plan, flag overdue items, approve or reject changes, and take corrective action early. Output: status reports and decisions.

□ **5. Closure** – obtain client acceptance, issue the final invoice, archive documents, release the team and record lessons learned. Output: a signed-off, fully billed project.

Project planning steps

Planning is the phase that decides whether the rest goes smoothly. The ten **project planning steps** below work for a small fit-out job and a large engineering contract alike; only the level of detail changes. Complete them in order, because each step uses the answer from the one before.

Keep the output short. For most small and mid-sized jobs the finished plan fits on two or three pages: a scope statement, a milestone table with dates and amounts, a cost estimate, a list of owners and a handful of key risks. A plan that nobody reads is no better than having no plan at all.

□ **1. Define the goal** – write one or two sentences describing the outcome and how success will be measured.

□ **2. Agree the scope** – list what is included and, just as importantly, what is excluded.

□ **3. Identify stakeholders** – note the client, sponsor, reviewers, approvers and anyone affected by the work.

□ **4. Break down the work** – split the scope into deliverables and smaller work packages.

□ **5. Set milestones** – choose the key checkpoints, give each a due date and, where relevant, a share of the contract value.

□ **6. Build the schedule** – sequence activities, note dependencies and find the critical path.

□ **7. Estimate costs** – add up labour, materials, subcontractors and overheads, then check the margin against the contract value.

□ **8. Assign roles** – give every deliverable an owner and agree who approves what.

□ **9. Plan for risks** – list likely problems, their impact and the response you will take.

□ **10. Baseline and communicate** – get the plan approved, freeze it as the baseline and share it with the team and client.

Project management best practices

Methods and templates help, but projects succeed because of habits. These ten **project management best practices** come up again and again in teams that deliver on time and on budget, whatever their industry.

None of them requires expensive tools or certification. They are simple disciplines that a team of three can apply as easily as a department of fifty. Introduce two or three at a time, make them routine, then add the next.

□ **Write the scope down** – a one-page scope prevents most later arguments with the client.

□ **Get approval before starting** – a formal review step catches unrealistic dates and prices early.

□ **Plan in milestones, not just tasks** – milestones show real progress and can link directly to payments.

- ☐ **Keep one source of truth** – store the plan, documents and status in one shared system.
- ☐ **Review progress weekly** – a short, regular check is better than a long monthly crisis meeting.
- ☐ **Track cost alongside schedule** – a project can be on time and still lose money.
- ☐ **Control changes formally** – record every change request with its effect on cost and dates.
- ☐ **Make overdue items visible** – highlight them on a dashboard so nobody can miss them.
- ☐ **Bill as you go** – invoice each completed milestone promptly to protect cash flow.
- ☐ **Close properly** – collect sign-off, archive files and hold a short lessons-learned review.

Common mistakes to avoid

The most frequent failure is starting execution before planning is finished. Teams under pressure jump straight into the work, then discover halfway through that the scope was never agreed, the budget did not cover materials or the client expected a different result. A few hours of planning saves weeks of rework.

Other common mistakes are quieter. Plans are made once and never updated, so the schedule on the wall bears no relation to reality. Progress is reported as a vague percentage with no evidence behind it. Small change requests are accepted verbally and never priced. And projects drift on without a formal close, so the last invoice is delayed for months.

The fix for nearly all of these is the same: a written plan approved before work starts, a weekly review against that plan, and a shared record where changes, costs and progress are logged as they happen rather than reconstructed from memory at the end.

- ☐ Skipping initiation and approval
- ☐ No written scope or exclusions
- ☐ Tracking dates but ignoring cost and margin
- ☐ Accepting unrecorded scope changes
- ☐ Leaving the final invoice and sign-off until "later"
- ☐ Reporting progress as a guess instead of completed milestones

How software supports each phase

A spreadsheet can hold a plan, but it rarely follows a project through all five phases. Dedicated software keeps one record from start to finish. In Catalystk, for example, initiation and approval map to a project that moves from Draft to Submit to Planned or Active with reviewers and approvers. Planning uses milestones with due dates, percentages and amounts, shown on a timeline, which is covered in detail on our free project planning software page. The contract document is uploaded to the project, so the agreed scope is always one click away.

During execution and control, the project dashboard shows work done, days left, overdue milestones, invoiced and to-bill amounts, while a linked cost estimate shows total cost and margin, explained on the free project cost tracking software page. At closure, the last milestone is billed through tax invoicing and the records can be exported to Excel and PDF. The whole module is free; see the free project management software overview.

Free download: project management process checklist (PDF)

Keep the process in front of your team with our **free PDF** checklist. It lists the outputs of every lifecycle phase, the ten planning steps and the best practices as tick boxes you can print or share at the start of each new job.

Pair it with our free project plan template to write the plan itself, and the free project status report template to report progress during monitoring and control. Used together, the checklist, plan and status report give even a very small team a complete, lightweight project management process without any special training.

Frequently asked questions

What are the 5 phases of the project management lifecycle?
The five phases are initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and control, and closure. Initiation approves the idea, planning sets scope, schedule and budget, execution delivers the work, monitoring compares progress with the plan, and closure secures sign-off and the final payment.

What are the steps in project planning?
Define the goal, agree the scope, identify stakeholders, break down the work, set milestones, build the schedule, estimate costs, assign roles, plan for risks, then baseline and share the plan. Each step relies on the output of the one before it.

What is the difference between the project management process and lifecycle?
The lifecycle names the phases a project passes through. The process describes the activities, documents and decisions inside those phases. In practice the terms are used together: the lifecycle is the map, and the process is how your team moves along it.

What are the most important project management best practices?
Write the scope down, approve projects before starting, plan with milestones, keep one shared record, review progress weekly, track cost as well as dates, control changes formally, bill completed milestones promptly and close every project with sign-off and a lessons review.

Which phase of the project lifecycle is most important?
Every phase matters, but planning has the greatest influence on the outcome. Errors in scope, schedule or cost estimates made during planning become far more expensive to fix once execution has started and materials, people and money are committed.

Is the project management process checklist free to download?
Yes. The checklist is a free PDF download on this page, with no sign-up needed. It covers the five lifecycle phases, the ten planning steps and the best practices in a printable format you can reuse on every project.

Read online: https://www.catalystk.com/project-management-process