

Want to learn how to ensure project management is aligned with your organisation's strategic goals? Our programme on **project management** might be just the one for you. For more information, get in touch with [mario.vanhoucke@vlerick.com](mailto:mario.vanhoucke@vlerick.com)



## Project Management WHY TAKE IT SERIOUSLY?

Interview with Mario Vanhoucke and Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez

This interview is published on [www.vlerick.com](http://www.vlerick.com)

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Project management awareness and good project managers are critical to the success of today's organisations. But this where too many fall short. Mario Vanhoucke is professor at Vlerick Business School, University College London and Ghent University. His research focuses on project management using earned value management. Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez is director of the program management office at GlaxoSmithKline. He is a lecturer in project management at Vlerick as well as professor and visiting professor at Duke CE and Instituto de Empresa. They draw on their complementary backgrounds to explain why project management is important and why organisations should invest in the development of project management skills and capabilities.

### Projects are everywhere

“Project management is a set of tools and techniques used by organisations to create value, to implement changes and to solve problems,” says Antonio. “It’s a profession. But it’s also a core skill in our lives. We deal with projects from an early age onwards – learning to ride a bike, going to university, building a house, planning our wedding etc. The same holds for organisations: any change they want to implement, new products or services they want to launch, markets they want to enter ... these are all projects and they must be managed.” Mario nods in agreement. “Project management is a broad concept indeed. It encompasses managerial aspects such as leadership, motivation and stakeholder management as well as quantitative aspects such as planning, risk analysis, monitoring and control. And while the managerial aspects are no less important, the quantitative

aspects are precisely what sets it apart from general management.”

### More important than ever

“Organisations need to constantly evolve and innovate. Without projects, they wouldn’t be able to survive,” Antonio says adamantly. “So, they need to invest in project management skills and capabilities.” Mario explains why this is more important than ever: “Things are becoming increasingly short-lived. Projects, by definition, have a finite life span, with a beginning and an end, and this life span gets ever shorter. Careers shorten as well – people seem to prefer to work on a project basis as it were. Today’s dynamic environment, where anything can change from one day to the next, calls for a project-based approach. Projects used to be the realm of IT and engineering, but not anymore.”

## Project Management Why take it seriously?

### Experience, training and best practices

What makes someone a good project manager? Antonio: “First of all you need experience and maturity. It’s difficult to take on the role of project manager if you’re fresh from college. The job requires lots of communication, convincing, and networking. You can’t sell a project to C-level executives unless you’re confident and understand how it ties in with your organisation’s business and strategy. Second, you need proper training. Project management isn’t something you learn in high school and only few masters programmes teach it. And third, you should follow best practices, which are similar in any industry, i.e. build a business case, develop a plan, align the stakeholders etc., and execute the project in a disciplined, step-wise fashion.”

### Intuition or big data?

Mario picks up on Antonio’s last point. “So you need to know how to develop a good plan and understand its purpose. That’s one of the reasons why in our programmes we don’t focus on a specific methodology, such as Prince2, PMBOK or Agile. More important than the method are the fundamental principles behind it and understanding why they are important. When should you intervene? Most people will answer ‘when something goes wrong’. But a three-week delay at some stage can be perfectly acceptable if it doesn’t jeopardise the final deadline or budget. It’s also important to realise that project management – monitoring, risk analysis etc. – is not about intuition or gut feeling. It’s about statistics, about measuring performance and analysing the impact of deviations. It’s about knowing when a deviation is a problem.” He pauses, then adds: “Mind you, the developments in big data and analytics have had a hugely positive impact on the quantitative aspects of project management. If you want to use a decision support system to monitor your project, you need statistical data.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

### In line with your strategy

Project-based working radically differs from other work methods. Just like its opposites of routine work and improvising, project management has its characteristics and challenges of its own. These days, project management is no longer solely considered as a set of static planning techniques. Focus is shifting toward other aspects such as dynamic planning and control, coaching and directing project teams and optimal structuring of projects. This programme offers a clear focus on the business practice and guarantees a positive impact on your projects.

This 4-day programme focuses on the essentials of proper project management practices: project and portfolio management, planning, scheduling and team management.

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Until five years ago precious few organisations had access to such information. That much has changed.”

### Pitfalls to avoid

What are the typical challenges project managers face? “There are plenty, but let me name three,” says Antonio. “First, stay focused. Organisations should set clear priorities to avoid a proliferation of projects, while as a project manager you shouldn’t have to try to juggle too many different projects at the same time. It’s also important that you speak the same language as your stakeholders. Marketing directors aren’t interested in the details of the plan to set up a new CRM system, they want to know how it will benefit the business. And finally, some project managers are good at managing the plan, but they fail to keep their sponsors on track. Project management is as much about managing the project as it’s about managing your boss.”

Mario smiles: “And, at the risk of repeating myself, another challenge is to balance the managerial and quantitative aspects. The analytics provide you with a sound basis to help you convince your stakeholders. I work with project managers at CERN in Switzerland. They’re great people managers, but they also manage their multimillion dollar research projects in an extremely

quantitative, analytical way. What they do is a textbook example of integrated project management and control.”

### Shared responsibility

“Project management isn’t a task for project managers alone, the entire organisation needs to be project-minded,” Antonio points out. “This means project sponsors and senior management would benefit from training as well. Project sponsor isn’t just a name on a project initiation document. Sponsors and senior management need to dedicate sufficient time. In a recent study by Forbes half of the participants stated that strategic projects fail due to a lack of buy-in and understanding from key stakeholders.”

