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Book review—Radical Project Management

[Tanuj Vohra](#)

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from the Rational Edge: Vohra reviews a book that explains the complexities of managing time-sensitive projects in rapidly changing environments, and suggests tools project managers should use to manage those complexities.

by Rob Thomsett

Prentice Hall, 2002

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348 Pages

What do project managers really do? Most team members don't know. A developer friend of mine used to describe her project manager as "unnecessary overhead"—a person who did nothing constructive except schedule meetings, nag people to get their work done and keep up the quality, and caution them of the risks involved in delivering a feature. In her view, the project manager was just one more impediment to getting the product ready for release on time.

However, her perspective quickly began to change when she found herself leading a new, strategic project for her company that had engineering teams spread across three continents and rapidly changing requirements. During the first three months her team prototyped a set of features that no one would sign off on. Six months later, new requirements were still coming in, and there was a new set of stakeholders, each with different notions about the delivery schedule and feature list. Everywhere she turned, there were chaos, confusion, failed expectations, unhappy managers, and — most important — low employee morale. She tried using traditional project management techniques, such as detailed project and resource allocation plans, but they didn't help much. Clearly, she needed something more radical. And then she found this book.

In this book Rob Thomsett crystallizes his group's more than twenty-five years of experience working with more than 20,000 project managers into a new approach to project management that he calls "eXtreme Project Management (XPM)." XPM defines a new approach to measuring project success and progress that encompasses scope and objectives, project risks, team satisfaction, stakeholders, sponsors, managers, and more.

The book is structured into three distinct parts. The first part, on basic concepts, discusses the evolution of project

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management and the need for XPM. According to Thomsett, traditional project management (TPM) focuses on *content* — the ultimate product that the team expects to create through their development effort. This focus is ill-suited for today’s development environment, in which the only real constant is change. In contrast, XPM focuses on the *context* (the managerial, political, and social environment of the project). The context includes several stages: project planning, implementation, post-implementation review, project support, and benefits realization. According to XPM, the effective management of a project requires a balance between, and integration of, the content and the context.

A focus on Rapid Application Development (RAD)

The second part of the book details the XPM process and discusses complementary tools. Beyond the traditional project management processes — project justification, approval and review, project planning, project tracking and reporting — Thomsett introduces additional XPM processes. The most important of these is Rapid Planning (RAP) sessions. Thomsett dedicates much of the book to discussing these sessions, including a chapter on each of their structural components.

According to Thomsett, a successful application of RAP requires completing the following activities:

- Define what “success” means for the project.
- Determine the project scope and objectives.
- Analyze potential benefits and define how to achieve them.
- Define quality requirements.
- Select a project development strategy.
- Analyze project risks.
- Develop a project task list.
- Estimate the effort and costs associated with tasks/projects.
- Develop a project schedule.
- Allocate people to each task.
- Estimate total costs and return on investment.
- Create a project business case.

He discusses each of these process activities in detail, using actual cases as examples, and provides tools to assist with the activities. These include “success sliders” (used to gain consensus among stakeholders regarding project success), risk analysis spreadsheets, and process checklists.

He also lays out XPM rules throughout the book — simple, common sense principles that project managers often tend to ignore. Here are a few of my favorites:

- The less the project manager knows about the technical details, the better (I’ve taken this one to heart; my standard reply when my boss asks me anything is that I don’t have an answer!).
- No sponsor, no project.
- If your project hasn’t changed, be afraid — very afraid.

Part three provides advanced tips and tools for project management, as well as discussions of issues such as ethics, project sponsorship, negotiation, and communication.

A reference for all project players

My friend benefited greatly from applying the concepts in this book. She found herself a sponsor for the project who was clearly able to define success, rein in requirements, help estimate costs, and create a business case. She then followed the RAP process, getting the team to help her identify risks, formulate a development strategy, and estimate costs. Finally, she got the team's buy-in on quality and the project schedule. She then adjusted the project schedule with management approval, and the team was able to meet deadlines while maintaining product quality.

This is a great book not just for project managers, but also for everyone else associated with a project: sponsors, business analysts, stakeholders, IT professionals, developers, and even customers. It can provide them with an excellent understanding of the complexities involved in managing time-sensitive projects in today's rapidly-changing environments, and of the tools project managers should use to anticipate and manage these complexities. Although most of the examples focus on the high-tech industry, they are applicable to other industry sectors as well.

A serious shortcoming of the book is that it mentions good points about the waterfall model, along with fast track prototyping and agile methods. But there's no mention of the highly effective iterative approach inherent in the industry-leading IBM Rational Unified Process® (RUP®). Nevertheless, this book can serve as an excellent reference and provide instant value to project managers.

About the author



Software engineering manager Tanuj Vohra manages IBM Rational's PurifyPlus family of runtime-analysis tools. He is also keenly interested in management and leadership development practices. Before joining Rational as a software engineer in 1997, he held positions at Citibank, N.A., and Computer Maintenance Corporation, India. He earned a bachelors degree in computer science and engineering before leaving India, and then a masters degree in computer science from Michigan Technological University.



What do you think of this document?

Killer! (5)

Good stuff (4)

So-so; not bad (3)

Needs work (2)

Lame! (1)

Comments?