PM World *Journal*
Vol. VIII, Issue IX – October 2019
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Creatures that slow down portfolio delivery
and how to kill them
by Marisa Silva and
Henny Portman

Creatures that slow down portfolio delivery and how to kill them[1]

Marisa Silva and Henny Portman

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations struggle to finish their projects on time, on budget, and within scope. If you look into their portfolios, one of the first things to notice is the huge number of projects. I remember an organization with more than 600 projects. It was firefighting all over the place. Problems in one project were solved by resources from other projects and as a result the problem project is not at risk anymore (but delayed) and by using resources from other projects, these projects are now at risk too. And this approach was continuously repeated. Furthermore, the portfolio had independent projects delivering the same benefits (on paper) or delivering the same output. 100 percent resource utilization in optima forma and as a result a 'traffic jam' in the portfolio pipeline. After rationalization the final portfolio contained less than 100 projects and all of a sudden it was possible to finish projects and deliver benefits.

Portfolio management helps to solve these kinds of problems. Portfolio Management supports management by answering the following four questions:

1. Are we doing the right projects?
2. Are we doing projects the right way?
3. Are we getting projects done well?
4. Are we getting the business benefits?

In this article we want to focus on these questions by visualizing projects as specific creatures with their own behavior. For example, a pet project is a project that can be seen as a 'pet' or personal favorite from a senior manager and is not contributing to the organization's strategy. This is not the right project (question 1) but by running this project you are absorbing scarce resources and change budget. The sooner this project is killed the better.

For each project creature you get one or more examples to understand the creature, to which question it relates, who must act, and how to kill the project creature or transform the creature into a project that fits in the portfolio.

PROJECT CREATURES

Project creatures out there:

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[1] How to cite this paper: Silva, M. and Portman, H. (2019). Creatures that slow down portfolio delivery and how to kill them; *PM World Journal*, Vol. VIII, Issue IX, October.

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1. <u>**Pet project**</u>

What is it? A project pursued as a personal favorite, rather than because it is generally accepted as necessary or important. Every organization has one of these – it might be the President's last project, the CIO deciding that it's time for a revolution, or even a Mayor dreaming of a library named after him. The projects are their "babies" and they will stop at nothing to have them implemented. Pet projects are a clear example of projects which might not be suitable to the portfolio, thus, they relate question 1 (are we doing the right projects?).

How to kill it? These types of projects are political and highly-emotional, and that is why they are so difficult to kill – they do not represent a rational problem, but instead they are linked to the egos and legacies of those who are trying to leave a mark behind. Unfortunately, most of the time pet projects do not entail real benefits to be achieved (or their business case is simply the result of confirmation bias) and are nothing more than a futile attempt for power games in the organization, wasting useful and often limited resources that would have been better employed in other initiatives. Because most times pet projects are conceived by the sponsors and others at the highest level in the hierarchy, the "whistleblower" needs to be someone independent from the project (or ideally, from the organization), such as a Project Management Office (PMO), or an Assurance or Audit department. However, remember this is not a rational project. Thus, there's no point in coming to the sponsor with rational arguments or metrics, which will prove useless for this project creature. Instead, use a skeptical approach and ask ingenuous questions: "who are the customers of the project?", "what will they gain from the project?", "what does success looks like?". To speak truth to power, speaking to their head is not enough, you need to speak at their heart too.

2. <u>**Watermelon project**</u>

What is it? Watermelon projects, also known as watermelon reporting, refers to projects which are continuously reported as green (or healthy) on the outside but, when you look closer, surprise-surprise…they are red (in trouble) on the inside. The Red-Amber-Green (RAG) approach is a typical and well-established way of reporting the health of projects. However, while it is visually appealing and easy to interpret, reducing the pluralistic reality of a project to a single indicator may result in a loss of reliability over the real situation of the project and lead to such watermelon projects. Moreover, under the principle of management by exception, to present a project as red is almost as an invitation to senior management to dive into the situation, bringing unwanted attention to it, hence why the Project Manager may show a natural reluctance to flag the project as red. Yet, watermelon projects are symptomatic of a bigger problem and suggest that we are not doing projects the right way (question 2) nor getting projects done well (question 3).

How to kill it? Watermelon projects do not arise by chance but are usually a reflection of organizational cultures that promote 'blamestorming' instead of 'brainstorming', in

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this way influencing how facts are reported and risk management is addressed in projects. It is then crucial that the tone is dictated at the highest level from senior management downwards, encouraging transparency in status reports and emphasizing that a "red project" does not necessarily reflect poorly in the project manager but instead should be understood as a cry for help. Another approach that will prevent this project creature from happening is the existence of regular health checks, typically carried out by a PMO. This will ensure that there is continuous visibility over the project and that early warning indicators can be effectively and timely spotted. Finally, you can also consider reporting using multiple indicators rather than relying in just one – this mechanism will enable a richer picture of the project are areas in need of an intervention.

3. <u>Mushroom project</u>

What is it? Can represent a project that pops up out of nowhere or be used to refer to a project kept in the dark. Let us take the first case first: projects that emerge out of thin air and in abundance, just like mushrooms. No one sees them coming, know where they originated or, sometimes, not even who is managing them. Such scenario begs the question "are we doing the right projects?" (question 1) and suggests, not only the absence of strong governance around how projects are initiated and approved, but also a lack of visibility over the overall portfolio of projects of the organization. As for the interpretation of mushroom projects as projects that are kept in the dark, these can also evidence poor visibility (and transparency!), but, more significantly, poor communication from the project manager, where the question "are we getting projects done well?" (question 3) becomes difficult to answer.

How to kill it? If your portfolio contains so many mushroom projects to the point that it is now resembling a forest, the first thing you will want to do is make them visible by producing a portfolio register, an activity of the responsibility of the PMO. You might need to spend some time doing fact-finding of who is responsible for the project, who is the owner, what is its status, etc. but you will then achieve greater visibility and promote better communication. Similarly, to prevent other mushrooms from growing, it is fundamental that you establish a governance process for how project proposals are captured, reviewed, and approved to be initiated as formal projects.

4. <u>Submarine project</u>

What is it? Submarine projects are those projects that only come to the surface when in need or when forced to, such as a stage gate. "No news is good news", the saying goes. However, in the world of project management, not knowing what is going on in a project is never ideal and in fact it is often a sign of trouble, where the project is being neglected, forgotten, or lost priority in the portfolio. If the project is no longer active but still consuming resources, we should pose the questions if we are doing the right projects (question 1) and if we are getting projects done well (question 3).

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How to kill it? Submarine projects are a clear example of lack of visibility but can also suggest a bigger communication and escalation problem. To ensure that submarine projects are traceable in the deep and vast ocean of projects, the PMO can request regular status reports from the project and should engage with the project board and project manager to gain clarity of how the project is progressing.

5. Cockroach project

What is it? As with cockroaches, this project creature never dies no matter your efforts to kill it. This type of projects could also be called super-human projects because when you think the project was finally cancelled, or at least put on hold, it somehow still manages to survive. Cockroach projects suggest that you might not be doing projects the right way (question 2) since your process for killing projects is not robust enough.

How to kill it? A starting point to kill cockroach project is to have a solid stage gate process in place by an assurance body, where projects need to meet certain criteria if they are to progress to the next stage. The stage gate should analyze not just how the project performed in the stage now ending but also how prepared it is to move to the next stage and if, overall, it is still feasible, aligned with the strategic objectives, and desirable. However, most stage gates continue to be a simple lip service exercise and, very often, the gates are always open, with even disastrous projects passing "with recommendations". Thus, if you already have a stage gate process, test how robust it is. Are we really empowered to stop projects or are we just pretending and trusting all will end up well? Perhaps it is now time to demand for executive support.

6. Ghost project

What is it? These are similar to mushroom projects in the sense that nobody knows who the owner is, but the project is still running. Despite the lack of ownership, ghost projects will still come to scare you at night (or at month-end or year-end reviews) when it suddenly becomes clear that there is this immaterial creature that no one is accountable for but is costing the organization a fortune. As ownership and commitment are key to project success and the owner is lacking the question "are we getting projects done well?" (question 3) becomes difficult to answer.

How to kill it? There is great danger in having a project without clear ownership since it means there is no one driving its vision or committed to make it happen. Therefore, no project without a well-defined responsible should be approved to start, as part of the governance processes for project initiation. If the project is already underway, the PMO should force it to go through a stage gate and query senior leadership about it. If someone really cares about the project and if the project is stopped at a stage gate, meaning that resources will no longer be provided, we're certain that someone will suddenly appear to rebel against that decision. The owner is finally uncovered.

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7. Zombie project

What is it? Zombie projects are a variation of cockroach projects, where the project is killed but it still absorbs resources, either human or financial. As zombies, this project creature exists without a clear sense of purpose and is an example of a project that is, simply, not right for the organization (question 1). A zombie project is often caused by a poor termination/closure process and related handover, where housekeeping and knowledge transfer failed (question 3). In such scenarios, elements of the project team may still be asked to assist with open issues and to fill the knowledge gaps, ending up spending their time in an inefficient manner.

How to kill it? If the project has been stopped but is still making use of organizational resources, the best the PMO can do is to show the implications, financial and others, of continuing feeding this project creature. Few things capture the attention of executives as figures, thus, start by making the actual impact of the zombie project implicit. Make no mistake: time is money, and the number of meetings and calls people are being asked to participate do have a cost. Also, it is important that you prevent other zombie projects from occurring. To do so, a termination/closure checklist could be a good prompt to ensure that all the necessary steps were taken and that outstanding issues relating to the project have clear ownership with a resolution date. Walking dead projects should be dead projects.

8. Tsunami project

What is it? Tsunami projects are a destructive type of project creature since they destroy everything in their path. Once in a blue moon, every organization encounters one of these projects – they usually carry the prefix of "strategic" and are deemed as the highest priority in the organization. Not rarely, tsunami projects are confidential and known by just a few people since they might involve a restructure or redesign of the organization. Since this type of projects takes no consideration for other in-flight projects in the organization, suggesting weaknesses in the prioritization process, this begs the question if we are doing projects the right way (question 2) and if we are getting projects done well (question 3).

How to kill it? Tsunami projects should receive the same preparation as real-life tsunamis: alerts should be put in place and a clear plan of action should the project occur. Executives should discuss with portfolio managers (and/or PMO) what the dependencies and implications are, how resources will need to be re-assigned, and what this would mean in terms of de-prioritizing any in-flight projects (damage containment). Additionally, the business case for such tsunami projects needs to stack up on its own and a clear vision for the project needs to be effectively communicated if the tsunami is to lead to change rather than just being perceived as a necessary evil.

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9. <u>**Pufferfish project**</u>

What is it? Pufferfish projects are a very common project creature and refers to projects that look small but, when you get close enough to have a proper look, it expands to four times the size. This type of project tends to exist when the scoping and planning exercise is rushed, lacking a clear scope structure that would enable more accurate estimates to be considered. It can also be an indicator of optimism bias or, if intentionally designed in such way, of strategic misrepresentation in order to get the project approved in the first place. To this respect, question 2 (are we doing projects the right way?) should be asked.

How to kill it? Project managers can avoid pufferfish projects by using the decomposition technique, which breaks down the project's scope into smaller elements, enabling clear ownership and more accurate estimates to be produced. This will ensure that no key area is forgotten and allows for a rough order of magnitude of what the project entails. Other approach that can be used includes the use of parametric models and consultation of subject matter experts and historical databases as to enable reference forecasts. Finally, if you believe your organization has a tendency for being too optimistic about the duration and scale of projects, this is something that can be challenged by a PMO when conducting assurance on the project.

10. <u>**Holy cow project**</u>

What is it? Another variation of cockroach projects, holy cow projects, also known as "sacred cows", are kept alive forever no matter the costs, too highly regarded to be open to criticism or curtailment and therefore never questioned, and often widely appreciated as symbols of continuity and tradition. Consider the case of an annual teambuilding week, for example. This project creature is a cousin of pet projects in the way that often holy cow projects come from the senior leadership and are implemented out of pride and of not wanting to be the one breaking the cycle. For their nature, this project makes us wonder if we are doing the right projects (question 1) or just carrying them out because "we have always done it this way."

How to kill it? As with pet projects, holy cow projects have more emotional than rational ties, thus, they should be addressed with extra care. Because they are rooted in tradition, it is crucial that the PMO or portfolio manager do not challenge the tradition itself as this might cause discomfort but, instead, s/he should challenge the way this project is contributing to the maintenance of the tradition. Could there be a more effective way of achieving the same results at a lower cost?

11. <u>**Peacock project**</u>

What is it? Peacock projects are the exemplary case of vanity. They are launched with much braggadocio and hyperbole, but in the end turn out to be useless follies or bland mundanities. This type of project tends to be institutional and highly political,

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have catchy titles, and usually follows the latest management fashion. Peacock projects are based on inflated expectations and quickly reach disillusionment once the organization realizes what it entails in practice, much marketing but no real change. This type of project caters for question 1 – are we doing the right projects?

How to kill it? The best way to kill a peacock project is through its business case, by ensuring that it contains clear measurable benefits and that it shows a solid justification for the project. It is important that the PMO, or whoever is assuring the project, can read through the lines and make sense of what it entails in practice and the change it will bring. Continuous justification (viable business case) for the project to proceed should then be tested at each stage gate. Similarly, it is important that expectations about the project are realistic, which can be attempted through transparency and effective communication by the project management team.

12. <u>White Elephant project</u>

What is it? White elephant projects are one of the oldest project creatures out there and there are several well-known cases reported for this species with many of them being visible in international, high-profile projects such as the Olympic Games. White elephant projects refer to extremely expensive (usually infrastructure) projects with little or no output/outcome, very often resulting in poor adoption for the deliverables of the project once completed.This type of project caters for question 1 – Are we doing the right projects and question 4 – Are we getting the business benefits?

How to kill it? Projects require a solid feasibility study if they are not to become white elephants. Clarity on why the project is necessary and if benefits surpass costs is essential when the project is still in conception stage. However, it should be noted that it is not enough to just consider implementation costs but also ongoing costs, post-implementation. Indeed, for this project creature, it is essential to start with the end in mind, that is, defining what is going to be the legacy of the project and how it is going to be planned and managed. Such activities are central to effective change management and a change management plan should be drafted by the project management team as early as possible in the project and must be taken into account when deciding to proceed with the project.

13. <u>Prambanan project</u>

What is it? Prambanan projects take their designation from the largest temple compound dedicated to Shiva in Indonesia and, although the name may have been unknown to you till now, you probably encountered some of these projects before. A Prambanan project is one of such urgency that it must be completed in one night, the "I need it yesterday"-type of project. This project creature typically comes as a demand from higher management and is often based in a date provided by the random-deadline-generator. Here we should pose the question if we are doing the right projects (question 1).

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How to kill it? Prambanan projects may carry a false sense of urgency but that does not mean that they should be treated differently from any other project. First, it is important to understand what is driving that urgency – is it really an urgent or just an important project that can be done at any other time? Also, portfolio managers/PMO should analyze the impact of introducing such urgency into the project – if resources are limited, what will happen to the other projects in flight or in pipeline? Can we afford to put all our focus in the Prambanan project or to hire more resources? A grown-up conversation should occur to discuss the implications of such project and, in turn, which projects will need to be stopped, if any. If such implications are not worth the effort, then the project will be better placed on hold.

14. Groundhog Day project

What is it? If you have watched the popular "Groundhog Day" movie, you know what this project creature is about. This is the project that you think you have seen before. It can also refer to projects you are stuck in and can't get out, making it a distant nephew of zombie projects. Groundhog Day projects are a result of organizational amnesia and are often linked to poor knowledge management in the organization. Similar projects might have been executed in the past that would benefit the current project, but there are no survivals left to tell the story and the organization lacks the evidence of lessons and risks logged at the time. Or, equally risky, there are lessons, but these were just documented, not really learned. Typically, a question 1 – are we doing the right projects.

How to kill it? Groundhog Day projects can be killed with effective knowledge transfer. This implies not just documenting lessons throughout the project (rather than when the project is ending and no one remembers a thing or people are just too tired of the project and want to move away!), but also making use of previous lessons. When a project is initiated, the PMO should bring related risks, estimates, lessons from previous projects to the attention of the project manager, in this way providing a platform that avoids a déjà-vu and creates a solid foundation for the project. Likewise, it is important to stress that knowledge management is more than just documenting lessons – there are a myriad of mechanisms you can use for effective knowledge transfer such as communities of practice, case studies, lunch & learn sessions or even a lessons wall. You don't need to be re-living yesterday when instead you can be creating a successful future.

15. The Fake Nose project

What is it? The Fake Nose project refers to a project that is renamed so people can't tell it's the struggling project that we failed to deliver last year. It can also be called a "Chameleon project" since it changes its look to protect itself from threats. This project creature is sadly popular given that, although statistics continue to remind us of project failure, in practice, no project manager or sponsor likes to admit failure – instead, incomplete elements from the project simply become a "phase 2" project. The Fake Nose/Chameleon project follows that same principle; it continues to survive

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but now under a new disguise. If you are facing these kinds of projects you missed the first three questions (Are we doing the right projects, are we doing projects the right way and are we getting projects done well?).

How to kill it? As with Watermelon projects, Fake Noses emerge of an organizational culture that does not acknowledge failure or where failure is perceived as a disaster rather than as an opportunity for learning and growth. Thus, the most effective way to prevent Fake Nose projects from happening is by building a culture where project teams are not afraid of failure. Additionally, changing the project's name or doing a re-branding is rarely enough for sustainable transformation and this is likely to cause more harm than good when it comes to gaining buy-in for the project since people are not fool. Instead, have an honest conversation, show them what was learned from the original project and what you are going to do differently this time to make the project succeed.

16. <u>Octopus project</u>

What is it? An Octopus project refers to a creature that is so deep in the darkness of the ocean that it involves several steering committees that are not aware of each other. Octopus projects tend to exist in organizations with many layers and bodies of governance, in projects that are highly complex in nature and scale, or in projects that are part of programs. Such type of project denotes a lack of integration and can also suggest an excessive governance structure, with unclear roles and redundant responsibilities (Question 2 and/or question 3).

How to kill it? An effective governance structure is essential to cope with Octopus projects and a PMO can play an important role in identifying which governance committees are more appropriate for the project – e.g. does the project really need to have fortnightly meetings with the Design Authority Board or would it be enough for a representative from this group to join the project board? Many projects are overkilled with governance, thus, under the principle of Minimum Viable Bureaucracy (MVB), the PMO together with the sponsor and project manager, should discuss what is the minimum level of governance needed for the project. Moreover, the governance of the project should be documented and made visible to all the project participants as to ensure that everyone is aware of their role, which other entities are supporting the project, and how they fit into the big picture.

17. <u>The Elephant in the Room project</u>

What is it? This is a generic term for many project creatures, such as the Pet project or the White Elephant project. It allures to a project that is known of everyone, is heavy and smelly, but is quietly standing in the corner of the room. This is a taboo project, that is, a project that for some reason people prefer not to talk about, often because they are afraid to. It can also refer to any other unspoken problem which is obvious in the project, such as the known risks that are not being addressed, an underperforming team member, a process that is poorly done, or even more serious matters, like

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corruption in projects. Compare the Abilene paradox as described by Jerry B. Harvey[2]. This creature is covered by question 3 – Are we getting projects done well?

How to kill it? Because perception can be different from reality, the project management team should do a reality check to confirm if there is really an elephant or not. If there is one, then it is important to be straightforward about it and go to the root cause of the problem, not the symptoms. Additionally, depending on the nature of this elephant, it might be appropriate to have a private conversation rather than a public one. After all, people have feelings and it is fundamental that they can openly express how they feel and pass their feedback. Finally, don't let the elephant grow to occupy the full room; instead, address the issue as early as possible in the project.

18. The Unicorn project

What is it? Unicorn projects have a captivating beauty. They are somewhat fantastic and magical… but also untouchable. These type of projects are made of the same material dreams are made of and they are usually born out of blue sky thinking when the C-level goes in a strategy getaway weekend.

How to kill it? Despite their inspired nature, unicorn projects often miss a clear purpose (question 1) and/or a solid implementation plan (question 2). Sure, let's be more agile. But how? Sure, let's have a digital transformation programme. But why? It is therefore important that the feasibility of such projects is carried out in a objective, emotion-free, way that enables the "why" and the "how" of the project to be effectively understood and tested before attempting its execution.

CONCLUSION

If your portfolio is turned into a wasteland full of these project creatures, and you, as a portfolio manager or PMO'er hunts down these creatures you could create a clean portfolio. A clean portfolio is a lean portfolio with less projects, and where there are no duplications, where there is no need for firefighting and where there are no overloaded resources. As a result, the productive organizational energy to deliver your portfolio and the chance for successful portfolio delivery, will increase.

Having a clean and lean portfolio gives you the time to support your organization to do projects in the right way and to get them done well. And if the projects are done well you can start harvesting and getting the business benefits. We wish you a lot of success with your project creature hunting activities!

Acknowledgment: we would like to thank all contributors on LinkedIn for their feedback on the project creatures post and the examples of project creatures they shared.

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abilene_paradox

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