Strategic Program Management (The Uruk) Case Study

Abstreviated Abstract

This case study shows how we used advanced and adaptive project management to lead a strategic initiative (program). We will explain the initiative's business triggers, justification, and strategic alignment. We will share how we divided the vision into stepping stones, where each vision step is a (sub)program. We explain the subdivision of the strategic program into subprograms. Next, we will discuss how we planned each program and identified its projects. Finally, each project is divided into increments and iterations.

Mounir A. Ajam
Founder & CEO
Uruk Project Management

Table of Contents

I.   Setting The Scene

We are writing this paper for a relaxed reading storytelling style! This style is necessary since we explain an entrepreneurial journey with failures and successes. We also cover business and technology startups and project and program management.

A. Abstract

This case study shows how we used advanced and adaptive project management to lead a strategic initiative (program). We will explain the initiative's business triggers, justification, and strategic alignment. We will share how we divided the vision into stepping stones, where each vision step is a (sub)program. We explain the subdivision of the strategic program into subprograms. Next, we will discuss how we planned each program and identified its projects. Finally, each project is divided into increments and iterations.

B. Vital Points

The following are a few vital and relevant points that we will address:

- This case study uses the concepts of rolling wave planning at multiple levels, where we first prepare the strategic program and go deeper as we dive into the subprograms, projects, and increments.
- In this program, we had to be highly adaptive and agile, mainly due to the Pandemic and a team tragedy. We used a practical methodological approach that is a genuine hybrid.
- The program included integrating business aspects with technology, operations, and program management.

Further, we will also explain how this program included the formation of a tech startup and the challenges of funding and product-market fit.

C. What Is This Program?

The strategic initiative is to develop and sustain a pioneering, versatile, and comprehensive digital SaaS Solution. The final solution would be an **Integrated Organizational Solution (IOS)** that we build on a project management foundation.

D. Learning Outcome

- Learn about converting a strategic goal to an initiative to a strategic program.
- Understand how to plan and lead a strategic program (including rolling wave planning).
- Understand how to divide a program into projects and projects into increments/ iterations.
- Learn a genuine hybrid methodological process.
- Become familiar with tech startups, stages of a startup, and their challenges.
- The challenges of a solo entrepreneur and dealing with adversity and tragedy.

- Understand how competent project management is crucial to launch companies and products.
- Finally, understand that a program can include projects and operating initiatives and how to manage both.

E. Definitions[1]

Project

- A Project is a change initiative to create something from scratch or a significant change to something existing!
- It has clearly defined objectives.
- It has a 'project life cycle' covering the project from vision to operations.

Program

- A Program is a group of related projects and associated non-project work.
- The projects are related to a shared business or long-term strategic objective that aligns with the organizational strategic direction, mission, and vision.
- While working on the program, the organization may adjust the projects, such as accelerating or slowing one or more projects. The changes would be driven based on organizational needs and various other factors.
- Each project within the program must deliver some benefits. The projects' benefits are in addition to the collective benefits of the entire program.

Strategic Program

A strategic program is the term we use for significant programs vital for implementing the organization's strategic vision. In the context of this paper, we subdivide this strategic program into (sub)programs.

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[1] Extracted from our book (work in progress) Project Management Guide and Terminology.

II. Vision and History

A. The Evolution Of A Vision

Business Triggers

From 2004 to 2007[2], we delivered numerous project management workshops, primarily for certifications. The common themes from clients' feedback included, but were not limited to, the following:

- "We certified many people, but they still do not know how to manage projects."
- "We understand the project management guides but are still trying to figure out how to apply them to our projects."
- "What is it, and how do we build a project management methodology that aligns with our environment?"
- "How do we define or assess project success?"

The Search For A Solution

The business triggers led us to launch a research and development program to identify the root causes and develop solutions. The work led to various organizational solutions[3] and a methodology, The Customizable and Adaptable Methodology for Managing Projects™ (CAMMP™). Next, our work led to practical workshops using the principles of project-based learning. From these workshops, we improved the organizational solutions and CAMMP™. In parallel, we were working on self-published books on CAMMP™ Version 1 and later 2. Finally, in 2017, CRC Press Published CAMMP™ Version 3 in a book titled Project Management Beyond Waterfall and Agile.

The Initial Solution

With the work mentioned in the previous paragraph, including the workshops and books, colleagues, clients, and friends wished for a software tool or solution based on CAMMP™. We started to explore the idea of developing a simplified, practical website, which we did, but that was not enough. Some asked for an App, but we believed it was too basic and could not meet our expectations.

The Vision

Finally, we launched a technology division with the vision of building and marketing a SaaS (Software as a Service) digital solution. The solution has to be pioneering, comprehensive, versatile, adaptive, and scalable. It has to cover the 4PMs (project, program, product, and portfolio management). That SaaS solution is now the Uruk Platform, and it is our strategic program.

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[2] We continued to deliver training until 2019. However, by 2007, we already have enough info to trigger this initiative.

[3] Including: The Seven Elements of Project Management Maturity, The Four Dimensions of Project Success, and others; https://urukpm.com/the-uruk-way-project-management/.

B. Historical Perspective

The Knowledge Foundation

As mentioned, we started our work in 2007 and continued to enhance it until 2017 with the publication of Project Management Beyond Waterfall and Agile. Since we would build our solution on a project management foundation, it was naturally CAMMP™. Therefore, CAMMP™ Version 3 became the knowledge foundation for the project management element of the Uruk Platform[4]. The program management element also depends on a modified version of CAMMP™ and other resources. For the other platform elements, we can rely on published knowledge and the expertise of our founders, associates, and advisors.

Failed Attempts

This part belongs to the business aspects. However, it is good to share it here.

We tried to launch the strategic program through the technology division. However, our first attempt (2010) and the second attempt (2013-2104) failed.

Our first attempt was when we were operating in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). We needed funding, but our attempts failed, primarily because of our roots as a service company. Although we were launching a technology solution, investors do not fund service companies. We learned that the hard way and shelved the idea. The lessons learned: We should have tried to launch an independent company (a tech startup); maybe that could have helped. However, another contributing factor was that the startup ecosystem was not well developed in the UAE then, so we did not proceed with the startup.

The second attempt was in Lebanon. Lebanon has an Innovation Program supported by the government and the European Union. The program will provide guarantees for a loan with negligible interest rates. We applied and received approval for about $200,000 (in 2013). However, we still had to go through the banks for the money. The banks could not understand project management software or SaaS or our project. Due to this factor and other economic factors – it was a no-go. So, back to the shelf.

Kick-Off

After publishing Project Management Beyond Waterfall and Agile, we received interest in converting CAMMP™ to a digital solution again. This time, we had a potential partner who is a software development expert with extensive experience in project management on the IT/Software Side, and the primary author has significant experience on the industrial/capital projects side. We got enough interest in this initiative, mostly from people who read my book, took classes with me, or followed me online and liked what I shared. They agreed to provide initial funding (friends, family, colleagues), and we proceeded with this strategic program. In June 2019, we registered the company.

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[4] A relevant short video: https://youtu.be/x3fLLBEaCBc.

III.   The Strategic Program

A. Bridging Vision to Achievements

Many project management practitioners and thought leaders believe project management (the 4PMs[5]) is essential for implementing organizations' strategic plans. Executives and directors are often responsible for setting the organizational direction by formulating a strategic plan derived from vision and mission. However, strategy formulation is one thing, and implementation is another. We know that effective strategy implementation requires project management[6].

Implementing a strategic plan starts by:

- Listing the strategic initiatives, goals, and objectives.
- These will result in modifying the organization's portfolio.
- Further, we can translate every strategic initiative (goal) into a program and use program management for effective implementation.

The significant advantages of program management include:

- Focus on the long-term strategic goal (i.e., begin with the end in mind).
- Clear objectives, yet flexible enough to allow for emergent trends and market changes.
- We can subdivide it into projects, where each has clear, more focused deliverables that deliver value independently in addition to the collective value of the program.

This case study shows how we used advanced and adaptive project management to lead a strategic initiative (program). We will explain the initiative's business triggers, justification, and strategic alignment.

In this case, the strategic initiative is establishing a technology-centric company to build, market, and operate the Uruk Platform as a SaaS digital solution. The company will also provide relevant advisory, consulting, and training services.

B. The Three Principles[7]

The following are three principles (three simple truths) about change management (and project management) that we embraced as UrukPM to help organizations bridge vision to achievements. We used the first two principles to build the methodology, and all three are vital for the Uruk Platform.

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[5] Project, Program, Product, and Portfolio Management
[6] Please note that in this context, by project management we mean organizational project management, the 4PMs.
[7] Shortly, we will be publishing a video on the three simple truths (should be live by the time you read this paper).

Projects[8] Are Change Initiatives

Therefore, we must integrate project management with product management, business, and operations. In other words, we should shift our thinking from task/stage management or technical project management to value delivery. For this principle, we illustrate it with the current version of CAMMP™, which we rebranded as the Value Delivery Methodology (VDM). Figure 1 is one view of the VDM[9].

Change Must Align With Culture

The change initiative, and in this context, the methodology of the first principle, must align with the organizational culture and environment. In other words, we need to respect the diversity of the project management practice and align the methodology to the industry, organizational function, current change adaptability, and other factors. In short, the VDM must be adaptable and scalable. We must use tailoring techniques to develop bespoke methods that align with the organization's uniqueness.

People Are The Key To Success

We know competence leads to success. We also know that we can directly link project management competence to project management processes (and systems) and organizational maturity. In other words, higher project management maturity and individual competence are vital for organizational success. Subsequently, we wanted the Uruk Platform to embody the People—Processes—Tools concept.

- Since the Uruk Platform would be a SaaS, it already covers the tools aspect.
- Then, embedding the VDM, tailoring, and other approaches into the platform allows us to claim that we also covered the aspects of the processes.
- Finally, we had to cover the people aspects. Accordingly, the Uruk Platform must include extensive functionalities to support the people, elevating competence and performance.
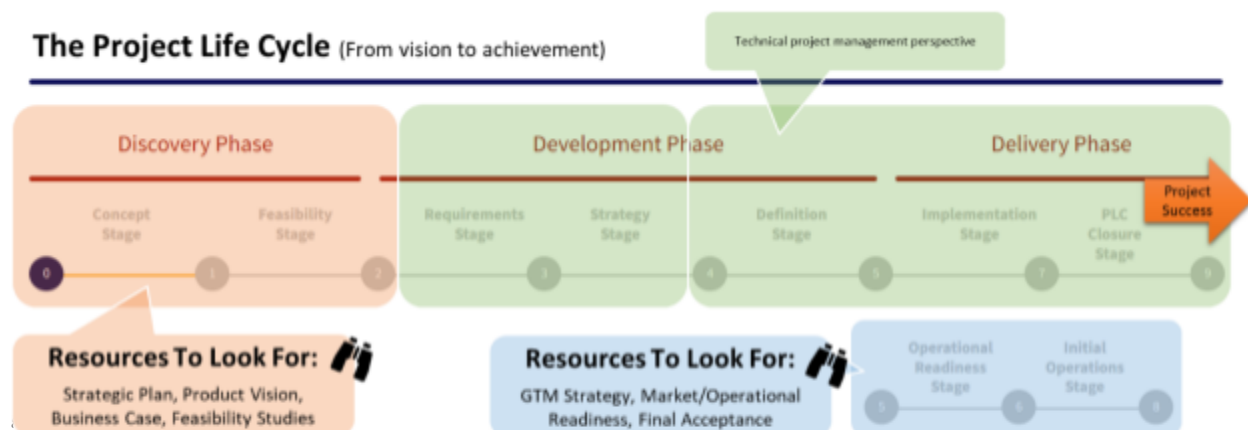
[9] We covered this topic in the 2023 UTD Project Management Symposium. You can also find more information via

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1: The UrukPM Value Delivery Methodology (VDM)

C. Program and Program Management

The Roadmap Timing

When we started in 2019, we knew this was a strategic initiative. By definition, this meant long-term.

Since we have not done this type of work before, we had no idea how long it would take. We had guesstimated about five years to achieve the full vision of an **Integrated Organizational Solution** (IOS). However, we knew that the actual durations could be longer or shorter, a factor of many variables, such as funding and emergent trends.

Consequently, we subdivided the vision into seven stepping stones, each a (sub)program.

Initial Program Breakdown Structure

As already mentioned, we divided the vision into stepping stones, where each vision step is a (sub)program. These were:

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2: The Initial Program Breakdown Structure

1. POC: Build the Proof of Concept limited to the value delivery methodology (principle 1).
2. MVP: Build in the tailoring capabilities and other enhancements (principle 2), leading to the Minimum Viable Product. Also, a knowledge portal should be incorporated (principle 3).
3. Portfolio Management element
4. The Supporting Actions and Tools
5. Expanding the tailored methods
6. Organizational Integrations
7. Advanced Additions.

In total transparency

If you go back to our original plan and writeup on this, you might not find some of the terms we are using here. The vision has been amazingly constant but the details and terminology changed. These changes are understood and accepted program management practices.

Current Roadmap

However, as we were working on Program 2, and based on feedback from our community, board, advisors, and shareholders, we revised this structure to the following:
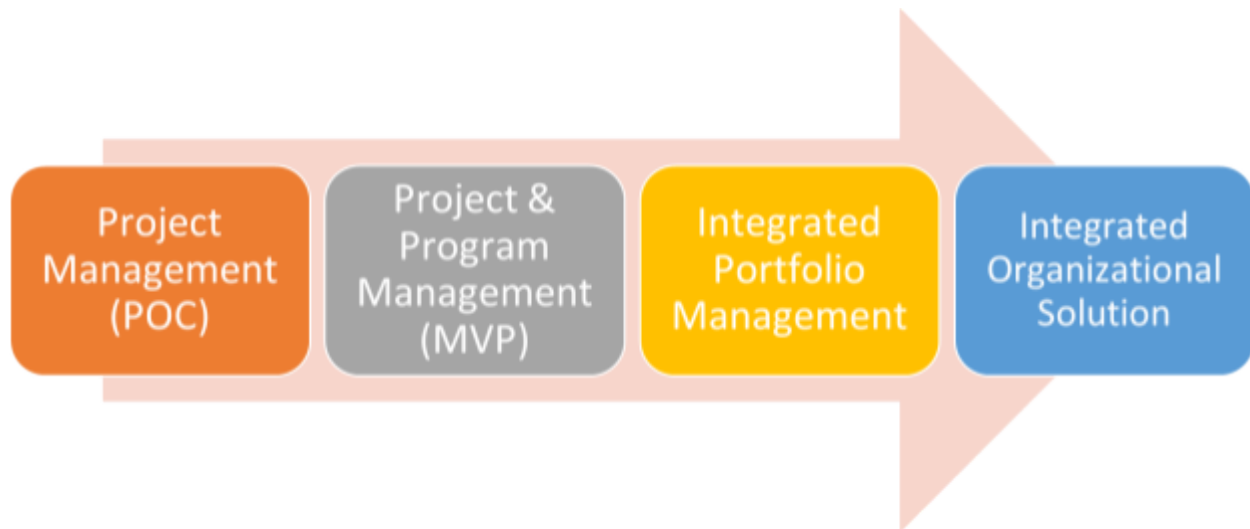

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 3: The Uruk Platform, Current Roadmap

1. POC: no change since we had completed this program.
2. MVP: The only change here was to incorporate the first iteration of program management and basic supporting actions.
3. Integrated Portfolio Management: we combined Programs 3-5 from the initial vision.
4. Integrated Organizational Solution: we combined the last two programs. We could likely split it again when we get to this program.

Once we finish the above, we will shift from strategic program management to operations management, including product management.

D. Program Life Cycle

The following is the program life cycle that we use in UrukPM. It is highly similar to the value delivery methodology for projects. The only exception is when we reach the Program Delivery Phase, which consists of two or more projects. In other words, we go through the first few

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 4: The UrukPM Program Life Cycle

phases at the program level. In the Program Definition Phase, we break down the program into projects. Finally, we carry out the project's work in the Program Delivery Phase.

E. Linking Program to Project Management

Then, we took each program and subdivided it into projects. We will elaborate on Programs 1 and 3 to illustrate the concepts.

Program 1

Program 1 consisted of two projects.

- Project 1 was to build the initial version of the POC. The development team used scrum and sprints as iterative/incremental development. However, from a business owner's perspective, we considered that a Big Bang since we could not gain value until the POC was ready for user testing.
- Project 2 was to carry out a few iterations on the POC to fix issues and enhancements.

Therefore, in Program 1, we used Big Bang, Iterative, and Incremental Development—a real-world hybrid application.

Program 3

Program 3 consists of six projects.

- Project 1 was to onboarding a new development team and perform various enhancements.
- Project 2 is to finalize the conversion of the MVP into a beta version of the Base Plan. We planned for a May 2024 release. We are here today (at the time of writing).
- Project 3 will lead to the fully functional Base Plan in July 2024.
- Project 4 leads to the Enhanced Plan scheduled completion around October 2024.
- Project 5 will lead to the IPM Initial Plan.
- Finally, Project 6 will produce the Advanced Plan and convert the IPM Initial Plan into the complete plan.

However, we must remind ourselves (and our readers) that we use program management, which means agility and change. Therefore, the above could change for many reasons. For example, we are working on a few strategic partnerships that might require the development team's attention. We could change the flow or delay some projects to accommodate these partnerships. On the other hand, since we are currently going to market, a client might want some modules we planned for later development, and we will have to shift them to an earlier date. This approach aligns with agility, which, by definition, is a core concept of program management.

F. Rolling Wave Planning

This part will be easier to understand in the presentation.

Two vital points:

- Rolling wave planning is an iterative and progressive process. It goes contrary to common beliefs that in traditional project management, we must have detailed and inflexible plans in advance. Looking at Figure 5, one should automatically conclude why there is no planning phase; planning is continuous throughout the program/project life cycle.
- Rolling wave planning and program/project/work breakdown structure are interrelated.

Let us explain (please refer to the illustration as you read).

- First, we started with a vision leading to a strategic program. We have a clear vision of what to build, but we do not have details or partial details. We only have a guesstimate for the duration. This vision goal is the strategic program with the highest-broadest arch.
- Since the strategic program is long-term and ambiguous by default, we subdivide it into subprograms (seven initially and four currently). Therefore, at this point, we have a good idea of what to produce in each program. However, once again, there are no details.
- In Figure 5, the light blue arches are not there from the start. After the strategic program

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 5: Rolling Wave Planning with Program Breakdown Structure

kicks off, we will also begin the first program with a rough plan. Here, we will have to develop a rough plan for the program (the first light blue arch), including the subdivision of the program into projects (the orange arches).

- Depending on the project's scope, we could have sub-projects or significant functionalities, which we need to plan. These could be considerable increments or iterations (not shown in the image). For example, the current project (leading to beta release) includes the following increments: projects and programs databases, captured lessons learned, document management, project success, tasks management, sustainability management, projects, and programs performance, and the executive dashboards.
- Finally, we will be down to sprints, where each sprint covers some of the work of an iteration or all, if small enough.

Notice, in Figure 5, we do not have projects for Program 4 since we have not planned it yet.

Also, we do not have any details (the sprints) for Projects 9 – 11. We know what each project will produce, so we have the orange arches for these projects. However, we do not know enough about all of the sprints that would be required.

G. Program Control

Program Management and Control is happening from the beginning. We monitor progress, adjust the work as needed, speed up or slow down specific projects, and shift priorities where necessary. Unfortunately, we did not have the program management element fully functional before we started this work; otherwise, we could have used our platform to do this work and even produced the performance charts and dashboards to show. Maybe next year!

H. Operational Readiness and Business Projects

Most of the discussions in this section have been about the product, building, and developing software. In parallel to all of the above, at the project level, we have operational readiness. For example, with Program 1, we had the legal registration and business setup. With Program 2, we had an equity crowdfunding project. Once we finalize the beta release, we will run a Seed Round for growth funding. Along the way, we had to do many other things, such as technology infrastructure, domain names, building and updating websites and social media sites, trademarks, hiring and letting people go, forming partnerships, and reaching out through video, podcast, and blogs.

IV. Business and Personal Learning

A. The Business Aspects

Tech Startup

One of our challenges was a lack of knowledge of the technology startup scene. Also, the primary founder had been outside the United States for 20 years and, as an immigrant founder, did not have a strong network in the US. It is also well known that the venture capital scene is still white men dominated, where most of the funds go to those coming from elite schools or have prior startup experience. We did not have that knowledge when we decided to register in the US. On the contrary, we thought being in the US versus UAE or Lebanon would be an advantage in the early stages. That has not been the case. Now we know. We have learned our lessons, and our resilience helped us sustain; more on this later.

Legal

The legal topic can be lengthy, so we will keep it short.

- For a startup, we must register a company to provide a legal structure and project our initial investors.
- If the startup is to seek funding, it is best to register in Delaware and as a C-Corp.
- Since we will be operating from Texas, we also had to register in Texas.
- Raising funds can be complex from a legal perspective to ensure compliance with the SEC, Security and Exchange Commission.
- Legal is not cheap!

Funding

When we started with initial funding with friends, family, and colleagues, we knew that would only be enough to register and develop a proof of concept (POC). We thought we could pursue Seed Funding to help us build on the POC. We understood seed funding would be possible when we started (like planting a seed). Later, we learned that we could have pursued pre-seed (which we did not know existed). We also learned that seed was only possible at MVP (Minimum Viable Product Stage). So, we started to work toward that goal. However, the unwritten rule has changed due to the Pandemic, changes in funding sentiments, and banking failures. The new rule is to secure 6-12 months of tractions and revenues to be considered for a seed round. In other words, the goalpost moved. Consequently, how can we achieve this goal with a tiny team and almost no funding? We will answer this question later.

Product Market Fit

The product market fit is related to the funding discussion and is an essential concept in startups. The tech startup world is about finding customers and subscribers to your SaaS solution to prove that there is a market. For an enterprise, a SaaS solution is a significant challenge. Another challenge is that the Uruk Platform is pioneering, comprehensive, and different from what exists in the market; this is an opportunity and a challenge. We are at this

stage.

B. The Personal Aspects

This section is not a core part of program management, but it highlights many risks and challenges we can face in projects and programs, especially startups. Therefore, we share as a learning, especially for any aspiring entrepreneur.

Working Virtually

One of the challenges we faced was working virtually before working from home, or hybrids were popular. In our case, it was also 7 hours time difference. One co-founder was in Florida, and the other was in Lebanon. We kicked off in Florida in July 2019. Can you guess what is next?

The Pandemic

In January 2020, we planned to meet to accelerate the program. Upon arriving in Houston and getting ready to go to Florida – the Pandemic was spreading rapidly, and we had the shutdown. A one-month planned trip became six months, and the co-founders could not meet.

The Pandemic affected not only our ability to meet as co-founders but also our ability to go out and see investors attend events, etc. Most people were still trying to cope and adjust to working from home and communicating via Zoom and other tools.

In project management, that was an unknown-unknown, unforeseen risk.

Tragedy

The technology co-founder, Mr. Neville Goedhals[10], had old military injuries that started to affect his ability to work, and the Pandemic did not help in allowing him to get treatment quickly. His medical situation was aggravated, and he could not do any work or even transfer the work to someone else. Distance did not help, and even online communication was not possible. In the summer of 2020, we lost Neville (RIP), I lost a friend and a partner, and the company lost a critical founder.

Solo-Founder

Consequently, our startup has become a solo-founder. A founder that is not a techy and has no experience in developing software. It was time to shut down the project. Being a solo entrepreneur and dealing with adversity and tragedy were not easy. We did not reach a level of development to use with investors, and we could not recover Neville's work. That was a critical risk that we did not manage and almost led to our failure.

However, resilience can lead to innovation. Failure was not a choice. We must continue, and we found a way. However, we lost about 20 months.

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[10] Neville Goedhals was a holder of the IPMA Level A certification.

Bootstrapping

As a result of the delays, the little money we had was gone. Funding was not possible for the reasons we explained earlier. We could get some money from crowdfunding, but about half were from the initial group. Therefore, the only choice was significant bootstrapping, i.e., self-funding and liquidating an IRA (Individual Retirement Account).

V.   Progress

A. Where Are We Now?

We are working diligently to convert the MVP into a Beta Release. By the time you read this paper, we should have released the Base Plan-Beta, and we are continuing to work to convert this to a full version of the base plan.

In parallel, we are implementing our go-to-market plan and seeking validation through a product-market fit. We are also working on strategic partnerships.

B. What Is Next?

We continue to work to achieve the full vision of the Integrated Portfolio Management status, anticipated in the first quarter of 2025. Then, we will continue the journey toward the Integrated Organizational Solution.

C. Closing Remarks

Project management is a great domain. It is indispensable for organizational success. Unfortunately, we (the project management community) suffer due to a lack of recognition or acceptance and the continued failures we see on projects, delays, and cost overruns, among other issues. Organizations (private and public, for-profit and not-for-profit) are losing millions of dollars (if not billions). We need to do something about it.

Innovation is one route that could help change the status quo. Innovation can produce excellent products and solutions; however, we must demonstrate success to help shift paradigms and regain the executives' acceptance. This can only happen when the project management community goes beyond the debate on waterfall and agile. It will happen when we move beyond task management and technical project management. It would happen when we view projects as the engine to deliver success.

Project success leads to value creation. Yet, how do we deliver success?

We believe success must be pre-determined (planned into our projects), cultivated (across the project life cycle and in every stage), and finally achieved (with the proper assessment and validation).

We wish you success today, tomorrow, and always!

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