# Identifying and managing Drift-changes

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## Abstract

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the project management of unexpected events by exploring a phenomenon which it terms Drift-changes. Drift-changes occur when external influences impact on a project causing it to deliver outcomes that were not originally requested or envisaged by the stakeholders. Using a Grounded Theory methodology, our research finds that Drift-changes are distinct from two previously identified change typologies, Plan-changes and Goal-changes. Our research provides clear criteria for the identification of Drift-changes and demonstrates that Drift-changes should be managed by using a Revision or Re-opening to shift the project to a goal-seeking mode, before establishing new project trajectories and shifting the project back to a goal-oriented mode.
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*Keywords:* Drift-changes; Stakeholder satisfaction; Unexpected project events; Expectation management

## 1. Introduction

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the project management of unexpected events by exploring a phenomenon which it terms Drift- changes. Drift-changes occur when external influences impact on a project causing it to deliver outcomes that were not originally requested by the stakeholders. Drift-changes impact on a project manager's ability to deliver the project goals they were commissioned to deliver. However, our research shows that Drift-changes can be effectively managed to achieve both project success and stakeholder satisfaction despite creating significant deviations from the project's originally anticipated goals.

Our research is positioned between Dvir and Lechler's (2004) research, which identified the change typologies of Plan-changes and Goal-changes, and Söderholm's (2008) research on the project management of unexpected events. Our research indicates that Drift-changes are distinct from the two change typologies identified by Dvir and Lechler (2004).

With this distinction made, our research investigates these changes by asking "*How can project managers identify and manage Drift-changes?*"

Using a Grounded Theory research methodology we conducted semi-structured, interviews with a purposively selected theoretical sample of ten project management professionals. Our interviews investigated their experiences in managing Drift-changes. The data collected from these interviews were triangulated through an archival content analysis of sixty-nine monthly project reports, five lessons learnt reports, two post-occupancy evaluations, and three project finalization meeting minutes.

Our research demonstrates that Drift-changes are clearly identifiable and that these changes can be managed by using a Revision or Re-opening to shift the project to a goal-seeking mode, before establishing new project trajectories and shifting the project back to a goal-oriented mode. Furthermore, we found that when a project has drifted from its initial trajectory to such an extent that a Revision or Re-opening is necessary, there may be more value in the project manager working to adjust the stakeholder's expectations than there is in applying energy and resources into driving the project towards the originally anticipated goals.

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## 2. Background and contiguous literature

### 2.1. What are Drift-changes

Project management is a discipline which relies heavily on detailed planning and strong mechanistic controls to achieve favourable project outcomes (Baker et al., 2008; Bryson and Bromiley, 1993). Traditional project management theory would have practitioners believe that developing a well-documented Initial Plan that sequences tasks, allocates resources and demonstrates how project outcomes can be delivered within the known constraints, is a fundamental precursor to achieving successful project outcomes (Hällgren et al., 2009; Project Management Institute (U.S.), 2013).

This type of detailed and deliberate planning is founded upon certain assumptions, these being: that projects follow rationalistic and linear sequences (Taylor, 1911; Shewhart, 1931; Deming, 1967; Usher, 2014); that the planner is in possession of perfect information when developing the Initial Plan (Ernst, 2002; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997); and that the delivery of the project will be conducted in a stable and controllable environment (Boje and Winsor, 1993; Taylor, 1911). However, the practice of project management would suggest that these assumptions are not supported (Hällgren and Wilson, 2008; Hällgren, 2009), and that unexpected events will create deviations from the Initial Plan regardless of how rational, logical and detailed that plan is (Munthe et al., 2014).

Geraldi et al. (2009) notes that, by their nature, the types of events which create deviations in documented plans are *ex ante*. As a result they cannot be by-passed in advance and so project managers typically address these *ex post*, through the development of new plans and courses of action (Munthe et al., 2014).

In their research into the impacts of quality planning on project success Dvir and Lechler (2004) distinguished between two types of changes that impact on a project's Initial Plan. These changes are Plan-changes and Goal-changes.

Dvir and Lechler (2004) defined Plan-changes as unexpected events "… *induced by the environment* …" (p 4.) which impact on the project plans but not the project's goals. One defining aspect of a Plan-change is that the project manager must address them by making "… *the necessary adjustments* **without changing the project scope and goals** [emphasis ours] …" (p. 4) (Dvir and Lechler, 2004).

In contrast, Dvir and Lechler (2004) define Goal-changes as changes in the project's goals which occur as a result of a "… *conscious decision by the stakeholders to change the goal of the project* …" (p. 4). While the term 'stakeholders' is not explicitly defined by Dvir and Lechler (2004), a reading of their work indicates they consider 'stakeholders' to be the organisation that requires the project to be undertaken and not the larger project team. For consistency with Dvir and Lechler's (2004) research, we have adopted this definition of stakeholders.

According to Dvir and Lechler (2004) Goal-changes are stakeholder initiated changes; that is, the decision to change the project's goals is generated from within the stakeholder group. Goal-changes can arise for a range of reasons including the incremental expansion in the project scope (i.e. scope creep) (Kuprenas and Nasr, 2003; Giezen, 2012), an increasing understanding of the project details throughout the project life-cycle (i.e. progressive elaboration) (Project Management Institute (U.S.), 2013; Collyer and Warren, 2009; Collyer et al., 2010), or from changing organisational requirements. It is important to note that Goal-changes can also result in changes to the project's plans, however the changes to the plan are a result of a decision made by the stakeholders to amend the project's goals. According to Dvir and Lechler (2004), Goal-changes are usually addressed by collaboration between the stakeholders and the project team.

We believe a third change typology exists, one that was not identified by Dvir and Lechler (2004). This typology changes the project's goals, but is not the result of a conscious decision by the stakeholders. These changes are driven by external influences that do not originate from within the stakeholder group. These external influences could include, but are not limited to, latent conditions, economic conditions, technological advances, and the unavailability of equipment, resources or materials at the time they are required. Essentially, our definition of an external influence is anything that creates a change in a project's goal that is not a result of a conscious decision by the stakeholder group. These external influences can create Drift-changes which dictate changes to the project's goals that the stakeholders did not choose, but which they must ultimately accept.

Drift-changes are neither Plan-changes nor Goal-changes, however they do share similarities with both. Drift-changes are similar to Plan-changes in that they are caused by external influences and are not a result of a conscious decision of the stakeholder's to change the project's goals. However, Drift-changes also require changes in project goals, so they do not fulfil the definition of Plan-changes as outlined by Dvir and Lechler (2004).

Drift-changes are similar to Goal-changes in that they change a project's goals. However, Drift-changes are not initiated by the stakeholders themselves, so they do not fulfil the definition of Goal-changes as outlined by Dvir and Lechler (2004).

These types of changes are identified in passing by Söderholm (2008) who noted, "… *our cases show that there are frequent interactions with the environment with an impact on project conditions or goals* …" (p. 83). Although this change typology was identified by Söderholm (2008) no further investigation was undertaken into these changes or how these types of changes could be managed.

Our review of the literature has identified that Drift-changes are distinct from Plan-changes and Goal-changes. A flowchart explaining how Drift-changes are different to Plan-changes and Goal-changes is provided in Fig. 1.

### 2.2. Corrective actions

Within a dynamic project environment, deviations from the project's Initial Plan are inevitable (Perrow, 1999; Terwiesch and Loch, 1999) and these deviations can cause delays and cost overruns (Standish, 2009). Completely eliminating deviations