How to Write a Project Description: Key Criteria and Steps

A simple guide to creating a description document for a project

A well written description of any project makes it possible for the indented audience (e.g. the sponsor, the executive) to understand the concept and context of the proposed project and to realize whether to approve and finance the project or not.

Writing a project description document is a general task of the project manager or his/her deputy who is supposed to identify the idea, goals, background, approach, outcomes and other data in a correct and comprehensive manner. The document should define the project as a worthwhile and economically effective and reasonable endeavor to convince the sponsor of the need to make the necessary investments. In this publication I’m going to talk about:

- Project Description definition
- Criteria to use to write this document efficiently
- Structure and sections of the document
- Steps to take to develop the document content

Definition

**Project Description** is a formally written declaration of the project and its idea and context to explain the goals and objectives to be reached, the business need and problem to be addressed, potentials pitfalls and challenges, approaches and execution methods, resource estimates, people and organizations involved, and other relevant information that explains the need for project startup and aims to describe the amount of work planned...
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The focus of the project description is put on creating a clear and correct understanding of the project in minds of the people and organizations involved in the planning and development process. The project team (which is supposed to do the project) uses the document to get a general idea of what amount of work and under what requirements is planned for completion. The senior management team regards the project description as the key source of preliminary information necessary for strategic planning and development.

I need to note that some people are confused with the terms “project description” and “project background”. They might regard both terms as equivalent. But the terms are not same and they have different meaning. Earlier, in one of our publications we briefly talked about the project background and how it differs from the project description. Please read more here. I also recommend the service at www.domyassignment.com specializing in delivering plagiarism-free ‘do my assignments’ orders to students worldwide.

Criteria: The 4C Rule

When writing a project description for requesting funding, it is always important to keep the structure and content of the document clear and understandable for the target audience. Personally, I try to follow the rule of 4C when I need to write a description for my future project, or when I’m in charge of leading the team who are supposed to do this job. The rule says that the project description is written well and efficiently if it is Clear, Concise, Complete and Credible. The 4C rule serves as the key criteria for document writing and development.

I suggest you keep this rule up when you describe the content and idea of your project. Here’s what I mean:

- **Clear** means your document uses simple, generally accepted and unambiguous words and sentences to describe the key point. You should never try to make the document more complicated by using some confusing words and ambiguous instructions in the text. You can only use special terms and definitions if the project really requires that (e.g. in an engineering project it may be required to write about some technical terms and math calculations). However, it is best to avoid using special terms and definitions in project descriptions.
- **Concise** means the project description actually “describes the project”, with no reference to other projects or not related information. You should never mention about something that is directly linked to your project and its context. Otherwise you’re likely to will confuse the reader or keep the reader unfocused on the key points of your project.
- **Complete** means that your description includes everything that concerns and deals with the project. Although you must keep the document concise (as I said above) there is the need to make sure the text is 100% complete for the intended audience. You must be sure that the document covers every critical aspect that is required for the reader to understand and comprehend the project and its context.
- **Credible** means in your project description document you refer to up-to-date and relevant information only. You should never use data that is not related to the matter or does not support the idea of your project.

I engage my team in following the 4C rule in every step of project development. We regard this rule as a foreseeing method (4C = Foresee) that lets us minimize the risk of failure, predict future events and ensure success of our effort, through developing Clear, Concise, Complete and Credible documentation. We use the method as the key criteria for writing any kind of project documents, no matter whether it the project description, the scope statement, a kind of report, the funding request, the feasibility study report, or anything else.

Structure

Below I list the key steps you can take to develop the structure and content of your sample project description. Please use the given checklist as an additional guide for developing the document.

A sample project description paper includes the following structure:

- Section 1. Project Title and Overview
- Section 2. Purpose and Need
- Section 3. Business Drivers and Significance
- Section 4. Benefits and Costs
- Section 5. Implementation Method
- Section 6. Timeline
- Section 7. Requirements
- Section 8. Expected Outcomes

Key Steps

Taking into account the typical elements of the document structure, you must complete the following steps to write a project description template:

1. **Summarize.** Summarizing the project means explaining the aims, outcomes, significance and benefits. You must use 3-5 sentences (or less) for writing the summary. The title of your project is to be placed at the beginning of the paper. Avoid using unnecessary and parenthetic words and expressions.
2. **Define.** Defining the project means explaining what purpose to reach and what need to address. Under the purpose you write about the main intent for project startup. Under the need you must define the business problem to be solved or the opportunity to be exploited,
3. **Justify.** Justifying the project means proving that the project underpins some business goals and is significant to success of the performing organization. You must identify business drivers that lead change to the project and determine how the project impacts the performance of the organization.
4. **Evaluate.** Evaluating means identifying the benefits to be gained upon successful completion of the project. You need to use the results of cost-benefit analysis to explain the ratio between the benefits to be gained and the cost to be covered.
5. **Approach.** Approaching the project means selecting, approving and describing a method that is efficient for implementing the goals and objectives of the project within the current operational environment. You must have an approach along with a methodology that explains how to phase the project and what lifecycle to be followed.

6. **Schedule.** Scheduling means performing a preliminary estimation of time needed for the project. You’ll need to develop a timeline that shows the total estimated amount of working hours required. Note that the timeline will be used later during the planning phase to develop the project schedule and estimate activity durations.

7. **Wrap.** Wrapping the project is a slangy word I use here to explain the need for stating the requirements for your project. Wrapping means identifying all those limits, demands, needs, and other parameters that define the user expectations and interests as to the product and the implementation process. The requirements wrap the project making it limited and bounded in terms of the user expectations.

8. **Compensate.** Compensating the project means identifying the results to be gained as a compensation of all those resources and effort invested in the implementation process. You need to create a description of the desired outcomes that are anticipated upon successful completion of the project. This data will be used later in developing the deliverables list.

When all the steps of the process for writing the project description are taken and completed, you must review the document for errors and mistakes to make sure it is correct. I recommend you to follow the 4C rule to check and manage every piece of data included in the paper. Also recommend these tips by Dr. Will Cantrell (Michigan Technological University).

I hope my publication was helpful for you. Please drop a line or more about your vision of the project description document, or just leave your comment on the article. Your feedback is appreciated! Thanks.

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