Project management for researchers and evaluators

Managing research project risks

Challenges can occur in any research or evaluation project, but we can improve our project success by proactively anticipating and planning for them

Ideally, every research or evaluation project would be characterized by a balanced budget, satisfied customers, an on-time finish, and high-quality and useful deliverables. In reality, we know that this is not the case.
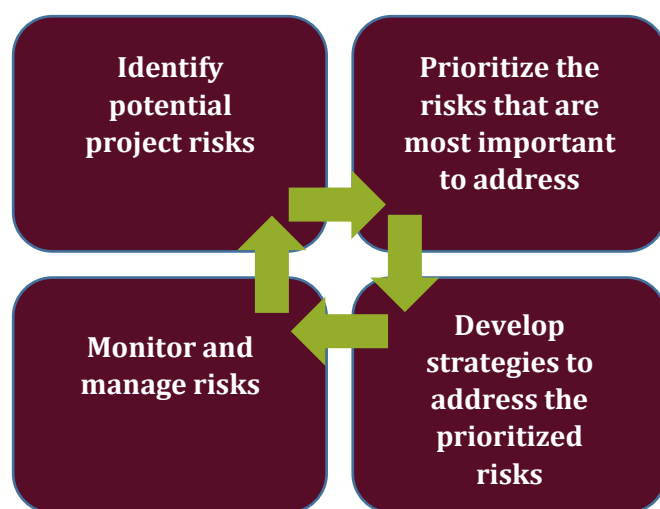
Most – maybe all – projects face some challenges along the way. These challenges can take a number of forms, such as disagreements among project stakeholders, difficulty recruiting study participants, team members leaving the project, analyses being unexpectedly complex, or changes in client priorities.

Anything that impacts our ability to successfully complete a project can be considered a risk. Risk management practices are designed to help us identify and plan for risk, with a goal of reducing the changes that risks will emerge or reducing the impact of risks that we could not prevent.

Risk management can be very formal and complex. However, the best approach is the one that is scaled to your project, organization, and team. This brief will provide a basic overview of project risk management as it relates to most evaluation and research projects.

> "One thing that makes it possible to be an optimist is if you have a contingency plan for when all hell breaks loose."
>
> - Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture*

- Identify potential project risks
- Prioritize the risks that are most important to address
- Develop strategies to address the prioritized risks
- Monitor and manage risks

BASIC RISK MANAGEMENT SEQUENCE

Identify potential project risks

It sounds like a negative way to start, but our first step is to brainstorm all of the things that could potentially go wrong in a project. Risks may be issues that frequently emerge in research, or be highly unique to a specific project. For smaller projects, this may be accomplished with some simple brainstorming on your own. For larger and more complex projects, a more formal process may be needed.

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Sample project risks

A multi-agency coalition hires you for an evaluation project. The partner who contracted with you presented a clear vision for the project, but it becomes clear that other partners do not agree about the project priorities or approach.

At the beginning of a project, you agreed to make a public presentation of your evaluation results to community stakeholders. The results were not as positive as the client had hoped, and they are no longer comfortable sharing the results.

As part of an evaluation being conducted for a human service agency, you will survey program participants. Agency staff agree to provide you with participant names and contact information for you to use in recruitment, but miss the deadline for sharing the information.

You develop a project work plan that will be carried out by a 3-person evaluation team, who each bring different skills and background. Midway through the project, one of the team members unexpectedly takes another position and leaves the project.

Your project requires qualitative interviews with community members. Despite having a plan for outreach and engagement, people are not signing up for interviews as quickly as you had hoped.

You are planning a series of community focus groups, but just before you are about to start a global pandemic erupts.

An agency contracts with you to conduct some quantitative analysis of their client records. When you receive the file, you find that it is not as "analysis-ready" as you had expected and will require significant cleaning before you can begin.

You are hired to convene community meetings to gather feedback about a potential city policy change. One cultural community that may be disproportionately impacted by the policy is reluctant to participate due to historical experiences of marginalization in their relationships with the city.

Three different evaluation projects all have reports due around at the same time, and you are worried about your capacity to get them all done.

As you identify potential risks, think about how they would impact the project if they emerged. Would they impact your scope? Timeline? Project quality? Cost? Stakeholder satisfaction? Something else?

At this stage, the goal is simply to list possible risks. Use your experience from past projects, or "best practice" guidelines to generate ideas. Some risks can be unpredictable – such as natural disasters, civil unrest, global pandemics, or staff illness. However, as you think about your specific project, you should be able to identify quite a few possible risks.

Tip: Engage your project team and stakeholders in your brainstorming

If you are working as part of a larger project team, it can be very helpful to have the full team brainstorm together. Not only might you end up with a more complete set of potential risks, but this also provides a foundation for collaboratively figuring out how you should manage these risks throughout the project.

It can also be helpful to include information from external collaborators or the client agency. While it may be appropriate based on your relationship, you do not necessarily need (or want) to invite clients to a meeting to discuss all of the ways that their project may go awry. However, you could identify stakeholders with relevant experience and interview them to identify potential project risks.

Tip: Try to identify the "root causes" for each identified risk

As you develop your list of potential risks, try to identify the root causes of the risk. The better you understand the potential risk, the better you'll be able to develop a plan to avoid or mitigate it. Try to describe risks using this format: "Due to _____, _____ may occur, causing _____ impact."

Understanding what may cause the risk will be vital in developing an appropriate plan. Rather than just describing broad risks related to not meeting deadlines or not developing strong products, dig into the "why" so that you develop strategies to address the specific risk.

For instance, while the impacts are the same, the issues described in the left column below will have different solutions than the ones on the right.

"Due to limited experience with qualitative analysis, I may not analyze data appropriately, reducing the quality of my analysis and limiting my ability to make strong recommendations"

"Due to a high workload, I may not have time to double check my coding, reducing the quality of my analysis and limiting my ability to make strong recommendations."

"Due to low attendance at meetings, the evaluation advisory team struggles to reach consensus, impacting my ability to design a project that meets their needs and delaying timelines"

"Due to high levels of conflict, the evaluation advisory team has difficulty reaching consensus, impacting my ability to design a project that meets their needs and delaying timelines"

"Due to previous experiences of racism and marginalization, some community members may decline to participate in focus groups, limiting the generalizability of the results and contributing to potentially inequitable recommendations."

"Due to a limited translation budget, some community members may be unable to participate in focus groups, limiting the generalizability of the results and contributing to potentially inequitable recommendations"

Prioritize the risks that are most important to address

Once you have identified the potential risks, you do not need to develop complicated plans to address every single one. Instead, you want to focus on those that are most important. Typically, this assessment is based on a consideration of two issues: the **likelihood**

that the risk will occur and the **potential impact** that it would cause if it did occur.

Analyzing the likelihood and potential impact of risks can be subjective. You do not need to determine the exact probability that a risk will occur. However, it is important to try to assess the general likelihood of the risk. Based on your team's collective experience and knowledge of the project, what challenges seem most likely to occur? A risk prioritization matrix can be helpful in classifying risks according to likelihood and potential impact.
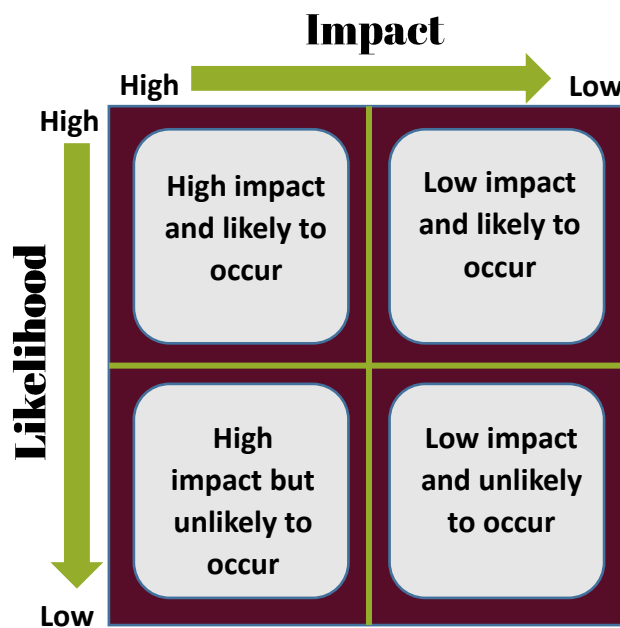
RISK PRIORITIZATION MATRIX

Tip: If a simple matrix doesn't help establish priorities, add more detail

If you have a lot of risks, or need to fine-tune the prioritization more, you could add more detail to this matrix, such as rating likelihood and impact as very low, low, medium, high, or very high.

Develop strategies to address the prioritized risks

Once you have completed the risk prioritization matrix, you can identify the risks that should be addressed in your planning. Most likely, you will want to develop plans to address any risks that have both potentially high impact and a high likelihood of occurrence, while deciding not to worry about those that have both low impact and low likelihood. You'll need to make some decisions about which other risks to address, such as those that are unlikely to occur but would have a significant impact and those that are

fairly likely to occur but which probably will not impact the project significantly.

It's easier and more cost- and time-effective to plan in advance, rather than trying to solve a problem after it has happened. Developing such a plan takes time and effort, but investing in the planning phase often pays off by creating a roadmap that will guide your team throughout the execution phase of your project.

Build strategies to address these risks directly into your project plans. Most risk management strategies fall into the following categories:

Avoid – **can you prevent the risk from happening?**

Example: You renegotiate your project budget to include funding to translate project materials and hire bilingual focus group facilitators, to avoid the risk that some cultural communities will be systemically excluded from sharing their perspectives.

Mitigate – **can you take steps to reduce the impact of the risk on the project if it does occur?**

Example: From your history working with a client, you suspect that they will not provide a required set of data before the agreed-upon deadline. You reduce the impact of a potential delay by extending your timeline for analysis and reporting.

Transfer – **can you shift the risk to someone else?**

Example: Your client wants to collect feedback on your draft report from a large team of stakeholders. You know from experience that you are likely to receive contradictory feedback from this team. You request that the client take responsibility for collecting and reconciling divergent feedback, providing you with one set of comments to review and address.

If none of these options are viable, you may just need to accept that the risk is likely to happen and to find ways to build it into your plan from the beginning.

Tip: Consider the implications of your risk management strategies

Before you implement your risk management plan, pause to consider the consequences of your proposed strategies. Your plan is likely to have implications for your project scope, timeline, or budget. Remember that changing one of these project elements often changes the other two, so be sure that you do not

implement solutions that introduce new challenges in completing the project. For example, will allowing additional time for data analysis require you to shift your timeline for preparing the subsequent report? If so, does adjusting the timeline create any challenges for your workload? Would allocating additional funding to translate data collection materials require you to reduce costs somewhere else?

Monitor and manage risks throughout the project

Once you have developed your risk management plan, do not put it away. Continue to monitor risks and your plan throughout the project – Are anticipated risks occurring? Do you need to activate any contingency plans? Are new unexpected risks emerging? Is the project aligned with what you expected regarding timeline and budget? Staffing?

As projects progress, risk ratings may change. Some risks will drop off your risk assessment entirely, while new risks may emerge along the way.

Tip: Designate someone from the project team to monitor each risk

If you have a project team, it is helpful to designate someone as being responsible for monitoring and managing each prioritized risk. This ensures that one person is watching for indicators that the risk is emerging and monitoring the success of your avoidance or mitigation strategies.

Tip: Document the project risks that occurred and the success of the strategies that you used to manage them

As you close a project, take time to reflect on the project risk management. What risks did you identify in advance? What risks emerged that were a surprise along the way? How successfully were risks managed? Documenting this information will help build up your repository of information to guide future projects.

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