Elizabeth Harrin

BOOK CLUB KIT

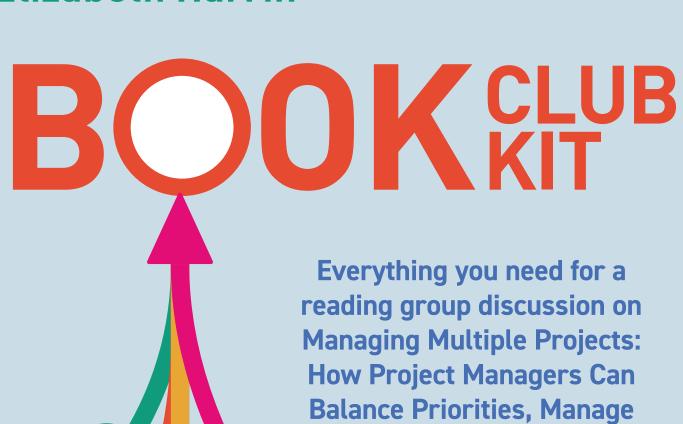Everything you need for a reading group discussion on Managing Multiple Projects: How Project Managers Can Balance Priorities, Manage Expectations and Increase Productivity

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you approach management books? Are you open-minded about looking for ideas, or do you read more cautiously, wondering if they would work for you?

2. Have you ever been overwhelmed with managing multiple projects? How did you approach that situation then? How do you think you'll manage your workload, and those situations, differently now you have read the book?

3. In Chapter 2, Elizabeth Harrin talks about having a sushi, spaghetti or side dish workload of projects. Which one most resonates with your current workload and why?

4. One of the hardest things to do when managing multiple projects is to keep everyone happy and meet all the expectations put upon you. Have you ever been in a situation where you haven't been able to meet expectations? How did you handle that? And what would you do different now (if anything), having read the book?

5. Did any of the stories from project managers in the book resonate with you? Which one, and why?

6. Were you surprised by any of the survey results shared in the book? What makes you say that?

7. What piece of advice gave you the biggest 'a-ha' moment? How will you put that advice into practice?

8. What other books on project management or productivity have you read? How did this one compare?

9. What tip, tool or anecdote can you share with your team? Why did you choose that one, and what difference do you think it will make to them?

10. There are 5 parts to the Managing Multiple Projects framework that Elizabeth Harrin shares in the book. Which one stood out the most to you and why?

11. What new questions do you have, now you've read the book? What topics would you like to dive into further? (Feel free to get in touch with Elizabeth and let her know – she may already have resources to point you to! Contact details are later in this book club guide.)

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What's your experience of managing multiple projects?

In my corporate career, I went from managing one big project to managing several small (but according to my sponsors, equally important) projects as a result of returning to work part-time after maternity leave. I had to quickly learn skills to juggle competing priorities and manage expectations from board level down. It required a whole new way of thinking about my workload and engaging with the people around me to keep everything moving forward – because even after I had prioritized my work, I was still expected to show some kind of progress on all my projects, even the ones at the bottom of the list.

Why did you write the book?

My lived experience and research shows that more people manage multiple projects than single projects. Yet, if you read project management books or attend a course, you'll learn about the end-to-end approaches for managing a single piece of work. That's good. We need that. But we also need a practical approach for layering project upon project. That's what I wanted to do with this book.

In 2019 I ran a six-month training and mentoring programme for project managers leading multiple projects that attracted 50 students from around the world. In 2021 I launched an online Mastering Multiple Projects course which had a first cohort of 81 students, and people continue to join.

This book has dropped out of my interest in this topic over the past few years, and is deepened by my understanding of the real-life situations project managers find themselves in. I wrote it for the people who have to juggle so many different initiatives that sometimes the workload feels overwhelming and who end up working evenings and weekends just to stay afloat. Because there is a better way.

So, what's the trick to getting it all done?

There is no trick! There's no magic wand to being able to manage multiple projects, objectives and deadlines. First, you need solid project management skills so you can do the job of a project manager with ease. In other words, you understand the basics of project management and can apply them efficiently. You don't want to have to keep looking up how to create a Gantt chart or wondering what process or form to use for the next part of your work. Being comfortable at the basics of managing a project is a pre-requisite. This book won't teach you how to do that, by the way. But it will show you that repeating the 'one project' method over and over for each project is inefficient and how to do things differently.

In your book, you talk about the challenges of managing multiple projects and the skills, processes and techniques that help overcome those. What barriers might project professionals face when it comes to using those tools?

The biggest thing that stops people from using their skills to the best of their ability, or changing the way they work, is fear. Maybe that's caused by a lack of self-confidence or a feeling that they're not empowered to make those changes.

A lot of the project managers I talk to need a bit of support to do the things and say the things that they know they need to do. Because of the contextual situation they're in, or because of the way they're managed, they feel they can't quite take the action they know is necessary. If you can address that, you'll find it easier to break down the barriers stopping you from changing working practices for yourself and others.

Confidence sounds key to taking active steps in how you manage your workload. How can project professionals increase their own confidence?

Confidence requires a mindset change. It's easy to wake up and say 'today, I'm going to be really confident'. Then you go into work and you're actually not more confident than usual! The real world kicks in, someone says something, and you are back to your old working patterns.

In my experience, it helps to look at the things that make you feel more confident. These will support you in actually being more confident. It might be something small like dressing professionally, or doing vocal exercises before work. It might be having a deep knowledge of the statistics you are presenting so no one can ask you a question you can't answer. Of course, confidence develops with time and experience, but it's also a product of lots of small things.

We hear a lot about the importance of good stakeholder engagement, but what are the real benefits for people managing multiple projects?

Projects are done through people. You need people to support you on your projects, and if you've got more than one on the go at any time, there is normally a point where you have to make trade-offs. Trade-offs, unforeseeable issues and problems are easier to manage if you have good relationships with your colleagues, project sponsors and leaders.

If they trust you to get the job done, and they trust you when you say there's an issue, the whole juggling act of keeping all your balls in the air becomes easier. They still might give you a hard time, but underneath it all, they know you're approaching the challenges with good faith and that you aren't being deliberately difficult to cover something up. Transparency matters!

If you've got good stakeholder engagement and positive relationships at work, you end up with more input to projects and, ultimately, better quality results. You get more commitment to the deliverables. You get people paying more attention to your projects and you get people doing what they need to do, which helps everything keep moving so projects don't get stuck.

More engagement means more people follow through on their tasks and they also commit to the process. It's one thing to say 'we really want this project'. It's another thing to say 'we really want this project and we'll support in delivering it through project management best practice processes.'

How does remote work change how multiple projects need to be managed?

It doesn't really. The work is still the work. We just doing it using different tools and we can't shake hands any more.

My project teams have been distributed for at least the past 13 years. We speak on the phone, we use software to communicate, we collaborate remotely.

What's different is the lack of informal opportunities to influence and network. You have to be more conscious about getting time with senior stakeholders: no more getting into the office early to catch a director before she gets sucked into a day of meetings. That can make it harder to move some of the smaller items on your To Do list on, so it's even more important to be organized and have your personal portfolio put into buckets so you can make the most of people's time when you do get to talk to them.

Another difference is what we are managing – the kinds of projects we get involved with. Consider what digital skills you should learn and start thinking how tech affects the projects you lead. What data protection, security, privacy principles need to be baked into your work in ways they perhaps didn't before because the solutions you are delivering have changed?

What are the biggest challenges involved in managing multiple projects in a remote environment?

I think the biggest challenge is building relationships with people. I put a lot of effort into getting to know the team, understanding their work preferences and communication preferences and tailoring.

Being able to treat people as individuals is important because it gets us better results when time is short and stakeholders are distracted.

Another tip is to get comfortable on camera. Get a headset and a decent lighting system for your office. Switch off at night and find a way to transition from work to home because remote work can be all-consuming without the physical cues of the commute home.

How did you get into project management?

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left university so I joined a graduate training scheme that allowed me to test a number of different areas. I discovered a department called Business Re-engineering which is basically project management and process improvement. It felt like I had found something I could really enjoy. It was all about lists, making changes, organising people, getting things done. I had no idea prior to that that I could find a job that would play to my natural strengths.

I love the variety of the work and the fact that projects let you see different areas of the business so you really understand how the whole organization works.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Harrin is an author, trainer and mentor who helps people juggle their projects and ditch the overwhelm. She does that through straight-talking, real-world advice, based on her 20 years in project management roles.

Elizabeth is a Fellow of the Association for Project Management who has written 7 books about project management. She also writes the award-winning blog, Rebel's Guide to Project Management.

Elizabeth holds degrees from the University of York and Roehampton University. She supports project managers through her mentoring programme, Project Management Rebels, and also contributes to a variety of other initiatives including sitting on the advisory board for the RISE Being Lean and Seen programme at Liverpool John Moores University.

Elizabeth has led a variety of IT, process improvement and business change projects including an ERP deployment and compliance initiatives. She spent eight years working in financial services (including two based in Paris, France) and 12 years in healthcare.

Elizabeth lives with her family in the UK.

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FURTHER READING

Adachi, K (2020) The Lazy Genius Way, WaterBrook, Colorado Springs

Allcott, G and Watts, H (2021) How to Fix Meetings, Icon Books, London

Amabile, T and Kramer, S (2011) The Progress Principle, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston

Clark, D (2021) The Long Game: How to be a long-term thinker in a short-term world, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston

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Pullan, P (2016) Virtual Leadership, Kogan Page, London

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Thomas, M (2021) From To-Do to Done, Sourcebooks, Naperville

Williams, T C (2017) Filling Execution Gaps: How executives and project managers turn corporate strategy into successful projects, Walter de Gruyter, Boston
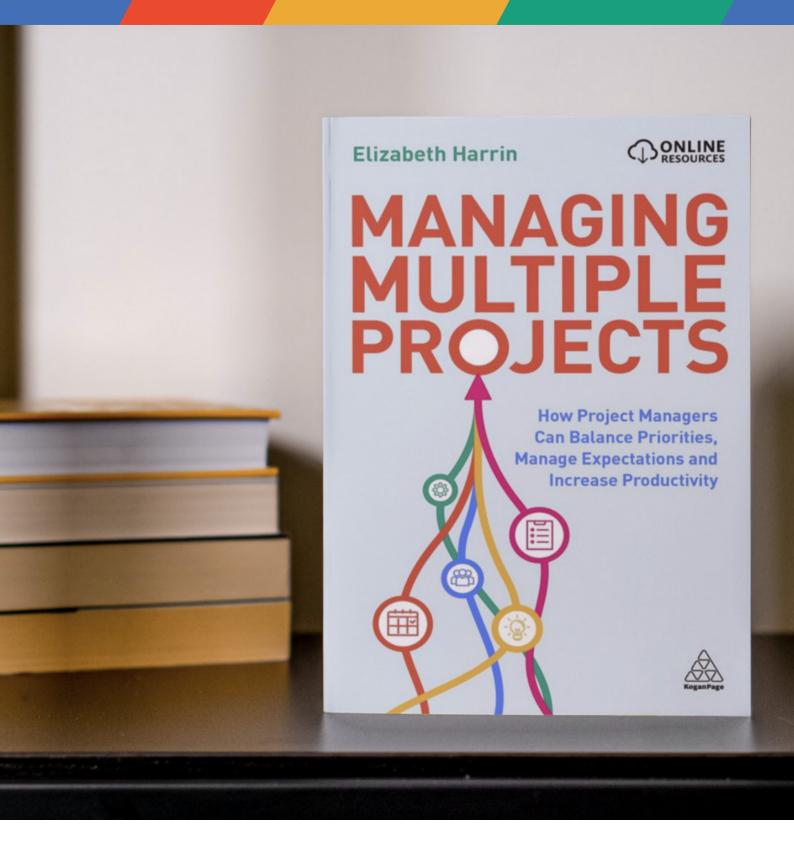
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Elizabeth Harrin has written an excellent guidebook for project managers and others juggling multiple projects. Filled with practical advice on managing it all, you will become a better project manager. She lays out a framework that is easy to follow and will help you get control of your workload. To get the most out of this book, implement the action steps at the end of each chapter and check out the appendices to find helpful checklists and templates. I highly recommend this book!

**CORNELIUS FICHTNER, PMP, CSM,
HOST OF THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT PODCAST**

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Your perfect 'assistant' in successfully leading multiple projects - Elizabeth Harrin's book, Managing Multiple Projects, really delivers the practical help you need with a framework to tame the chaos.

**PETER TAYLOR,
AUTHOR OF THE LAZY PROJECT MANAGER**

For more information about how to manage several projects at the same time, manage your workload and still leave the office on time, check out *Managing Multiple Projects: How Project Managers Can Balance Priorities, Manage Expectations and Increase Productivity* by Elizabeth Harrin (Kogan Page, 2022)