

The Wow Project

In the new economy, all work is project work. And you are your projects! Here's how to make them all go Wow!

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First appeared: FC24, p.116

I learned about the future of work by living in the projects — the kind of projects you routinely do at a professional-services firm.

More years ago than I care to remember, I reported to the offices of McKinsey & Co. in San Francisco for my first day as a professional management consultant. At 9 a.m., I started to work. At 3 p.m. that afternoon, I was on an airplane to Clinton, Iowa to work on a project that involved an investment in a \$150 million petrochemical plant, and even if you'd spotted me four letters, I couldn't have spelled "petrochemical." But that was life — in the projects.

Fast-forward 25 years. All white-collar work is project work. The single salient fact that touches all of our lives is that work is being reinvented. The workplace revolution that transformed the lives of blue-collar workers in the 1970s and 1980s is finally reaching the offices and cubicles of the white-collar workers. For the blue-collar worker, the driving force behind change was factory automation using programmable machine tools. For the office worker, it's office automation using computer technology: enterprise-resource-planning systems, groupware, intranets, extranets, expert systems, the Web, and e-commerce.

After decades of wholesale neglect, companies are finally facing the fact of pathetic white-collar productivity and realizing that they need to organize work in a fundamentally new way. The old ways of working are too slow, too convoluted, too hard to grab hold of — and the value is too hard to capture. At the same time, white-collar workers themselves are catching on: They need to rethink the very nature of work. If they're going to have work in the future, they must be able to demonstrate clearly, precisely, and convincingly how they can add value. The answer — the only answer — is the project. And not just any project, no matter how droning, boring, and dull, but rather what my colleagues and I have come to call "Wow Projects": projects that add value, projects that matter, projects that make a difference, projects that leave a legacy — and, yes, projects that make you a star. Distinguished project work is the future of work — for the simple reason that more than 90% of white-collar jobs are in jeopardy today. They are in the process of being transformed beyond identification — or completely eliminated.

Architects, accountants, graphic designers, lawyers, consultants, and all other workers in "official" professional-services firms understand life in the projects. As a professional, age 56, I can honestly say that I live the new formula: I = My Projects. Yet this idea is fairly new for the typical white-collar "staffers" in the human-resources departments, the IT departments, the finance departments, and all of the other departments in standard-issue manufacturing, production, and operations companies of the United States. All work of economic value is project work.

And because project work is becoming that important, a few rules are needed for thinking about projects the right way:

Project work is the vehicle by which the powerless gain power. Forget about "empowerment programs." Instead, volunteer for every lousy project that comes along: Organize the office Christmas party. (Turn that dreadful holiday party into an event that says, "Thanks for a terrific year!" to all employees.) Here's a dirty little secret from my professional career: The research that became "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies" (with Robert H. Waterman, Harper & Row, 1982) was a McKinsey project that virtually no one in the firm cared two hoots about.

Project work is the future of the company waiting to be discovered. Somewhere, in the belly of every company, someone is working away in obscurity on the project that 10 years from now everyone will acknowledge as the company's proudest moment. Someone is creating Java, designing the iMac, reviving the VW Beetle, engineering the Mach3. Why isn't that someone you?

Never let a project go dreary on you. Your goal should be to work in perpetuity with Wow people, on Wow Projects, for Wowable clients. How do you know when your project measures up? Each week, ask yourself and your teammates, "Will we be bragging about this project five years from now? If the odds of success are low, what can we do — right now! — to turn up the heat?"

When it comes to life in the projects, draft people as if you were a GM and invest as if you were a VC. Work today is about two things: talent and projects. If you're in charge of a project,

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you ought to think like the general manager of an NBA franchise: You've got to fill 12 chairs with the hottest people you can draft. And when it comes to picking your projects, you need to think like a venture capitalist: You bet on cool people who have demonstrated their capacity to deliver cool projects.

When it comes to Wow Projects, you need to remember one essential fact: Contrary to all of the project-management literature and all of the project-software checklists, the point of the exercise is not to do a "good job" of managing the project that your boss dumped into your lap. It's to use every project opportunity that you can get your hands on to create surprising new ways of looking at old problems. To do that, you need to understand the four steps that go into every Wow Project: finding and creating a great project, selling the project, executing the project, and handing off the project so that you can move on to the next one.

Finding and Creating Your Wow Project

It's out there, waiting for you — your Wow Project. All you have to do is find it, identify it, and then create it. It's that easy — and it's that hard. After all, how are you supposed to know it when you see it? And once you've got it, how do you know how to shape it, to develop it, to make it Wow?

To answer those questions and to keep you on the right track, here are four steps to take to make your Wow Project happen, one trap to avoid that could kill it, and five criteria to use to judge it.

Step One: Take the "Does it matter?" test. No project worth talking about ever came to pass without passion. Period. So, as you begin to gauge the worth of a potential project, ask yourself a series of passion-parsing questions: What do you care about? What matters to you? What matters to your company? If an idea for a project is meek and weak — the equivalent of just another line extension — it simply isn't worth spending time on. A Wow Project has to meet or to create a compelling need — or to be capable of being redefined so that it does.

The biggest, boldest, most stimulating and innovative projects often come from the most compelling need for a team or a company to do something that will change the game: Launch a sexy new product. Craft a breakthrough ad campaign. Change the logistics and the service rules in your niche. Those are the kinds of projects that leave a legacy, projects that everyone wants to wrangle their way onto — or at least to get close enough to collect the commemorative T-shirt that proves that they were there!

Here's the point: Projects — particularly projects that can actually change the shape of the future — are all about emotion.

So, when it comes to recognizing a project that matters to you, trust your emotions. Listen to your stomach and to your heart. They'll tell you whether a project has the kind of pulse-racing, mind-expanding possibilities on which you're ready to stake your reputation — and a precious year of your life.

Step Two: Here's the corollary to Step One: No project is too mundane to become a Wow Project. I've seen a person who was assigned a presumably dead-end task — cleaning up a warehouse — turn that project into a chance to redesign the company's distribution system and to earn a ticket to even more responsibility and even cooler projects. All it took for that to happen was the application of personal passion (see Step One) and an unwillingness to see the project as anything other than a first-rate opportunity.

How did it happen? Given the project of "cleaning up the warehouse," our passionate Wow Project leader (PWPL) quickly determined that the problem wasn't a "messy" warehouse; the real problem was that the warehouse was poorly organized — which made the warehouse necessarily messy. A simple cleanup wouldn't do a damn thing to solve the deeper problem: The warehouse needed to be reorganized. That led our intrepid PWPL into a few carefully targeted benchmarking forays to educate herself and a small, select group of suddenly interested team members on the art of warehouse reorganization.

One of their key lessons: The organization of the warehouse needed to take into account both the incoming parts from suppliers and the outgoing parts to customers. So, a short time after getting the warehouse-cleanup assignment, this PWPL found herself making a compelling case for a new distribution system that would feed flawlessly into the reorganized warehouse — a warehouse that would now stay neat because of newly designed processes that fit the new distribution system perfectly. And that is how you turn a little chore into a Wow Project.

Step Three: To a real life-in-the-projects person, everything is a golden learning opportunity. To Richard Branson, the passionate, daring, let's-try-it-and-see-what-happens chairman and president of the Virgin Group, the whole world is full of projects waiting to be discovered. His main tool for project discovery: a seemingly endless series of notebooks in which he painstakingly records his observations about everything that he runs across. In these notebooks — which probably number in the hundreds — are all kinds of observations on projects that are just waiting to happen.

Karl Weick, the brilliant University of Michigan professor of organizational behavior and psychology, has his own system: His sport coat doubles as a filing cabinet. He fills the pockets with anything that he can make notes on — scraps of paper,

napkins, matchbook covers. Then, once a week, he empties out his tweed filing cabinet and records his observations.

If you're always observing, you're always learning — and, in the process, you're collecting ideas, leads, starting points that you can turn into a Wow Project later on. Open your eyes, and you'll start seeing project material everywhere you look. What's more, recording what you see teaches you another critical project lesson: Little things do matter. For instance, design counts. When you're looking for passion to infuse your project with, design is where you'll find it. And passion can come in small touches: A flash of humor can change a completely mundane, easily overlooked communication into a personal expression of attention.

Or passion can materialize in the art of simplification — such as taking a mindless form that unnecessarily forces office workers to decode gibberish and turning it into a simple set of statements and boxes to check off. Which is exactly what the folks at the Simplified Communications division of New York-based Siegel & Gale Inc. specialize in: They can take something as uninformative and confusing as a credit-card bill and turn it into an easy-to-read, easy-to-understand, customer-friendly communication that repositions the bank that sends it out as the kind of financial institution that actually delivers service! If you study the approach of Siegel & Gale — or just look at street signs that actually direct you — you'll learn one key lesson: The best kinds of design, like the best kinds of projects, don't call attention to themselves. They use small touches to demonstrate the sensibility and the sensitivity — the authenticity — of the people who have worked on them.

Step Four: Use superfast approximations to refine your Wow Project. 3M has built a company around a simple approach: Make a little, try a little, sell a little — and then repeat those steps. The fastest, smartest way to get your project defined and refined is to practice the art of quick prototyping. Don't keep your project hidden in some private skunk works until you can hone it into a perfect deliverable. Instead, make a rough prototype, and show it to some team members. Listen to their feedback; then go back and make a second prototype. Show it to them again. You'll be doing two things at once: improving your project, and selling people on its value (after all, you've incorporated their input!). Make a little, try a little, sell a little — that's how prototyping and selling overlap from the beginning of a Wow Project.

One Trap to Avoid: getting too much money too soon. That's the worst thing that can happen to a project. (Believe it.) Money will kill you on two counts. First, it takes the pressure off. Early in the life of every project, there's no substitute for the scrounging mentality. If you don't have enough money, you have to innovate your way around problems that you could oth-

erwise simply buy your way out of. You have to work more closely with your users and your suppliers — and, as a result, they become part of the project from the beginning. You have to adopt the pirate's mind-set: It's us against them! We're going to outthink, outhustle, outdream everybody — because we sure don't have the money to outspend them. Second, if you take money early on, from internal or external sponsors, then early on you've got to listen to them. They just bought the right to sit at your table and to meddle in your life. And the last thing that a Wow Project needs is a money person setting the specifications for the project, deciding what's worth investing more time and money in, and draining the passion from the project. To avoid the problem, live poor and dream big.

Five Criteria for Judging Each Project: You can boil a project down to a simple list of five criteria: Wow! Beautiful! Revolutionary! Impact! Raving fans! (That last criteria comes courtesy of Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles's book "Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service" [William Morrow, 1993].) After all, this is the big enchilada. We all know what those five terms mean. (Right?) But we rarely — make that, never — use such language between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. It's time to change that. Write down those five terms on a card. Put the card in your wallet. When the time comes for you to judge whether a proposed project measures up — or can be made to measure up — simply dig the card out of your wallet. It either measures up, or it doesn't. You'll know.

Selling Your Wow Project

If you read the literature on project management carefully, there is one word that I guarantee that you won't find: selling. People in the world of project management talk about everything else — from PERT charts (PERT stands for program evaluation and review technique: I got my master's degree around this), Gantt charts, and time lines, to "specification creep" and "risk-management methodology." Rarely, if ever, will you hear those people talk about the need to sell your project. The assumption seems to be that, like a better mousetrap, a worthy project will sell itself.

Although the project-management experts may not appreciate the need to sell, there is a group of businesspeople who do understand the critical role of selling projects. They are the people who inhabit the "real" professional-services firms: Every management consultant, every ad-agency wizard, every stock-market jock is a salesperson. They're selling their strong point of view, their recognized expertise, and their scintillating services to customers on the outside, and they're selling their reliability, dependability, and talent to colleagues on the inside. It's just another part of our old friend the Brand Called You. (See the August:September 1997 issue of Fast Company.) Your project and your brand go hand in hand: Both depend on your

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ability to sell yourself and to sell your project. If you want your Wow Project to happen, you have to learn how to sell it — smart, hard, and from beginning to end.

A PWPL has to master two essential sales skills: pitching and community organizing. The art of the pitch boils down to what we call “the two-minute elevator spiel.” You’re on your way to your office, and you’re riding the elevator. The doors open, and the CEO gets on. As the doors slowly slide shut, she turns to you and asks, “What are you working on that makes a difference to this company?” Her eyes bore into you. You’re alone in the elevator with the biggest of the big cheeses, and you’ve got two minutes to tell her exactly why your project matters. So what is your pitch?

Sure, you’ve got butterflies in your stomach and a hammer in your heart — but the elevator pitch isn’t really about dealing with pressure. It’s about communication. And caring. Can you take the hopelessly complicated set of problems that you’re juggling in your project and reduce those problems to three bullet points that anyone can immediately understand? Better yet, can you dispense with PowerPoint slides altogether and sum up your project in the perfect metaphor? For example: “By the time we’re done with this customer-satisfaction project, we’ll be so close to our customers that they’ll be our bungee-jumping buddies.” You’ll know that you’ve nailed the perfect metaphor when the T-shirts arrive for you and your team with the words “The Bungee-Jumping Bunch” silk-screened across the chest — courtesy of the CEO herself.

The other essential skill of the PWPL is community organizing. It’s an art that flourished in the 1960s under the tutelage of legendary activists such as Saul Alinsky, who wrote “Rules for Radicals” (Random House, 1971), and Caesar Chavez, who was the founder of the United Farm Workers. The lessons they taught also apply to your project. Community organizing is all about building grassroots support. It’s about identifying the people around you with whom you can create a common, passionate cause. And it’s about ignoring the conventional wisdom of company politics and instead playing the game by very different rules.

For example, conventional wisdom instructs would-be PWPLs to get top management to give their projects early “buy-in.” The standard line says, “Get the boss’s support, and you’ve got the go-ahead you need.” Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Never go to the boss too early. And never go to the boss before you’ve done your grassroots organizing to build the community support that you need to make the project a reality, a cool thing that cool people want to be part of. Community organizing doesn’t mean looking at the organizational chart to see what the boss thinks. It means looking around you to see whom you can convince to sign on; looking below you to see whom you can enlist in the cause; and looking around you to see who’s in a key area

and who can contribute expertise. Don’t worry about the boss’s approval. Get the community organizing done, and by the time you go to the boss, she’ll recognize that you’ve already gotten approval from the cool parts of the organization.

The second political mistake that you can’t afford to make is to spend precious time and scarce emotional energy worrying about your enemies — and if your project is genuinely a Wow Project, don’t doubt that you’ll have enemies. (Project axiom: Anything worth doing makes the establishment mad.) Forget your enemies. (The hell with ‘em!) Concentrate on building support among your friends. Get strong endorsers who will lend their names and their clout to your project. Remember: You will never be able to change your enemies’ minds. The best you can do is to surround them with your passionate, determined supporters.

Executing Your Wow Project

Now that you’ve worked hard to identify and to sell your Wow Project, you’re ready to roll into phase three: time to execute!

Except that it doesn’t work that way — not exactly. Only in magazine articles can you break down work into separate, tidy phases. In the real world of work, this stuff overlaps, runs together, merges, separates, and merges again. In real work life, the DNA of a Wow Project is present in each of the four phases: What differs is the relative concentration in each phase. So, for example, while you’re getting your Wow Project started, you’re already doing some of the things that will become important later in the life of the project — such as practicing how to pitch it and doing early community organizing. And as you move into selling your Wow Project, you’re already doing some of the things that you’ll need to do to execute it — such as prototyping, listening, and improving. Just remember: You don’t stop doing some activities simply because the emphasis shifts. It’s more a matter of recognizing where you are in the project’s evolution, so that you can make the right kind of concentrated effort at the right time.

At the execution phase, you need to be sure to put the right kind of concentrated effort into following three important “do’s” and three equally important “don’ts.”

Do think of execution as a series of rapid prototypes. Life is a series of approximations. You will never get your project right the first time (or the 21st time, for that matter) — never. Holding onto it until you get it “right” is simply wrong. That’s a surefire way to guarantee that, by the time you unveil the project, not only won’t it be right, but you also won’t have enough time, energy, or support to go back and make it right. Great projects live off instant feedback and adjustment cycles. That’s one way to look at the Web: It’s a giant real-time prototype.

But the practice of using fast feedback and fast adjustment cycles predates the Web. Hewlett-Packard pioneered that practice to develop several innovative products: People would build a prototype and leave it lying around in the open for others to talk about. Instant feedback allows for instant adjustment cycles. The more iterations you can rapidly go through, the faster you can execute your project. David Kelley, a design genius and the CEO of Ideo, had it exactly right when he said, “Fail often to succeed sooner.” As strange as it may sound, the work of execution is actually all about failure. So celebrate it! Bronze an oversized screw, and award it each week to the project-team member who made the “best screwup of the week.” Why not?

Do think, live, sleep, eat, and breathe your time line. It’s time to get serious about getting your project done. So break this big amorphous thing called “your project” into a living To Do list. What needs to happen today? Tomorrow? This week? Build a simple, easy-to-use tool to track the project’s progress. The tool could be something as old-fashioned as a three-ring binder with a chapter divider for each deliverable. If you want to see a good example of the three-ring binder at work, read Guy Kawasaki’s book “The Macintosh Way” (Addison-Wesley, 1989). It includes the complete Macintosh rollout plan — an exemplary living To Do list if there ever was one.

Also, master the art of the 15-minute meeting — a daily, attendance-required “hot” session in which each member of the project team gives a quick progress report, identifies that day’s milestones — or issues a desperate call for help. If CNN can organize its whole day of broadcasting in a 30-minute morning meeting (as it was doing in 1993, when I visited its headquarters), then you certainly can keep your project on track in 15 minutes.

Do keep it fun. The point of the living To Do list is to make it clear that you have reached the button-down phase of the project. But that doesn’t mean that you have to button down your personality. Don’t you dare lose the sense of playfulness that brought the team together in the first place.

The simplest way to make sure that you don’t lose sight of the joy of doing a Wow Project is to remember to celebrate. No accomplishment is too small or too insignificant to warrant a little celebration. As you hit each of your milestones and as you fill up the three-ring binder with your project team’s accomplishments, remember the pause that refreshes. It doesn’t have to be a big bash: It can be just enough to keep the troops pumped.

Just as important as those three “do’s” are the three “don’ts”: the bad habits that teams can slip into when it comes time to

execute — the killers that can derail even the most promising Wow Project.

Don’t talk it to death. You’re going to spend a good part of any project talking about your project. But the reality in most organizations is that execution too often turns into talking about execution. It becomes talking instead of doing. The team stops building prototypes and beta-testing and instead starts talking about what needs to happen next. Or the team spends too much time in meetings, talking to each other, and not enough time in the marketplace, talking with end-users. Think of it as a math problem: If most teams have a talk/do ratio of 70% talking to 30% doing, then you want to reverse those figures so that the ratio is 70% doing to 30% talking.

Don’t stop selling. Here’s another way to think of execution: It’s “just” scaled-up sales. (No baloney.) Your job during the execution phase is to roll out your project. And that means building an ever-widening support base. Execution is about taking the 5 fervent believers who backed you during the finding-and-creating phase, along with the 15 fervent believers who joined the cause during the selling phase, and adding the 45 new fervent believers who can help you take your project into the field — where it can be implemented. Never stop selling! Never stop recruiting!

And, finally, Don’t lose the emotion; don’t let the project go dry. Just as important as keeping the project on track is keeping it Wow! Face it: Project execution is emotionally draining. It’s easy for the Wow in the project to slip away slowly and imperceptibly. After a while, you and your team get so tired that you forget what gave the project its Wow, Beautiful, Revolutionary, Impact, Raving Fans quality in the first place. You’re in danger of executing what will turn out to be just another project — a “mediocre success” as one of my seminar participants damn-ingly put it. (Another equation: Mediocre Success = Death.) This is the time to take a station break. Take your team off-site for a day-long excursion. Go back to first principles, and see whether you’re still on course emotionally. Bring in a new recruit, someone with fresh energy and enthusiasm. But don’t lose the energy that created the Wow Project in the first place.

Handing Off Your Wow Project

Congratulations! After what feels like — or actually is — months or years of hard work and mega-amps of personal energy, the project is happening. You’ve achieved rollout: The new product is in the marketplace, the new service is available to customers, the new sales force is in place, the new customer-service center is open for business. Now comes the (really) hard part.

It’s time for you to turn the project over to someone else to run

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on a day-to-day basis. It's time for you to walk away from the project that you worked so hard and against such long odds to create, sell, and execute — so that you can now start the creative cycle all over again. It's the healthy thing to do, it's necessary, and it's hard. (Just ask Newt Gingrich.)

It's healthy and necessary because, as I know from personal experience, people who have what it takes to create Wow Projects rarely have what it takes to operate those projects. It's the same kind of difference that typically separates an entrepreneur from a manager: If you're good at creating the project, at fighting and winning the "us versus them" internal battles, and at handling the emotional roller-coaster ride of getting the project going, then chances are that you won't be good at managing it over the long haul. Besides, you've done what you set out to do. You may even be tired of the specifics of that particular project; you may be hungry for a new challenge.

But it's also hard — because, as you've learned throughout the project experience, project management is emotion management. Period. It's yet another core truth about projects that they don't teach you in the "official" literature. But that's the nub of the issue: Projects are intensely personal. You and your team have invested all that you've got of yourselves and your relationships into making your project a go. When you think about that project — even if you're just looking at cold numbers on a sheet of paper — what you remember are all of the late nights, the pizza-at-the-office dinners, the arguments, and the agreements that made it all worthwhile. Now you've got to hand over all of that to someone else. Handling the handoff is the last test of the PWPL.

The first thing you do is to throw the party-to-end-all-parties. If project management is emotion management, then you and your team members will need a serious celebration to mark your accomplishment. Don't be shy about it: Remember, you're still selling the project, still building your brand. Commission the writing of a project history that records the contributions of your team members and that captures the important lessons that were learned during the project's development. And send out thank-you notes to all of the helpers, supporters, and raving fans who made it possible: You're going to need them again — on your next Wow Project. Make sure that you give your successor your blessing, and that everything you do as you hand off the project is designed to make that person's job easier. The whole bloody point is to make sure that the project stays successful — not to demonstrate that without you, it would quickly hit the skids. (Memo to self: Don't be dumb!)

If you're a great PWPL, you've already been sizing up your next opportunity. You've already identified and recruited most of your team — you want to make sure that you get the people you want, not the people the human-resources department

wants to give you. And, if you've been practicing the Richard Branson-Karl Weick style of observation, you've been assembling your own notebook-and-filing-cabinet collection of newspaper clippings, personal experiences, and random thoughts. All of that is raw material: It's just waiting for you to sift through it and to pick one thing to turn into your next Wow Project.

But most important, the end of the project marks your biggest opportunity: the chance for you to do a self-evaluation. Calling the project a "success" doesn't begin to capture the real value of the experience. If you're intent on making it an intensely personal success, you need to spend some time reflecting on what the project has meant to you. What did you learn from it? What were you good at? What were you less good at? What skills did you feel yourself developing? What skills do you still need to develop? As you do your own project postmortem, you're not only closing the emotional and professional books on your last project, but you're also opening the first chapter of your next project.

From this self-evaluation will come the answers that will guide you forward. You'll find yourself deciding whether you want to work next on a project that can give you a new set of experiences, or whether you want to develop your skills in an area where you've already demonstrated your expertise. Should you work on your weaknesses — or play to your strengths? As you look at your portfolio, you may decide that your next project should take you into a new field — so that you can learn more about finance, for example. Or into a new role — so that you can operate as a team member, rather than as team leader. Or into a new geographic area — so that you can create a project outside your home country.

You do your evaluation, you look for a narrow project with wide implications, you give each project the "Does it matter?" test, and you begin the Wow Project cycle all over again. You've learned to move from project to project in a world where work is defined by projects. You've learned the new equation of the world of work: You = Your Projects. Welcome to your life in the projects.

Tom Peters (tom@tompeters.com) says that he's no genius — but he does know that his life = his projects. And you?