

Project Charter FAQ

What is a project charter? Why do I need one?

A project charter defines the scope and objectives of a project, lists roles and responsibilities for the project team, and clarifies the resources required to complete the project. It outlines the project roadmap at a high level, lists deliverables, and serves as a contract among the decision-makers, stakeholders, and implementers involved in the project. Completing a project charter ensures that everyone involved has a shared understanding of the project and authorizes the Project Manager to oversee project work.

When should I fill out a project charter?

First, ask yourself if the work you're undertaking is actually a project (versus an ongoing service or program) -- does it have clear objectives and a definite endpoint? Will it involve multiple people? If so, completing the charter before the project begins will ensure a shared sense of scope, resources, and roles.

If you have an idea for a project that has not yet been approved, consider using a lightweight version of the charter to describe the project to decision-makers. You can fill out the overview, objectives, scope, and other high-level fields. If the project is approved, you'll already have started the charter!

Who should fill out the project charter?

Typically, the Project Manager completes the charter, with input and approval from the Project Sponsor(s). (The Project Manager handles day-to-day project work, whereas the Project Sponsor advises, secures resources, and champions the project at a leadership level).

How long will it take to fill out the charter?

It may take a couple of weeks (or more) to complete the charter – it's not easy! You may need to collect information from many different people/groups, so allow yourself plenty of time for communication and feedback. You will probably uncover questions that you hadn't considered yet, and they may be tough to answer. Sometimes you'll find that the original project is too big to lend itself to one charter, and you may end up writing multiple charters for different phases or components of a major project.

Who should approve the charter?

Typically the Project Sponsor approves the charter by signing it (or indicating approval digitally). There may be multiple sponsors, particularly if this is a major project that requires heavy involvement from more than one department.

How do I get approval for staff time when staff are outside my department?

If there is significant staff time required from a department other than yours, you may want to recruit the Department Head as a Project Sponsor, ensuring that s/he is involved with decision-making as you complete the charter.

Alternately, it may be sufficient to get feedback from the Department Head as you fill out the charter. You may want to enlist the Project Sponsor or your own Department Head for these communications.

What do I do with the charter once it's complete?

Make sure that project sponsor(s) and everyone on the project team has access to the charter. You'll probably want to devote time during a kickoff meeting to going over the charter and making sure that everyone has a shared understanding of its contents.

If you'd like to share your charter with the Project Management Community of Practice, we'll add it to our list of examples so that it can be a resource for future Project Managers.

What if my project changes once we start working on it?

Hopefully there won't be substantial changes to scope or objectives. But if there is a significant change which will affect the outcome of the project, you'll probably want to revise the charter, have it approved, and share the revision with all key players.

For minor changes, you could edit the existing charter, making a note or using versioning to indicate changes.

You may want to clarify in advance that milestone dates are approximate and subject to change.