A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide:
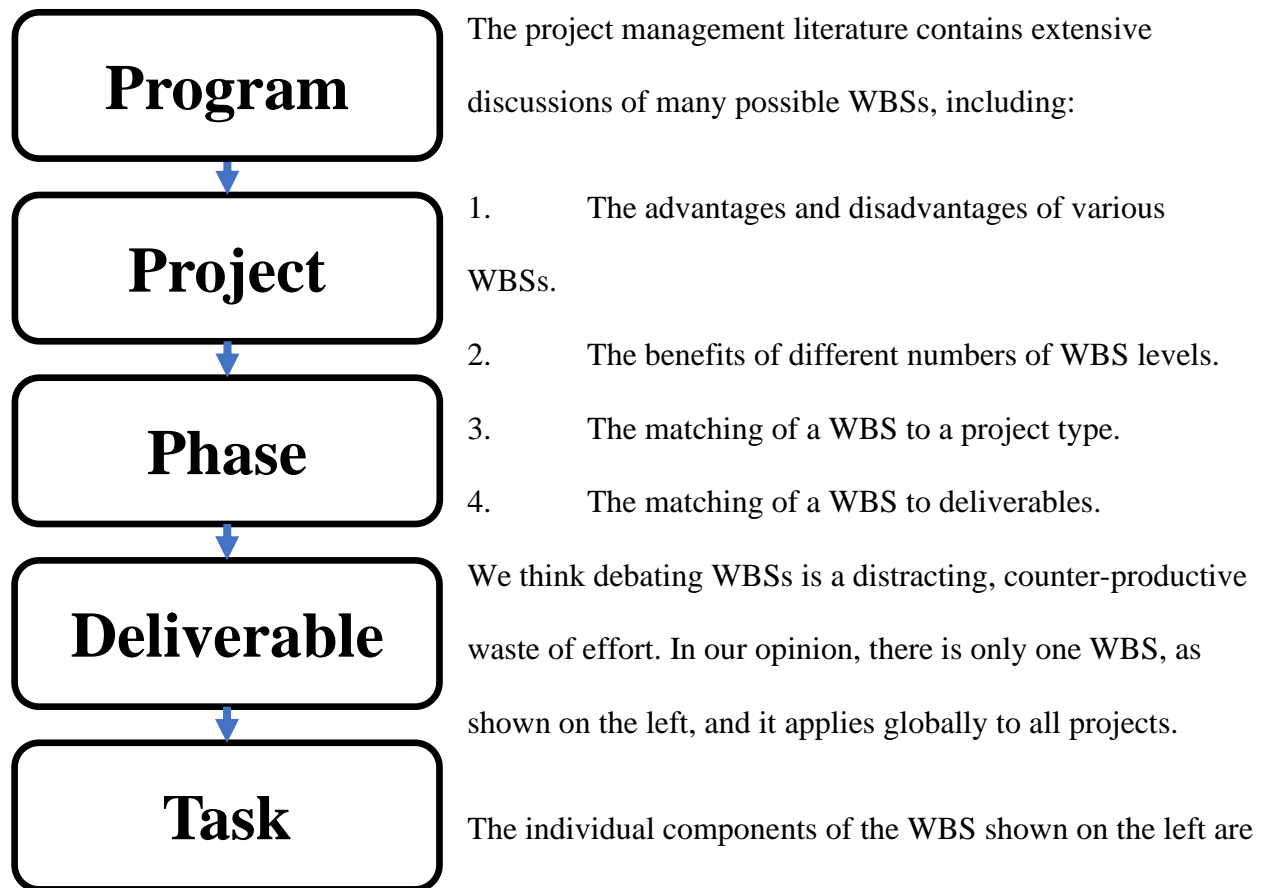## Improving project performance

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Appendix J – Work breakdown structure (WBS)

Recommended WBS description

This appendix contains a summary discussion of a recommended work breakdown structure.

Recommended project WBS components

Program

Project

Phase

Deliverable

Task

Figure 0-1 Project WBS components

The project management literature contains extensive discussions of many possible WBSs, including:

1.   The advantages and disadvantages of various WBSs.

2.   The benefits of different numbers of WBS levels.

3.   The matching of a WBS to a project type.

4.   The matching of a WBS to deliverables.

We think debating WBSs is a distracting, counter-productive waste of effort. In our opinion, there is only one WBS, as shown on the left, and it applies globally to all projects.

The individual components of the WBS shown on the left are defined in the Glossary.

The list of deliverables is closely tied to the characteristics and products of the project and will be different for every project.

Benefits of the recommended WBS

The benefits of the recommended WBS include the following:

1. It's easy to explain and accessible for all project stakeholders to understand.

2. The WBS always consists of precisely five levels. For example, there are no sub-projects or sub-tasks.

3. There is as much clarity of definition as possible at all levels. There are no vague or unclear concepts, such as activities where it's unclear how the work contributes to a deliverable.

4. All the one-to-many relationships point down, as indicated by the arrows. For example, all phases consist of multiple deliverables.

5. No one-to-many relationships that point up. For example, no task contributes to more than one deliverable.

Features and benefits of the related project plan

Understanding of project work is enhanced, and scheduling is simplified when the detailed project plan implements the WBS above and exhibits the following features:

1. No task has an associated effort of less than one day or more than five days. This granularity reduces the error term associated with estimates for larger tasks.

2. All tasks are assigned to only one resource. This simplicity makes responsibility clear and simplifies project scheduling.

3. Tasks are not linked via precedence relationships. Tasks are scheduled sequentially by default. This simplicity avoids clutter and makes managing the project plan easier.

4. Tasks are estimated using effort and not duration. Effort estimates lead to better resource utilization and high-confidence project budgets.

5. Tasks contribute to only one deliverable. This simplicity reinforces deliverable independence and enhances project understanding.

6. Deliverable precedence relationships only link to other deliverables. This simplicity enhances project understanding and simplifies project scheduling.

7. Deliverables do not contribute to other deliverables. This simplicity enhances project understanding.

8. Deliverable precedence relationships do not cross the boundary between phases. This simplicity leads to clear project milestones.

9. The schedule for deliverables does not cross the boundary between phases. This simplicity simplifies project scheduling.

10. Adding lead or lag time to tasks is minimized. No lead and lag times reinforce a schedule-focused project execution approach.