Imperial College Business School

BPES 2024-25 - PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project Review: Fyre Festival



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1 Introduction

1.1 Background Information

The Fyre Festival was a planned luxury music festival in the Bahamas, co-founded by entrepreneur Billy McFarland and rapper Ja Rule, seemingly to promote a new talent-booking app [2]. Marketed as an ultra-exclusive paradise getaway, the festival was heavily promoted through social media by celebrity influencers, promising attendees an extravagant experience on a private island featuring famous musical acts, extravagant accommodations, and gourmet dining [1]. Tickets cost thousands of dollars, with promotional materials projecting a glamorous lifestyle with supermodels and exclusive events [5].

However, when the inaugural event weekend arrived in April 2017, the festival descended into chaos due to severe logistical failures. The festival was abruptly cancelled, stranding hundreds of attendees without adequate food, water, shelter, or medical care.[3] Instead of luxury accommodations and fine dining, guests received disaster-relief tents and packaged cheese sandwiches.[4] The festival's collapse led to widespread media coverage and public outrage, culminating in criminal charges against the organizers. Billy McFarland pled guilty to fraud charges and was sentenced to six years in prison, ordered to forfeit $26 million in assets [6,7]. The event has since become emblematic of project mismanagement and fraudulent business practices.

1.2 Scope

The scope of the Fyre Festival was extensive, encompassing the creation and delivery of a luxury music festival on a remote Bahamian island over two consecutive weekends (April 28–30 and May 5–7, 2017) [8]. Organisers envisioned providing attendees with an exclusive experience comparable to elite global events, including accommodations in beachfront villas or geodesic domes, transportation via private jets and yachts, and premium catering by celebrity chefs. Additionally, a significant aspect of the festival's scope included booking high-profile musical talent and influencers, alongside an intensive social media marketing campaign featuring celebrity endorsements [9].

The ambitious vision involved substantial infrastructure development, from staging and sound systems to sanitation and transportation logistics. The organisers aimed to create a complete pop-up luxury resort experience, requiring meticulous planning, considerable resources, and experienced project management. However, this broad scope and ambition greatly exceeded the organisational capacity and budget of the inexperienced team leading the project [10].

1.3 Timeline

The Fyre Festival was publicly announced in December 2016, with the event scheduled to take place in late April and early May 2017. This highly compressed planning period of approximately six months significantly impacted the feasibility of the event, leading to critical logistical failures. The first attendees arrived on Great Exuma Island on April 27, 2017, quickly encountering inadequate infrastructure and amenities. The event was officially cancelled the following day, leading to urgent evacuations and subsequent legal repercussions for the organisers. Detailed analysis of the timeline and specific planning missteps will be further examined in Section 2.3 of this report.

1.4 Resources

The resource management of the Fyre Festival was severely inadequate, contributing directly to its collapse. Below, key resource categories are outlined:

1.4.1 Material Resources

- **Accommodations and Facilities:** Promised luxury accommodations were not provided. Attendees were instead offered FEMA disaster-relief tents, unsuitable for the advertised luxury experience.

- **Catering and Amenities:** High-end culinary experiences were advertised but replaced with insufficient and poorly prepared meals, notably boxed sandwiches, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and distress among guests.
- **Infrastructure:** Critical infrastructure, such as reliable electricity, sanitary facilities, and medical services, were either insufficient or entirely absent, exacerbating safety and comfort issues.

1.4.2 Human Resources

- **Project Leadership:** Key management positions were occupied by individuals lacking adequate experience in event planning, contributing significantly to poor decision-making and project mismanagement.
- **Labor and Contractors:** Local Bahamian workers and contractors, hastily employed under rushed conditions, were often unpaid following the festival's collapse, highlighting severe ethical and managerial shortcomings.
- **Staffing and Volunteers:** Over-reliance on inadequately trained volunteers and inexperienced personnel led to organisational confusion and inefficiencies, further undermining operations on-site.

1.4.3 Financial Resources

- **Budget Allocation:** Although significant financial resources ($26 million from investors and advance ticket sales) were raised, they were disproportionately allocated toward promotional activities rather than essential operational expenses.
- **Mismanagement and Fraud:** Funds were improperly managed or misused, exemplified by extravagant payments for influencer marketing, including a single $250,000 payment to Kendall Jenner for a social media post [9]. Essential payments to vendors and contractors were neglected, creating severe operational disruptions.

1.4.4 Technological Resources

- **Marketing and Social Media:** Effective utilisation of social media platforms to market the event led to an exceptionally successful promotional campaign. However, this success did not translate into practical operational outcomes.
- **Cashless Payment Systems:** Implementation of RFID wristbands designed for cashless transactions led to increased complexity and attendee frustration, particularly when the festival's infrastructure failed, rendering the technology practically useless.
- **Planning and Logistics:** Negligible investment in essential project management software, risk assessment tools, and logistic support systems severely impacted the execution of fundamental project requirements.

2 Project Analysis

2.1 Stakeholder Analysis

The Fyre Festival affected a wide network of stakeholders with varying levels of power and interest. The list below identifies different stakeholders:

- **Organizers (Billy McFarland and Ja Rule):** As project's funders and key organisers, they were responsible for overseeing the planning, execution, and financial aspects of the event. They had high decision-making power.

- **Investors:** Investors provided the capital necessary to fund the festival, with the expectation of seeing a return on their investment. Investors had strong interest in the festival's success and their reputation is associated with the success or failure of the event.
- **Ticket buyers/attendees:** They invested thousands of dollars and played a central role in the festival's revenue model through ticket purchases, yet had little influence over project decisions once they bought in.
- **Vendors and service providers (e.g. caterers, transportation providers):** They were contracted to provide services and support the event's operations and were crucial in delivering the festival's promises.They have high interest in being paid and maintaining their reputations.
- **Local community (Bahamas):** The local community was expected to benefit from the influx of tourists and economic opportunities generated by the event.
- **Employees:** They worked to help plan, organize, and execute the event. Many of them worked under extreme pressure and in difficult conditions without adequate resources.
- **Performing artists:** The artists were expected to draw crowds and generate excitement for the festival through their involvement. They were also part of the revenue model, as their performances were marketed as key attractions for ticket buyers.
- **Social media influencers (e.g. Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid):** They had significant promotional power during the marketing phase. They were hired to create buzz and attract attention.
- **Regulatory bodies:** They oversee the event's legality, safety, and compliance with local regulations and monitor for any fraudulent activities to ensure consumer rights.
- **Public and media:** The media played a major role in both promoting and later exposing the Fyre Festival's failure. They had low direct power but showed great interest.

Major stakeholder groups can be mapped based on their power and interest as can be seen in the following figure:

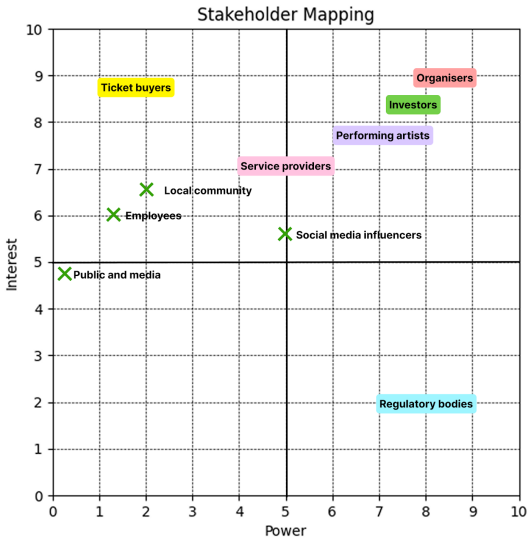


Figure 1: Stakeholder Power-Interest Mapping for Fyre Festival

2.2 Project Timeline

Effective scheduling is critical to successful project delivery; however, the Fyre Festival suffered from severe timeline mismanagement. Organisers adopted an unrealistic timeline that severely underestimated the complexity involved in executing an international luxury event on a remote island. Key timeline events and significant milestones contributing to the festival's failure are detailed in Table 1 below:

Date	Milestone & Description
December, 2016 **Festival Announcement**	The event was officially announced as an exclusive luxury music festival in the Bahamas. The festival's aggressive marketing strategy leveraged influencers and celebrity endorsements, rapidly selling out tickets and significantly increasing public expectations.
March, 2017 **Venue Relocation**	The original venue was revoked due to breaches of contractual agreements concerning promotional content. With less than two months to go, organizers moved the festival location to Great Exuma island, greatly increasing logistical challenges while leaving the timeline unchanged.
March-April, 2017 **Planning Delays**	Severe delays in construction and logistical arrangements emerged. Infrastructure, accommodation setups, and other essential services fell critically behind schedule. Warnings from professional consultants and event specialists about the infeasibility of timelines were ignored by management.
April 27, 2017 **Arrival of Guests**	Festival attendees arrived on-site, quickly confronting incomplete facilities and inadequate infrastructure. Essential amenities, including proper shelter, food, and sanitation, were insufficient or entirely lacking, sparking immediate distress and negative media coverage.
April 28, 2017 **Official Cancellation**	Organisers officially canceled the festival due to overwhelming operational failure and attendee safety concerns. Immediate evacuation measures were implemented, and the second planned festival weekend was subsequently abandoned.
May-June, 2017 **Legal Repercussions**	In the aftermath, multiple lawsuits were filed against organisers by attendees, investors, and contractors. Criminal investigations uncovered extensive financial mismanagement and fraud, leading to significant legal consequences.
October, 2018 **Criminal Sentencing**	Billy McFarland pled guilty to charges of wire fraud and was sentenced to six years in prison, marking the culmination of legal actions related to the event's collapse.

Table 1: Fyre Festival Development Timeline

2.2.1 Challenges and Adaptions

A primary challenge was the organisers' insistence on maintaining their initial timelines despite substantial setbacks, particularly the late venue change. The failure to recalibrate project timelines following this event severely compromised feasibility. Furthermore, continuous disregard for warnings from experienced professionals prevented necessary adaptations that might have mitigated emerging risks.

Overall, the Fyre Festival's timeline underscores the essential need for realistic scheduling, built-in flexibility, and responsive management strategies to accommodate unexpected challenges in complex projects.

2.3 Business Case

The business case for Fyre Festival was enticing, which helped McFarland secure considerable investor funding. However, in reality, this business case was built on unrealistic assumptions and misrepresentations.

2.3.1 Market Opportunity

Fyre Festival could have capitalised on several emerging trends, including the rise of the luxury music festival market, consumers' demand for experiential luxury, and the power of social media influencers. The live music and festival industry has seen rapid growth in recent years, with festivals becoming significant revenue-generating events. The Fyre Festival offered a novel selling point that capitalized on these emerging opportunities by offering high-end, boutique festivals that combined the popularity of music festivals with the demand for luxury travel and premium experiences. The lineup of performers, including major artists in the music industry, also would have been a huge draw for attendees.

Consumers, particularly younger wealthy demographics, were moving away from traditional luxury goods and services and instead focusing on experiences. These high-net-worth individuals were looking for exclusive, memorable events that catered to their desire for luxury and privacy. On top of the shift in consumer behaviour, social media played a huge role in shaping the market opportunity for the Fyre Festival. The rise of influencer culture meant that the event could gain significant exposure through celebrity endorsements and social media campaigns.

The festival offered the potential for cross-promotion and strategic partnerships with luxury brands to create further revenue streams and brand associations. Additionally, the Fyre brand had the potential to build Fyre Media's brand as a premier platform for booking artists, fostering partnerships with major brands, and creating a sustainable business model around event planning and management.

2.3.2 Revenue Stream

In theory, Fyre Festival had significant financial potential by leveraging exclusivity, celebrity endorsements, partnerships with luxury brands and the potential success of its associated app. The event organisers planned to generate income from the following sources:

- **Ticket Sales:** Admission tickets were the primary revenue source of the event. Tickets ranged in price from a few thousand dollars for basic access to tens of thousands of dollars for higher-tier packages.
- **VIP Packages and Custom Experiences:** The premium packages which offered private luxury accommodations and tailor-made experiences, such as private yacht rides, gourmet dining, and exclusive beach access were priced significantly higher than general admission.
- **Sponsorship and Brand Partnerships:** Fyre Festival sought partnerships with luxury brands and corporate sponsors which pay for marketing exposure in front of wealthy audiences.
- **Merchandising and Event Merchandise:** Exclusive or limited-edition merchandise would serve as memorabilia for attendees and additional revenue for the organizers.
- **Event Planning and Digital Bookings App:** The festival was marketed as a launchpad for Fyre Media's broader goals, which included developing a platform for booking artists and events online. By charging service fees or subscription fees for its event-planning services, Fyre Media could have created a steady revenue stream from this digital platform.

While Fyre Festival was marketed as a luxurious experience sale, the failure of the event meant that these revenue streams were never realized.

2.4 Risk Management

The Fyre Festival is a famous example of poor risk management. Risks were underestimated, and strategies for mitigating them were either nonexistent or ineffective. Ultimately, the event's downfall highlights that successful risk management requires not only identifying potential threats but also implementing robust processes to address them. The festival's risks can be categorised into four key areas:

- **Logistical Risks:** The festival's remote island location demanded rapid development of infrastructure, including accommodations, utilities, food supply, and medical services. However, organisers failed to engage experienced professionals or secure contingency plans, leading to inadequate facilities and services for attendees [11].
- **Timeline Risks:** With a planning period of approximately four months, the ambitious timeline left little room to address complex logistical challenges. Despite expert advice recommending a 12–18 month planning period for an event of this magnitude, leadership pressed ahead without incorporating necessary buffer periods or escalation procedures [12].
- **Financial Mismanagement:** Despite raising millions through ticket sales and investor funds, financial resources were misallocated, with disproportionate spending on high-profile marketing and celebrity endorsements over essential operational needs. This mismanagement resulted in cash flow shortages and unpaid vendors, contributing to the festival's collapse [13].
- **Communication Failures:** The extravagant marketing campaign, heavily driven by social media influencers, created expectations that far exceeded the organisers' capacity to deliver. The lack of a crisis communication plan further amplified public outrage when promises were unmet, leading to multiple legal actions and severe reputational damage [14].

2.5 Project Organisation

The organisational structure of the Fyre Festival was characterised by a hierarchical framework where key individuals were responsible for specific aspects of the event. Billy McFarland oversaw the whole project, with personnel reporting to him without intermediary supervisors [15]. The lack of a more distributed management structure may have contributed to challenges in communication and project execution, ultimately impacting the festival's success. Below is a diagram illustrating these relationships:

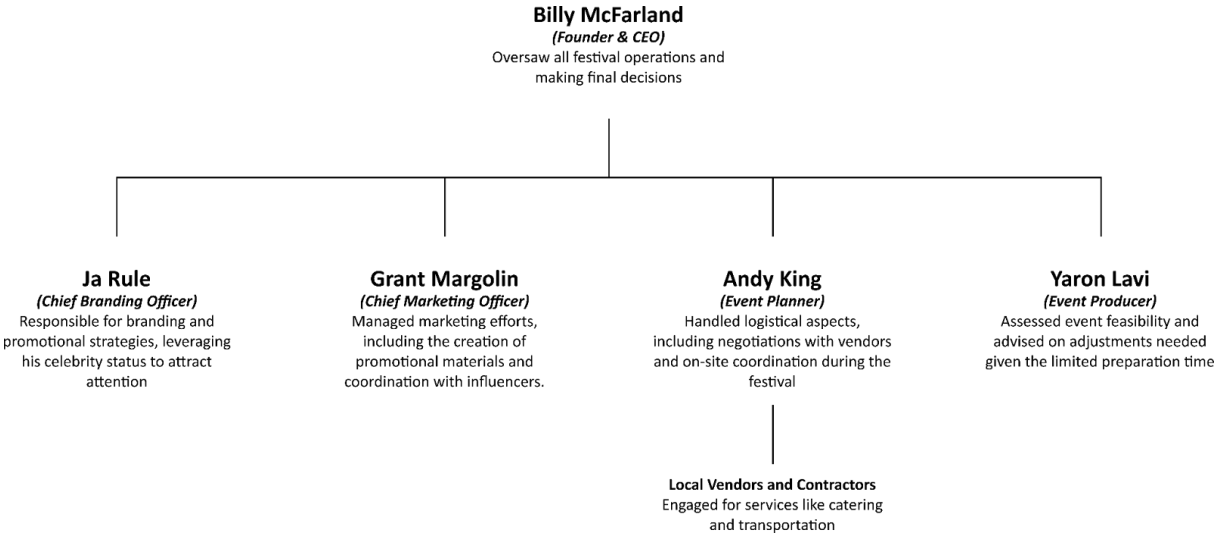


Figure 2: Fyre Festival Organisational Structure

3 Project Evaluation

3.1 Cost, Time and Quality Outcomes

The Fyre Festival's outcomes can be assessed against the fundamental project constraints of cost, time, and quality. In all three areas, the project failed to meet its objectives. The organisers attempted to deliver an ultra-luxury experience (quality) in an extremely compressed timeline (time) with insufficient budget control (cost). This violated a core project management principle that one can typically only prioritise two of the three constraints (scope/quality, schedule, cost) at a time. The result was severe underperformance across the board.

3.1.1 Cost

Financially, the festival was a disaster. Cost was deprioritised from the outset, with little emphasis placed on financial control or long-term resource planning. Budget overruns and misallocation plagued the project. Millions of dollars were raised from investors and ticket sales, yet funds were misused—channelled heavily into influencer marketing and high-profile promotion rather than essential infrastructure or operations [16]. This short-sighted approach prioritised optics over sustainability. In the end, the project ran out of cash well before execution, evidenced by unpaid vendors, withdrawn services, and desperate last-minute funding attempts. The aftermath included lawsuits, investor losses totalling over $26 million, and multiple fraud charges [17]. In a well-managed project, Earned Value Analysis (EVA) would have flagged these variances early. Metrics like the Cost Performance Index (CPI) would have shown that the project was spending far more than the value it was delivering. However, no such financial controls were implemented, and cost was treated as an expendable variable.

3.1.2 Time Management

Time was prioritised above all else. The event date—set for April 2017—was non-negotiable and became a fixed constraint around which all other project elements were forced to bend. The timeline from announcement (December 2016) to execution left just six months to plan and deliver a large-scale international festival. Experts recommended a minimum of 12 to 18 months for a project of this scale [18], but their guidance was disregarded. There was no evidence of the Critical Path Method (CPM) being used to analyse task sequencing or bottlenecks. Instead, the project team relied on schedule crashing—compressing timelines by throwing money and people at the problem—without proper resourcing or planning. Critical milestones such as infrastructure setup, artist logistics, and accommodation provisioning were repeatedly missed. A basic Gantt chart would have revealed that overlapping tasks with no slack created unresolvable dependencies. By the event date, the site was non-functional, and guest arrivals only amplified the crisis. Time had clearly been prioritised at the expense of cost and quality, resulting in a project that delivered neither.

3.1.3 Quality Control

Despite being heavily emphasised in promotional material, quality was not genuinely prioritised in execution. The festival promised luxury villas, gourmet meals, and exclusive experiences, yet delivered disaster-relief tents and boxed cheese sandwiches [19]. The disconnect between intended and actual outcomes points to a complete breakdown in quality assurance. With time fixed and cost unmonitored, quality became the sacrificial element. Critical aspects such as accommodation, catering, sanitation, and entertainment were either downgraded without notice or failed entirely. Headlining artists cancelled due to unpaid fees or poor coordination, and the physical infrastructure lacked even basic safety or comfort standards. In project terms, scope and quality had drastically changed over time, but there was no formal change control process to manage this transition or inform stakeholders. Rather than adjusting expectations or scaling the vision realistically, the organisers maintained the illusion of quality while abandoning the means to deliver it. No deliverable met minimum viability, and the project

failed to fulfil even a basic event experience—demonstrating that quality, although initially positioned as central, was ultimately deprioritised in favour of a rigid schedule and unsustainable hype.

Reflecting on these outcomes, the project's position within the Iron Triangle can therefore be inferred as follows:

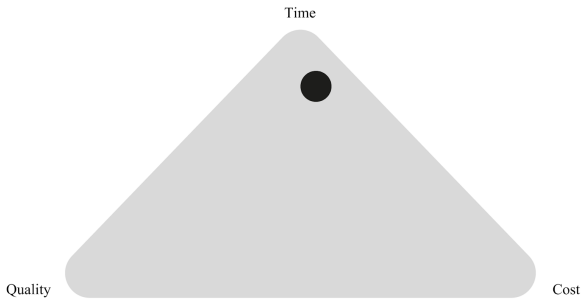


Figure 3: Fyre Festival Iron Triangle

3.2 Risk Management Efficacy

Risk management at the Fyre Festival was fundamentally lacking. A proper project would maintain a risk register, assess threats via probability-impact matrices, and develop mitigation and contingency plans. In Fyre's case, none of these were in evidence. High-impact risks—such as delivering infrastructure on an undeveloped island within six months—were either underestimated or ignored [20]. No formal mitigation strategies were developed. No contingency plans were in place for accommodation failures, weather events, or catering shortfalls.

Qualitative and quantitative risk tools were not applied. Had the team conducted even a basic Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA), they would have identified multiple high-probability, high-impact risks. Instead, early warnings from contractors and internal team members were dismissed. Critical vendors raised red flags, but their concerns were silenced or ignored [21].

As issues escalated, the absence of a crisis communication strategy compounded the situation. There were no predefined escalation pathways, nor a plan B. The response to each new problem was reactive and often reckless. From customs delays to last-minute tent procurement, decisions were made impulsively under duress. The complete lack of monitoring and review mechanisms meant that risks materialised unchecked, and ultimately destroyed the project [22].

3.3 Organisational Structure

The organisational structure of the Fyre Festival was highly centralised, with most decisions funnelled through CEO Billy McFarland. There was no defined project management office (PMO), no steering committee, and no oversight mechanisms. This absence of internal governance led to unchecked decision-making, unfiltered optimism, and widespread mismanagement [23].

Standard governance tools—such as stage-gate reviews or formal progress reporting—were not used. Key structural changes, such as losing the original venue, should have triggered a scope review and project pause. Instead, organisers pressed forward with the original promises, despite radical changes to the project conditions. No structured change control process was implemented, and stakeholders (including attendees and investors) were not informed of the deteriorating feasibility [24]. There was also no responsibility assignment matrix (e.g., RACI chart). Staff and volunteers were unclear on their roles and reporting lines. A lack of formal risk ownership meant no one was accountable for emerging problems. Critical decisions were made by individuals with no event management experience. In a functional organisation, a clear hierarchy, defined roles, and accountability mechanisms would have enabled better control and escalation.

4 Lessons Learnt

The Fyre Festival offers essential lessons for any future project manager. It demonstrates that effective planning, risk mitigation, and governance are not optional—they are foundational to project success.

1. Scope must align with time and cost. If the vision is ambitious, timeframes must be extended or budgets increased. The classic project triangle—good, fast, cheap—remains relevant. The Fyre team attempted to ignore this, and failed on all fronts.

2. Risk management must be continuous and embedded. A risk register, pre-mortem workshops, and contingency plans are essential tools. Project managers must foster a culture where risk reporting is encouraged and acted upon.

3. Ethical leadership and transparent stakeholder communication are vital. Misleading stakeholders for short-term gains results in long-term fallout. Project leaders must be honest about progress, limitations, and changing expectations.

4. Future managers should understand that no amount of effort in the final weeks can compensate for poor upfront planning. Crashing a broken plan rarely delivers success. Instead, robust early planning using tools like Gantt charts, stakeholder mapping, and risk matrices builds the foundation for sustainable delivery.

The Fyre Festival's downfall is a cautionary tale, but also an instructive one. It reminds us that while visionary ideas may inspire, it is disciplined, methodical project management that delivers.

5 Appendix

5.1 Project Organisation

5.2 Individual Reflections

Arnav Bhatia:

Diyona Dsouza: Analysing Fyre Festival's risk management and organisational structure taught me the critical importance of clear leadership, accountability, and proactive risk mitigation. This experience sharpened my ability to assess risks systematically and reinforced the value of contingency planning. Moving forward, I will apply these lessons to ensure better project organisation and risk management in future endeavors.

Zubayr Ghufoor: As the team member responsible for writing the introduction and creating the project timeline, I gained valuable insight into how early-stage planning shapes overall project outcomes. Analysing the Fyre Festival's scope and sequencing deepened my understanding of how unrealistic timelines and poor alignment between vision and resources can lead to failure. This task improved both my academic writing and my ability to think critically about scheduling and dependencies. I'll take these lessons forward to ensure future projects I work on are built on achievable and well-structured plans.

Ewan Ginger:

Callum Hargroves:

Nora Luo:

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