What Is a PM Methodology?
A Search for Efficiency, Consistency, and Performance

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Abstract

By now, you would think that everyone who needs a Project Management (PM) methodology would have one. They have been in popular use for over 30 years. But as more Enterprises understand the importance of demonstrated PM Competence in projects, programs and portfolios, new requirements emerge, that your methods may not support. In this article, we answer the question **"What is a PM Methodology?"** from a perspective of today's requirements. While we cite Information Technology methodologies, we also refer to other application areas, and to universal methods. Finally, we list the criteria against which to score your in-house or commercial methodologies. You can then use the criteria to help improve the effectiveness of your PM delivery.

What Is *Not* a Methodology

This update of our popular 2007 article is prompted by the recurrence of a problem already solved—but perpetuated by a few who seem not to understand the nature and purpose of PM methodologies. While some find it convenient to assert that exam-oriented knowledge taxonomies are true PM methodologies, most audiences understand the differences—and different purposes between these documents and true PM methodologies. But recently, we have noticed that it still serves some parties to consider BOKs, or bodies of knowledge, to be true PM methodologies. For those who understand the differences, they are huge. For others, the purpose of this article is to help clarify those differences so you can make better decisions in your selection of PM methodologies.

Background and PM Methods Experience

First, we share a bit of our background in this topic. For 30+ years we have developed or helped clients adapt or develop over 50 commercial or home-grown methodologies. Part of our PM Practice in the early 1980s was to help companies scale down and improve their internal or purchased PM methodologies. Starting with USA Department of Defense Program Management monoliths or "Big Eight" Consultancies' 36,000 hour-target methods, we helped them scale their methods down to lean, low-overhead methods that were more appropriate for their 1,000-3,000 (or 15,000) hour projects.

We developed new PM methodologies, including THE Guide[1], for Information Technology projects, working with Dan Myers (of Requirements Solutions Group[2]). One of the "Big Eight" consultancies integrated our PM methodology into their Systems Engineering methodology in a software bundle that proliferated in the 80s and 90s. In 1986 we developed a universal PM methodology for Small Projects[3], those that are 8-360+ hours of effort. Today, that method is used by thousands of people on six continents.

In the early 1990s, our PM consulting and methods work exposed us to a variety of new twists on PM methods. Ken Schwaber's Scrum and some of the other emerging Agile methods had their strengths. With the emergence of Component Development, and then of the World Wide Web, there were many new methods to evaluate and adapt. But these were mostly for Information Technology projects—an area with obvious potential for great improvements in PM methods. Other areas, such as Construction Engineering have always demonstrated appropriate rigor, with less opportunity for improvement.

In the late 1990s we started seeing increasing numbers of universal methods, designed for "all the rest of your projects", like our Small Project Guide. And the last 10 years have seen more proliferation in this space than in the entire 30 years before, as Project Management Office leaders realize they need organizational consistency—at least at the roll-up level—to properly prioritize, staff and report the portfolios of projects and programs. This again brings up the question, ***"Just what is a Project Management Methodology?"***

What Is a PM Methodology?

A Project Management methodology is a set of appropriate repeatable processes that help introduce consistency, flexibility and efficiency while improving quality in managing an enterprise's (or department's) projects. It typically consists of process descriptions, templates, roles and responsibilities, Life Cycles and Work Breakdown Structures, together with other support information.

Why Use a PM Methodology?

If we understand what a methodology is, why do I want one? For many reasons, including to:

- Improve alignment of projects to Enterprise Strategy
- Increase competitive advantage, where appropriate
- Produce better business results faster and cheaper
- Help predict staffing requirements on priority efforts
- Improve Management information in the areas of least visibility for most Enterprises
- Assure the best use of Enterprise funds and resources
- Identify PM knowledge, skill and competence needs
- Improve skills and performance of project teams
- Assure appropriate ownership of process and results
- Improve stakeholder satisfaction with all projects

Why This Resurgent Interest in PM Methodologies?

In part, we can blame the PRINCE. PRINCE2[4], the UK-developed standard, claims more people certified in project management than any other PM certification. Why is this happening? Because even though the PRINCE2 Certifications are based primarily on Knowledge (and not deep Skill, Behavioral Attributes or Competence), the market appears to perceive that PRINCE2 applies *relevant knowledge for success*.

Other factors include the increasing popularity of Enterprise Project Management and Portfolio Management. While this has been a focus of our methods for years, it has recently been discovered by others. Add to this the fact that despite billions of dollars spent globally in PM training, projects still too-often disappoint their owners and Executives, failing to provide the intended benefits. Another reason for the rise in PM methods' popularity: Increasing rigor in Regulatory Compliance requirements also adds to the demand for consistent processes with traceable results.

In addition to these pressures, just think of the opportunity presented by PM methods that could apply the full performance suite of Knowledge, Skills, Behavioral Attributes and Competence![5] But before getting into the details about such a method, let's look at a brief history of PM methodologies.

The Moving Target of PM Methodologies

Few people today agree about all the components and structure of a useful PM methodology. In the 1970s we saw *forms-driven* methodologies: Just fill out all the forms, and the project would produce itself. Then in the 1980s most were *process-oriented:* Just follow all the steps of the recipe, and everything should come out ok.

With the rise of the lean movements of the early 1990s (and pioneered by us in the 1980s), many started calling them PM methods, to distinguish them from the forms-driven monolithic *methodologies* of the past. Also in the 1990s, some of the best methods were *blended versions* that were *product-oriented*, while retaining useful and supportive templates and processes.

In the new Millennium we have seen the daring Information Technology *Agilistas* who toss out all the processes and forms and rely on the working results to drive the process—and they are right, for some applications, much of the time. But we often have a conflicting need for rigor, resulting from those increasing Regulatory and Governance requirements—not to mention increased project and business risk.

Ironically, and despite the methods changes, little has changed over 35 years in the basic critical success factors of projects. Many of the "New Age" methods require (or even assume) the same factors needed for successful project 35 years ago. Typical Critical Success Factors, then and now include:

- Competent project management, including estimating, scheduling and tracking, throughout the team;
- Technical performers who are effective in performing their assignments *and* in communicating within and outside the team;
- Effective upper management, who prioritize work well so teams can focus on the most important projects with minimum distractions and interruptions; and
- Constant customer involvement.

Some of the most important factors never change!

Characteristics of An Effective PM Methodology

An effective Project Management methodology does not produce project success. It merely provides the framework for competent Project Managers and key Stakeholders and Team Members to succeed. Yet there are a handful of characteristics that consistently differentiate an effective and efficient PM method from an ineffective and weak or bloated one. Those characteristics include:

1. Contains guiding processes for those who are new to project work;
2. Identifies Key Roles and Responsibilities of all Stakeholders, including Customers or Clients;
3. Cites Skills or Competences needed, by Role, by Process;
4. Provides useful templates and examples;
5. Supplies model project Life Cycles for projects of different types, with more detailed WBS examples;
6. Offers audit checklists to assure proper process, Governance and results;
7. Is customizable by Enterprises and project teams;
8. Is fully scaleable, for projects of different sizes;
9. Is tool-neutral: works well with all PM power tools;
10. Offers a range of rigor for different project needs;
11. Saves more effort and time than it costs.

We expand upon these characteristics below. We suggest that you compare your current PM methods to this list, and evaluate how well they demonstrate these characteristics. Is your method a burden, or key to success? We are also interested in your suggestions for additions to the list. After all, the best methods are designed for tomorrow's needs, not just to correct the sins of the past.

If you have suggestions (or disagreements) please contact us! And now, we offer more detailed explanations for the above list of characteristics.

1. Contains Guiding Processes

Who is the user of today's PM methodology? It is clear that the stakeholder list moves beyond Project Managers, to include Team Members, internal and external Customers, End Users, Project Management Office consultants, Sponsors, and Executive Managers. And within this list, each stakeholder has some level of appropriate use. But the primary target for any methodology is those people who are performing work on the project, whether in managing it, making key decisions about it, or delivering the results.

And here is an irony: Even with the best methodologies, most target users tend to use them in full for just the first 3-5 times. And the first several of those times, they are still learning them, and not effectively applying them. After the fifth (or so) time they use one, most people have fully integrated the philosophy and approach. Thus the ideal PM method should have approachable process explanations for beginners (and not overwhelming), yet be accessible enough for easy reference once each user, from new team members to your Project Sponsor, has used it several times, and has climbed the learning curve to Skills and Mastery (Competence).

2. Identifies Key Roles and Responsibilities

Too often we see PM methods that fail to identify the responsibilities of each role. Some fail to even include such crucial roles as Sponsor (or Project Executive), key managers who make prioritization and allocation decisions, and internal and external Customers or Clients. In reviewing our customers' project plans we continually point out the risk/threats these omissions present.

How do these stakeholders know what is expected of them? How do they know if their results are "good enough?" Unless they are very experienced, they don't, and they become a failure point. Thus a PM methodology must identify all the responsibilities each person filling one or more roles should sign up for. The list below shows the Sponsor responsibilities from MinProj,[6] our universal PM method for larger projects:

The effective Sponsor's Responsibilities:

- ❑ Establish and maintain the project vision
- ❑ Fund the project or negotiate for funding
- ❑ Produce or sign off on the Project Charter
- ❑ Approve and communicate the business case
- ❑ Assure the project meets business needs, at startup, throughout, and at closure
- ❑ Represent the project to your Enterprise Executives, keeping them informed and in support of the project effort
- ❑ Define the Project Manager's authority
- ❑ Empower the Project Manager and Team
- ❑ Assure availability of the right Resources, with the right competences, the right amount of time, especially from the project's Customers
- ❑ Serve as project spokesperson for all communication outside the Team
- ❑ Eliminate roadblocks outside the control of the Project Manager and Core Team
- ❑ Ramrod or speed approvals (develop a sense of urgency-by-example)
- ❑ Arbitrate disputes, when needed
- ❑ Provide significant rewards for the Project Team

Will your Sponsors "sign up" for such responsibilities?

If not, who will perform them? And what are the consequences if some go missing? This shows why the *asapm* Performance Rated Organization *(aPRO)* assessment, another brainchild of *asapm* co-founder William Duncan, is so important. You can see from this why a Competence-Based PM method requires Contextual competences, in addition to the Technical ones, just as the IPMA Competence Baseline prescribes.

3. Cites Competences Needed, by Role, Process

While PM knowledge is an essential foundation, knowledge by itself does not accomplish anything. It must be applied, to get needed results. Beyond application is clear Competence. To deliver on the above responsibilities, it is clear that more than just the Project Manager must have PM Competence. That is why my company uses PM CompModel,[7] to identify target Competences and criteria (at varying levels) for all key stakeholders. Thus your PM method should relate the Competences needed, and the level required to complete each process or result. The consequence: You use this information (together with effective decision-making on priorities and talent allocation) to reduce time, cost and risk/threats, while increasing quality in every assignment in the project.

4. Provides Useful Templates and Examples

About half of all people prefer to review process steps for project assignments that are new for them. That is why a process-oriented method is useful, at least until people no longer require a reference. The other half of all people tend to prefer an output or result-oriented template. Even with outputs such as computer code in an IT project, many of these people prefer to modify something that someone else wrote, so long as it works.

Templates for results are useful for this group of people. What makes them even more useful are two additions:

1) Add annotation or explanations that reduce the need to use a separate process reference. These are especially useful if they can be shown or hidden, so they don't distract from the deliverable, when complete.

2) Add Completed examples, from your Enterprise, or better, your own workgroup. Try as we may, even when we provide excellent *generic* example sets, most people find them less-useful because "they aren't ours."

We've long known an interesting aspect of that second point: For some interim results in your Enterprise, such as a Test Plan, as much as 80% of it can be re-used in later projects. Thus these example templates can again reduce time, cost and risk/threats, while increasing quality in many parts of the project. Do you see a trend here?

5. Supplies Model Project Life Cycles

Too many Project Life Cycles begin too late, and end too early, to be useful. The actions taken (or failed to be taken) between Concept and formation of the project team determine much of the success or failure of today's projects. For example, Early Estimates are often based on incomplete understanding of Scope, and costs and/or hours of effort are budgeted based on that information. Then too often, the team is held to that very preliminary estimate. **Not only should the Life Cycle begin at the beginning,** but early scope discovery should be traceable, and estimates revised, *not held firm*, at major Stage Gates or Milestones.

Similarly, too many Life Cycles end when the team captures their Lessons Learned, and leaves the project. Such nuances as the project ending point have significant impact on perceived project success. Obviously for the Enterprise, the true project closure is when you verify Benefit Realization. In all too many projects, that never happens, and even when it does, there may be fewer benefits than promised, due to inadequate tracking or ineffective Change Control. Few people want to explain this lapse to Executive Management. Worse, full benefit realization may require months or years after project closure, and no one except the Sponsor remains on the team to perform the analysis—the rest were assigned to new projects long ago.

That is one set of considerations about Project Life Cycles. Here is another. Different groups in your enterprise need different Life Cycles, just because of the nature of their business. A Pharma Clinical Trials Life Cycle will differ from a Construction Engineering one. An Information Technology Life Cycle may have multiple variants, depending on the technologies applied, whether you buy or build (or outsource), or use classic versus agile methods. And, even within IT (or ICT), networking is far different than Systems Development; and so on.

Within the Life Cycle, the Work Breakdown Structures (WBS) must vary in depth and breadth based on the size of the project. Small, Medium, Large, and *Too-Large* projects (*Too Large* projects tend to cost more per delivered Scope-point, and fail much more frequently) each require a different number of Phases, and different extent of levels of detail within each phase. And, there is no such thing as the perfect Life Cycle.

Using a Medium project Life Cycle and WBS on a Small Project causes far too much overhead in the project, adding unneeded cost and time burdens. Does this sound like chaos? Perhaps, but there are many solutions. Even with multiple different Life Cycles, savvy Project Oriented Enterprise leaders establish common "roll-up" points. These are usually based on similar or identical Major Milestones or Gates throughout all their Life Cycles. This *consistency where needed, and adaptability where required* approach works for almost all Enterprises, and any Universal PM method must support it.

6. Offers Audit Checklists

Assuring proper process, Governance trails and other verifications result from a consistently applied PM method. But how can you assure that you are using your methods effectively? Especially important: How

can you perform this assurance pro-actively, while the work is in-process, rather than in autopsy mode, when it is too late to correct omissions, and audits feel more like punishment of the innocent?

An effective PM method should provide process, compliance and result audit checklists. Not just yes/no quantitative checklist (Does the Project have a Charter or Brief?), but *qualitative* ones, that specify the criteria for an adequate result. This approach not only helps guide the team to better results, we also use it to measure progress of implementation for new methodology users. The information, in some cases, is useful as part of your Department Manager's Project Improvement Performance Reviews.

7. Is Customizable by Enterprises, Teams

Customizability is important for a number of reasons, including the obvious: Enterprises have different requirements. We find, for purchased PM methods, that if an Enterprise does not feel the need to make even a minimum amount of change, they will probably not succeed with the method. This offers the opportunity for a good early assessment of success. And some want to change too much; those Enterprises often fail, as well.

There is another reason for Customizing: The Enterprise that does the right amount of customizing (typically around 10-15% if it is the appropriate PM method for them) builds a sense of ownership that is essential for integration and adoption as part of the Enterprise culture. That Organizational Change Management process only works if all the right people participate in that customization—not if it is merely done for everyone by the Project Management Office.

Related to customizing, see our *PM Methods Improvement Plan*[8]. This is a methodology for successfully implementing a PM methodology. Yes, we understand that is a bit recursive; but we find that practical use is the best way to evaluate any methodology. It explains more about the process and benefits of engaging PM practitioners in adapting the methods they will use. The PM Methods Improvement Plan has been used to improve PM methods by hundreds of companies over the last 35 years.

This need for customization has always existed, but years ago, when the vendor delivered eight 3-inch three-ring binders it was more difficult than today. Still, even with editable web pages and custom forms in PM Software, customization is not easy. The current "hot solutions", either a mega-scale content management system (hard to learn, hard to use, but very powerful), or a Wiki based approach (increasingly popular, but may require external hosting and a constant network connection; sorry remote notebook users). This will continue to be an area of constant change.

8. Is Fully Scaleable for Projects of Different Sizes

Many methodology providers claim that their methods are fully scalable. Most of us discovered in the 1980s how important that is, when the large consultancies claimed that their methods, developed for 35,000 hour projects, were perfectly scalable for 3500 hour projects. Yes, and we have a bridge we can sell you, too!

We use a rule of thumb for how much a particular method can scale: 4x or the "fourple factor." Here is an example: a method built for a 2000 effort hour project will work very well for a project that is half or twice as large: 1000 or 4000 hours. It will work, with adjustment, on the one-third or triple-sized effort. And it will consistently fail at the fourple factor. This scalability really means multiple methods for each path through your overall methods suite. And for smaller projects, your teams do much of the same work, but they may have fewer phases or milestones, less-deep work breakdown structures, fewer document templates, and less overall administrative work. ***That is scalability.***

9. Is Tool-neutral; Works Well With PM Tools

Tool-neutral means you don't have to buy another product to use it. For example, it has been popular in the past to just add process explanations to PM tools such as Microsoft Project. That's fine, for those who already have it (and who can do more than move Gantt bars around until it looks good enough for Management approval). But what about everyone else, especially now that many companies have 50-70% of their

staff involved with projects? We are seeing a new influx of tools that are designated for project management, but are merely mobile or tablet apps for a tiny portion of managing projects. Thus the PM methods must be more flexible, not less.

Many serious Project-Oriented Enterprises have already invested in industrial strength PM Software. For better or worse, they are now seeing a broad movement away from proprietary single source solutions, and toward a variety of Open Source purpose-built options. Thus this requirement adds complexity, because any PM method should use the tools an Enterprise has invested in, but not require additional ones, or additional copies. This continues driving us towards a collection of web-based solutions—that share the information between them.

10. Offers a Range of Rigor

A project to update your department procedures does not require the level of rigor that a project to fulfill a contract commitment requires. A small project does not need as much ceremony and supporting documentation as a medium one does. A very large project may have significant demands for interdepartmental or inter-organization and international coordination, while a medium project may involve a half dozen people within the same office.

A PM method must provide guidance for the right level of rigor, documentation, review cycles, and approvals—and identify the cases where variance from that guidance is wiser than blind application. Of course, some people avoid all rigor, as a matter of personal style. Even those people can appreciate appropriate rigor when they see the ways the rigor helps them. Similarly, methods that add rigor that fails to help the people doing the work will continue to fail.

11. Saves More Effort And Time Than It Costs

This characteristic is the flip-side of the above item on rigor. Any new method will require more time at first. Training, coaching, monitoring, establishing new baseline and ongoing performance measures all take time. There is also the issue of the Learning Curve. But after the *third time's a charm* use, any effective PM method must clearly save more time than it requires. And measurably so. This is the greatest place where we have seen Enterprises fail in improving PM methods: even when they achieve huge savings, they cannot always prove them.

Or, they cannot separate out the benefits of each of several components implemented concurrently, to see, for example, that the new chosen tool requires too much effort for the value of the information it provides, thus wiping out much of the new PM methods gain. Or, the Enterprise fails to establish the new Policies, Roles and Responsibilities that are the prerequisite to any lasting change. The methods can't do it all.

Is Methods Benefit Realization Important?

Improving your PM methods can cut the cost of your projects and speed benefit realization. Adding the right competences in all stakeholders doubles the return. Helping the Enterprise to manage its portfolio of projects effectively compounds the benefits again. For those who measure benefits, the returns can be great.

Example: In the early 1990s a consultancy wished to improve their project management effectiveness. We evaluated their PM methods, training, policies, prioritization and staffing practices, tools, and management evaluation and incentive measurements. We involved their staff in selecting, tuning and rolling out all the needed changes. We provided a bit of PM training, plus executive and mid-manager coaching.

At the end of three years, their project cost-per-measured-Scope-unit **was 10% their pre-improvement level**—and *they were price leaders when they started*. In other words, they cut their unit costs by 90%, by using even smarter Project Management practices and methods. In the project's final Benefit Realization milestone, the leadership team identified how they could pursue the next 10X improvement.

Appropriate PM Process helped. In addition to the right processes, executed with competence, the tools, policies, and a compensation system that rewarded managers for results were key parts of the improvement. *They always are*. In fact, our experience is that after your teams develop basic competences in their project roles, the greatest remaining performance improvement comes from coaching your managers to lead project teams more effectively. Because of this, one of our most popular offerings is a workshop for managers on this subject.

Conclusions

Project Management methodologies, or PM methods, are once again popular. They seem to come into and out of style each decade. But the most effective Project Oriented Enterprises' PM methods don't ebb and flow with the latest performance improvement fad. Instead, the organizations continue to adapt—and measure the results—of their existing PM methods.

Importantly, savvy organizations and individuals avoid the imposter methodologies. We have seen too many situations where contract proposals require, for example, "the use of the PMI® methodology." There is no such thing; and now, dear reader, you have a way to determine what is, and what is not, a PM methodology.

We suggest that you use the information in this article, including the ***Characteristics of an Effective Methodology***, to evaluate your PM methods. Then look at ways you can improve your PM methods' effectiveness. You certainly don't want your Project Teams to think you are in favor of process and rigor for its own sake, rather than improved Project Performance, do you?

And again, if you have characteristics to add to the list, let us know. If you have disagreement with our list, we'd especially like to know. Send your comments to us! Or, if you have applied the insights we offer, send us a summary of your actions and results. Perhaps we can craft a case study explaining your successes!

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Performance Coach*, is President of ProjectExperts®, a USA-based, global practice that provides Programme and Project Management coaching, consulting, tools and training. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982.

He is a co-founder and past President of asapm, IPMA-USA, the American Society for the Advancement of Project Management, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. He has also been a contributing member of PMI® since 1983.

An insightful consultant and dynamic speaker, Mr. Goff provides project consulting services and presents workshops of great interest to Executives, Managers, Program and Project Managers and Team Leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His Project Management tools and methods are used by enterprises, government agencies and consultancies on six continents. He uniquely combines his PM process insights with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects. The result: Measurably increased project performance.

Goff's interest in project and programme competence, effectiveness and performance began when he set up a PM Competency Center in a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s. It continued with engagements in the 1980s and 90s that helped organizations assess and improve their project and programme performance. Today, he continues his interest in individual, project team, organization, national and global PM performance. For more about Goff, or to contact him, see: http://projectexperts.com/about-us/principals-bio-stacy-goff/.

References

1 THE Guide is an Information Technology and Project Management method developed over 30 years ago, and still used by organizations today. Even in the 1980s, it was lean and iterative, as opposed to monolithic and waterfall.

2 Requirements Solution Group specializes in establishing better Business Requirements, earlier in every project. Learn more about them at www.requirementssolutions.com.

3 Co-Pilot: Small Project Guide® recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. It is a universal project management and business improvement method for all organizations. Learn more about it at www.ProjectExperts.com.

4 PRINCE2 is a registered Trademark of the Office of Government Commerce (UK).

5 For more information about the spectrum of steps in Competence Development, see our paper, presented at the 2006 World Congress, in Shanghai, China: http://projectexperts.com/assets/PMCompetence2006.pdf.

6 MinProj is ProjectExperts' universal business improvement and project management method for medium and larger projects. It is fully compatible with Co-Pilot: Small Project Guide, which is for smaller projects. See more about these methodologies at the ProjectExperts.com website.

7 PM CompModel is the ProjectExperts competence model for consultants and the Project Management Office. It supports individual, departmental or enterprise assessment of the half-dozen key roles that drive project and business success. For over 30 years, ProjectExperts has offered it as a way for organizations to identify the smartest use of project performance improvement funds.

8 PM Methods Improvement Plan is a monograph that presents a methodology for PM methods improvement. See www.ProjectExperts.com/assets/PM_Methods2007.pdf.

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