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Hybrid project management – a meaningless term?
by Robert Buttrick
Commentary

Hybrid project management – a meaningless term?[1]

Robert Buttrick

Challenging 'hybrid' as a project management method

There has been a lot of discussion and postings on social media relating to 'hybrid project management'. Disputes relating to so-called 'agile project management' and 'traditional project management' are now joined by discussions on so-called 'hybrid project management', presumably on the basis that this is a sort of compromise[2]. Disputes often arise when there is no common understanding between people as to what those terms actually mean. If people are talking about something and have a basic misunderstanding on the core terms being discussed, those conversations are fruitless. This is hardly surprising as there is no commonly understood definition of 'agile', 'traditional' or 'hybrid' in these contexts.

This article takes the view that there is no such thing as 'hybrid project management', 'agile project management' nor of 'traditional project management'. There is simply 'project management'. It goes on to suggest how the good intentions relating to these often contentious terms have been and can be made a reality.

Delivering successful projects

Fundamentally, what is needed are **successful projects**, being those that deliver the desired outcomes and realize the expected benefits. Most projects of any worth need a range of different deliverables and outputs to achieve their objectives. For example, in the digital sector this can mean software for a new application, its operating systems and platforms (such as for development, verification and validation, training as well as live operation), buildings and facilities (such as power and ventilation), data transmission, training modules, user facilities and equipment. This could be associated with physical infrastructure, such as for water supply, power supply, rail, air travel and roads. A single project usually needs many distinct deliverables and outputs in order to achieve its objectives.

Project management is the discipline which sets out the practices needed for achieving a successful project. Three sets of practices are needed[3]:

- **planning and control practices**, which include topics such as risk management, issues management change control and reporting.

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[2] For a discussion on agile project management see Buttrick 2022.

[3] The distinction between the three sets of practices is long-standing and has been apparent in GovS 002 since 2017 and also in BS 6079 since 2019 and ISO 21502 since 2020.

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- **solution delivery practices**, which are focused on the delivery of the outputs, integrating them and putting them into use; practices such as requirements management, design, development, verification, transition and change management.
- **management or integrative practices**, which draw information from the solution delivery and planning and control practices to gain insight into progress and actions needed to keep the project on track to achieve its objectives.

These three groups of practices are well documented and can be found in BS 6079, ISO 21502, and in GovS 002 and its supporting guide, *The Teal Book*[4]. A project cannot be successful if the basic output is inadequate or poorly put into practice, regardless of how well the project is directed and managed. The management, planning and control practices can be generic for all projects, subject to tailoring. While the solution delivery practices can be generic at a high level, at a practical level of 'doing the work', they need to suit to the specific deliverables and outputs being developed and associated risk. For example, the method for designing and building a steel framed structure is different to that used for developing a software module. In both cases, however, the same project management approaches can be used.

Hybrid, agile, traditional – a fruitless conversation?

The words 'hybrid project management' did not appear until people started questioning other peoples' assertions on 'agile project management' and its supposed superiority over so-called 'traditional project management'. Again, conversions are taking place without a common understanding of what the terms mean and so discussions can easily become muddled and even confrontational. It seems to boil down to:

- **agile** being about adaptive, iterative, incremental;
- **traditional**[5] being about linear, predictable;
- **hybrid** being a mix of agile and traditional.

Agile, however, is also interpreted as a set of:

- **techniques**, defining how specific tasks are undertaken, many of which are not unique to 'agile'
- **behaviours and mindsets**, which emphasize the culture required for success, again, not unique to 'agile'.

Getting out of this fruitless, and misleading, loop of conversations needs people to take a different perspective and separate 'project management' from the delivery or development

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[4] GovS 002 and *The Teal Book* have a good description of solution delivery practices at a generic level.
[5] Note, however, 'traditional' in common use is about things that have been established for a generation: the *Agile Manifesto*, which only relates to software development, was coined over 20 years ago. In this sense, 'agile' can also be seen as 'traditional'.

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processes and methods needed for each type of deliverable and output. Besides, doesn't every stakeholder in a project want the outcome to be predictable, the work approach to be reactive and proactive to change and emerging information? Good project management has always had this as a core[6].

Changing the mind-set

The project life cycle[7] is key

Projects can be phased in whatever way is suitable to meet the business or strategic need. Phases are about delivering the outcomes when needed and managing risk; they are not necessarily related to the delivery approaches used. Phases are represented by the project life cycle. You can iterate activities within a phase and build a solution incrementally in progressive phases or within a phase. This has always been the case for people who use the project life cycle properly.

Work is done in work packages

Delivery or development methods for a specific deliverable are used within a work package, by a work package manager and their specialist teams. The development approach used for a deliverable could, for example, be Scrum for a piece of software or one of the many design and installation standards and codes of practice used in the construction industry. Regulated industries, such as air and rail have defined, mandatory practices for developing and assuring the outputs. Some of the approaches could be described as 'linear' and others as 'iterative' or whatever; but it doesn't matter. The appropriate development approach should be used for each deliverable in a work package. A phase can have many work packages and therefore many different development approaches can be used in a single project. This has always been the case.

The project manager's challenge

As part of achieving a project's objectives, the challenge for a project manager is to:

- **plan**: define a life cycle which respects the overall objective, dividing the work into work packages, understanding interdependencies and risks
- **control**: gather meaningful data from every work package manager to gain insight into progress to date, the prevailing issues and risks and the outlook for the future.

This is why project management practices need to be tailored, as the data from the work package managers can differ depending on the deliverable being produced, such as function points in software to cubic metres of concrete in a structure. The project manager needs to understand
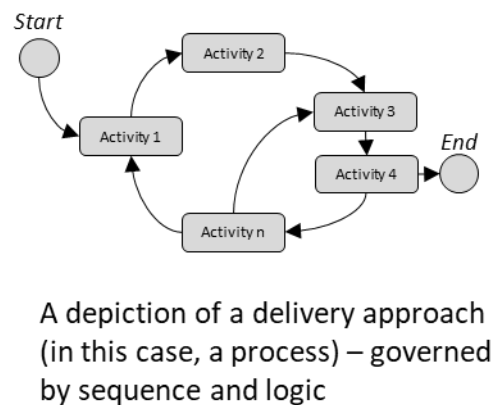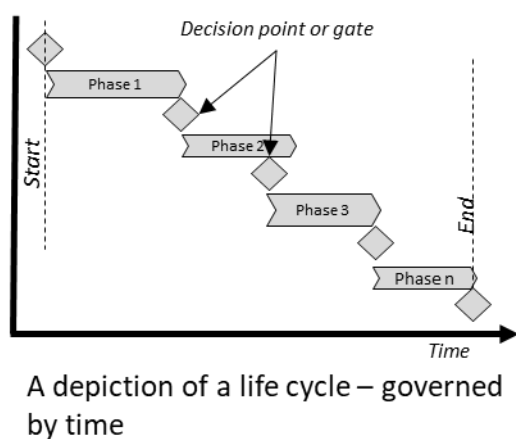
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[6] The supposed 'rigidity' of so-called traditional approaches to project management seems to stem form shortfalls in 'big design upfront' software development; a totally different topic.

[7] Project life cycles are often misunderstood and misused; for a more exhaustive discussion see Buttrick 2019, 2019a and 2019b, as well as BS 6079, ISO 21502, GovS 002 and *The Teal Book*.

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how progress is tracked for each type of deliverable and output and then be able to pull all the progress data together to understand the current status and outlook for the project as a whole.

Understanding this means changing to a mind-set which differentiates between 'project management' and 'delivery/development processes and methods'. To do this the manager needs to realize (see Figure 1):
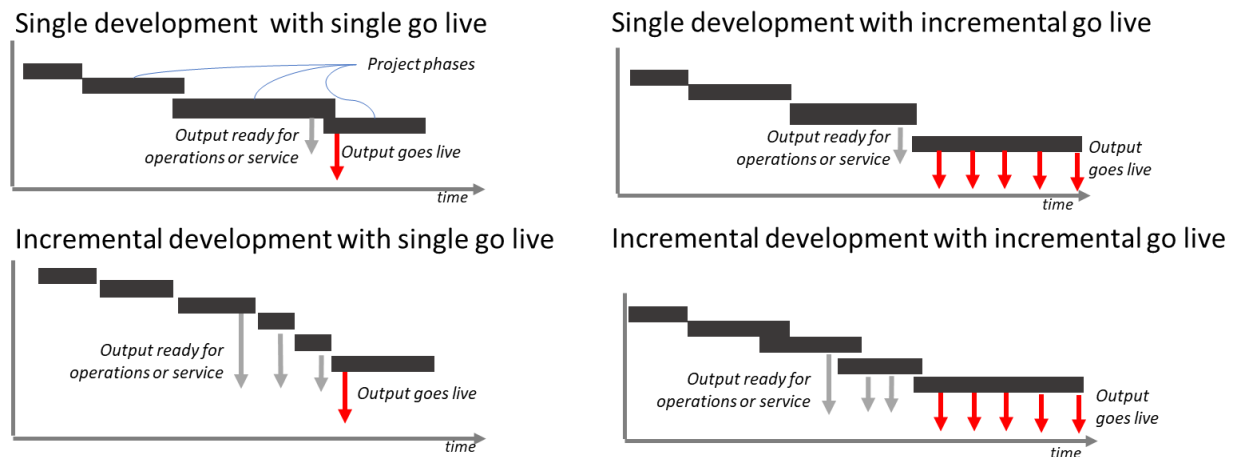
- a project management approach is **not** the same as a method for developing a deliverable or output;
- a project life cycle[8] is **not** the same as a 'cycle' used in iterative development.

A depiction of a life cycle – governed by time

A depiction of a delivery approach (in this case, a process) – governed by sequence and logic

Figure 1 Time driven and logic drive work

The terms' iterative' and 'incremental' are often seen, along with 'adaptive' as ways of adjusting a project's scope to manage complexity and reflect emerging requirements or changes in the environment/context. However, 'iterative' and 'incremental' when used in relation to a 'life cycle' should be differentiated from 'iterative' and 'incremental' when used in relation to a delivery approach. Within a delivery approach, the output can be developed iteratively and either 'stored' for later release or released as soon as it is completed. Regardless of how an output is developed, it can be released for operations or put to use in many ways, as shown in the examples in Figure 2. It is therefore possible to have a project deploying its outputs in one release or a number of increments, where some of those outputs are produced using so called 'linear' development approaches. In this way, all projects can be adapted to the circumstances and emerging needs. What counts is when the required outcomes are realized once the outputs are in use; by that time, how it has been developed is irrelevant.

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[8] Some people argue that 'project life cycle' is a misnomer as it is not a 'cycle'. There is a lot of sense in that, but sometimes terms are so engrained it is difficult to change them. In the first edition of *The Project Workout* in 1997, I called it the 'project framework'.

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Figure 2 Examples of incremental development and deployment

A word of warning on single deliverable projects

There might be people thinking that separating a project management approach from the delivery approach does not make sense to them. That can be the case when a person is working on a 'project[9]' which has a single type of deliverable, using a single delivery approach. In such cases, the project management and delivery approach can be so close as to be seen as one and the same. This is because a project management approach always needs to be tailored to reflect the objectives of the project and the work being undertaken. In such a case, planning and control techniques for the project are often taken directly from the planning and control techniques in the delivery approach. This is what we see in many software development methods, which incorporate 'project management' within them. In isolation that can work, but when combined in a wider project with the development of other required outputs, the approach can fall apart.

References for further reading

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[9] A single deliverable 'project' would often be a 'work package' if a holistic approach to project management is taken. A contractor might see a software module as 'their project' but in the context of a customer's or promoter's project, it is usually just one of many work packages. Context and perspective is always important to understanding.

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About this article

This article builds on concepts in *The Project Workout* which provide practical advice and techniques to direct and manage projects in a structured, yet agile, way. The article takes Chapter 13 from *The Project Workout* as a starting point and goes into greater depth on the challenges of using, or even discussing, 'agile' in the context of projects. It then incorporates the concepts in Chapter 24 of *The Programme and Portfolio Workout* with respect to understanding delivery approaches in the context of project life cycles.

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Robert Buttrick is an independent advisor on portfolio, programme and project management, specialising in business-driven methods, processes and standards. Recent clients include the UK's Cabinet Office, Network Rail, and AXELOS. He is a member of the British Standards Institute's committee MS/2 for project management and is a UK Principal Expert on the equivalent ISO technical committee, TC258 (dealing with international standards on portfolio, programme and project management). He was, until recently, a Visiting Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick. Robert's recent work has been as lead author on GovS 002, the government functional standard on project delivery and as a contributing author to the associated *Teal Book,* which replaces the AXELOS suite as the UK government's primary guidance on project delivery. He also advises the government on functional standards generally.

As well as being the author of "*The Programme and Portfolio Workout*" and the "*The Project Workout",* Robert gained his experience in one of the world's most turbulent and challenging industrial sectors, telecommunications, where he has been accountable for creating and running project-based frameworks for managing change, involving the direction of portfolios of over 2500 projects, totalling £4bn spend per year. Before this, Robert was with PA Consulting, where he specialised in business-led project management, advising clients such as TSB Bank, National Rivers Authority, Property Services Agency, Avon Industrial Polymers, National Westminster Bank and RHM.

After graduating from the University of Liverpool with a first-class honours degree, he joined Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners (now Jacobs) who provided consulting, design and management services for infrastructure, working in countries as diverse as Kenya, Mauritius, Yemen, Senegal and Sudan. He has also worked with the World Bank, in Washington DC on investment appraisals for major development projects.

Robert is a Master of Business Administration (Henley Management College), a Member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, Chartered Engineer and a Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers. In 2010, Robert received a Distinguished Service Certificate from the BSI for services to national and international project management standards, and in 2013 he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management. He can be contacted at
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