

PMBOK and PRINCE2: how project managers can survive in an agile world

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Any discussion of project management in the USA demands the question: “*how well are we doing?*”

I’d like to say that project managers are doing a good job in delivering projects on time and within budget along with all the scope and quality the customer expects. However, the reality is different: with so much emphasis on the elements of time and cost, we are losing something in scope and quality. No, it doesn’t affect all projects or project managers in the US, but it remains a real and unfortunate phenomenon.

How has this happened?

In the past decade, project managers have been struggling to balance cost, time, scope and quality without enough capacity to focus on the *benefits to the customer*. More than ever before, customer requirements are changing over the life of a project and what many projects deliver today isn’t what the customer needs; this disconnect is a huge issue in project management.

Also, the increasing popularity of agile and Scrum approaches in delivering what customers want is a symptom of an underlying malaise in project management. In fact, the Agile Manifesto itself shows an active hostility to traditional project management – especially in the US – in which the role of the project manager doesn’t exist. Some see agile as the solution to delivering more successful projects.

Which brings us to PMBOK-based project management; clearly, this offers a vast body of knowledge to project managers, but without the specific guidance to distil the knowledge into practical and actionable methods tailored to different situations. This has resulted in failures and practitioners spending too much time translating the knowledge and not enough time executing and delivering it.

When trying to introduce the PMBOK to organizations and people, I’ve often been told: “Stop! I don’t want to go there.” Instead, they’ve developed their own methods. But in creating a variety of different, customized templates, methods and processes it becomes difficult to collaborate and communicate. And then there are organizations that have made a huge investment in the PMBOK but are reluctant to say out loud there’s a problem; obviously, Project Management Professionals (PMPs) don’t want organizations to lose confidence in their ability to do their jobs!

But among the project management community, we need to figure out a way – a mechanism – to get the best out of the PMBOK and make it actionable. I think PRINCE2 is the solution to the problem of taking PMBOK knowledge and making it practical.

At first, I was skeptical about PRINCE2, with the misconception that it was just another version of the PMBOK. I now understand that it's complementary to PMBOK in providing what the latter doesn't: a *prescriptive method*. Having been through the PRINCE2 training, I decided it didn't conflict with what I already knew from the PMBOK, was the solution to the problem and could help me as a project manager.

What US-based project managers need to overcome is the idea that PRINCE2 is a substitute for PMBOK. Equally, they need to see how it can be used to address the agile challenge facing the project management world. For example, in a list of organizational projects, you might identify 40% suitable for an agile approach and 60% that aren't. Rather than trying to handle the two groups of projects in a different way, using different methods, project managers could use a method like PRINCE2 to run traditional projects while using it to wrap around agile projects. If PMPs are looking for how they fit into a Scrum world, this is it.

But what's the payback of investing in another approach for project management professionals and the organizations that hire them?

In short, a lot! With PRINCE2, an organization's Project Management Office is able to capitalize on its existing investment in PMBOK. Many new and early career project managers flounder because they have some project management knowledge, but little experience and no method to apply it. Sitting the PMP requires between 4,500 and 7,500 hours leading and directing projects, so project managers have a tendency not to study the PMBOK until they have the necessary hours, right before sitting for the exam! As a result, they spend the early part of their careers figuring out project management on their own and learning bad habits.

Adopting the same method of applying project management knowledge will heighten efficiency, effectiveness and help project managers produce more consistent results at every level of experience. And, for individuals advancing in their careers, with PMBOK *and* PRINCE2 they will have a practical method that enables them to bring knowledge and solutions as soon as they're hired.

Yes, we know that project managers are under a lot of pressure, working at more than capacity already and with little spare time to examine the value of something new. But this is a *solution* to project managers' problems, complementing and improving what they already have, freeing them up to do a better job and to spend more time on projects' scope, quality and value.

With both PRINCE2 and PMBOK you speak the language of project management across the entire world, regardless of who you're doing business with.

About the Author



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Lisa Hodges is a PRINCE2® Practitioner, PMP®, ITIL Expert™, and CPDE® - Certified Process Design Engineer. Lisa is uniquely qualified with 20+ years practical experience in project and service management; applying principles of ITIL, Agile, Scrum, DevOps, PMI's PMBOK, and PRINCE2.

Lisa is an entrepreneur, owner and principal consultant of Cincinnati-based Cornerstone Service Management. Cornerstone delivers consulting, accredited certification training, and workshops to organizations seeking to achieve competitive advantage through superior service delivery.

Lisa gives back to the industry and is actively involved in professional organizations including PMI – Project Management Institute, and itSMF USA, where she is a regular speaker at local and national events and holds numerous leadership roles.

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