

Want projects to move fast and robust? Try standardization ¹

By Manuel M. Ancizu Beramendi

Abstract

In this article, the author exposes different pain points affecting project management and identifies ten benefits that standardization can provide to develop projects that combine speed and a robust consistent approach.

Introduction

I must admit that I am an advocate of standards and their enormous potential in the field of projects, programs and portfolios management.

We've all been there, does any of these situations sound familiar to you?:

- You are leading several projects in parallel and each one is managed differently, team members prepare their own documents according to different criteria, use their own tools and methodologies... and you go crazy with reports.
- You have new team members and you have neither enough time to train them nor even have a manual to offer them; you have to explain everything in one-to-one sessions, with a pen, a notebook or a video call... and the newcomer gets disappointed and you cannot move forward with your own activities.
- There are several active projects with the same client and each focal point sends the client different formats for the same subject; and the client asks you, do you all work in the same company?
- You have to issue a formal letter to a client related to a contract and you don't know where to start, you can't find a standard template, with logo, sample presentation, etc. And, what's worse, other colleagues have to issue the same type of letter for other contracts and they do exactly the same: each one creates, prepares and issues the documents according to their own knowledge and what they think may be the best. For sure, not efficient at all.
- You finish one project, start the following one and realize that the scope has not taken into account one of the key lessons learned from the previous project.
- You are in charge of submitting bids for new projects and you have to start each one from scratch because you don't have a system to save previous offers submitted or a data-base from which to start and customize from there. You end up frustrated and with that feeling of always being at the starting point, of not moving forward.

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There are many other examples and some of them certainly happened to me too... until I found the standards. This concept is used to define something that can be taken as a reference, pattern or model.

Activities, methods, processes, templates, forms, tools, communications, documents, metrics, training... in short, anything that is part of a recurring activity has the potential to be standardized.

Body of paper

Are you ready to go through some of its benefits?

1. Standard methodologies.

A standard methodology drives your project management through four elements that reinforces each other in a positive manner:



- a) **Clarity**: Some of its benefits are a clear path to execute, established interfaces, defined processes, clear roles and responsibilities, analogous milestones for the projects, solid systematics adapted to your needs.
- b) **Reasoning**: During the definition of the methodology, one of the steps is to think about the reason why you do things, why you define and choose one method and not another; this is very positive because you it combines the clarity of knowing what you have to do with the certainty that it is something you have reflected on, it is systematic and allows you to move forward consistently. Eventually, that makes you agile because you have consciously chosen to go in that direction and you go for it with a plan and a method to execute it.
- c) **Efficiency**: the methodology is defined once and then, it is scaled up, implementing it throughout the organization, replicating it over and over again in a very agile way, so that your projects can go full speed in a controlled way (standards lead also to better control project risks).

Once the standard methodology is implemented, you can also go a step further, combining its efficiency and structure with the flexibility that the day-to-day may require with clients, generating a common global structure and local adaptations depending on the project, client, needs, etc.

- d) Virtuous circle: Finally, a methodology that has been analyzed, consciously defined, tested and constantly replicated in different projects, will enable a robust learning process, generating a complete virtuous circle to incorporate those learnings into the process.

Standard methodology = agility + consistency = success.

2. Standardized support resources.

Standardization of formats, templates, checklists, forms, IT tools..., in short, you make a model (template) of the resources needed to support project management activities and use them every time an activity is performed.

This strategy is very powerful in terms of efficiency to find synergies, not to re-invent the wheel at each step and build-up incrementally on what is already known; and this is especially relevant in complex projects, if you are involved in several projects in parallel or even a program with several related projects.

Here are some good examples:

- Templates and standard documents can be used not only to gain efficiency but also to show a consistent corporate image.
- Submitting an offer and making an initial budget can take a lot of time unless everything is pre-defined and it is only a matter to adapt it to the specific project.
- Checklists are very useful to go through the topics quickly and ensuring nothing is forgotten.

3. Understandable organizational structures.

If organizations follow international standards (ISO, PMI, IPMA, etc), their operating structures (portfolio management, programs and projects, PMO, ...) will be understandable anywhere in the world and will implement the best practices available.

This is particularly important in international project tenders or contracts financed by multilateral institutions where following standards is a must to receive financing to execute the projects.

4. Support internal and external communication; speaking the same language.

Global clients might have many interfaces and focal points in their suppliers; or a program manager might be working with different project managers at the same time developing internal projects.

No matter if it is external or internal, we all want to receive recognizable templates and similar approaches to the same topics. In this case, standardized processes and templates can add lots of value, clarity and trust; for example, if there were several Project Managers serving the same client there would be no differences in reporting for example as all of them would be using the same templates.

Moreover, all internal and external stakeholders speak the same language and, thus, it allows a better understanding and conflicts resolution.

5. Projects in different parts of the world.

Project execution can be tough with a small team located in the same place; now imagine global projects led by core team members located in different parts of the world that communicate virtually with site team (and that they never see one another in person).

What could happen if each of the team members worked differently? Or if one of the team members changed? People would probably go crazy; standardization and having the same structure no matter the project or the team members can be the solution for a smooth execution according to planning.

6. Risk and Opportunity management.

Everything out of the standard can be a risk, so this makes easier to detect the issues that can impact the project negatively. If the processes are standardized, any gap found during execution can be more easily detected and, therefore, analyzed and controlled.

Some examples of benefits:

- The detection of deviations and agile root cause analysis by having the same methodology and following the same processes.
- Following the same steps, process knowledge leads to better economic control and more accurate forecasting.
- Keeping a detailed systematic and proactive approach to risks is fundamental to ensure that all the risks have been identified and addressed.

7. Employees' onboarding and training.

The standardization of processes, templates, documents, etc. can benefit execution and, at the same time, also benefit onboarding and training activities; this is a great synergy: work once and use it everywhere.

Actually, if projects were classified using some standard criteria (for example, sales price, complexity, number of units sold, sector, etc.), it could be very helpful to design a career path for employees that is objective and measurable; everyone would know where they stand, what projects they are qualified to manage currently and what they need to do to manage other kind of projects in the future.

And also, if some of the team members were to be replaced, it would be clear what skills and qualifications would be required for a new person to enter the job position.

8. Outsourcing.

As there are standard processes and documents, it facilitates the process of incorporating outsourcing personnel if necessary or working remotely. No matter where the employee is located, he/she will use the same documents, processes and templates.

9. Agile transfer of lessons learned between people and projects.

Having standards and sharing all the knowledge in a common sharepoint is a very powerful combination: shared knowledge leads to collaborative work, more efficient implementation and exponential growth.

And something important: the new lessons learned are incorporated into the sharepoint, are then available for all team members and, therefore, serve for a continuous improvement in other similar projects.

10. Data collection and metrics analysis.

A standard execution means that data can be collected efficiently and metrics are comparable between projects, leading to an objective evaluation of performance.

A deep analysis of data will help to establish benchmarks and define representative improvement targets.

Apart from periodical data monitoring, a good way to evaluate the health of the project and to get learnings is to perform project audits. It can be organized by a PMO with its experts, internal auditors, external auditors...

The audit can be conducted by internal or external auditors and can serve as a healthy internal check to learn, to detect strengths and improvement points, trends, potential learnings to transfer to other projects as good practices, etc. In fact, an audit can be an excellent starting point to establish targets, an action plan and the training to gain the necessary capabilities to be successful.

Conclusion

Many times, the decision to move fast can lead to lack of control, frustration, mistakes, new risks and, eventually, to not comply with project goals. Standardization and its benefits explored in this article can be the reference to combine speed and a robust consistent approach in the projects.

About the Author



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Human leadership, Global Sustainable Projects, Renewable energy, Story-teller, Keynote speaker, Lifetime learner, Risk management, Standardization

Manuel Ancizu is passionate about human leadership, sustainable projects and people's motivations. Enjoys working in international multicultural environments and wants to have a positive impact in society.

Manuel graduated in Economics from University of Navarra and obtained an MBA from IESE Business School (Spain); he has also studied in CEIBS (China) and University Anahuac del Sur (Mexico). He holds a number of professional certificates such as the PMP by Project Management Institute, Lead Auditor in ISO 9001:2015 by IRCA Association and has also received training in Management of Development Projects and Risk Management by Interamerican Development Bank (IDB).

Manuel has lived in Spain, France, UK and Mexico; he currently works in the wind energy sector leading the quality management of Offshore projects. Manuel has been involved in wind energy renewable projects developed in different parts of the globe with external customers, as well as in internal projects of cultural transformation, IT and global processes.

Thanks to his experience, he has delivered training sessions, lectures and keynotes to a different number of institutions.

Manuel is a qualified member of the Spanish Standardization Body (UNE) and has been involved in the development of Standards and Norms in Projects, Programs and Portfolios; he has also participated in the translation of different ISO 21500 to Spanish language.

Manuel loves smiling, storytelling, dreaming and making ideas come true in a sustainable manner.

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