

## **Response to Project Life Cycle \* Sophie's Choice <sup>1</sup>**

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### **The purpose of this paper**

The purpose of this article is to critique and clarify a number of points made in *Project Life Cycle \* Sophie's Choice*, published in June 2023 0. This paper does not appear to take into account a wide range of authoritative publications and converging consensus, which it is important for readers of the article to understand and as such, can be misleading.

### **Examples cited in Smith (2023) 0**

#### **The development banks**

The paper's author provides examples of project life cycles, seven of which are from development banks and therefore tuned to that funding agency's particular needs. As these are looked at from the funding agencies viewpoint, they would not reflect the actual life cycles used by the client or contactors of the work being funded, nor would they be practical for such use.

In a footnote, the author of the paper states that it is significant that the development banks concern themselves with evaluating the outcomes after the project has closed,

*"whereas other institutions omit – or neglect – this function, as beyond the Project Manager's responsibility."*

This is an incorrect statement, ISO 21502, BS 6079 and GovS 002 are concerned with outcomes and include such an evaluation, as do those organizations whose methods are based on those standards. The point made by the author regarding outcomes being "*beyond the Project Manager's responsibility*" most likely derives from PMI's traditional view that sponsorship, business cases and outcomes are not a part of project management; this has been a mainstay of PMI's education and qualifications.

#### **Other examples**

Other examples given are from

- The American Institute of Architects for generic architectural projects;
- Asana, a consulting and construction company;
- PM4DEV and eSUB Academy (training).

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being their view on what the life cycle phases should be. Like the banks and funding agencies, these four example project life cycles have been developed for specific purposes, not general use.

### **PMI's project life cycle**

The paper wrongly asserts that PMI defines a project life cycle by naming its phases. This is incorrect. PMI's definition in the PMBoK® glossary 0 is: "*The series of phases that a project passes through from its start to its completion*". Life cycles are dealt with in sections 2.3 and 3.3.1 in the PMBoK® Guide.

The phases mentioned in the paper align to PMI's process groups, however PMI is very clear in clause 4.2.7.4 of the PMBoK® Guide that: "*The Process Groups interact within each phase of a project life cycle. It is possible that all of these processes could occur within a single phase.*" PMI's recently published *Process groups: A Practice Guide* 0 emphasises the difference between process groups and life cycle phases by repeating the advice and saying, "*It is up to the project management team to determine the best life cycle for each project based on the project's inherent characteristics*" (section 1.7.1).

The misinformation in Smith 2023 0 paper regarding process groups and phases of the life cycle is commonly seen throughout the internet despite PMI making the above statement in all its recent versions of the PMBoK® Guide.

Strangely, the American standard on project management, AINSI/PMI 99-001-2021 [1] does not define a project life cycle nor its characteristics.

### **PRINCE2's project life cycle**

Smith 2023 0 wrongly asserts that PRINCE2® 0 prescribes a set of phases in a project life cycle. In fact, PRINCE2® does not prescribe any particular life cycle phases, but, like ISO 21502, BS 6079 and GovS 002, provides a set of characteristics and enables the practitioner to tailor the project life cycle to suit the project. The use of a project life cycle is mandatory in PRINCE2® (see section 3.4). Figure 6.2 in PRINCE2® shows an indicative life cycle to demonstrate its relationship with the business case; that life cycle has with no prescribed stages. Section 9 deals with planning and includes the creation of a 'stage plan', with further advice given in section 9.3. PRINCE2 follows the same approach as BS 6097, which it quotes in section 9.1.2. AXELOS published a discussion paper in 2019, *Project lifecycles and PRINCE2®* 0, to clarify a number of points on project life cycles, which includes detailed criteria and example project life cycles.

### **Other authoritative sources**

When looking at project life cycles it is important to understand current consensus. The three standards given below relate to:

- An international viewpoint from the International Standards Organization;

- A national viewpoint from the British Standards Institute;
- A government viewpoint from the UK government.

## **ISO 21502:2021**

The latest international standard on project management, ISO 21502:2021 0 covers project life cycles in its subclause 4.4 where it states:

The number and names of a project's phases depend upon the type of project being undertaken, desired governance, and the anticipated risk. The phases can reflect the delivery approach being taken, such as predictive, iterative, incremental, adaptive or a hybrid of approaches. Management methods often use different words to denote phases, such as "stage", "iteration" and "release".

The number and naming of the phases is deliberately left to the user to determine, such that they are appropriate and proportionate for the project being undertaken.

The standard then does go on to define the characteristics of a project life cycle.

Each phase should:

- have a defined start and end;
- have specific milestones that relate to the decisions, key deliverables, outputs or outcomes;
- be preceded by a decision point (often referred to as 'gate' and an essential aspect of project governance).

The criteria to be met to authorize the start of a phase should be defined but can vary depending on the organizational environment, the specific life cycle being used and the established project governance. In some cases, phases can overlap.

The decision points and phases, as illustrated in Figure 4, should be defined and can vary depending on the organizational and external environments, funding, benefits required, risk and constraints.

## **BS 6079:2019**

BS 6079:2019 [2] covers project life cycles in clause 8 as well as putting them in the context of other project management activities in subclause 4.6 and Figure 6. BS 6079 follows the same concepts as ISO 21502, which it pre-dates and influenced. BS 6079, however covers the topic more extensively and also addresses the relationship to agile approaches and to life cycles covering more than the development aspect of the work.

Like ISO 21502, BS6079 deliberately avoids prescribing particular cycle phases, but includes criteria the practitioner can use to create an appropriate and proportionate project life cycle for the project being undertaken.

## **GovS 002, 2021**

The UK government's project delivery standard, GovS 002 0 covers project life cycles, from a government viewpoint. The life cycle is addressed in subclause 6.3. GovS 002 follows the same concepts ISO 21502 and BS 6079, defining the characteristics of a project life cycle and the relationship to other management activities (in its Figure 6).

GovS 002 however goes a step further in that it:

- provides the criteria for starting a phase of a project;
- includes what it terms a reference project life cycle.

In terms of the criteria for starting a phase, GovS 002 states that the following shall be defined for each gate (start of a project's phase):

- criteria for providing authorisation;
- the decision makers;
- who should be consulted;
- the type of assurance review required prior to the decision.

In addition, the criteria to be met need to include:

- work aligns with policy and strategy and is still needed;
- the business case is acceptable;
- risks have been identified and are acceptable or can be mitigated;
- the solution is (or is likely to be) acceptable;
- there are funds and resources to complete the work and support any outcomes;
- there is a plan for the next stage and outline plan for the remainder of the work.

The reference life cycle for the UK government's projects is detailed in Annex D of the standard and includes the following phases:

- Feasibility
- Appraisal
- Definition
- Delivery
- Operation

This life cycle is provided so that it can be cross referenced from any life cycle in use within a government organization (hence its name). The standard states:

*The project life cycle should be defined to suit the circumstances by tailoring and mapping to the reference life cycle shown in Figure 5 and Annex D. The number of gates and stages, types of assurance review and form of the business case should be chosen to ensure governance is appropriate and proportionate to the circumstances, with simpler projects having fewer stages (minimum of two) and more risky projects having more stages.*

It should be noted that GovS 002 draws on the experience of PRINCE2®, which the UK government originated, and from ISO 21502 and BS 6079.

### Comment on the author's conclusions

Smith 2023 0 concludes:

*“ . . . every entity has its own perception and description of what a Project Cycle is -- or should be -- comprised; but each is unique, with subtle variances defined by its creator!”*

*“**Precise definition of a criterion is essential to its attainment.** Consequently, for a **discipline** that epitomizes precision – some entities even maintain **project management** is a “profession” not just an amalgam of best practice tools, techniques, and guidelines – this indifference to inconsistent criteria for a key concept is a startling aberration!”*

The advice given in ISO 21502, BS 6079, GovS 002 and PRINCE2®, is that a project life cycle ought to be designed to suit the circumstances, this can be at enterprise level, for a particular project type or for an individual project. Tailoring is fundamental to all the sources I mention in my critique. Criteria are provided in the sources to enable a user to define a project life cycle which conforms to the requirements and advice given.

The conclusion that project management is not a profession is at odds with the approach taken in many countries and not relevant to the discussion.

### Conclusion

Smith 2023 0 asserts that there ought to be a single, defined set of life cycle applicable to all projects is at odds with established best practice, which is to define a life cycle to suit the circumstances. Descriptions, criteria and such like are provided in the latest standards and methods which provide a practitioner with the tools to create an appropriate and proportionate project life cycle, whether at enterprise, project type or project level. It is recognised that practice in some organizations is lagging, especially in those based on earlier versions of the PMBoK Guide®.

There is international consensus, through the International Standards Organization, on what a project life cycle is and the associated characteristics. Whilst many might argue this does not constitute a ‘universal definition’, it is as close as can be achieved whilst each country and organization seeks its own interpretation.

I would recommend caution on using Smith 2023 0 as a basis for information and future work. What is, in my view, clear is that each project needs to have a defined and unambiguous project life cycle as part of its governance and risk management strategy. It is recommended that BS 6079, ISO 21502 and GovS 002 which set out the project life cycle in the context of wider project management practices.

For more information on project life cycles, see *The project framework: understanding gates and stages 0*, published by PM World Journal and incorporated in *Rethinking project management for a dynamic and digital world 0*.

## References

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## About the Author



### **Robert Buttrick**

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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 Visiting Teaching Fellow at the University of Warwick, a member of the British Standards Institute's committee MS2 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.)

After graduating with a first-class honours degree, he joined consulting engineers, Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners (now Jacobs) 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.

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