

# **Bridging the Gap: How Process Thinking Elevates Project Management<sup>1</sup>**

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You've scoped a high-stakes project with a detailed project plan and mapped out deliverables, timelines, and resources. But a few weeks in, deliverables are off track, content is scattered, and teams are improvising on how work is getting done. The result: Confusion, inconsistencies, and delays. What went wrong? The answer might lie in your organization's process maturity.

Project and process management are often treated as two separate domains. In reality, every project is a bundle of processes arranged in a [work breakdown structure](#) (WBS), and the maturity of those processes can make or break project outcomes.

This article explores how embedding process thinking into project management strengthens delivery, reduces risks, and connects project outputs to organizational performance.

## **How Processes Can Improve Projects**

Many people view projects and processes very differently—while projects might be seen as dynamic and creative, processes are sometimes thought of as rigid and repetitive. But the truth is that every successful project implementation depends on processes.

### **Project Management versus Execution**

It helps to think of project-related processes in two categories: those that facilitate project *management*, and those that are required for project *execution*:

- **Project management** processes focus on an organization's overall governance and systematic approach to managing projects, programs, and portfolios.

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- **Project execution** occurs in processes specific to certain stages along the project timeline such as research, design, risk analysis, and content management.

For example, suppose your company is developing a new human resource management system (HRMS). The project *management* activities would incorporate activities like project scoping and planning. You might use a project management platform such as Asana, Jira, or Trello to establish resource dependencies and map timelines. The *execution* activities would focus on project-specific processes including software development and HR processes such as payroll, benefits, and onboarding.

## The PM's Process Toolkit

So how can organizations design their project plans to better leverage process management methodology? The two categories, project management and execution, each contain helpful tools for project managers (PMs):

- The project management toolkit includes RACI (responsible, accountable, consulted, informed) charts, stakeholder analysis surveys, and numerous other [proven methods](#) for analyzing processes and obtaining role clarity and accountability.
- Project execution can be facilitated with systematic approaches to each of the project activities, for example, implementing knowledge management best practices for content reuse.

“There’s the process of managing a project. And there are the processes you’re actually executing within the project that make up the project plan,” explains Jeff Varney, APQC’s Director of Advisory Services. “The work breakdown structure of your project plan is actually linked to the processes you’re either trying to improve, change, automate, or execute.”

## Advantages to a Process Approach

By embracing the process discipline in their approach to projects, PMs can help their organizations see benefits that include:

- More accurate planning and time estimates
- Reduced errors and rework
- Faster onboarding and collaboration across teams
- More scalable, harvestable project outputs

## Process Thinking in Action

Projects with low process maturity rely on improvised methods, ad hoc decisions, and reinvented wheels. An organization operating with advanced process maturity will manage their projects with clear ownership, structure, governance, and tools. The relevant PM processes will be specific to your project and organization, but the idea is to erase the false divide between process and projects and embed process thinking into project management from the outset.

Organizations can begin to level up their process maturity by taking the following steps to building reusable project plans.

**Map projects to core organizational processes.** Begin by identifying recurring project types, then define and formalize their reusable processes. Standardizing tasks and activities for every research or design project, for example, helps PMs map out projects more efficiently.

A [process framework](#) is a good place to start, as it defines “what” to do at a high level and drills down into the “how” via activities, tasks, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). In project planning terms, these SOPs can then be mapped to the WBS to define the people, tools, and other resources required to carry out the tasks of the project.

**Learn to use and customize process tools** like RACI and SIPOC (suppliers, inputs, processes, outputs, customers) charts, governance frameworks, and measurement worksheets. Reusable methodology and tools help reduce planning overhead, promote consistency, and allow for scalability.

For example, incorporating detailed role definition and clarity via RACI charting helps define the workflow for proper handoffs and improves the overall effectiveness of the project. Outlining who is responsible and accountable versus consulted and informed is critical to ensuring your project adheres to budgets, timelines, and resource requirements.

**Equip teams with content management best practices** that enable them to retain and reuse project knowledge.

For example, Varney worked with a client on an APQC advisory project that involved helping a large global company reuse content across the enterprise. As the team began collecting content from every corner of the business, they ran up against inefficient collection

processes due to fragmented data marked by a lack of naming conventions or standardized tagging.

By embedding solid content management processes into a process plan, such as defining taxonomies and creating business rules for naming and storage, new team members can be more easily onboarded, and everyone can operate together more efficiently.

These same principles can be applied for projects involving data and records management or knowledge transfer efforts. By putting in more time in the front end, project teams see efficiency gains down the line. And as efficiency increases, the output becomes cleaner, simpler, and more accurate.

“Once you’ve set up the process and start to reuse it, your project planning becomes faster, more consistent, and harvestable,” Varney points out. “It’s a huge force multiplier.”

## Conclusion

Embedding process thinking into project management strengthens planning, reduces risks, and connects project outputs to organizational performance. By reframing projects not as stand-alone events but as extensions of organizational processes, PMs can build repeatable workflows that improve efficiency and accountability. And by capturing lessons learned along the way, organizations can continue to leverage and multiply these benefits across future initiatives to elevate their value and impact.

## About the Author



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**Madison “Maddy” Lundquist** studies the best practices that top organizations use to build strong processes and drive continuous improvement. As the leader of process and performance management research at APQC, she sets the vision and leads projects that explore how organizations manage workflows, define responsibilities, and track results. Her work surfaces practical strategies to improve agility and alignment across the business. Maddy partners with members to understand the real-world challenges they face and help them find ways to address them. She also manages internal process documentation efforts within research services, ensuring that workflows are clearly mapped and accessible to staff across the organization. In addition, she frequently presents her research findings to members, sharing insights in a way that is both practical and easy to implement.

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