What Is A PM Methodology?
A Search for Efficiency, Consistency, and Performance
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Abstract

By now, you would think that everyone who needs a Project Management Methodology would have one. After all, they have been in popular use for over 30 years. But as more Enterprises understand the importance of demonstrated PM Competence in projects, programs and portfolios, new requirements emerge, that your methods may not support. In this article, we answer the question **"What is a PM Methodology?"** from a perspective of today's requirements. While we cite Information Technology methodologies, we also refer to other application areas, and universal methods. Finally, we list the criteria against which to score your in-house or commercial methodologies. You can then use the criteria to help improve the effectiveness of your PM delivery.

What Is *Not* a Methodology

This update of our popular 2007 article is prompted by the recurrence of a problem once before solved—by all but a few who seem not to understand the nature and purpose of PM methodologies. While some find it convenient to assert that exam-oriented knowledge taxonomies are true PM methodologies, most audiences understand the differences—and different purposes between these documents and true PM methodologies. But recently, we have noticed that it still serves some parties to consider BOKs, or bodies of knowledge, to be true PM methodologies. For those who understand the differences, they are huge. For others, the purpose of this article is to help clarify those differences so you can make better decisions in your selection of PM methodologies.

Background and PM Methods Experience

First, we share a bit of our background in this topic. For 30+ years we have developed or helped clients adapt or develop over 50 commercial or home-grown methodologies. Part of our PM Practice in the early 1980's was to help companies scale down and improve their internal or purchased PM methodologies. Starting with Department of Defense Program Management monoliths or "Big Eight" Consultancies' 36,000 hour-target methods, we helped them scale their methods down to lean, low-overhead methods that were more appropriate for their 1,000-3,000 (or 15,000) hour projects.

We developed new PM methodologies, including THE Guide[A], for Information Technology projects, working with friend and business partner Dan Myers. One of the "Big Eight" consultancies wrapped our PM methodology into their Systems Engineering methodology in a software bundle that proliferated in the 1980s and 90s. In 1986 we developed a universal PM methodology for Small Projects[B], those that are 8-360+ hours of effort. Today, that method is used by thousands of people on six continents.

In the early 1990s, our PM consulting and methods work exposed us to a variety of new twists on PM methods. Ken Schwaber's Scrum and some of the other emerging Agile methods had their strengths. With the emergence of Component Development, and then of the World Wide Web, there were many new methods to evaluate and adapt. But these were mostly for Information Technology projects—an area with obvious potential for great improvements in PM methods. Other areas, such as Construction Engineering have always demonstrated appropriate rigor, with less opportunity for improvement.

In the late 1990's we started seeing more universal methods, designed for "all the rest of your projects," like our Small Project Guide. And the decade beginning in 2000 saw more proliferation in this space than in the entire 30 years before, as Project Management Officers realize they need organizational consistency—at least at the roll-up level—to properly prioritize, staff and report the portfolios of projects and programs. This again brings up the question, *"Just what is a Project Management Methodology?"*

What Is a PM Methodology?

A Project Management Methodology is a set of appropriate repeatable processes that help introduce consistency, flexibility, and efficiency, while improving quality in managing an enterprise's (or department's) projects. It typically consists of process descriptions, templates, roles and responsibilities, Life Cycles and Work Breakdown Structures, together with other support information.

Why Use a PM Methodology?

If we understand what one is, why do I want one? For many reasons, including to:

- Improve alignment of projects to Enterprise Strategy
- Increase competitive advantage, where appropriate
- Produce better business results faster and cheaper
- Help predict staffing requirements on priority efforts
- Improve Management information in the areas of least visibility for most Enterprises
- Assure the best use of Enterprise funds and resources
- Identify knowledge, skill and competence needs
- Improve skill and performance of project teams
- Assure appropriate ownership of process and results
- Improve stakeholder satisfaction with all projects

What is *Not* a PM Methodology

The PMBOK® Guide is *not* a reference of key areas of process that people can follow starting at the front cover and you to fail. Successful projects applied in the right sequence methodology. While it is a good knowledge, it falls short as a to project success. In fact, following every page can cause require skill and experience, and selection. Unfortunately, many people use it as a methodology, and then blame the text when the project fails. There exist other "not a methodology" candidates. Those include Capability Maturity Models and 6-Sigma efforts.

> *The PMBOK® Guide is not a methodology... Unfortunately, many people try to use it as one.*

Why This Resurgent Interest in PM Methodologies?

In part, we can blame "the Prince." PRINCE2, the UK-developed standard, can claim more people certified in project management than any other PM certification. Why is this happening? Because even though the PRINCE2 Certifications are based on Knowledge (and not deep Skill, Behavioral Attributes or Competence), the market appears to perceive that PRINCE 2 applies *relevant knowledge for success*. Other factors include the recent popularity of Enterprise PM and Project Portfolio Management.

While organizational PM improvement has been a focus of our methods for years, it has recently been discovered by many others. Add to this the fact that despite billions of dollars spent globally on PM training—primarily just in knowledge, projects still disappoint their owners and Executives, by failing to provide the intended benefit realization. Another reason for the rise in PM methods' popularity: Increasing rigor in Regulatory Compliance requirements also adds to the demand for consistent process with traceable results.

In addition to these pressures, just think of the opportunity presented by PM methods that apply the full performance suite of Knowledge, Skills, Behavioral Attributes and Competence![C] But before getting into the details about such a method, let's look at a brief history of PM methodologies.

The Moving Target of PM Methodologies

Few people today agree about all the components and structure of a useful PM methodology. In the 1970s we saw *forms-driven* methodologies: Just fill out all the forms, and the project would produce itself. Then in the 1980s most were *process-oriented*; just follow all the steps of the recipe, and everything should come out ok.

With the rise of the lean movements of the early 1990s, many started calling them PM methods, to distinguish them from the forms-driven monoliths of the past. In that era, some of the best were *blended versions* that were *product-oriented*, while retaining useful and supportive forms and processes.

In the new Millennium we have seen the daring *Agilistas* who toss out all the process and forms and rely on the working results to drive the process—and they are right, for some applications, much of the time. But we often have a conflicting need for rigor, resulting from those increasing Regulatory and Governance requirements.

Ironically, little has changed over 40 years in the basic Critical Success Factors for projects. Many of the "New Age" methods require (or even assume) the same factors needed 40 years ago. Typical Critical Success Factors, then and now include:

- Competent project management, including estimating, scheduling and tracking methods, throughout the team;
- Technical performers who are effective in completing their assignments *and* in communicating within and outside the team;
- Effective upper management, who prioritize work well, and assign talent appropriately, so teams can focus on the most important projects with minimum distractions and interruptions; and
- Constant customer involvement.

Some of the most important factors never change!

Characteristics of An Effective Methodology

An effective Project Management methodology does not produce project success. It merely provides the framework for competent Project Managers and key Stakeholders and Team Members to succeed. Yet there are a handful of characteristics that consistently differentiate an effective and efficient PM method from an ineffective and weak or bloated ones. Those characteristics include:

1. Contains guiding processes for those who are new to project work;
2. Identifies Key Roles and Responsibilities of all Stakeholders, including Customers or Clients;
3. Cites Skills or Competences needed, by Role, by Process;
4. Provides useful templates and examples;
5. Supplies model project Life Cycles for projects of different types, with more detailed Work Breakdown Structure examples;
6. Offers audit checklists to assure proper process, Governance and results;
7. Is customizable by Enterprises and teams;
8. Is fully scaleable, for projects of different sizes;
9. Is tool-neutral: works well with all PM power tools;
10. Offers ranges of rigor for different project needs;
11. Saves more effort and time than it costs.

We expand upon these characteristics below. After reviewing the list, we suggest that you compare your current PM methods to this list, and evaluate how well they demonstrate these characteristics. We are also interested in your suggestions for additions to the list. After all, most of the best long-life methods are designed for tomorrow's needs, not just to correct the sins of the past. And now, we offer more detailed explanations for the above list of characteristics.

Consistent Characteristics in Detail

1. Contains Guiding Processes

Who is the user of today's PM methodology? It is clear that the stakeholder list moves beyond Project Mangers, to include Team Members, internal and external Customers, End Users, Project Management Office consultants, Sponsors, and Executive Managers. And within this list, each stakeholder has some level of appropriate use. But the primary target for any methodology is those people who are performing work on the project, whether in managing it, making key decisions about it, or delivering the results.

And here is an irony: Even with the best methodologies, many target users tend to use them in full for just the first 3-5 times. And the first several of those times, they are still learning them and not effectively applying them. After the fifth (or so) time, most people have fully integrated the philosophy and approach. Thus the ideal PM Method should have approachable process explanations for beginners (not overwhelming ones), yet be accessible enough for easy reference. Each user, from new team members to Project Sponsor uses it several times, while climbing the learning curve to Skills and Mastery.

2. Identifies Key Roles and Responsibilities

Too often we see PM methods that fail to identify the responsibilities of each role. Some fail to even include such crucial roles as Sponsor (or Project Executive), key resource managers who make prioritization and allocation decisions, and internal and external Customers or Clients. In reviewing our customers' project plans we continually point out the risk/threats these omissions present.

How do these stakeholders know what is expected of them? How much time it will take? How do to know when their results are "good enough?" Unless they are very experienced, they don't know the answers to these questions, and they thus become a failure point. So any decent PM method must identify all the responsibilities each person filling one or more roles should sign up for. For example, the list below shows the Sponsor responsibilities from our universal PM and Business Improvement method for medium and larger projects.

The Effective Sponsor's Responsibilities:
- ❑ Establish and maintain the project vision;
- ❑ Fund the project or negotiate for funding;
- ❑ Produce or sign off on the Project Charter;
- ❑ Approve and communicate the business case;
- ❑ Assure the project meets business needs, at startup, throughout, and at closure;
- ❑ Represent the project to your Enterprise Executives, keeping them informed and in support of the project effort;
- ❑ Define the Project Manager's authority;
- ❑ Empower the Project Manager and Team;
- ❑ Assure availability of the right Resources, with the right competences, the right amount of time, especially from the project's Customers;
- ❑ Serve as project spokesperson for all communication outside the Team;
- ❑ Eliminate roadblocks outside the control of the Project Manager and Core Team;
- ❑ Ramrod or speed approvals (develop a sense of urgency-by-example);
- ❑ Arbitrate disputes, when needed;
- ❑ Provide significant rewards for the Project Team.

Will your Sponsors "sign up" for such responsibilities? If not, who will perform them? And what are the consequences if some go missing? You can see why a Competence-Based PM Method requires Contextual competences, in addition to the Technical ones, just as the IPMA and USA National Competence Baselines prescribe.

3. Cites Competences Needed, by Role, Process

To deliver on the above responsibilities, it is clear that all key project players must have more than PM knowledge. While knowledge is an essential foundation, knowledge by itself does not accomplish anything. It must be applied, to get needed results. Beyond application is clear Competence. That is why my company uses PM CompModel, to identify target Competences and criteria (at varying levels) for all key stakeholders.

Thus your PM method should relate the Competences needed, and the level required to complete each process or result. The consequence: You use this information (together with effective decision-making about priorities and talent allocation) to reduce time, cost and risk/threats, while increasing the quality of results in every assignment in the project.

4. Provides Useful Templates and Examples

About half of all people prefer to review process steps for project assignments that are new for them. That is why a process-oriented method is useful, at least until people no longer require a reference. The other half of all people tends to prefer an output or result-oriented template. Even with outputs such as computer code in an IT project, many of these people prefer to modify something that someone else wrote, so long as it works.

Templates for results are useful for this group of people. What makes them even more useful are two additions:

1) Add annotation or explanations that reduce the need to use a separate process reference. These are especially useful if they can be shown or hidden at will, so they don't distract from the deliverable, when it is complete.

2) Provide completed examples, from your Enterprise, or even better, from your own workgroup. Try as we may, when we have provided example sets, most people find them less useful than internally-produced examples, because "they aren't ours."

We've discovered an interesting aspect of that second point: For some interim results in your Enterprise, such as a Test Plan, 60-90% of it can be re-used in later projects. Thus these example templates can again reduce time, cost and risk/threats, while increasing quality in many parts of the project. Do you see a trend here?

5. Supplies Model Project Life Cycles

Too many Project Life Cycles begin too late, and end too early, to be useful. The actions taken (or failed to be taken) between Concept and formation of the project team determine most of the success or failure of today's projects. Estimates are made based on incomplete understanding of Scope, and a dollar amount or hours of effort is budgeted based on that information. Then too often, the team is held to that very preliminary estimate. Not only should the Life Cycle begin at the beginning, but the early scope discovery should be traceable, and estimates revised, not held firm, at major Stage Gates or Milestones.

Similarly, too many Life Cycles (or *Life Spans* as our friend Max Wideman calls them) end when the team captures their Lessons Learned. Speaking of Max, see his excellent, in-depth article on Life Cycles at his website[D]. Obviously for the Enterprise, the true closure is when you verify Benefit Realization. In too many projects, that never happens, and even when it does there may be fewer benefits than promised, due to inadequate tracking or Change Control. Few people want to explain to Executive Management why benefits fell short!

Worse, full benefit realization may require months or years after project closure, and no one except the Sponsor remains on the team to perform the analysis—the rest were assigned to new projects long ago. That is one set of considerations about Project Life Cycles. Here is another. Different groups in your enterprise may need different Life Cycles, just because of the nature of their business. A Pharma Clinical Trials Life Cycle will differ from a Construction Engineering one.

An Information Technology Life Cycle may have multiple variants, depending on the technologies applied, whether you buy or build (or outsource), or use classic versus agile methods. And networking is far different than Systems Development; and so on. Within the Life Cycle, the Work Breakdown Structures (WBS) must vary in depth and breadth based on the size of the project. Small, Medium, Large, and *Too-Large* projects (*Too Large* projects tend to cost more per delivered Scope-point, and fail much more frequently) each require a different number of Phases, and different numbers of levels of detail within each phase. And, there is no such thing as the perfect Life Cycle. Example: using a Medium Life Cycle WBS on a Small Project causes far too much overhead in the project.

Sound like chaos? There are solutions. Even with multiple different Life Cycles, savvy Project Oriented Enterprises establish common "roll-up" points, based on similar or identical Major Milestones or Gates throughout all their Life Cycles. This *consistency where needed, and adaptability where required* approach works for almost all Enterprises, and any Universal PM method must support it.

6. Offers Audit Checklists

A consistently applied PM Method assures proper process, Governance traceability and other verifications. But how can you determine that you are using your methods effectively? Especially important: How can you perform this assurance pro-actively, while the work is in-process versus in autopsy mode, when it is too late to correct omissions?

An effective PM Method should provide process, compliance and result audit checklists. Not just yes/no quantitative questions (Does the Project have a Business Case and Charter or Brief?), but *qualitative* questions, that specify the criteria for an adequate result. This approach not only helps guide the team to better outcomes, we also use it to measure progress of implementation for new methodology users. The information, in some cases, is useful as input to a Department Manager's Project Improvement Performance Reviews.

7. Is Customizable by Enterprises and Teams

Customizability is important for a number of reasons, including the obvious: Enterprises have different requirements. We find that if an Enterprise does not feel the need to make even a minimum amount of change, they will probably not succeed with the method. This provides a good early assessment of implementation success. And some want to change too much; those Enterprises often fail, as well.

There is another reason for Customizing: The Enterprise that does the right amount of customizing (typically around 10-15% if it is the appropriate PM Method for them) builds a sense of ownership that is essential for integration and adoption as part of the Enterprise culture. That Change Management process only works if all the right people participate in that customization—not if it is merely done for everyone by the Project Management Office.

See our PM Methods Improvement Plan[E]. It is a methodology for implementing a PM methodology. It explains more about the process and benefits of engaging PM practitioners in adapting the methods they will use. PM Methods Improvement Plan has been used to achieve PM methods improvement by hundreds of companies over the last 35 years.

This need for customization has always existed, but years ago, when the vendor delivered eight 3- inch three-ring binders it was more difficult than it is today. Still, even with web pages and custom forms in PM Software, customization is not easy. The current popular solutions include either a high-end content management system (hard to learn, hard to use, but very powerful), or a web or Wiki based approach (increasingly popular, but may require external hosting and a constant network connection; sorry remote notebook users). This will continue to be an area of constant change.

8. Is Fully Scaleable for Projects of Different Sizes

Many methodology providers claim that their methods are fully scalable. Most of us discovered in the 1980s how important that is, when the large consultancies claimed that their methods, developed for 35,000 hour projects, were perfectly scalable for 3500 hour projects. Yes, and we have a bridge we can sell you, too! We use a rule of thumb for how much a particular method can scale: 4x or the "fourple factor." Here is an example: a method built for a 2000 effort hour project will work very well for a project that is half or twice as large: 1000 or 4000 hours. It will work, with adjustment, on the one-third or triple-sized effort. And it will consistently fail at the fourple factor. This scalability really means multiple methods for each path through your overall methods suite. And for smaller projects, your teams do much of the same work, but they may have fewer phases or milestones, less-deep work breakdown structures, fewer document templates, and less overall administrative work. **That is scalability.**

9. Is Tool-neutral; Works Well With All PM Tools

Tool-neutral means you don't have to buy another product to use it. For example, it has been popular in the past to just add process explanations to PM tools such as Microsoft Project. That's fine, for those who already have it (and who can do more than move bars around until it looks good enough for management approval). But what about everyone else, especially now that many companies have 50-70% of their staff involved with projects? We are seeing a new influx of tools that are designated for project management, but are merely mobile or tablet apps for a tiny portion of managing projects. Thus the PM methods must be more flexible, not less-so. Many serious Project-Oriented Enterprises have already invested in industrial strength PM Software. As well, some organizations use non-Windows software (gasp!). We are seeing a broad movement away from proprietary single source solutions, and toward open options. Thus this requirement adds complexity, because any PM Method should use the tools an Enterprise has invested in, but not require additional ones, or additional copies. This has driven us towards web-based solutions.

10. Offers a Range of Rigor

A project to update your department procedures does not require the level of rigor that a project to fulfill a contract commitment requires. A small project does not need as much ceremony and supporting documentation as a medium one does. A very large project may have significant demands for interdepartmental or inter-organization and international coordination, while a medium project may involve a half dozen people within the same office. Your PM Method must provide guidance for the right level of rigor, documentation, review cycles, and approvals—and identify the cases where variances from that guidance is wiser than blind application. Of course, some people avoid all rigor, as a matter of personal style. Even those people can appreciate appropriate rigor when they see the ways that rigor helps them. Similarly, methods that add rigor that fails to help the people doing the work will continue to fail.

11. Saves More Effort And Time Than It Costs

This characteristic is the flip-side of the above item on rigor. Any new method will require more time at first. Training, coaching, monitoring, establishing new baseline and ongoing performance measures all take time. There is also the issue of the Learning Curve. But after the *third time's a charm* use, any effective PM Method must clearly save more time than it requires. And measurably so. This is the greatest place where we have seen Enterprises fail in improving PM Methods: even when they achieve huge savings, they cannot prove it. Or, they cannot separate out the benefits of each of several components implemented concurrently, to see, for example, that one chosen part requires too much effort for the value of the information it provides, thus wiping out much of the Methods gain. Or, the Enterprise fails to establish the new Policies, Roles and Responsibilities that are the prerequisite to any lasting change. The methods can't do it all.

Is Methods Benefit Realization Important?

Implementing improved PM methods can cut the cost of your projects and speed benefit realization.

Adding the right competences in all stakeholders—especially in manager—doubles the return. Helping the Enterprise to manage the portfolio of projects effectively compounds the benefits again. For those who can measure benefits, the returns can be great.

Example: In the early 1990s a consultancy wished to improve their project management effectiveness. We evaluated methods, training, competences, policies, prioritization and staffing practices, tools, and Management evaluation and incentive measurements. We involved their staff in selecting, tuning and rolling out all the needed changes. At the end of three years, their project cost-per-Scope-unit **was 10% of their pre-improvement level**—and they were price leaders when they started.

In other words, they cut their unit cost by 90%, through even smarter Project Management practices. In the final Benefit Realization milestone, the leadership team identified how they could pursue the next 10X improvement. Appropriate PM process helped. In addition to the right processes, executed with competence, the tools, policies, and a compensation system that rewarded managers for results were part of the improvement. They always are. Of course, your mileage may vary.

Conclusions

Project Management methodologies, or PM methods, are once again popular. They seem to come into and out of style each decade. But the most effective Project Oriented Enterprises' PM methods don't ebb and flow with the latest performance improvement fad. Instead, the organizations continue to adapt—and measure the results—of their existing PM methods.

We suggest that you use the information in this article, including the ***Characteristics of an Effective Methodology***, to evaluate your PM methods. Then look at ways you can improve your PM methods' effectiveness. You certainly don't want your Project Teams to think you are in favor of process and rigor for its own sake, rather than improved Project Performance, do you?

And again, if you have characteristics to add to the list, let us know. If you have disagreement with our list, we'd especially like to know. Send your comments to us! Or, if you have applied the insights we offer, send us a summary of your actions and results. Perhaps we can craft a case study explaining your successes!

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Performance Coach*, has coached and inspired tens of thousands of project and program managers, and hundreds of organizations, on five continents, for over forty years. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has also been a strong contributor to professional organizations such as IPMA® and PMI® since 1983.

He is a co-founder and past-president of IPMA-USA, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In September, 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow.

Goff's interest in project competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center for a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s. It continued with international engagements during the 1980s and 90s as he helped organizations assess and improve their project and program performance.

Today, he coaches, speaks and performs keynote speeches at major project-related events. And, he continues to pursue his interest in individual, project team, organization, and national and international PM performance.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management coaching, consulting, and training. His insight for the needed PM Competences, and his delivery of effective training translate to improved project performance. In his working life, he combines his Project experience with sensitivity for the interpersonal skills areas—the human aspects of projects.

In his papers, presentations, workshops or in consulting, he combines his project experience with strategic linkage for all projects and programs. And his sensitivity for the human aspects of projects (leadership and interpersonal skills), together with his insights for strategic alignment, have provided competitive advantage for his clients for over 40 years. His business result: measurably increased **PM Performance.**

Contact Stacy at +1.719.488.3850, email: Stacy.Goff@gmail.com. His website is https://StacyGoff.com

References

[A] THE Guide is an Information Technology and Project Management method developed over 35 years ago, and still in use by some organizations today. Even in the 1980s, it was lean and iterative, as opposed to waterfall and monolithic.

[B] The Small Project Guide™ recently celebrated its 35th anniversary. It is a universal project management and business improvement method for all organizations.

[C] For more information about the spectrum of Competence Development, see our paper, presented at the 2006 World Congress, in Shanghai, China.

[D] See Max Wideman's excellent article on Life Cycles at: at www.maxwideman.com/papers/plc-models/intro.htm.

[E] PM Methods Improvement Plan is a free Monograph that offers a methodology for PM Methods improvement. See it on our website.

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