

Selecting the Right Project Management Methodology

Many professionals are not aware of the differences between project management methodologies and system development lifecycles (SDLCs) / product methodologies, or why it is important to use a consistent project management approach. The two types of methodologies are significantly different as they are designed to address different issues and achieve different goals. This article explains the common project management methodologies offering insight into how to select the right one for your organization.

The best starting point is to understand the definition of a methodology. It is a collection of processes, methods and tools for accomplishing an objective. Methodologies provide a checklist of key deliverables and activities to avoid missing key tasks. This consistency simplifies the process and reduces training. It also ensures all team members are marching to the same drummer.

A project management methodology provides a roadmap for managing projects. Project methodologies provide guidance to project teams to collaborate in tackling projects. Project teams who do not use a shared methodology tend to be inefficient, resulting in higher cost, longer schedule and the introduction of higher risk. While the entire team is affected by the project management methodology, the project manager is the owner and typically most impacted.

Most IT projects use an SDLC that defines phases and specific activities within a typical project. These SDLCs reflect different approaches to completing the product deliverables. There are many different SDLCs that can be applied based on the type of project or product.

Given that the bulk of the effort in most projects is focused around the product, why use a project management methodology? The most obvious is that it reduces the risk of project failure if used correctly. Over time many organizations introduce multiple SDLCs to address product specific needs. Managing projects is a process that should be performed consistently regardless of the SDLC used. This consistency reduces the need for training in different methodologies. It also reduces the contention and confusion that often arises from allowing choices where none are really required. Finally, and most important, if you plan on managing your portfolio of projects, a consistent project management methodology is mandatory for effective reporting and analysis.

Now that you've decided that to use a project management methodology, which one should you use? There are countless choices, however, there are some that immediately leap to mind as strong contenders.

1. The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBoK) is often referred to as the defacto project management methodology due to the popularity of the PMI project management certification process. While there are differing opinions regarding whether PMBoK is a project methodology or not, it is certainly used as the basis for many project management methodologies. It defines project management 'best practices' and is intended to be applicable to any project regardless of the SDLC or product methodology used. Because PMBoK has become well recognized in North America it forms the basis for a majority of North American project management methodologies. If you decide to use PMBoK, use it as the basis for your methodology and tune it to your organization.
2. PRINCE2 is a project management methodology originally developed in 1989 for the UK government. It has been adopted as a standard IT project management methodology in non-government organizations throughout the world. It is still most common in the UK and Europe. PRINCE2 is broken into eight high level processes (i.e. Directing a project, Planning, Starting up a project, Initiating a project, Controlling a stage, Managing product delivery, Managing stage boundaries, and Closing a project). It is intended to be used in a flexible manner, relating to the product and other project constraints. Typically users of

PRINCE2 do some tuning of the methodology to their specific environment to simplify the process and introduce some organization specific processes and templates.

3. Many consulting firms and vendors provide their own project management methodologies. These methodologies are generally 'home grown', based on the firm's experience. Sometimes they are tool focused or tied to an SDLC. If you are a user of their tool or services, there is potentially value in considering these as options.

So how do you select a methodology that will provide you with the greatest benefit?

- As a general rule, the first step is to select something that is independent of an SDLC. This ensures that you can change your SDLC without impacting the project management methodology.
- Next you should take into consideration what is popular in your geographic area. This will reduce training costs since you may be able to find appropriate training close by. You may also find it easier to locate staff already trained in the methodology.
- Finally, look at your internal project management expertise. Use this internal expertise to review methodologies used in the past, the basic elements needed in your organization and develop a strategy for the degree of vigour your future project management methodology will require

When selecting any methodology there is almost always a debate that ensues among affected parties. Each side tends to focus on emotional issues rather than on whether the methodologies under evaluation will improve project performance. The reality is that if you stay focused on the fundamental project management elements you should be able to drive the selection past the debating points and effectively achieve significant project improvements.

Project management methodologies can significantly improve the success rate of your projects if introduced and used effectively. Separating them from SDLCs provides you more options for product methodologies without impacting the project management process thus creating a clear pathway for implementing project portfolio analysis and reporting processes.

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