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Why should a project need an outside focus on Quality?

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Why should a project need an outside focus on Quality?

Background

Experience has shown that complex projects need considerable resources devoted to continually monitor their progress. However, nearly all sectors exist in a changing environment with new challenges, staff changes, loss and change of partners as well as unrealistic project specifications and estimates.

Independent, external Project Quality Management teams can design and execute a thorough Project Quality Plan through involvement at the early project design stage. This enables an interaction with all stakeholders in order to achieve a successful project outcome through constructive and objective recommendations during every phase of the project.

This paper is based on 500+ project evaluations, mainly for the European Commission, in programmes such as: Media (convergence of digital media technologies), Esprit (research in IT) and 4th, 5th framework IST (Information Society Technology) programmes (Multimedia, Environment, E-Learning), Grundvig (adult education), Leonardo (vocational training), Minerva and Comenius (schools), Erasmus (higher education), @LIS (Latin America) and DG EAC on European Citizenship.

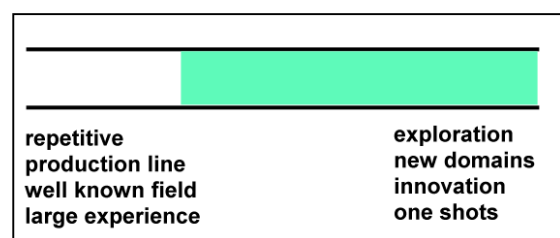
The subjects dealt with several educational issues (lifelong learning, vocational training, corporate universities, educational networks, digital literacy, online learning, transfer of experience, advanced project in cognitive sciences, Knowledge Management etc.), with environmental issues (intelligent buildings, disaster prevention systems), with advanced IT solutions (cloud computing) and with societal issues (European citizenship, town twinnings).

Some of the projects were evaluated for initial selection in the programme; others were also monitored during their entire lifecycle, up to completion. The methodology explained below stemmed from both situations. The observation of the Quality Monitoring approaches of those projects, and the many mistakes encountered, led to the conclusion that there is room for a **general purpose generic Project Quality Monitoring Service**, adaptable to a large variety of situations and industries. In this paper, it will be called PQM.

Types of Project

Although most projects would benefit from this approach it is particularly relevant to 'development' projects, where the exploration of the unknown is the order of the day. It also lends itself to transnational projects involving different partners with a variety of cultural and technical backgrounds.

Projects in the scale below can have very different natures.

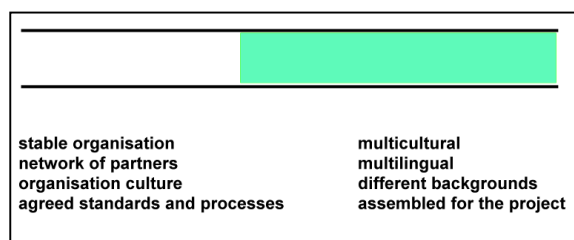


On the left hand side, we talk about projects addressed, within an organisation by

traditional Quality Management methodologies (the ISO family, for instance), while on the right hand side, those methodologies are less adequate. Our approach (PQM) tends to deal in the main with the right hand side.

It is worth noting that many organisations are inclined to replicate what they know best and are often blind to new situations. On the other hand, given the current economic turmoils, organisations are more and more obliged to innovate and explore new domains.

Projects in the scale below can have teams with various composition schemes.



On the left hand side, we deal with stability, well known processes, while at the other side, partnerships or consortiums are assembled for the purpose of the project and have often different working habits, reporting systems, and less experience of working together.

The PQM approach deals more with the right hand side. In the global economy, joint ventures are often composed of teams belonging to the category on the right hand side.

Typical Lifetime of a Project

A project starts with an idea or mission which sets the focus of the work. Having established this the next task is to organise the team to carry out the tasks (who does what ? budgets, resources, standards etc.). Each partner then develops work packages with the necessary controls. These work packages then need to be integrated into one programme of work and this is tested to see if it works. Every project needs to be developed to the point where it can be used in a real situation. Evaluation of the project then follows and a conclusion is drawn as to whether it was a success or not.

Typical Problems. What could go wrong?

Especially for projects in the green areas depicted above, either in terms of nature or in terms of partnership, there are typical pitfalls that can result. Often the mission and objectives are not really shared and the needs analysis, feasibility studies or initial market surveys are superficial. Usually the project manager belongs to one of the partners which carries with it particular self-interests. Often the partnership is unbalanced with some partners being more dominant.

On many occasions project monitoring is limited to budget considerations with the control of work package success not being the objective. Also partners are often very specialised which results in communication difficulties. Turnover of staff results in partners leaving the consortium during the course of the project with newcomers replacing them. Often there has been no initial risk assessment to explore potential problems or issues.

Many projects are undertaken without any evaluation criteria having been defined at the outset. Also many measurement tools are introduced to the project on an improvised basis without any attempt to standardise the approaches. There is also a lack of early warning of slippage and abnormal situations.

The Project Quality Monitoring methodology

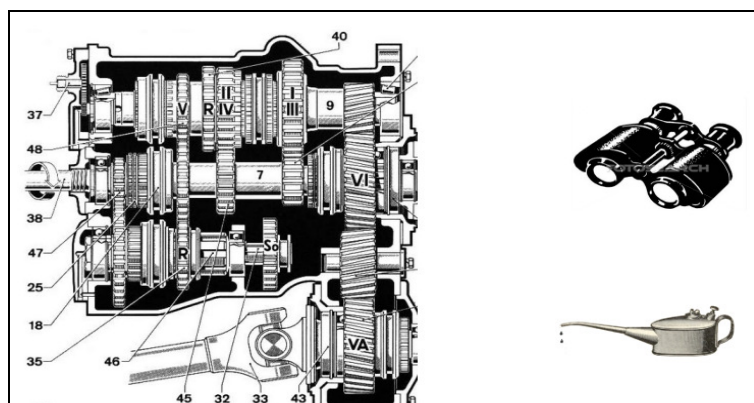
The Central idea

- neutrality
- stable observation point
- consistent evaluation standards
- evaluation methodology
- systemic approach, based on CSF and KPI's
- risk assessment
- generic methodology applicable in many different fields

Neutrality is important, which is why an external Quality Monitoring body is recommended, as a stable observation platform. It will be able to define and apply standard methods for the evaluation of work packages. The Quality Monitoring team will perceive the project as a system, an engine where the partners are the cogwheels, thus applying consistency to the Quality Monitoring. Since partners are often very specialised, it is essential to have them reflecting on the key items of their contribution.

Minor or major accidents may arise during the lifetime of a project which need to be managed. The risk assessment is also a key element, because it has the virtue of identifying in advance mitigation strategies.

The lateral view



The method is not just limited to careful watching of a project. It also contributes to the good functioning of the various elements together.

Main Areas

CSF Methodology

The methodology focuses on the Critical Success Factors. Each contributor will establish what the critical success factors of their tasks are and will then reflect on the required performance indicators and a measurement methodology. The rest of the actions aimed at establishing a thorough Quality Plan flow naturally from this CSF discipline (such as the deliverable quality, the review calendar, etc...).

We have observed that this is a difficult exercise. The question " what will be the elements ensuring that your project or task will be a success?" is often answered differently when several members are interviewed. The same happens with the way it should be evaluated and establishing the indicators.

It is also observed that developing a complete "Quality Package" before the start of a project is impossible. Standards, methods and directions should be set in the beginning, but it is an ongoing process in which it is difficult to set the quality objectives of each work package in one go: iterations are needed.

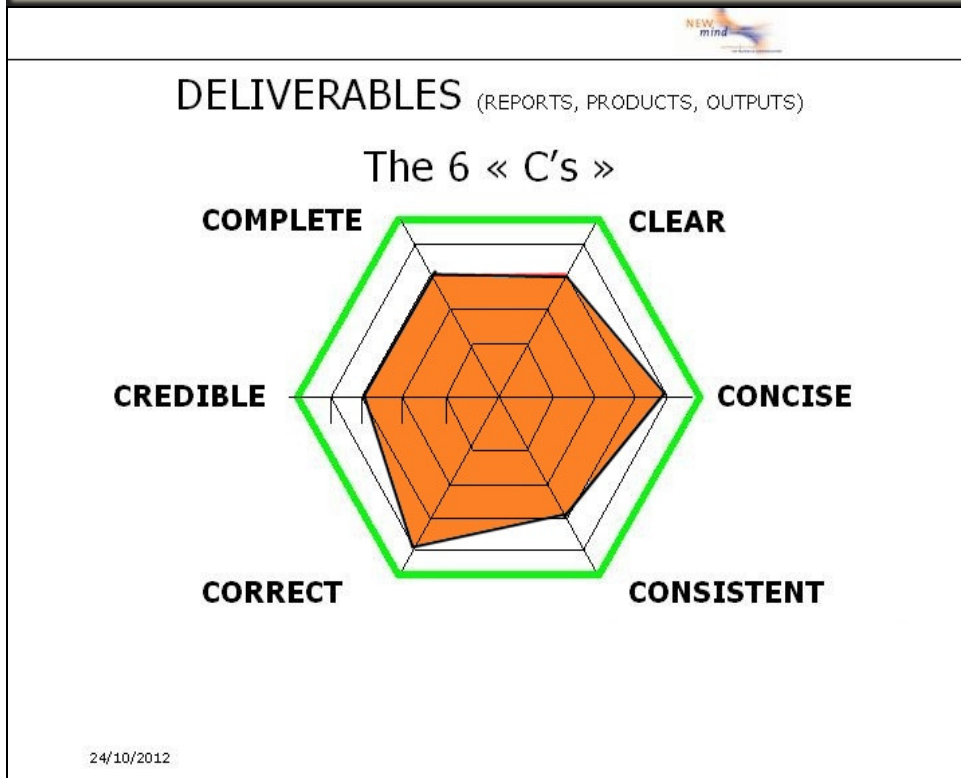
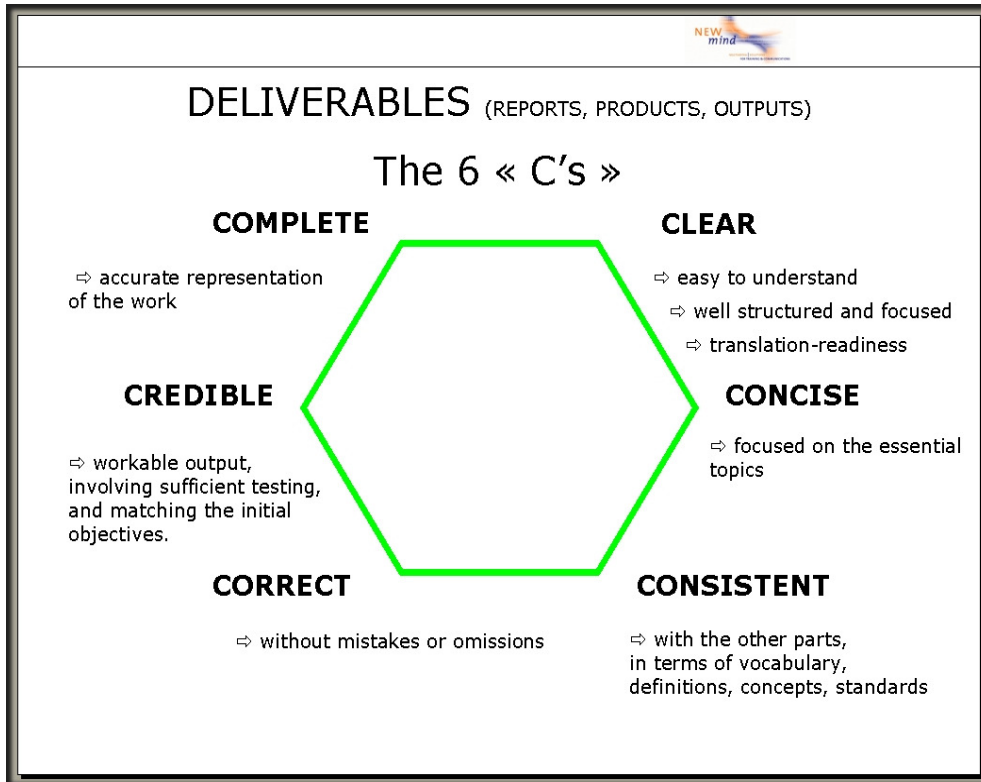
Risk assessment

The methodology requires that participants are aware of RISKS. Experience shows that risk is underestimated in most cases and that it requires concentration, imagination and even creativity to figure out "what could go wrong, what would be the impact, and what can be done to prevent it". Creativity is also required to work out in advance ways to mitigate potential risks.

Quality plan for deliverables: the 6 C's

- **Complete:** accurate representation of the work;
- **Clear:** easy to understand, well structured and focused, translation readiness;
- **Concise:** focused on the essential topics;
- **Consistent:** with the other parts, in terms of vocabulary, definitions, concepts, standards;
- **Correct:** without mistakes or omissions;
- **Credible:** workable output, involving sufficient testing, and covering the initial objectives.

The PQM team does not specialise in all of the domains mastered by the partners and often a self assessment of the deliverables using a consistent methodology is enough. On the other hand PQM will insist on a process which produces deliverables, which is a quality assurance behaviour and will lead the partners to reflect on built in controls.



example of deliverable analysis (this chart is produced for each deliverable, together with comments)

Case Studies

The 2 case studies show that the approach is adaptable to different environments. However all the features will not be used in all cases.

Case Study No. 1

The Team

- 7 partners in 3 countries (2 in eastern europe, one in western europe), different levels of expertise, 2 years project, 1 million euros.
- 100+ people involved at various stages
- objective: experience transfer (E-Learning development and deployment in Business Schools and SME's via local Chamber of Commerce)
- the project required technical and organisational changes at the installation locations.

Organisation

Dedicated project manager, supported by an external quality monitoring expert

The Challenge

- Adoption of the CSF discipline
- Identify KPI's and obtain a consensus: the partners have the tendency to present "soft" indicators
- Risk assessment and mitigation plans: it required imagination, what if ? at every step
- Actual evaluation/measurements

Case Study No. 2

The Team

5 partners in 5 countries: most of them private consultants
objective: help organisations with in house Corporate Universities to benchmark and position themselves with the help of a tool developed for the project

Organisation

Project Management -dedicated project manager, assisted by two external quality monitoring experts

The Challenge

Within the project process, every partner had to interview several well identified organisations, to convince them to take advantage of the tool and run a benchmarking exercise, encompassing an in depth analysis of their own achievement.

Some slippage happened in the early days of the project and the Project Manager realised that the portfolio of targets was too weak. The commitment of the targets to take part in the interviews and analysis was considered as the major CSF.

The quality team helped to secure the targets, challenged the WP leaders to have enough reserve candidates, helped to rhythm the sequence of actions, through frequent reminders and remoteconferences.

How to Choose an Independent Quality Project Management Team

Transparency – The Quality Team should be willing to be exposed to all phases of the project thus enabling it to fully understand the project's dynamics and objectives.

Ownership - External people able to understand the issues should be engaged as members of the Quality Team, but certainly not people who could compete with the work package leaders as subject matter experts. It is advised to select members able to take enough distance and have enough diplomacy to convince the work package leaders to build their own Quality Plan and own it.

Confidentiality - It might be advisable to draw up a confidentiality agreement with the Quality Team.

Sharing -There should be a preliminary briefing of the partners or work package leaders to ensure that the same definitions and same visions are shared.

Standards - For good communications, templates and/or agreed standard formats are absolutely essential. Make sure that the Quality Team provides the right balance between imposing formats and welcoming a variety of inputs.

Experience - The Quality Team should be able to show a broad experience in this type of work with case studies showing where the method has been applied.

Benefits

The suggested benefits of adopting independent Project Quality Management are:

- Questioning initial specifications and estimates at the outset
- Enhancing the focus and ensuring a constant outside presence, whatever the circumstances
- Providing an independent look by a neutral party
- Giving an opportunity to consult with an outside party on areas of confidentiality
- Providing a reminder to review progress in a systematic way
- Delivering a record of progress against KPIs and targets
- Providing material on the quality of a project for the funding authority both internal and external
- Adding a very high value due to its leverage for a small share of the project cost

Conclusion

If all project tasks are undertaken well and defined during the early stages of the project then there would be no reason to have an outside focus on quality. Sadly, however, this is not the case. Also in this economic climate one cannot afford financial risks due to poor quality. The boat must keep heading towards the shore, while taking into account the changing weather, sea conditions and hidden hazards. The captain must rely on a compass onboard but also on an observer from the harbour.

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