



# BEST PRACTICE IS A LIFELINE IN A **SINK OR SWIM ECONOMY**

Why hesitate to adopt best practice models asks Eddie Kilkelly, when a change of mindset and methodology could haul you clear of troubled water?

**W**hen the economy is growing, companies develop new products and services, increase headcount and open new offices.

With the recent economic decline, organisations have been buffeted by the combined winds of the credit crunch and the recession, they have had to restructure, reduce headcount, and exit from certain markets. How can management be sure they are following the most beneficial and profitable course of action, regardless of economic conditions? Without an

appropriate framework the quality and outcomes of decision-making is undermined.

Many claim that the organisation is too busy or resource-constrained. However, these models are all about managing the change and maximising the resources at the heart of every organisation. Now is exactly the right time to implement a best practice model, when the implementation of new frameworks and processes can be part of the overall process of change in response to the recession. However, it is important to select the model that best reflects the organisation's needs.

Three of the best known and most respected models are:

1. Managing Successful Programmes (MSP™), which comprises a set of principles and processes for managing business change.
2. PRINCE2® which is a process-based approach for project management and increasing efficiency (and the de facto standard for project management in the UK).
3. ITIL®, which outlines a best practice approach to the delivery of efficient operations in commercial IT services.

Contrary to common perceptions, there are very few mandatory expenses associated with implementing best practice. The models are detailed in reference books costing £60-£70 (for MSP™ and PRINCE2®), or £300 for the full series of books on ITIL®, which Version 3. An

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individual can apply the principles as soon as they have read the books, and the books can be circulated around a number of employees, increasing the return on investment.

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There may also be opportunity costs associated with a short term reduction in efficiency while individuals become used to new processes, but this will be outweighed by the longer term benefits post-implementation.

#### HOW BEST PRACTICE DELIVERS BENEFITS

Best practice models are built upon years of management experience of what works – and what does not – in project management or service delivery. In effect, the organisation can avoid the pitfalls that have caught others before them. In addition, the emphasis on documentation and continual improvement of processes enable the organisation to build up its own repository of shortcuts and handy hints that can be used to improve the delivery of future projects.

Best practice can help a commercial business focus on the activities that deliver the greatest benefit and financial contribution. Equally, it can help public sector organisations increase efficiencies and control costs – which is likely to become increasingly important as public sector budgets are cut. In fact, any organisation or individual can benefit from understanding how to work more efficiently and there is specific guidance on how each model may be applied to small, medium or large organisations. The latter is likely to utilise more aspects or processes of each method, with a greater degree of rigour.

However, if a smaller company is delivering a substantial project for a larger organisation, the more formal adoption of best practice methods can help it to work and communicate more effectively with its customer. It may even help to win the business in the first place. Accreditation enables smaller businesses to differentiate themselves in the marketplace as a more efficient business partner or supplier. Conversely, a larger organisation may decide not to apply full best practice to a smaller project.

#### GAINS THROUGH TRAINING

The headline processes of Best Practice models like MSP™, PRINCE2® and ITIL® mislead some managers to think they are



just common sense. While they adopt a common sense approach, the true value of these models lies in the integral frameworks and concepts that have been developed and honed over years of practical application. They can generally be customised to suit the particular needs and terminology of the organisation. If this is the case, it is useful to identify the external trainers or consultants, who can recommend or deliver high-quality, bespoke learning that will help embed the change.

It is important not to skimp on training as it increases the level of understanding and compliance. For example, the practice of 'train the trainer' delivers perfectly acceptable results for many learning topics, though organisations consistently find it difficult to take this approach with best practice training. It is such a complex, specialist subject that there is a large gulf between understanding the topic and being able to explain it to another. This is why so many organisations turn to external trainers. However it is important to work with accredited suppliers who have the correct experience and knowledge.

### CONSULTING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Organisations that believe employee training marks the end of the implementation process will not reap the full benefits. In reality, if the organisation is serious about using best practice to continually improve performance, the training is just part of the journey. An external consultant can review how the model has been applied and highlight how it can be tailored more effectively to specific needs.

Whether the economy is in growth or recession, we need to be effective in managing change and efficient in maximising the return from resources. Best practice approaches can deliver a rapid step change in business performance. To achieve the best results though, the organisation must adopt a three-stage comprehensive approach. Firstly, tailor the best practice to the organisation's own needs and terminology. Secondly, train the whole organisation in applying the model. Lastly, invest in ongoing consultancy to ensure the change is properly embedded. There is never an ideal time for fundamental change. But if not now, then when?

For further information about accreditation programmes visit <http://www.apmgroup.co.uk> and the Best Practice User Group is available at <http://www.usergroup.org.uk>

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## THE MAIN PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

Applied correctly, best practice models help the organisation to:

- 1** Focus on the right things – What are the business benefits of a particular course of action? Are we making the best use of resources or capacity? What delivers the biggest savings or best contribution?
- 2** Ensure the appropriate people are involved – Does the team contain the right skills to deliver the right tasks at the right time? Do individuals have the right technical skills to be effective in their role? Are we engaging with the right stakeholders to minimise risk and maximise the chances of success?
- 3** Adopt the correct approach – Are we applying the most up to date, best practice to ensure that projects or services are well structured, manageable, visible and well communicated?
- 4** Undertake regular reviews – Are we reviewing the project at the end of each stage to ensure that the project is on track and remains in the best interests of business?

## BEST PRACTICE

The search for best practice needn't be difficult, just follow some basic steps:

### STEP 1 Make the business case

Embedding best practice requires an investment of time, effort and cost. While not excessive, this still needs to be justified, just like any other business project.

### STEP 2 Engage with stakeholders

Use the business case drawn up in Step 1 to raise awareness of the method and its benefits among key decision makers.

### STEP 3 Map a plan

Have a structure for implementing best practice. If introducing more than one method, decide which should be introduced first. ITIL® should be first, if introduced into a stable business environment. Adopt PRICE2® or MSP™ first to address fundamental business change.

### STEP 4 Engage with the experts

Engage with external consultants, training companies, accrediting organisations like The APM group, and the Best Practice User Group, to make implementation easier.

### STEP 5 Define how best practice will affect each process

Specify how existing processes may need to change to comply. Best practice models can be highly customised at the practical application level.

### STEP 6 Start implementation

Users find it valuable to complete a generic, foundation level introduction to the best practice. This prepares them for the second stage of their training, the practical application to their jobs and processes, once the definition process is complete. Accelerating implementation in this way enables the organisation to reap the benefits more quickly.

### STEP 7 Review the programme regularly

Measure the success of the implementation against the original business case, so users and stakeholders can identify the benefits of retaining the model.