

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUSTAINABLE PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES



EXPERIENCED PROGRAMME MANAGER AND APM FELLOW DAVID STEWARD CHPP IS ON A MISSION TO DEVELOP PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES TO ACHIEVE NET ZERO. HERE'S HIS PLAN FOR HOW IT COULD BE DONE.

Project professionals are at the vanguard of delivering sustainable development goals. However, to achieve maximum impact, projects must integrate the full value chain and employ processes that are also sustainable. If project professionals are going to step up to help meet ambitious net-zero targets, then a clear blueprint is needed, and that starts with implementing sustainability in everything we do.

Sustainability is ultimately good for business. It is also an essential part of our ethical duty as project professionals. The challenge is to integrate sustainable processes into the project life cycle.

Put sustainability at the heart of the system

Sustainability requires organisational responsibility to ensure that the products, outcomes and benefits of all projects are sustainable over their life cycle. All members of a project team have an influence on sustainability and may therefore be expected to think creatively and act responsibly in their day-to-day work. Project professionals have a responsibility to ensure that their work minimises environmental impact or, ideally, positively affects ongoing sustainability.

If project outcomes are defined to be sustainable, the products and



processes that engage significant resources must also be contained or integrated into our project processes. There is significant reliance on technology to solve our escalating resource needs, but this alone is unlikely to resolve the shortfall in the near term.

Guidance for professionals

Currently, only limited guidance is available to the project professional. The *APM Body of Knowledge 7th edition* defines the three pillars for sustainability, namely economic, social and environmental. This is represented by a Venn diagram that adds a fourth dimension, termed administrative. However, the model defines little in terms of the process or controls that are needed. Dr Martin Barnes, one of APM's founding members, introduced the concept of the triple constraint (time, cost, quality). Perhaps the Barnes triangle should now include a further dimension, or alternatively 'quality' could be defined in terms of sustainable outcomes and biodiversity.

In 1994, John Elkington coined the term 'triple bottom line', defined as people, planet and profit, in his vision for 21st-century business. This has been further expanded by various authors. However, the GPM global network established its Projects Integrating Sustainable Methods (PRISM) approach nearly a decade ago to help projects align to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

GPM created the GPM P5 Standard for Sustainability in Project Management, which includes processes for sustainable delivery and a template for a sustainability management plan. This standard has added two perspectives to the three pillars, namely sustainable project delivery (i.e. project processes) and sustainable project deliverable (i.e. product impact). This defines the five 'Ps' as people, planet, profit, product and processes. Profit can be substituted with prosperity; however, the three main pillars remain similar.

Another commonly used tool at the outset of a project is PESTEL: political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal. This approach contains the three pillars of sustainability, namely, economic, social and environmental, but also highlights the need to understand the legal impacts, which could be interpreted as the standards, laws and governance by which a project must abide to support sustainability.

Embed sustainability into governance

Sustainable project management processes and practices will be determined by the governance set in place through project control systems. The project management office (PMO) can configure sustainability into the tools it uses to monitor and manage project performance and must be embedded into the project control reporting cycle. Richard Samworth, in a 2020 APM blog, states that: "Financial measures within project management processes and practices, for example earned value, are well understood and documented. Sustainability measures do not enjoy the same level of maturity however." We need to establish a method to measure sustainability of the processes to get us to the end goal. These arguably should be of equal importance as financial or be converted to value. Samworth suggests defining sustainability as a project tolerance and embedding sustainability in the business case. Project management tools could be configured to measure and manage sustainability tolerances and make small changes to the way we work.

The challenge for project organisations, including the PMO, is to develop and apply consistent and meaningful sustainability tolerances to all their projects. This highlights further the need to embed sustainability into corporate governance to control the process. Sustainability and

7 IMMEDIATE ACTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE PROJECT PROCESSES

- 1 A systemic approach is needed to understand and establish the root cause of sustainability impacts using techniques such as Ishikawa diagrams.
- 2 Consider the whole value chain. Use sustainability measures when establishing procurement, partnering and collaboration. Organisational governance has a major impact on sustainability.
- 3 Consider a root-and-branch review of how an organisation is structured – its hierarchy, roles and responsibilities. Project management frameworks may require an overhaul to look at more appropriate life cycle models. Gate reviews should incorporate sustainability impacts and configure sustainability in project management tools.
- 4 Biodiversity should be considered an asset, no matter what the project, so objectives must be defined to achieve or improve biodiversity targets embedded into processes.
- 5 Raise the bar. All project team staff must receive an appropriate level of training to ensure they fully understand the project impact on sustainability.
- 6 Quick wins should include minimising travel through use of virtual meetings, flexible working patterns and locations, and less use of office resources and energy consumption.
- 7 Hold a 'sustainability moment' at the start of each meeting to promote sustainable thinking.



Process	Action plan	RAG now	RAG target
Project life cycle	Tailor the project life cycle model to support sustainability and the value chain, ensuring it is efficient and effective.	■ Amber	■ Green
Risk and opportunities	Identify sustainability risks and opportunities, quantify, and set up risk action plans.	■ Red	■ Green
KPIs	Include sustainability targets that measure the effectiveness of the processes.	■ Red	■ Amber
Procurement	Apply favourable weighting for suppliers with a good sustainability culture. Evaluate the full value chain.	■ Amber	■ Green
Milestones	Use sustainability goals as milestones as well as the usual time/cost bases.	■ Red	■ Green
Progressive assurance	Set realistic, achievable assurance levels to optimise resources and minimise rework.	■ Red	■ Amber
Reporting	Rationalise the need for face-to-face meetings; optimise use of virtual meeting tools and locations.	■ Amber	■ Green
Change management	Evaluate sustainability impact as part of the process; minimise changes where feasible. Consider a better level of delegation as part of the process.	■ Red	■ Amber
CPI	Integrate sustainable benefits into cost performance measurements.	■ Red	■ Amber
Collaborative working	Use a collaborative approach with suppliers and stakeholders to identify and maximise sustainability opportunities throughout the value chain.	■ Amber	■ Green

biodiversity should be integral to the design process and reviewed at each stage gate. Where targets are projected to be missed, then it must be possible to redefine the goals with the sponsor and stakeholders to ensure the outcome is sustainable. This suggests the need for more flexibility on scope and a collaborative approach with the client and stakeholders.

Sustainable methodologies

According to the International Project Management Association, achieving sustainability requires project managers to apply systemic thinking, taking various interrelationships and reciprocal transactions into account. To analyse the project, its context and all influencing factors and their interrelations, a variety of methods and tools are available, including:

- context analysis, PESTEL analysis, functional flow analysis;
- interrelationship and Ishikawa diagrams, system dynamics analysis; and
- scenario planning.

PESTEL has some merit, in that it reinforces the three pillars of sustainability and introduces a fourth. This could be interpreted as standards, administration or governance. This also supports the APM model in the *Body of Knowledge*.

It is, however, clear that a systematic viewpoint is important, and a simple cause-and-effect diagram (Ishikawa) could shed light on other controlling factors. This approach is consistent with the fourth pillar and suggests that if project processes are to be more sustainable, it should be embedded within corporate governance. Investigation of an organisation and its governance will undoubtedly reveal the need for changes to the framework for project processes and life cycle models.

Measuring the sustainability of project processes

To measure the impact of the project process, it is possible to establish tolerances using a simple RAG status chart. Elements

of the process can be assessed qualitatively for its current sustainability status as either red, amber or green. By defining an action plan for improvement, a target RAG can be forecast. This is similar to a risk and opportunity matrix – an example is shown in the table above.

RAG assessment of the project processes can be developed over the life of the project and reviewed periodically like many other controls and reporting. Along with a risk and opportunity plan, a sustainability opportunity plan should be produced. As part of the blueprint, a framework should be established for managing a sustainable approach to project delivery that takes a systemic approach and embeds the ideas discussed into the project governance of the organisation or programme/portfolio.

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