MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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МОНИТОРИНГ, ОЦЕНКА И ОСИГУРЯВАНЕ НА КАЧЕСТВОТО В УПРАВЛЕНИЕТО НА ПРОЕКТИ

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Abstract: To deliver successful project management, specific processes need to be performed in all project phases – initiation, planning, execution, and closure. This paper explores the correlation between successful project management and the implementation of three main processes – monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance. On the basis of practical research and application of expert assessments inquiry, involving 16 experts with proven expertise and long-term experience in project management, the article examines the strategic importance of the three processes. Furthermore, practical recommendations for their implementation are formulated as vital prerequisites for successful projects that lead to organisational competitiveness, improvement of performance, and progressive growth.

Keywords: project management, monitoring, evaluation, quality assurance

Резюме: За да се реализира успешно управление на проекти, е необходимо да се изпълнят специфични процеси, присъстващи във всички проектни фази – иницииране, планиране, изпълнение и приключване. Настоящата публикация разглежда взаимовръзката между успешното управление на проекти и изпълнението на три основни процеса – мониторинг, оценка и осигуряване на качеството. На базата на практически изследвания и прилагане на метода на експертна оценка с участието на 16 експерти с доказан опит в управлението на проекти, е разгледано подробно стратегическото значение на трите процеса. Освен това, публикацията предлага и практически препоръки за тяхното изпълнение, формулирани като жизненоважни предпоставки за реализирането на успешни проекти, които осигуряват конкурентоспособност, подобряване на ефективността и прогресивен растеж.

Ключови думи: управление на проекти, мониторинг, оценка, осигуряване на качеството
1. Introduction

In the current dynamic and highly competitive business environment, organisations have shifted their focus towards elaboration and implementation of strategies for successful project management, which turns out to be a prerequisite for sustainability, long-term results, and high performance.

Project management principles and methodologies are becoming a significant part of traditional management of business organisations as key enablers for transforming business strategy into manageable actions, which deliver tangible benefits (Office of Government Commerce, 2006). Projects not only drive innovation and strategic development, but also have a direct effect on profits. Their implementation develops the organisation’s technical capabilities and builds experience base for future business growth (Kerzner, 2017).

But managing a project always means facing a lot of challenging issues and requires considerable efforts, including efficient planning, risk management, provision of informed decision-making about company resources, monitoring, and measurement of performance results. To deliver successful project management, specific processes need to be performed in all project phases – initiation, planning, execution, and closure. These processes become a foundation base for all kind of projects, regardless of their type, scale, or industry of implementation. Three main framework actions are considered as necessary conditions for project success – monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance.

Each of them could be determined as “Project Manager’s friend and ally”. This means that if the business organisation is capable of their successful implementation, its projects will succeed in meeting the preliminary defined objectives within the planned time and cost. On the other hand, initiating and managing a project without the presence and proper realisation of any of the three processes, usually leads to failure.

This paper explores the correlation between successful project management and the implementation of three main processes, performed in every single project phase – monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance. On the basis of practical research and application of expert assessments inquiry, involving 16 experts with proven expertise and long-term experience in project management, the article examines the strategic importance of the three processes. Furthermore, practical recommendations for their implementation are formulated as vital prerequisites for successful projects that lead to organisational competitiveness, improvement of performance, and progressive growth.

2. Conceptual Framework

Within the conceptual framework of project management and its principles, a variety of definitions need to be clarified, specifically definitions concerning the correlation between project management, monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance, as well as their integration as a competitive advantage for successful performance of business organisations.
The PMBOK gives the classical definition for project management as “application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to achieve project requirements. Project management is accomplished through the application and integration of the project management processes of initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing” (Project Management Institute, 2000). Another definition suggests that project management process includes scientific application of modern tools and techniques in different project stages to produce desirable outputs in accordance with the preliminary determined objectives within the constraints of time and cost (Nagarajan, 2004). According to Dennis Lock the purpose is to predict as many of the dangers and problems as possible and to plan, organise and control activities, starting before any resource is committed and must continue until all work is finished (Lock, 2007).

The common characteristic in all these definitions is the presence of a controlling element, as the development starts with determination of specific objectives, continues with execution of processes, and concludes with producing of results, positive or negative according to the quality and effectiveness of management. Without controlling, the management itself cannot be performed successfully, as controlling is also defined as a supporting subsystem that coordinates planning, implementation, and measurement of achieved outputs.

In the context of project management, the controlling processes are designed in three main frameworks – monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance.

To monitor means to check, track, or control a process on a general basis. Applied to project management, monitoring aims to keep track of the progress, the project implementation, the management of resources, and check whether what is being achieved is within the framework of preliminary defined aims and objectives (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2000). Monitoring is considered as a continuing process with the purpose to “track all major project variables – cost, time, scope, and quality of deliverables” (Gudda, 2011).

The benefits of monitoring in project management are related to a continuous control of the status according to quantitative and qualitative indicators, usually preliminary determined during the planning phase of the project implementation. Based on these metrics, the variables are being measured, analysing comparatively via application of certain tools and methods the achievement of predefined goals. (Figure 1)

Monitoring is crucial for project control, as it identifies any gaps in performance and alerts the management as to what the project implementation weak points are. As monitoring is conducted, amendments can be made in an effective and timely manner to steer the project towards successful achievement of all goals, objectives, and set targets. Monitoring can be focused on several separate areas in the context of project implementation: financial monitoring, performance monitoring, and outputs monitoring. This approach aims to ensure a full and holistic monitoring overview of the processes, such as when and where activities occur, who delivers them, and what the achieved results are. Moreover, the combinations between the factors ensures that the overview of the project encompasses all aspects of project progress and corrects any possible deviations between set targets and actual performance.
Another activity that is performed in parallel with monitoring is evaluation. It could be carried out on several levels: internal level (project and organisation), content level (subject area), external level (impact, exploitation, sustainability) (Kasamska, 2017).

On the one hand, it is used as a controlling process, aiming to question on an ongoing basis what the project team is trying to achieve and how they are performing compared to set goals. In this context evaluation is used to understand what is being done in the project in depth and improve its performance in various manners, ensuring that decision-making is informed by the best available evidence. In this case, evaluation provides tracking, identifies potential risks that contribute to the project risk management strategy, as well as facilitates cost management, showing full visibility of the budget and expenditures (Koleva & Kasamska, 2017).

On the other hand, evaluation is implemented as a final review assessment of the project. On the basis of performed project evaluation, business organisations determine the relative success or failure, as well as the lessons learnt, meaning what could have been done differently (Thomas, 2015).

While monitoring focuses primarily on understanding if and where gaps between targets and actual performance lie, evaluation is centred around the reasons behind the existence of the gaps, as well as options for ongoing optimisation of not only the activities, but the targets set for the project. In cases in which the project is obviously and steadfastly moving ahead of schedule and above the set targets, it could be deemed that the targets could be set higher in order to fully exploit its potential.

The third process applied to ensure successful project management is quality assurance. It is implemented in all kinds of projects irrespective of their specific design, activities, or industry, as “it is not possible to produce a desired quality and maintain it consistently over a length of period unless adequate control is exercised at every stage” (Jain, 2001). Quality assurance is
focused on the processes implemented in the project. It ensures they are effectively executed to produce quality project outputs. Quality assurance involves following standards, continuously improving project work, and correcting project deviations. When implementing quality assurance, several aspects need to be defined, including the expected level to be reached, qualitative indicators to measure the real level achieved per outcome planned, time-frame for assessing quality, mitigation actions, roles and responsibilities of project team members. The benefit is meeting the project requirements, which ensures compliance with its strategic goals and regulations in the most cost- and resource-efficient manner, creating opportunities for expansion and improvement of performance.

After clarifying the main definitions, the current paper will focus on exploring the significance of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance, as well as on applying their principles as practical recommendations for effective project management, providing high business performance, sustainable growth, and long-term competitive advantage.

3. Strategic Importance of Monitoring, Evaluation and Quality Assurance for Project Management

Through an expert assessments inquiry, the current paper explores the opinions of practitioners in the field – taking the views of 16 experts with long-term experience in project management and specifically on the topics of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance.

The created questionnaire was distributed online for convenience and time efficiency and received 16 responses, 86.7% of which are from managers with more than 1 year of project management experience (and 26.7% of which – from managers with more than 10 years of project management experience), like the graph details below. Further, almost 60% of responders have worked on the management of more than 10 projects in their work experience (also available in a graph below).

Figure 2. Experience in Project Management of Respondents, Source:
The questionnaire therefore shows the opinions of experts in the fields, who have time-tested knowledge of the methods and tools of project management, relevant to this topic. All participants have noted that they have experience specifically with monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance.

The next questions of the questionnaire focused on the importance of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance, as well as specific methods and tools, which the experts believe are the most efficient, the most valuable and note-worthy.

For monitoring, the experts claim that it is “crucial for the timely and continuous execution of the project activities and the collaboration between partners.” Another response to the question noted that monitoring “secures timely implementation of the project and its compliance with the initial parameters of the project's proposal”, as well as “allows to keep track and to deal with current/past issues on the road.” and “ensures smooth implementation of any project”. As the experts obviously find monitoring as crucial for project management, they have also suggested appropriate tools and methods with which to apply monitoring in projects. The tool most often cited is simply constant communication and feedback from team members and partners, as to see the progress in their work. Other often mentioned tools and techniques include:

- Planning;
- Process (flow of work through a department, personal observation, and feedback from the employees doing the work, very connected to the behavioural monitoring) and Progress management (comparison with the project design indicators and implementation activities' outputs);
- Quantitative (Solid statistics, Key Performance Indicators) and qualitative monitoring of behaviour and results;
- Gantt charts and milestones;
- Sending reminders and guidelines in time;
- Questionnaires and surveys, monitoring forms, and
- Review of documents.

_Evaluation_, experts identify as a “substantial element of project management”, agreeing that it is a must-have element for the project management toolkit. Even though evaluation techniques were identified as usually being “custom-made and based on the project activities”, experts did identify some tools and methods for evaluation, which are applicable to most projects:
- Creating a general template for evaluation at all levels – work-related, team-related, etc. and setting up monthly meetings specifically for those evaluations;
- Checklists, interviews, questionnaires, observation, user diaries/logs, concept maps, group or community dialogue, scratch maps;
- Evaluation matrix – developed and followed throughout the project;
- Involvement of an external evaluator to ensure objectivity;
- Trend analysis – for long-term or new projects – with the purpose to assure brand position of the organisation;
- Earned value analysis – which compares the amount of planned work to what was accomplished used weekly in staff meetings;
- Surveys; reviewing documents with respect to the requirements, including objectives of the documents set in the project plan;
- Results mapping, and
- Impact assessment.

Finally, for _quality assurance_ the thoughts related to its importance note that this is a process, which increases productivity and impact, reduces risk, and keeps standards high. Further, one respondent notes that “quality assurance is there to guarantee that the project outputs will meet both the criteria set during the project design phase and the needs of the target group/client”. To meet the need of high-level quality assurance, the following tools were suggested by the experts in the field:
- Checklists, audits, process and progress reviews, benchmarks;
- Review of documents and outputs;
- Gathering feedback from experts on the produced deliverables;
- Peer-review;
- Timely delivery of feedback;
- Multidisciplinary approach;
- Cause and effect diagrams, flowcharts, control charts, scatter diagrams;
- Key Performance Indicators, Value Analysis, Quality Control.
In summary, the experts clearly and overwhelmingly believe in the importance of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance as parts of project management.

This practical questionnaire brings light to the opinions of practitioners and experts in the field of project management. The extracted know-how, together with the previously outlined literature review are the basis of the following implications and recommendations.

4. Implications and recommendations

In the field of project management, the processes of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance are many times seen by practitioners as ones that are done once or periodically, at strictly set times and by strictly set people. However, an implication from the research conducted for this paper, shows that these all are ongoing processes, which start before the beginning of a project and accompany the whole life cycle.

From the preparation of the project and planning indicators, means of control, monitoring, and evaluation, all the way through the end, the continuous nature of these project management processes is what defines them as valuable and what brings them to the forefront to project management experts.

Moreover, from the conducted research, it could be recommended that most project management experts have a varying and flexible set of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance tools, which they utilise in different combinations and at diverse times throughout the project lifecycle. Therefore, when planning and developing a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Quality Assurance Strategy, any Project Manager should consider how these techniques will interact with each other, how they will alter the effectiveness and efficiency of other processes, as well as how will span over time to complement each other best. Increasing the number of applied tools for these processes may not always be optimal, however, combining the tools in innovative ways can bring unexpected results, which can improve quality, performance, and efficiency of the work performed within the project implementation.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the project management processes of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance. Through an extensive literature review, which was used to clarify the main definitions, the current paper focused on exploring the significance of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance, as well as on practical application of these processes’ tools through the lens of experience of 16 project managers with significant expertise in using monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance for effective project management, providing high business performance, sustainable growth, and long-term competitive advantage.
The research and following conclusions point to the complex and ongoing, recurring nature of all discussed processes. Important for the practical implications of the recommendations listed above, is the attention to that exact complexity and the hidden depths, which define project management as a whole, as well as these processes in particular.

Further research into the topic could include the differences in impact on business performance based on the variance in frequency and mix of monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance techniques in different fields.

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