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How can we slow down the flood of projects that are poisoning the lives of our employees?

By Raphaël H. Cohen

Employees complain of being inundated with time-consuming projects whose relevance is not always demonstrated. The new ISO 56007 standard recommends an innovative yet pragmatic approach to better calibrate projects and retain only those that are worth launching.

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It's the same story in every company: too many overlapping projects, and not enough time to carry them out in addition to routine work. The result is projects that drag on and on, and sometimes never end, which is often a source of stress and wasted resources.

Researchers have measured the performance of project management in organizations, with a damning result: around 30% of projects initiated are interrupted along the way,

30% last longer than planned, and 50% cost more than budgeted. Ultimately, only 12% are completed on time and on budget.

__In conclusion, 88% of projects fall short of expectations or fail. When it comes to innovation projects, the scenario is even more discouraging.__

This appalling performance reflects both a poor calibration of the effort required and a poor assessment of the real interest of the project, even before it is launched. The solution lies in better calibration during the pre-project phase.

A new ISO standard with innovative solutions

This very issue is at the heart of the new [ISO 56007](#) standard "*Tools and Methods for Opportunity and Idea Management - Guide*", adopted by 42 countries and published on August 17, 2023. **This non-binding, non-certifying standard is the fruit of the collaborative work of international experts,** who have shared their experience and knowledge of pre-project stage to recommend a set of best practices and tools **designed to optimize project selection.**

The standard covers all the upstream phases of innovation, from the identification of ideas to the decision to allocate resources to launching a concept. **Here we only present a selection of tools, recommended by this standard, which contribute to a better calibration of projects.** They have the advantage of applying to all projects, not just innovative ones.

Cataloguing uncertainties/unknowns for better upstream calibration

One of ISO 56007's innovative approaches is the [crucial distinction](#) between uncertainties and risks. Whereas risks are associated with triggering events whose occurrence is uncertain, uncertainties express deficits in information/knowledge, or unverified assumptions.

The standard recommends cataloguing uncertainties at an early stage in a project. This inventory makes it possible to realistically assess the resources required to resolve these uncertainties, thus reducing the possibility of slippage and its consequences: loss of time and money. As this crucial distinction between risks and uncertainties is rarely made, the inventory of uncertainties is often omitted. **This lack of visibility of blind spots explains the poor performance of most projects.**

To guide companies in this process, **ISO 56007 suggests two complementary methods in its Annex B.** The first is based on the [IpOp model](#) (see ISO 56007 annexes B5 and B6), a structured process that guides project managers in identifying and managing uncertainties (the terminology of the IpOp model is sometimes different from that of ISO 56007: to avoid confusion with the uncertainty inherent in risks, "uncertainties" resulting from a lack of information or knowledge are called "unknowns" in the IpOp model). The second offers traditional uncertainty checklists

(see annex ISO 56007 B2 to B4), which are used to check that the critical aspects of the project have been taken into account.

Drawing on Paul Valéry's lucid observation **that "There is worse than false, it is the mixture of true and false"**, ISO 56007 encourages a clear distinction between verified and unverified information. The IpOp model has been designed precisely for those who want to operationalize this fundamental distinction, preventing decision-makers from falling into the trap, however unintentional, of mixing "true" and "false". **To make things easier for project managers,** the optional [IpOp Tools](#) software enables them to highlight, in a way that is highly visible to decision-makers, what has not been verified. Since they are much better equipped to distinguish between what is true and what is false, decision-makers are much better able to assess the blind spots in the projects they are asked to approve.

Explain project selection criteria

Apart from the miscalibration of unknowns, which puts projects at a disadvantage, it is extremely rare for decision-makers to use a complete checklist to select projects. **It is even rarer that this checklist, listing project selection criteria, is published and therefore known to those presenting projects to their management.** They are therefore unable to prepare themselves accordingly.

To fill this gap, ISO 56007 recommends that decision-makers define a standard checklist, complete with decision criteria, which their organization should use rigorously and transparently. As a source of inspiration, the standard provides a series of selection criteria. These are supplemented in Appendix C4 of the standard by an example of a tried-and-tested [tool: the IpOp Model decision tree.](#)

Standardize project presentation

Once the decision criteria have been established for each organization, **it becomes possible to define a standard project presentation template that precisely matches the selection criteria chosen by the organization.** With a standardized presentation, projects become comparable. This enables decision-makers to select the most relevant projects more rigorously.

ISO 56007 also offers an innovative alternative to the traditional business plan: the *Concept Case*, which corresponds to the Opportunity Case of the IpOp Model. Unlike the traditional business plan, which has a different architecture, the Concept/Opportunity Case concentrates on justifying the project in terms of management's decision criteria, relegating detailed implementation planning to a separate document.

As decision-makers are not interested in debatable implementation details, this separation of rationale and plan, which makes project presentation more concise and focused, enables them to focus on the essentials.

A major impact on project governance

Implementing the recommendations of ISO 56007 has profound implications for project governance within organizations. **It leads to a more rigorous selection of projects.** Fewer projects mean a lighter workload for teams, combined with a better allocation of resources. **This also leads to more efficient use of human and financial capital.**

The ISO 56007 standard, whose implementation is facilitated by the IpOp model, offers a robust framework for improving project and innovation governance in organizations. **This standard does not seek to impose a binding formalism like certifying standards, but rather to recommend practical tools that have proved their worth in improving project selection.** Thanks to the recommendations of ISO 56007, companies can not only improve the success rate of their projects, but also foster a more serene and productive working environment for their employees, who are freed from the poorly calibrated projects that overwhelm them.

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