



British Council

PRINCE2® 2009 PILOT CASE STUDY

By Sarah Chambers, Head of Programme Management, Global Information Systems

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Global Information Systems Programme Management team at the British Council has used PRINCE2 2009 to help deliver technical change in many countries around the world. Communication and sharing of information between the UK and other countries is very important to the organisation and they need the robust structure offered by PRINCE2 to help deliver projects in a challenging environment.
- The new Directing manual is very useful for project governance – it gives a good starting point and checklist for each project, and defines areas of responsibility very clearly. There is also clear practical advice on the impact of following good practice in running project boards.
- PRINCE2 gives the Programme Management team the confidence of a reliable authority because it is used widely in the public sector and is recognised as Best Practice. This saves discussion about the best way of managing projects and moves the discussion on to the best way of applying good practice to the particular project being delivered.
- The updated guidance is now more practical with useful examples, using terminology the whole organisation can understand. The new guidelines on benefits management and links between programme and project management have been useful in putting project management in a business context.

Context and background about the British Council

Celebrating 75 years in 2009, the British Council is the UK's international organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations. The British Council works in over 100 countries worldwide to build engagement and trust for the UK through the exchange of knowledge and ideas between people. Areas of work include the arts, education, science, sport and governance and in 2009 over 128 million people were involved in these areas of work. The British Council is a non-political organisation which operates at arm's length from government. Total turnover in 2007/8 was £565 million, of which grant-in-aid from the British government was £197 million.

Sarah Chambers manages the Global Information Systems Programme Management team which delivers change programmes and projects to support the work of the British Council. Communication and information sharing between the UK and other countries and regions is very important in an organisation whose mission is to facilitate long term cultural relationships. The British Council has over 250 offices including a number of small offices in developing countries, some large offices with English Teaching centres as well as a suite of online communities.

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Specific environment using PRINCE2

The Global IS team delivers many programmes and projects involving large scale technical change on a common infrastructure around the world. PRINCE2 is used because it provides the rigour that's needed when the team is updating systems in different regions and time zones. The robust structure of the method limits risks and the team makes good use of the lessons learned principles. When projects are rolled out around the world a careful analysis of what happened previously is always considered. Sarah and her team find the staged approach of PRINCE2 is helpful, particularly in giving control and decision points for stakeholders to take stock of issues and agree how to move on.

Why and how PRINCE2 is used

The principles of PRINCE2 are widely used at the British Council with core templates and guidance available on the corporate intranet from the Programme Support Office, the British Council's Centre of Excellence. PRINCE2 is used more rigorously by this Programme Management team than other parts of the British Council, due to the difficulties in juggling resources and the need to make sure that expensive technical investment gives the best value for money. The Programme Support Office was keen for the organisation to get involved in pilots of the updated version of PRINCE2 that were taking place and they suggested to Sarah that her team should take part.

All project managers in the Global IS team are trained in PRINCE2. A core set of PRINCE2 templates is used rigorously to ensure that aims, objectives and assumptions are clear and risks are monitored and managed. Key documents undergo a peer review process by other members of the team. This ensures not only that the project is well set-up but also allows people not working on that specific project to have an understanding of another area of the team's work. Use of the standard PRINCE2 templates and method come in handy if a project manager has to be replaced, or for new team members. Changes can be made with minimum delay and disruption and team members can be more easily replaced by other project managers with a PRINCE2 background.

PRINCE2 helps the team identify the reasonable deliverables of the project. Sarah says that in a big public sector organisation it is important to set expectations from the start. Mistakes can be expensive for changes that are implemented around the world and misunderstandings can be difficult to manage.

The Global IS team has made most use of the new Directing manual's guidance for the Project Board as this is something that was not previously available in this format. It explains the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders clearly and gives some good practical advice on supporting the project manager effectively and getting good value from the project. The checklist for senior management has been found to be very useful in setting out what their roles encompass. "This kind of guidance provides clarity at the outset and brings a clear perspective to effective decision making," Sarah said.

Another positive outcome from using the new version of PRINCE2 is that it has helped to free the project board to concentrate on the business case and benefits, getting less involved in the detailed work unless an issue is escalated. Sarah reports that it is also good for resource planning – for example better control gives a more reliable schedule of work and particularly assists in knowing when project managers will be free when projects have finished.

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Additionally, PRINCE2 acts as a reliable authority because it is used widely in the public sector and is recognised as Best Practice. If a specific action is questioned, the team can be confident in explaining why something is done that way because they are using a tried and tested method. Having said this, there is a good emphasis in the new manuals on how to adapt the method so that smaller lower risk projects are not hampered by too much paperwork while still retaining structure and control.

The limits of the method

The Global IS team found that in the earlier version of PRINCE2 there was a lot of technical detail and this meant it was difficult to get directors inspired by the method, which was viewed as bureaucratic. Although the new manuals also contain lots of information the format now makes it easier for senior managers and project managers to engage with.

Sarah's team found the sub components included in the earlier version of the manual to be too much information. Some of the detail was also seen as being cumbersome, particularly for the smaller projects. There was limited guidance on how to tailor the approach and this was sometimes difficult for new team members to assess.

The British Council also found that some of their able and competent project managers found it difficult to implement PRINCE2 without backing from their senior stakeholders – so as an SRO Sarah faced a challenge to demonstrate how the method benefitted the organisation.

How did you use the new version?

Project boards for a range of projects across the organisation have been taken through the new version in some detail. Management teams have had high level briefings to clarify governance on project delivery. "It was sometimes difficult to get senior stakeholders engaged before, but now the manual is written in business language they can understand," Sarah said.

Different project managers explored different parts of the new guidance depending on the different stages of their project at the time. The aim was to gather as much diverse feedback as possible. The outcome of the feedback was very positive and was reviewed at a team event where some work was done on assessing areas for improvement in the team's processes and standards.

The method is now regarded as having a more practical approach. The language, examples, and presentation is considered to be much better. There is less about the theory and more about the practice. There also a much greater focus on benefits, an area that Global IS and the Programme Support Office have been working on over the past couple of years. The inclusion of specific guidance on benefits that ties in with 'Managing Successful Programmes' (MSP) and the British Council's own organisational priorities has given the new version wider appeal across the organisation.

Advice to organisations wanting to use PRINCE2 for the first time

Sarah's advice for organisations wanting to use PRINCE2 is to invest upfront – it will save a lot of time in the end and you'll have more chance of a successful outcome. Also, don't panic if you don't see the benefits of PRINCE2 immediately, experience and use of lessons learned will mean that a team continues to improve their delivery with each new set of projects.

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About Sarah Chambers

Sarah Chambers is Head of Programme Management in the Global Information Systems department at the British Council. She has worked in IT for 20 years, starting as an Analyst Programmer at ICI then moving to a project management role in a small software house. Since joining the British Council she specialised in project and programme management, working to deliver their first Web Services, several Financial Systems projects (supporting postgraduate student programmes and client-sponsored development projects) and various IT change initiatives. As a Project Manager, Sarah became convinced that success in project management needed more than a natural aptitude and undertook postgraduate studies in Business IT with a major component in project management. She started a departmental trial of PRINCE2 when it was first launched, as a way to manage the complex and varied stakeholder input to these projects with requirements from offices around the world. More recently she spent two years in a Programme Management Office (PMO) role before moving to Programme Management. Her current role has an increasing focus on portfolio management, investment appraisal and benefits management to ensure that a good range of projects is selected to provide the best business benefits.

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