

# Project management standards – Diffusion and application in Germany and Switzerland

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## Abstract

This paper comprises the results of an empirical study on the use of project management standards in German and Swiss enterprises. This research points out the expectations, the realized benefits and – more importantly – the major differences between them. For this purpose, it compares ex-ante expectations of their respective users and compares them in turn with ex-post realised benefits. The results of the study are based on the statements made by 234 participants in an online survey conducted in 2006. Generally, standards are only rarely used in project management in Germany and Switzerland. And if standards are indeed used, they are rarely used “as is”; in fact they are usually modified or adapted before application. Moreover, it can be observed that most participants expect consistent communication in the projects and better process quality to be the primary benefits of standards. However, it is often impossible to realize expected benefits. Benefits are offset by deficiencies, such as the lack of acceptance, administrative overheads and associated costs. Based on the results of this study, recommendations for standard-giving organizations and standard-applying organizations are put forward.

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## 1. Introduction

Project management standards are increasingly regarded as an important building block in modern organizations. Among other benefits, they are expected to help harmonize divergent terminology and different understandings of processes and methods. As a result, stakeholders expect corresponding frictions to be overcome or at least reduced.

A wide range of standards is currently available for project management, issued by diverse organizational bodies, such as the large national and international official standard-giving organizations (e.g. ISO, ANSI), project

management associations all over the world and other associations that promote industry-specific standards.

Due to this diversity, the selection and application of PM standards is a complex problem for organizations. The challenge is to identify a standard that

- is widely used among project partners and stakeholders so that a *consensus* can be established,
- is applicable for this type of organization and the type of projects so that it can be implemented *efficiently* and
- unfolds real benefits for the organization so that it is *effective*.

Up to now, little research has been carried out into the actual diffusion of project management standards in contemporary organizations [3].

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent to which project management standards are used in Germany

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and Switzerland, whether standards meet the expectations of their respective users and which major differences exist between the expectations and benefits gained from the application of standards. The results are used to derive recommendations for standard-giving organizations (SGO) and standard-applying organizations (SAO).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 contains a more precise definition of the term ‘standard’. It also presents a classification of such standards, elucidating the scope of this article. Section 3 contains the hypothesis underlying this paper, whereas Section 4 describes the overall research process by outlining the research setting and the methodology. Section 5 covers the design of the questionnaire and the corresponding operationalization of variables. Section 6 presents the major findings of the survey, and Section 7 draws conclusions from these findings. At the end of this article, limitations and need for further research are outlined.

## 2. Conceptual and terminological foundation

### 2.1. Standards

The term ‘standard’ has its origin in Middle English and in Old French, and has found its way into conventional language use [1]. For the purpose of this article, we follow an ISO definition that defines a standard as a “*document established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context*” [2]. Over 1000 SGOs worldwide have developed over half a million standards [1]. Organizations significant to the development of project management in Germany and Switzerland are the American National Standardization Institute (ANSI), the International Standardization Organization (ISO), the Swiss Association for Standardization (SAS) and the German Institute for Standardization (DIN). Furthermore, the Project Management Institute (PMI) publishes a Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). The current version of the *PMBOK-Third Edition* is an internationally recognised standard (IEEE Std. 1490-2003). Another body of knowledge is maintained by the Association for Project Management, which is mainly used as a common standard in the UK, the Far East and the Middle East.

Standards may be regarded as socio-economic constructs reflecting a balance of perspective between stakeholders. They spread by market exclusion or joint modification. For a standard to be really beneficial it is important that the group of stakeholders accepting this standard is as large as possible [3]. This may be explained by the network effect theory [4], since each additional stakeholder applying a standard makes it more useful for the rest of the community. For this reason, stakeholders who select a standard need to analyze carefully which available standard is most commonly or

at least widely used among their peer group. Factors that can explain the adoption and diffusion of standards include ‘sponsored’ standards, market power, pricing and communication strategy, incentives, etc. [22], [23, pp. 492], [24].

In contrast to official national and international SGOs, there are also professional bodies for project management that evaluate, develop and assess project management techniques, methodologies and guidelines for delivering projects. These are then recommended to the respective members of such bodies. Examples include the Project Management Institute (PMI), the International Project Management Association (IPMA), the German Association for Project Management (GPM) and the Swiss Association for Project Management (SPM).

It is not always easy to distinguish between classical standards and guidelines issued by professional bodies. Whereas standards are expected to be objective, definitive and robust, guidelines issued by professional bodies are open to interpretation. However, guidelines sometimes become standards, such as PMI’s Project Management Body of Knowledge, which became an ANSI norm in 2004.

For this reason, we consider both classical standards and guidelines from professional bodies in this paper. From practical experience, we also know that most practitioners do not distinguish between standards and guidelines from professional bodies.

### 2.2. Standards for project management

Over the last decade, standards for project management have become increasingly comparable in terms of structure and content. Despite many differences at the detailed level, project management standards comprise:

- *Terminology*: One of the most fundamental tasks of project management standards is to harmonize project management terminology, allowing practitioners to communicate without (major) friction.
- *Functions*: Project management standards typically contain a functional decomposition of project management. This may be in the form of so-called knowledge areas or simply by presenting an outline that structures the field of project management in terms of its main tasks, such as resource management or cost management.
- *Process descriptions*: A functional decomposition of project tasks does not usually contain information about the meaningful sequence in which project management tasks should be carried out. Such a sequence is provided by process descriptions that frequently also define which inputs are necessary for certain process steps and what their outputs are.
- *Organizational models*: A growing number of standards contain organizational models for executing projects. E.g. organizational units such as project offices are introduced and project committees are defined.

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