

Why PRINCE2's Approach to Quality is Flawed

By David Hinde

PRINCE2 has many excellent ideas for project management, but I think its approach to quality is at best weak and at worst entirely inappropriate. My first gripe is that PRINCE2 redefines what the word quality usually means. My dictionary defines it as a "degree or standard of excellence, especially a high standard." If I've bought myself a quality car, I've probably purchased something like a Mercedes or Rolls Royce. PRINCE2's definition is something that is "fit for purpose" of satisfying stated needs. So for example, according to PRINCE my Landrover is a quality product. It's not luxurious but, as a keen skier, I can use it to haul equipment to the Alps each year. This re-definition of the word quality often confuses people, before they even look at the detail.



At the beginning of a PRINCE2 project you agree with the customer a set of measurable attributes about the products you will build. These are called Acceptance Criteria. Later, when you deliver the products, the client will only sign them off if they conform to these criteria. This assumes that the client knows what they want. They often don't. When Henry Ford was designing the Model T car he was asked why he didn't consult with potential users. He replied, "If I had asked people what they wanted they would have said faster horses!"

Users' not knowing what they want is often a problem in groundbreaking projects. People in the early 1900s knew they wanted to get places faster, but their idea on how to achieve this was limited by their own experience. Another example is the project to create the iPhone. Steve Jobs did not consult with potential users. Instead he went through many iterations of building prototypes, playing with them, deciding what worked and what didn't, until he ended up with the final design.

So this idea in PRINCE2's Quality Theme, that you can simply ask a group of potential users at the outset, to specify what products they want, doesn't always work. PRINCE2 defines a project as a piece of work that is unique. The more unique and groundbreaking it is, the more difficult it becomes to define exactly what is required at the end. Project work is a creative process. Sometimes it takes trial and error and a certain amount of vision to create something the end users will eventually be satisfied with.

As I said at the outset, PRINCE2 has many useful ideas. But the Quality Theme should be used with caution. In groundbreaking projects, they can hinder the creation of products the client is going to be satisfied with.

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