Light project management in the policy shop

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Project managers and government policy professionals don't always get on. The project manager's structured, sometimes black-and-white approach to delivery can be strange to the policy professional who thrives in ambiguity and blue-sky thinking.

Bringing the two worlds together doesn't always make a happy marriage. But a 'light-touch' approach to project management tailored to the policy environment can bring a great deal of value to both worlds.

WHY WOULD I NEED A PROJECT PERSON ON MY POLICY TEAM?

A policy manager or a team leader may be able to run project activities as a 'part-time' project manager. But having one person dedicated to keeping the ship on course makes things far simpler and more likely to be done well. Based on my observations, there are three key reasons to bring a project person onto your policy team: it allows your team to do what they do best, it gives your

governance confidence that things are being done well and they have the right information to do their job, and it helps to ensure that quality and timely advice is delivered to Ministers. These things are especially true for a policy project or programme but will also prove themselves true in a business-as-usual policy environment.

It allows policy to do what they do best

I doubt you could find many policy professionals who chose their career path because they wanted to make detailed plans, track risks, or report on progress. These tasks mustn't be neglected, but they do require a different approach and set of disciplines to policy analysis. While one person may be more than capable of doing both, their enthusiam and focus is likely to be on one discipline, at the expense of the other. And while there is a strong case for investing in the project management capability of the policy profession, giving these functions to an expert resource frees up your team to focus their efforts on producing high-quality advice they can take pride in.

It gives governance confidence

When planning and reporting is not a secondary chore for your analysts but the raison d'être for your dedicated project resource, you will almost certainly get higher quality information feeding up to governance. Giving governance clarity about what's going on enables them to be confident that delivery is in safe hands and allows them to act early to address blockages or manage risk.

It builds momentum and accountability

The disciplines a good project person brings can keep things running quickly and smoothly. Whether through running a quick-fire morning stand-up, or maintaining detailed planning and reporting processes, these disciplines can bring complementary structure to the often-unstructured world of policy. When the policy people tend to get stuck in a loop of endless iterations or dive down rabbit holes, project structures will keep the ship on course and keep team members accountable for the work they need to deliver.

DOES AGILE MAKE SENSE FOR POLICY?

The principles in Agile methodology make good sense in a policy environment: the emphasis on user needs, ongoing planning, and continuous improvement to both product and ways of working, and ongoing planning. However, transposing a way of doing Agile from an IT environment into policy may create unnecessary friction and confusion for your team. Before you recruit a Scrum Master into your team, start with working through a Kanban board each morning, then introduce working in two-week sprints. Keep whatever works; leave behind what doesn't.

Need help? If you're looking to build up the project delivery capability of your policy shop, or you've got a pressing policy project that you need done well, Tregaskis Brown can help. Visit us at **tregaskisbrown.co.nz** or call one of our consultants on **04 499 9363.**

About the Author

Ben joined Tregaskis Brown in 2019 after completing his Bachelor of Management Studies (Hons), with majors in Economics and Strategic Management. His observations are made from his own experiences and those of others working on policy projects.