CHARACTERISING PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN POLICY ENVIRONMENTS

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The Australia public service supports Government to develop, implement and update Australian policy which can have population-wide impacts. Project managing policy change can be a challenge due to the complexity, tight delivery timeframes, inclusion of many stakeholders and the high sensitivity to risk, uncertainty and changing political environments. Outputs stemming from policy change are often less specific and are more focused on longer-term outcomes. How policy outcomes will be achieved can be unclear and can continue to change as the policy is developed, negotiated and agreed to by Government. The implementation of policy is typically more contentious or polarising than other types of change.

Good project management is essential to ensure successful delivery of policy outcomes, which can be significant, challenging to deliver and may require a different project management approach, when compared to other types of large-scale projects. This article explores how policy project management differs and provides techniques that can be used to improve successful delivery of policy in Australia.

Why is policy project management different?

- When compared to other types of projects, policy projects typically attract broader **stakeholder interest** (Ministers, their staff, government agencies, industry, industry bodies, consumers and, the public more generally) due to their potential for broad population impact. Other project types have more limited and specific stakeholder interest. There may be a large number of stakeholders, but the variety is generally less.

- **Communication** is important on all types of projects, but effective communication is essential in policy projects to gain support from stakeholders, influence public opinion, and ensure successful implementation. Communication in other types of projects tends to be more focused on internal updates, user engagement and marketing type activities.

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- Developing policy involves extensive **research and analysis** (data collection, impact assessments and evaluation of pre-existing policies). Evidence-based decision-making is crucial to show the need for the policy, as well as supporting the development of sound policy. Research and analysis may also be important in other types of projects but it's generally market research, technical feasibility, or user experience.

- Policy projects must consider **legal and regulatory** frameworks, compliance issues, and the potential for legislative changes. Public consultations are often necessary and there is generally always a need for some sort of legal advice. Where legislation is part of the policy, Parliamentary processes must be followed, which can take considerable time. Non-policy projects may need to consider regulations and compliance but typically not to the same extent.

- **Implementation** often involves multiple phases and can include pilot programs to better understand impacts. Specific **evaluation** points can be established to measure the effectiveness of the policy to allow for adjustments if needed. Other project types focus more on project roll-out, user adoption and iterative improvements over time based on feedback.

- Policy projects are generally **funded** by public money or grants, which comes with an increased need for transparent reporting and accountability to ensure value for money. Formal policy authority from Government is required. Other project types are funded by private investments, internal budgets, or revenue, with different accountability mechanisms.

Understanding the differences between policy and other types of large-scale projects is crucial to establish fit for purpose project management, to ensure policy-specific challenges and requirements are addressed throughout the project delivery.

The challenges and complexities of policy projects

There are many challenges and complexities associated with the development and implementation of policy.

- Policy projects often have **interdisciplinary needs**, requiring expertise from multiple disciplines i.e. economics, legal, clinical, sociological, technology. Different disciplines and the greater numbers of stakeholders involved in policy development create **different project outcome expectations**.
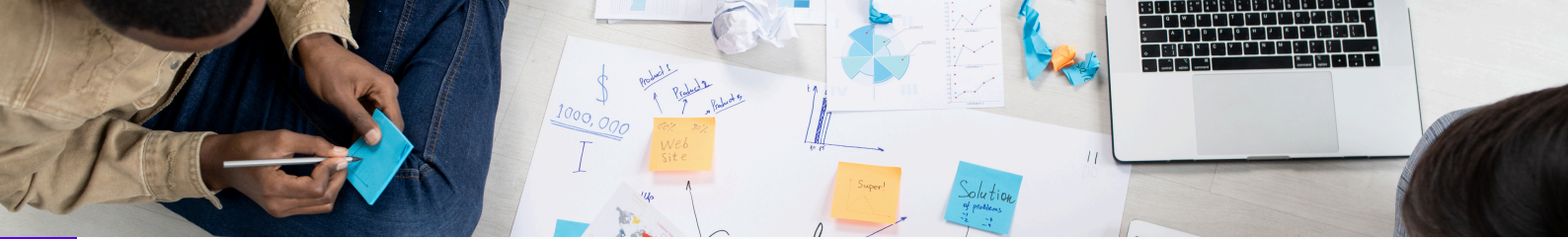
- It can be **difficult to define the scope** of a policy project due to ongoing changes as the policy intent is established and the realities of implementation are realised. A further contributor to scoping difficulties is the funding process, which can contribute to outcome expectation inconsistencies when requested and allocated funding are not the same, limiting or changing achievable outcomes.

- **Uncertainty** i.e. economic fluctuations, changes in political environment, natural disasters can impact policy outcomes and effectiveness. It can also complicate the translation of policy into action. **Implementation complications** could include logistical planning, management, monitoring, resistance, lack of capacity, or unforeseen changes.

- Gathering, analysing, and interpreting **large volumes of data**, is often necessary to inform policy decisions, which can be resource-intensive, time consuming and technically challenging. Privacy requirements always must be taken into consideration. Balancing competing **ethical considerations**, such as equity, fairness, and the public good, can add another layer of complexity to policy design and implementation issues.

- Policy **benefits** are often intangible and can be hard to identify and baseline in a manner that can be effectively measured. Often, benefit realisation cannot occur for considerable time after the completion of the project making **evaluation** difficult.

- Project management in policy environments is often undertaken by teams with **limited dedicated project management capability and capacity** which can impact project delivery and implementation success.

How to improve policy project delivery efficiency and effectiveness

With an understanding of how a policy project differs to other project types, and recognition of the complexities and challenges associated with policy project management, there are steps that can be taken to increase policy delivery success.

- There is a need for a deep **understanding of the policy intent** and any changes made to the policy through its development and implementation. Establishing artefacts and processes to underpin the project is important, but understanding the policy itself will improve delivery and outcomes.

- Taking a **flexible project management approach**, with consideration of the public sector team's capability, maturity, capacity, risk appetite and leadership expectations can increase buy-in and improve internal capability.

- Building **trusting relationships** with public sector team members and leadership. Policy-specific subject matter expertise is generally found in operational team members. It is just as important to have good relationships with project team members as it is with leadership. Being in the trenches with the team is one of the best ways to build trust.

- Make **exceptions when they are needed**. Hard and fast rules sometimes do not work, and they do not win you friends or influence people. Sometimes, it is appropriate to make an exception where it supports the team.

- There is a need for **fluid contingency planning**, done in a flexible way, which considers the complexities of the project. There are often too many moving parts to set up one or two contingency plans and stick with them.

Building **true partnerships** with policy delivery teams leads to more successful delivery outcomes. The use of our project management capability alongside the policy subject matter expertise in the public sector leads to improved policy delivery and outcomes.

CONSULTANCY THAT VALUES BIG THINKERS, WHO SOLVE UNIQUE PROBLEMS.

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