PRINCE2®

Tailoring PRINCE2®
to different
organizational cultures

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AXELOS
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Contents

1.   Introduction

Key to the successful use of PRINCE2 is the ability to tailor it to specific environments. PRINCE2 shows how to adapt the approach to a range of common situations such as:

- programmes and portfolios
- commercial customer and supplier situations
- delivery approaches such as agile and waterfall
- simple, localized projects.

However, one area that is not covered in the PRINCE2 guidance is how to adapt it to various organizational and local cultures, which have a huge impact on a project. Peter Drucker has been credited with coining the famous phrase, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast!' In the experience of many project managers, culture can hinder project success as well.

For example, PRINCE2 needs to be applied in a very different way in a large, process-driven and established corporate environment compared to a young, dynamic and sometimes chaotic start-up. Successful projects run very differently in creative, media environments compared to more traditional sectors such as finance or engineering. In the same way, projects are approached very differently in countries that have a strong hierarchical culture to those that favour flat organizational structures.

This paper will draw on the author's own experience of working with PRINCE2 across various organizational cultures and will give examples of working in different countries. It utilizes a range of recent research showing how to define and work within different cultural environments. It will show how to successfully adapt PRINCE2 to make it a robust project approach, no matter what organizational, industrial or global culture the project management team is facing.

2.   Organizational culture and its effect on projects

In many organizations, culture is a hidden force that is sometimes difficult to see and hard to define. It can be embodied in accepted behaviours, common shared values, widely-held beliefs and hidden assumptions that are largely understood by an organization's staff but are confusing to people outside the organization. It is 'how things are done here'. Some people within an organization may not even notice its culture; it is so ingrained that they tend to follow its rules at a subconscious level. Culture is most obvious when someone tries to go against it, for example, by openly questioning their manager in a hierarchical organization.

To achieve success, project management teams need to take account of the prevailing culture. A good analogy is a boat sailing along a channel on a seemingly calm sea. Beneath the surface, however, there is a strong tidal pull. If the boat is sailing against the tide, it will struggle to make headway. Sailing with the tide, however, the tidal force will enhance the power of the sails to propel the boat forward. Similarly, if a project moves in a direction that complements the underlying culture, it will have more chance of success than a project pushing against that culture.

I recently worked with an organization that launched a project to introduce more flexible working practices. They wanted to encourage employees to work at least one day from home. They hoped that this would give the employees a better work/life balance, improve morale and enable the firm to cut back on expensive office space. The project management team had no problem delivering the more tangible products needed for flexible working: new laptops for the employees, secure remote access to the company's network and home office equipment. However, they hadn't considered the fact that flexible working went against the prevailing office culture. Presenteeism, the practice of turning up to work even when ill, was rife. Inadvertently, senior management encouraged this by working long hours at the office and using an overly controlling style of management. Employees were reluctant to be away from the office for any length of time in case it damaged their employment prospects, so the benefits from the project were not delivered.

To be a success, the project needed to deliver cultural change, which is one of the hardest changes to make in any organization. Culture is deeply ingrained and widespread. In this case, the cultural change needed to start from the top. Senior management needed to lead the way by working from home themselves and adapting their management style to be less supervisory and more focused on results.

Identifying the prevailing culture and considering its impact on the project is an important first step for the project management team. However, to make things more difficult, a project might face a complex map of multiple cultures. For example, within any organization there might be multiple sub-cultures. Each department might have a slightly different take on the overall organizational culture. Sales departments might have an aggressive competitive culture populated by gregarious individuals, whereas a research and development department might have a more introspective and analytical culture, populated by introverts. Global organizations will have different sub-cultures across their operating countries. Additionally, a project may outsource work to a third-party, which might have a completely different culture. A project management team might need to take account of many differing cultures when approaching their work.

Culture introduces risks into the project. In the flexible working example, there was a strong office culture (risk cause), which meant that the employees may not have taken up the option of working from home (risk event), which meant they would not get a better work/life balance and morale would not increase (risk impact).

However, as culture is often hidden from the employees who are within it, these risks are rarely identified. The first step for any PRINCE2 project management team, therefore, is to identify the prevailing cultures in the project environment.

3. Identifying organizational culture

Whenever someone joins an organization they invariably notice how the culture differs from their previous places of work. They might be pleasantly surprised to see the company using working practices that were frowned upon in their old workplace. But equally, they might be frustrated to realize that what was acknowledged as a good idea among their old work colleagues is not obvious to their new peers. After a period of time, this outside perspective on the culture diminishes as the new person becomes immersed in the new way of working.

This process gives a clue to one key way of identifying culture: bring in an outsider to work with the project team. The external person can see the assumptions that the insiders are making, whereas the internal team may have a deep but subconscious understanding of the way things work.

Much of my work involves providing external consultancy to organizations. In the course of this work, I can bring an outsider's perspective.

3.1 TALE OF TWO CULTURES

Recently, I worked on two projects for two companies with different cultures. Ostensibly the projects were similar, implementing an IT system to control and plan the use of resources. However, the company cultures meant each project required a different approach.

The first company was based in the City of London, the financial district that is steeped in tradition. The organization obeyed a rigid hierarchy. Power and control came from the top of the organization. Employees worked regular office hours and wore formal business attire. The new controls that the system introduced needed to respect the top-down power structure. The project was driven by a project board which needed to include the right level of management with an appropriate level of authority in order to work. The company was accustomed to a process-driven, step-by-step approach to their work, so I suggested using a waterfall approach to deliver the new system.

The second company was only a few years old and was funded by venture capitalists. It employed mainly young people who worked hard but in an unconventional style. They had an informal dress code, had little deference for age or authority and were accustomed to working with new technologies.

I suggested that an agile delivery approach would be more adaptable to the ever-changing direction of the project. Having a structured project board would have been too controlling for their way of working. I helped the organization devise a style of project governance that was suited to their company culture. Decisions were made at key project milestones during project stand-ups; they were egalitarian and open to contribution from even the most junior personnel.

These two organizations were like oil and water. The project approach used in one wouldn't have worked in the other. However, both projects benefited from having an outsider provide a fresh perspective on the prevailing culture, someone who understood their environments and was able to identify which project approaches would work and which wouldn't.

3.2 HIDDEN INDICATORS OF CULTURE

As well as getting an outside perspective, a project team can look for clues in things like office layout and furniture as another cultural identification method. Although many aspects of culture are hidden, there are often physical manifestations which give clues to the underlying beliefs, values and assumptions. In their book, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business,* Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner point out that cultures often have a superficial layer which can be identified by the knowledgeable observer. These subtle indicators as to where the power lies in an organization and who and what is valued might include who sits where within the work space, who sits at the head of the table in meetings, who gets the corner office or who has the most luxurious chair.

The Google offices are a good example of a work space that displays clues to the company's culture. Their layouts are highly unconventional. The Zurich office, for example, has slides to take you between floors, ski gondolas turned into mini offices, recreation rooms and a relaxing aquarium. These features demonstrate that Google encourages its employees to think creatively. The office has a library with lots of comfortable chairs and a fireplace which indicates that Google encourages its employees to continually learn and develop. Google places a lot of importance on employee well-being, so all Google offices have gyms and cafeterias with healthy options.

The physical representations of the underlying culture can be subtle. I worked on a project which involved moving a group of people from one office to another. We had carefully ensured that the layout of personnel around the new office space replicated the old layout. However, when the move was complete, there was considerable resistance to the new work environment. We realized we hadn't allowed for the fact that each person's desk was subtly different from the rest and this difference was a function of their level within the group. Junior members had slightly smaller desks, more senior members had slightly larger desks and very senior ones had corner units with drawers.

3.3 CULTURE EMBODIED IN HISTORY

What other clues are there to an organization's culture? Many organizations tell stories about the history of their company. For example, 3M, a company that focuses on innovation as a key part of its corporate culture, has an oft-repeated (although disputed) story about the invention of the Post-it note. A 3M team developed a new type of glue which didn't quite work. It was sticky but didn't bond items together, as a glue might be expected to do. The idea was shelved. However, an employee at 3M sang in the church choir. He found it difficult to find the songs in his hymn book. He used book marks, but they tended to fall out during the service. In a moment of inspiration, he remembered the not-very-sticky glue and dabbed a little spot on each of his bookmarks. His problem was solved: the bookmarks stuck to the pages and no longer fell out of his hymn book, yet it was easy to remove them later without leaving sticky marks. Thus, the Post-it note was born.

Whether this story is true or not is beside the point. It demonstrates the key value of creative and innovative thinking. When their projects are aligned to this value, they are more likely to succeed.

3.4 CULTURE EMBODIED IN LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR

Observing leadership behaviour can provide further clues to the company culture. For example, do the organization's leaders spend most of their time with other senior management? If so, that suggests power lies at the head of the company and decisions are made at senior level. Here, new ideas spread from the top of the organization to the bottom. Such an organization may struggle with projects with a facilitative style of decision-making involving employees from the lower tiers.

I once ran a management workshop for members of the military. The direction of the workshop was supposed to be led by the delegates, beginning with a broad discussion of leadership, followed by the attendees choosing the specific topics they wanted to cover. However, I came to realize that this style wasn't suited to a military environment. The delegates were accustomed to being told what to do, with no input in decision-making. When they were asked what they wanted to discuss, there was an awkward silence!

There are leaders who spend time talking to staff at all levels within in the company, rather than sticking with higher management. Employees in this sort of organization are more likely to be familiar with a facilitative style of decision-making, where new ideas and behaviours can emerge from anyone in the organization.

Some leaders are willing to admit their own failures and mistakes. This can lead to an open culture within an organization that is not afraid to try new ideas and methods. Project teams are able to run workshops where stakeholders openly discuss what has worked and what hasn't.

However, there are leaders who cover up their errors and this behaviour can create a more distrustful workplace. In such a case, project teams may find it difficult to persuade staff to openly discuss issues and risks; they may have to use confidential one-to-ones to discover problems which could derail the project.

3.5 CULTURE EMBODIED IN RITUAL

There are many other organizational characteristics that give clues about the prevailing culture. Carolyn Taylor, in her book *Walking the Talk: Building a Culture for Success*, suggests looking for well-established rituals. Some organizations I work with hold regular stand-ups to discuss current and upcoming work. These rituals suggest an open, collaborative team culture. She also points out that organizational processes and controls provide cultural clues. For example, the performance-related pay process shows what behaviour the company values.

One of the first tasks in a new project is to identify what sort of cultures the project management team faces. The team needs to look for clues in the office layout, the oft-repeated stories, the behaviour of senior management, regularly repeated rituals and the dominant systems and processes in the organization. Analyzing this information, maybe with the help of an external consultant, they can build a picture of the prevailing culture to help adapt and tailor the PRINCE2 approach.

4.   Categorizing organizational cultures

Organizations are often described as being of a particular culture. Some places have a strong 'office' culture, where people feel compelled to be at the office within standard working hours. There are 'political' cultures, where the organization is dominated by constant manoeuvring by senior management. There are 'bureaucratic' cultures, filled with processes, systems and documentation. 'Creative' cultures are characterized by unconventional office layouts, a more informal style of dress and remote, flexible working hours.

Many cultural experts have taken this informal categorization a step further to create their own taxonomy of cultures. These taxonomies describe a range of common types of culture. Of course, no organization fits exactly into one type or another, but acknowledging which types are more dominant within an organization, and knowing how to adapt and tailor projects to each type, gives the project management team another useful tool.

4.2 USE OF METAPHOR

In his book *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan discusses the use of metaphor to describe how particular organizations work. The machine metaphor is particularly common. The organization is described as 'running like clockwork' or 'working like a well-oiled machine'. Employees might 're-engineer a process'. The leaders in a machine metaphor environment believe they can easily replace or repurpose people and/or departments. They think their organizations should be predictable and deterministic and that effects can be measured and controlled.

Morgan claims that this mechanical perspective on organizations is ingrained in our thinking. However, organizations don't behave like machines. They are filled with people with irrational thoughts, behaviours and emotions. Treating an organization like a machine and people like components is likely to lead to project failure.

Morgan suggests seven further metaphors that better describe how organizations works. For example, 'flux and transformation' is the complete opposite to the machine metaphor. It describes an organization as a living, complex organism, which constantly changes and evolves. In this organization, change and its side effects are difficult to predict.

A project manager with a machine metaphor mindset would struggle in a flux and transformation environment. The machine metaphor supposes that change can be instilled from above. Old behaviours and capabilities can be replaced like the components of a machine. However, in a flux and transformation

model, change can have unpredictable effects which could derail the project. The project manager requires a holistic mindset, creating the conditions where the change can flourish.

4.3 COMPLETION OF TASKS VS PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS; POWER AND CONTROL

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner rated an organization's culture on two scales. Firstly, whether an organization places more value on the completion of tasks, results and projects, rather than valuing people and relationships. Both are important, but their research shows that most organizations will value one more than the other. The second scale identifies where power and control lie in the organization. In hierarchical organizations, power and control is concentrated at the top, whereas in egalitarian organizations, power and control are more widely dispersed and the organizational structure tends to be flatter. Using these two scales, Trompenaar and Hampden-Turner described four cultural archetypes:

- Incubator
- Guided missile
- Family
- Eiffel Tower.

4.3.1 Incubator

Incubator cultures are fulfilment-oriented and generally have an egalitarian structure. The start-up I mentioned in Section 3 was an Incubator type. It was a young, venture-capital funded, technology-focused business. Staff worked hard but in an unconventional style: office hours were irregular, there was an informal dress code and there was little deference for age or authority. Status came from creative ideas, new approaches and innovative thinking.

PRINCE2 project managers will find that a dynamic environment like this one favours an agile development approach. PRINCE2 is best applied with a light touch, keeping processes and bureaucracy to a minimum. The PRINCE2 project manager will need to maintain a balance between too much control, which might stifle the creativity and innovation innate to such an environment, and not enough control, which might lead to chaos.

4.3.2 Guided missile

Guided missile cultures are accustomed to working in project teams. They focus on delivering multiple 'missiles' through multiple projects. The project manager will find that many of the core concepts of project management are ingrained in the culture, which hopefully means that managing projects will be straightforward. Guided missile organizations are more egalitarian so power for decision-making is dispersed across the organization. PRINCE2 project management teams will not need to go too high up into the organization to find good project board candidates. However, because there are likely to be many projects running simultaneously, people on the project boards may struggle to give adequate time to each project.

One potential downside with the guided missile approach is that once a given project delivers its product, the organization moves on to the next initiative, neglecting to ensure that the benefits from the original product are realized. It is important to ensure that benefits management is fully implemented, planning out the actions post-project that guarantee the organization utilizes the product as originally envisioned and, as such, gains the predicted benefits.

4.3.3　Family

Family organizations focus on both people and power; authority is vested in a parental figure and members of the organization are not treated as subordinates, but as people with close personal relationships. A good example of this type of organization is Mars Inc.: the Mars family ran the entire company from an office attached to their home during the earlier years of its existence. People in such an organization are treated like family members, with all the supportive benefits and dysfunctional behaviour this can engender. Project management teams will need to ensure large projects have the blessing of the parental figure. The structure of the organization may be more confused than the official organization chart shows; a shrewd project manager will benefit from uncovering the hidden web of family relationships and power struggles that are happening below the surface.

4.3.4　Eiffel Tower

Eiffel Tower cultures are similar to Morgan's machine metaphor. Highly structured and process driven, these cultures consider people solely as a resource, with specific roles within a strongly regulated organizational structure. Status within this organization is gained from your place within the hierarchy. Examples of such organizations can be found in the military and traditional businesses.

Projects that attempt to change this rigid structure may struggle. Processes, ways of working and job structures are deeply ingrained. Change takes longer and may need to be authorized high up in the hierarchy. PRINCE2 project management teams in this environment need to ensure that project board members are from an organizational level which can authorize change. Organizational silos may prevent the work from proceeding smoothly, requiring the project manager to actively manage the communication and engagement between stakeholders.

4.3.5　No exact fit

Although no organization fits exactly into these cultural categories, knowing these types can help a project manager understand the nature of their environment and how to tailor PRINCE2 to the prevailing ways of working.

5. Creating a PRINCE2 cultural management approach

This section looks at how a project management team can tailor PRINCE2 to different cultural environments.

5.1 RISKS TO THE BUSINESS CASE

It is important consider the risks that culture might pose to the project's business case. This should be done by the executive in the starting up a project process and the risks should be recorded in the risks section of the business case document and project risk register. If there are numerous risks, the project manager should record them in the daily log and transfer them to the risk register in the initiating a project process. For example, the executive in the aforementioned flexible working initiative should have foreseen that, although tangible products such as new laptops and network access were easy to deliver, the cultural environment of the organization prevented staff from working away from the office, which was likely to prevent the achievement of the benefits that were forecast in the business case.

5.1.1   Assessing the risk

The depth of this analysis depends on the complexity of the cultures involved and the expected value of the cultural risk impact. One possible approach is to use the expected monetary value technique given as an example in the risk theme chapter of *Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2*. The project team lists the cultural risks attached to the project, estimates their likelihood as a percentage and their impact in monetary terms, and then multiplies the two figures together to get an expected monetary value of the impact. By adding the expected values together, the project management team reaches an understanding of the overall risk that culture poses to the project. An example of this analysis is given in Table 5.1.

Description	Likelihood	Impact	Expected value
Risk one	50%	£10,000	£5,000
Risk two	20%	£20,000	£4,000
Risk three	40%	£8,000	£3,200
Overall expected value			**£12,200**

Table 5.1. Expected monetary value technique to assess cultural risk.

5.2 RISKS TO THE PROJECT APPROACH

During the starting up a project process, the project manager should consider cultural risks to the project approach. For example, if the project plans to off-shore some or all work, there may be a risk of miscommunication resulting from language and cultural differences, which could lead to quality problems, delays or overspend. As well as spotting the risks, the project management team will also want to follow the PRINCE2 risk procedure and consider how to respond. For example, with the off-shoring risk, a good response may be to train the project management team in how to deal with the culture of the off-shore supplier's country.

5.3 PLANNING FOR THE LEVEL OF CULTURAL RISK

Having established the overall level of cultural risk, the project management team can spend the appropriate time and effort to plan its approach to the prevailing culture.

If the risk is small, this work might be limited, perhaps to simply recording the cultural risks in the risk register and then planning and implementing responses.

For a medium level of risk exposure, the project management team should manage the risk by adapting PRINCE2 management approaches, such as risk management, quality management, change control, communication management and benefits management. For example, the communication management approach should consider what can be done to ensure effective communication across cultural boundaries. The benefits management approach needs should ensure that new ideas and products are given the time and tenacity to embed into a culture which might otherwise reject them. Another area of PRINCE2 which might need to be adapted is the project control, as documented in the project initiation documentation (PID). The project management team should ensure that the project approach is appropriate for the cultural environment. For example, an agile approach might be a good fit for an incubator type of organization.

Finally, if the cultural impact is deemed to be high, it might be a good idea to devise an entirely new approach: the cultural management approach, which could sit alongside existing approaches in the PID.

Generally, people are overly optimistic about the potential negative impact of culture on their projects. I have already described how culture is a hidden force because many people are unaware of its impact on their day-to-day work. The project management team needs to take this into account when assessing the overall scale of cultural impact. In particularly large projects, it could be worth investing in external cross-cultural consultancy. Not only will this bring specialist knowledge, it will highlight the hidden assumptions that insiders are making at a subconscious level and bring them to the surface.

6.   Examples of tailoring PRINCE2 to culture

There are many ways to tailor PRINCE2 to specific cultures. Here are a few examples.

6.1 WHEN STAFF RESIST CHANGE

Recently, I worked on an initiative to change an organization's project methodology. Senior management thought the initiative required the delivery of a new set of process diagrams and document templates. They viewed the organization like a computer and the new processes and documents like software: the processes and document templates would be input into the organization and the organization would immediately work in the way that the new processes prescribed.

They greatly underestimated the cultural backlash to working to the new methodology. The staff reacted badly, demonstrating cultural and emotional resistance.

To be successful, the initiative needed to consider how to engage the affected staff in the new approach. Communication management needed to plan ways to communicate with the stakeholders of the project, so they could understand the project's benefits and express their concerns. The project's scope needed to include workshops and training with the affected staff. Benefits management needed to include management actions to embed the new behaviours, for example, by ensuring that staff are appraised on how to use the new methodology.

6.2 WHEN A PROJECT CONFLICTS WITH EXISTING CULTURE

Sometimes a project's outputs might conflict with the prevailing culture. I once worked on a project to install a new IT system for an organization's human resources (HR) department. Among its many benefits, the new system would allow any line manager to create reports on the performance of their staff. However, the organization was hierarchical and the central HR function was an important power base. HR subconsciously reinforced this power by controlling access to personnel records and staff performance data. HR saw the new system as a threat to their power.

Senior management realized that the reaction from HR could limit the success of the project. They worked with HR to show how, if they released control of the data, they could keep their status in the organization by educating line managers on how to use this new information to better manage their staff. It would have been a good idea to plan these actions within benefits management at the start of the project.

The project controls section of the PID will be affected by the prevailing culture. End of stage authorizations in a hierarchical organization such as an Eiffel Tower archetype will need a project board populated with people from the right level of the organization with the authority to approve the stage. In contrast, a project running in an incubator environment might have a more egalitarian approach to decision-making, with the team coming together to agree to move on to the next stage.

6.3 CROSS-COUNTRY PROJECTS

A team's national culture should also be considered when managing projects. The Harvard Business Review ran an amusing but insightful article in 2014 entitled *How to Say 'This is Crap' In Different Cultures*. It discussed the experiences of a Dutchman working in London learning the cultural nuances of British communication. He realized that the British were less direct compared with the Dutch when communicating difficult messages, which lead to misunderstandings. For example, when his British colleague said, 'I was a little bit disappointed by the situation,' what he was really saying was, 'It was absolutely dreadful!'

Stories such as these may seem harmless, but the issues behind them can lead to difficult situations. To mitigate this risk, the project management team needs to consider a range of responses. One option is to run cultural awareness training at the start of a project. This could take the form of a workshop or access to material that explains how to communicate across cultures.

Teams that work across national borders tend to spend a lot of time on conference calls. Voice-only calls hide the important non-verbal aspects of communication, such as hand gestures and facial expressions. Studies show that as much as 80% of the message we are communicating is done through non-verbal means. This suggests it would be preferable to use web conference tools such as Skype and, where possible, it is a good idea to have initial meetings face to face. Of course, this adds time and expense to the project but this is often outweighed by better cross-cultural understanding.

The project management team should record these communication techniques in the communication management approach and record responses for overcoming cross-cultural communication risks in the risk register.

6.4 CROSS-ORGANIZATIONAL PROJECTS

Cross-cultural communication problems not only occur between countries but also between organizations. If an Eiffel Tower organization, for example a hierarchical public sector body, outsources work to an incubator organization, for example a young, dynamic start-up, there will likely be cross-cultural misunderstandings. A public sector organization might require a rigid communication approach, whereas an incubator company might prefer a more ad hoc approach. There would be real advantages in establishing an acceptable middle ground at the outset of the project.

7. Conclusion

The difference between a successful project and an unsuccessful project can depend on how much consideration is given to the prevailing organizational or country culture and how it might affect the initiative.

Culture can be a hidden force and this paper has outlined a range of techniques to help bring it out into the open. These include using outside experts to spot the hidden assumptions and beliefs which affect an organization's work or using pre-determined cultural categories to help the project team recognize the cultures they are dealing with.

This paper has given examples to show how PRINCE2 can be tailored for projects which may be affected by cultural forces. It has also looked at how the PRINCE2 method can be adapted to enable cultural tailoring. For projects with a low overall level of cultural risk, this might simply be ensuring that cultural risks are considered in the established risk management procedures. However, for projects with a higher overall level of cultural risk, it might mean creating a separate cultural management approach to complement existing PRINCE2 management approaches.

8. Further reading

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10. About the author

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11. Reviewers

Appreciation is due to the following for the time and effort put into reviewing this publication:

Neil Glover

Mike Acaster

12. About AXELOS

AXELOS is a joint venture company co-owned by the UK Government's Cabinet Office and Capita plc.

It is responsible for developing, enhancing and promoting a number of best practice methodologies used globally by professionals working primarily in project, programme and portfolio management, IT service management and cyber resilience.

The methodologies, including ITIL®, PRINCE2®, PRINCE2 Agile®, MSP®, RESILIA® and its newest addition AgileSHIFT® are adopted in more than 150 countries to improve employees' skills, knowledge and competence in order to make both individuals and organizations work more effectively.

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13. Trade marks and statements

About this White Paper
This article outlines ways of tailoring PRINCE2® to different organizational cultures to ensure project success.