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Project Management: Fostering Innovation in Government

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By Tim Jaques, PMP

We live in a time when governments are being required to innovate. From Brazil to Canada, South Africa to China, governments are beginning to recognize the power that innovation can play in reducing costs and increasing service levels.

All around the globe, governments are finding fundamentally new ways to deliver services, connect constituencies and leverage shared investments. What does this innovation look like?



Consider the U.S. government's recent employee incentive program, called [SAVE](#), Securing Americans Value and Efficiency. This program rewards government employees who deliver great ideas on ways to save money and improve efficiency. Some of the ideas have included:

1. Allowing patients to take home, rather than dispose of, in-hospital medicine upon discharge;
2. Delivering government employee pay stubs electronically;
3. Making appointments to discuss Social Security benefits online; and
4. Streamlining redundant inspections of subsidized housing.

Project management plays an important role in fostering innovation in government. **Our profession enables fresh, new thinking and problem solving.** Projects offer a way for innovative new ideas to be developed. And projects themselves can be an agent of cultural change that spurs new approaches to old problems.

Yet enabling project teams to truly innovate requires the right mix of creativity, freedom from bureaucracy, accountability and vision. These ingredients do not come easily in the typical government environment. More often than not, government organizations squeeze projects into existing molds.

The following techniques will help government organizations use project management as a tool for fostering innovation.

1. **Be selective.** Leverage governance processes to develop executive level consensus about the functions and technologies undergoing radical change. Use portfolio management to ensure that those innovative initiatives happen in a "protected zone," such as a specific portfolio, as needed. Maintaining this barrier helps limit risk to existing functions.
2. **Envision it.** Use business cases and project scoping techniques to articulate a path toward the new innovation. Business cases often involve dreaming big dreams, and scoping converts the selected dream into a tangible focus.

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3. **Get Your “A Team.”** Consider the best and brightest minds on your team. It could be the new programmer or the agency director. Innovation often comes from unlikely people, so look for those people who can see past the day-to-day and articulate a new vision of tomorrow.
4. **Know the risk.** Effective risk management supports sound decision-making. Imbue the schedule and budget with risk ratings to ensure a proper fit into the overall portfolio. Risk management processes may need to be enhanced for higher risk projects.
5. **Start Small and Scale It.** Take advantage of the project framework which enables pilots, limited rollouts and other mechanisms to try out an idea on a small scale before going big.

Innovation can result in quantum leaps to the way an organization operates. **Project management acts as a tempering mechanism, allowing the investments in innovative new ideas to come to fruition following a rational process.**

Project management increasingly is a critical skill set in the public sector. Articles that appeared previously discussed how project management is a [lever of change](#) in public organizations and how it brings [flexibility to bureaucracy](#). Today, you can see that project management also provides a vehicle for innovation.



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