

BEYOND THE TEMPLATE

The Template Trap — When Deliverables Displaced Delivery

A Practitioner's Perspective on Document-Driven Programme Culture



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The Pattern

There is a question that I find myself asking with increasing frequency in programme reviews: what, exactly, did this document achieve?

The question is not rhetorical. Across sectors and across organisations, a culture has taken hold in which the production of deliverables — business cases, project initiation documents, benefits maps, risk registers, stakeholder analyses — has become the primary evidence of progress. The programme plan is populated with milestones that mark the completion of documents rather than the completion of work. The programme board reviews documents rather than outcomes. The PMO measures progress by counting the percentage of templates that have been filled in.

This is template culture, and it has become so pervasive that many programme professionals no longer notice it.

Why It Matters Now

The timing is not coincidental. The convergence of PRINCE2 adoption, OGC Gateway Reviews, and increasingly formalised programme governance has created an environment in which documentation is not merely expected but mandated. Gateway reviews require specific deliverables at specific stages. PRINCE2's product-based planning, when misapplied, becomes a mechanism for scheduling document production rather than for defining what the programme needs to create and change.

The result is programmes that are rich in paper and poor in progress. I have encountered programmes where the project initiation document ran to eighty pages and the actual work had not yet begun. I have seen benefits realisation plans that were meticulously constructed, approved by the programme board, and never revisited. I have observed risk registers maintained with religious devotion that captured every conceivable risk except the one that actually materialised — because the risk register had become a compliance artefact rather than a management tool.

The Cost

The cost of template culture is not primarily the time spent writing documents, though that is substantial. The real cost is displacement. Every hour a programme manager spends producing a document that nobody will read is an hour not spent understanding a dependency, resolving a conflict, or making a decision that the programme needs made.

When the programme board spends its ninety minutes reviewing a highlight report rather than making the three decisions the programme director actually needs, the governance mechanism has become the obstacle.

There is a further, subtler cost. Template culture selects for a particular kind of programme professional — one who is comfortable producing structured documentation, who can navigate the administrative requirements of a governance framework, and who measures their own contribution in documents delivered. It selects against the practitioner whose strength lies in navigating ambiguity, building coalitions, and driving outcomes through influence rather than through paperwork.

The Way Through

The answer is not to abandon documentation. Programmes need plans, they need risk management, they need governance. The answer is to apply a ruthless test to every document a programme produces: will this document change a decision? If the answer is no — if the document exists because the template exists, rather than because the programme needs it — then it is waste, regardless of what the process manual says.

This is a harder discipline than it sounds, because template culture is self-reinforcing. The governance framework mandates the document. The programme team produces it. The programme board expects it. Removing it requires someone to challenge not just the document but the governance expectation behind it. In the current environment, that challenge is rarely made — and the programmes that suffer most are those that can least afford the distraction.