

PRINCE2[®] vs the PMBOK[®] Guide: A comparison

About the author



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Since graduating in 1988 with a Masters' degree in Information Technology from Kingston Polytechnic, Simon has gained a wealth of real-world experience. His work on projects has spanned over 30 years and includes working as a software engineer, team leader, consultant, technical director, and project manager including time working for the BBC, HSBC and IBM.

In 2005, Simon set up Knowledge Train with a passion to help others learn the best ways of managing projects. Since then, he has established Knowledge Train as a highly reputable PRINCE2 project management training company with a focus on delivering the very best in training and customer service.



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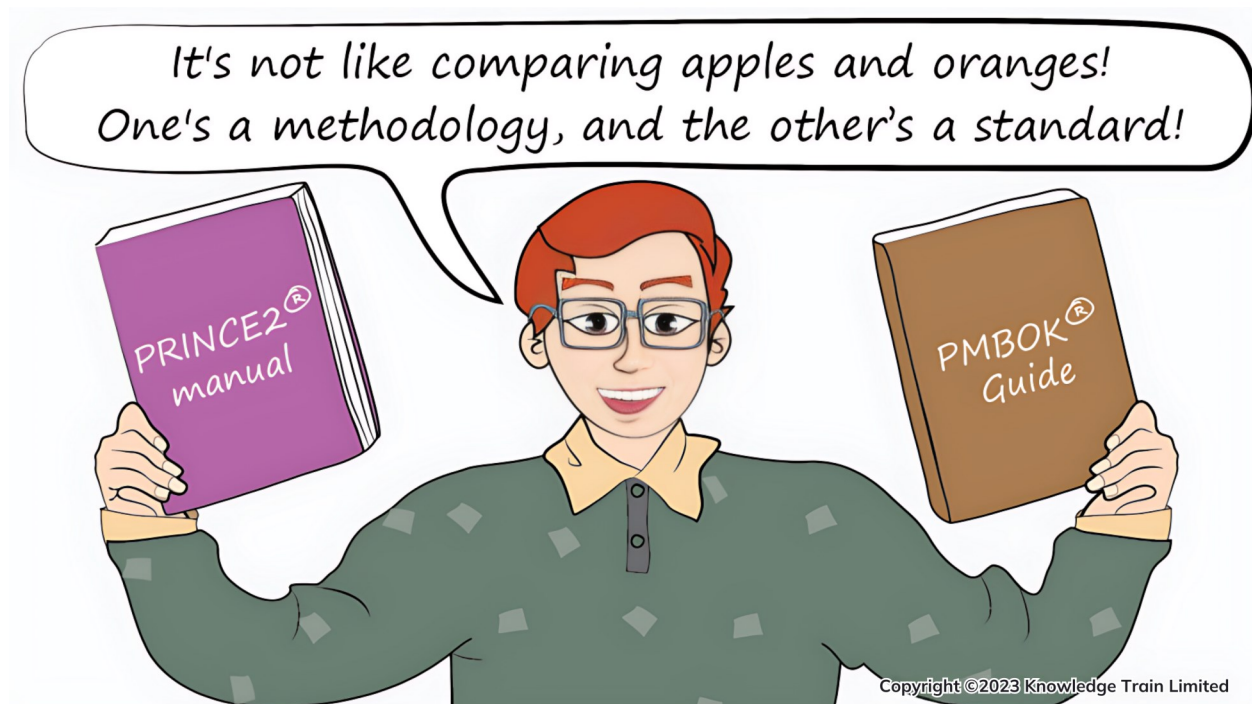
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Introduction

This ebook is a comprehensive guide to those project management professionals who want to understand the differences and similarities between PRINCE2 and the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide). It is assumed that North American readers will already be familiar with the PMBOK® but not with PRINCE2. For UK and European readers, the opposite is likely to be true.



This ebook provides a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of both PRINCE2 and the PMBOK Guide. It was originally published in 2017, but was updated in October 2023 to reflect changes in [PRINCE2 7th edition](#) ^[1], and the [PMBOK® 7th edition](#) ^[2].

It is designed to assist readers, whether serving as project managers, project sponsors, or members of a project management office (PMO). The ebook aims to help individuals make more informed decisions regarding the suitability of these frameworks for their unique needs.

Project management today is an ever-growing profession. According to the American-based Project Management Institute (PMI)[®] between 2017 and 2027, over 20 million new project management roles will be created globally across seven project-intensive industries ^[3].

As globalisation increases, more organisations are becoming projectised. This is happening as organisations seek to become more efficient – ‘to do more with less’ – and to bring new products to market quickly and cheaply. This is a phenomenon affecting both private and public sector organisations, especially those whose governments have chosen ‘austerity’ as their preferred approach to overcoming economic problems.

These organisations therefore perceive clear advantages to helping them achieve their objectives if they apply project management best practices to help them deliver their projects both more quickly, within budget and according to specifications.

Best-known publications

The two best known project management publications are the [Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge \(PMBOK[®]\) 7th Edition](#), (otherwise known as the *PMBOK[®] Guide*) and [Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2[®]](#). Both publications are claimed to embody best-practices in project management and are often seen as two different variations of the same thing. As this article will explain, this is a false comparison.

The *PMBOK® Guide* should not be read in isolation from ***The Standard for Project Management***. Both form one book, but each with its own distinct emphasis.

The Standard for Project Management describes some key terms and concepts. It also describes how projects form a way for organisations to create value and describes the project environment within which projects operate. The Standard for the first time introduces 12 core project management principles which inform the project performance domains described in the *PMBOK® Guide*.

The Standard for Project Management should be read in conjunction with the *PMBOK® Guide* and sets the tone for everything described in the *PMBOK®*. It documents a set of standard terminology, knowledge, and guidelines for project management. It also describes itself as a standard for project management. This is because the PMI itself was approved by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to be a standards developer in 1998.

Although the PMI started in the USA, it is very much now a global organisation with chapters (groups of members) in many countries in the world.

PMBOK® Guide structure

The *PMBOK® Guide* is divided into 4 main sections – introduction, project performance domains, tailoring, and models, methods, and artifacts – and several appendices with further details of the role of project sponsor, the project management office, and the concepts of products and product management.

Introduction

The introduction section outlines the structure of the Guide, its relationship with The Standard for Project Management, the changes made in the latest edition, and its relationship with PMISTandards+.

The main change to previous editions is the removal of the inputs, tools/ techniques, and outputs (ITTOs), and their replacement with principles which provides a different way of thinking about project management.

The Guide is complemented with further information within PMISTandards+ on PMIs digital content platform.

Project performance domains

This is a new concept in the latest edition, and these replace the process groups and 10 Knowledge Areas that had formed the backbone of the previous edition.

The principles from the Standard, are intended to guide the behaviour of practitioners, whereas the 8 new project performance domains provide broad areas of focus in which to demonstrate that behaviour.

The 8 performance domains are:

- Stakeholders
- Team
- Development approach and life cycle
- Planning
- Project work
- Delivery
- Measurement
- Uncertainty.

The performance domains are intended to be used as a unified whole, integrated together with each domain interdependent on the other domains to enable successful delivery of the project.

These performance domains run concurrently throughout the project. For example, the project manager should remain focused on stakeholders, the team, project life cycle, and project work for the duration of the project. They are addressed together, and not as siloed efforts in isolation from one another.

Tailoring

The tailoring section is one which was introduced in the previous edition but gains more emphasis in the latest edition. Tailoring is the deliberate adaptation of the project management approach, governance, and processes so they better suit the specific context of a project. It considers the development approach, project life cycle, processes, choice of people with whom to engage with, and the methods and artifacts used.

This section describes the many factors that affect tailoring, including the project scale, duration, complexity, organisational culture, industry, and level of [project management maturity](#).

Models, methods, and artifacts

This section provides a high-level description of some of the most commonly used models, methods, and artifacts useful when managing projects. Some of these models (for example ADKAR, Virginia Satir) originated in the [change management](#) realm, but were introduced into the Guide because of the importance of change management to successful project outcomes.

PMBOK® Guide strengths

When I reviewed the 6th edition of the *PMBOK® Guide* some years ago I wrote that key strength was its comprehensive treatment of the Knowledge Areas. However, in the 7th edition, the Knowledge Areas have been replaced by principles and the project performance domains.

Principles

One of the best parts of the new *PMBOK® Guide* is its introduction of 12 new principles. These are comprehensive and are designed to guide practitioners to tailor the guidance appropriately. The table below shows the most equivalent PRINCE2 principle.

PMBOK® principles	PRINCE2 principles
Be a diligent, respectful, and caring steward	
Create a collaborative project team environment	Define roles, responsibilities, and relationships
Effectively engage with stakeholders	Define roles, responsibilities, and relationships
Focus on value	Ensure continued business justification
Recognise, evaluate, and respond to system interactions	Manage by exception
Demonstrate leadership behaviors	Define roles, responsibilities, and relationships
Tailor based on context	Tailor to suit the project
Build quality into processes and deliverables	Focus on products
Navigate complexity	Manage by stages
Optimise risk responses	Manage by stages
Embrace adaptability and resiliency	Tailor to suit the project
Enable change to achieve the envisioned future state	Ensure continued business justification

Focus on delivering value

A very welcome change to the latest *PMBOK®* is its focus on value. This formed a huge gap in earlier editions, and with its introduction it brings itself much more into line with PRINCE2. PRINCE2 for many years has focused on a business case driving the decision-making on projects, and whether the project will continue to realise the benefits that the project is designed to bring.

With the new emphasis on projects creating value, the *PMBOK*® can help to ensure that projects remain means to an end, rather than the end in itself.

Project performance domains

So, now, I would say that its key strength is its comprehensive treatment of these domains. As you can see from the comparison below, it covers many of the same topics as all the PRINCE2 practices.

PMBOK® Guide project performance domain	Corresponding PRINCE2 element
Stakeholder performance	Organisation practice, people
Team performance	People
Development approach and life cycle performance	Plans practice
Planning performance	Plans practice
Project work performance	Organisation practice, issues practice, people
Delivery performance	Business case practice, quality practice
Measurement performance	Progress practice
Uncertainty performance	Risk practice

Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2



The [PRINCE2 manual](#) was first released by the UK government in 1996, and the [7th edition of PRINCE2](#) was released in 2023. [PRINCE2](#) has grown to become widely used by both public and private sectors around the world.

PRINCE2 structure

The PRINCE2 manual consists of 19 chapters, 2 appendices and a glossary. As a whole, the manual covers the five main areas of PRINCE2 – principles, people, practices, processes, and the project context.

Principles

The 7 [PRINCE2 principles](#) are the building blocks upon which everything else in the method is based. Applying all 7 principles to a project an indicator that the project is being managed according to PRINCE2. There is some overlap between the PRINCE2 principles and those of the *PMBOK® Guide*.

People

People are at the heart of all projects. The success of a project depends greatly on the strength of the relationships between the [people](#) involved. The chapter from the manual covering people discusses concepts such as leadership, team dynamics, and team building.

Practices

The 7 [practices in PRINCE2](#) are aspects of project management which must be continuously addressed throughout the lifetime of the project. Themes are very much like the project performance domains in the *PMBOK® Guide*.

Processes

The practices and principles are applied throughout the 7 [PRINCE2 processes](#). The processes describe who is responsible for taking decision, and when. Each PRINCE2 process is divided into a number of activities.

Project context

Within each of the chapters about processes and principles the manual provides guidance on how to tailor the method to different projects, depending on their size, level of risk, complexity, and other factors. Tailoring guidelines are no dissimilar to those in the *PMBOK® Guide*.

Roles & responsibilities

Appendix B of the PRINCE2 manual provides a very detailed set of responsibilities for the different project management team roles.

PRINCE2 strengths

Business case

Perhaps the single greatest strength of PRINCE2 is its expectation that the major decisions about a project must be based upon a robust business case. This means that a clear understanding of the benefits versus the costs, timescales and risks are required. This understanding is developed prior to the project and is refined in more detail during its initiation stage. It is then maintained and updated on a stage-by-stage basis as revised forecasts for the project become known.

This ensures that the project is always seen as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. PRINCE2 describes explicit responsibilities for developing, maintaining, and approving the business case.

Prior to the 6th edition of the *PMBOK® Guide*, the business case was only described in a cursory way. Since the 6th edition, the *PMBOK® Guide* has taken on board much of the guidance about the business case which has been in PRINCE2 since its inception. In addition, the latest *PMBOK®* also covers the concept of value, and the importance of delivering value from projects. This is very much in line with the concept of benefit realisation in PRINCE2.

In its business case theme, PRINCE2 also describes the importance of measuring the performance of the project's products in their operational life. This helps the organisation understand whether the forecasted benefits are, in fact, being realised. To help the organisation plan how to measure and who will measure the benefits after the project closes, a benefits management approach is recommended to be created whilst initiating the project.

Project management team roles

A second major strength of PRINCE2 is its detailed and wide-ranging description of multiple project management team roles. Whereas in the *PMBOK® Guide* the emphasis is mainly on what the project manager does, in PRINCE2 there is a whole appendix providing detailed descriptions of the responsibilities for seven distinct project management team roles.

The different roles can be seen in the diagram below.

PRINCE2 project management team roles	PMBOK® Guide equivalent
executive	project sponsor
senior user	no equivalent
senior supplier	no equivalent
project assurance	no equivalent
project manager	project manager
team manager	no equivalent
no equivalent	change control board (CCB)

Tailoring

One further strength of the latest edition of PRINCE2 is its tailoring guidance. Rather than being a separate chapter, as it was in the previous edition, it now covers tailoring throughout the manual when it explains each practice and process. With lots of examples of tailoring within each chapter, it makes it easier for the reader to grasp how the practices and processes can be tailored to different project contexts.

Summary



One of the interesting things I learned since reviewing both the latest versions of the *PMBOK® Guide* and PRINCE2 is just how similar they now are. They are now both based upon a set of project management principles. They both emphasise how important it is to understand the expected return on investment in a project. This is through the discussion of value in the *PMBOK® Guide* and the discussion of the business case and benefits realisation in PRINCE2.

Tailoring to the project context

Both books also discuss the need for tailoring of the project management approach. In the previous editions of the PRINCE2 manual tailoring always formed its own chapter but that has now been removed. Discussions of tailoring are now embedded within each process or practice chapter. In the *PMBOK® Guide* tailoring does have its own chapter which makes it a little divorced from the remainder of the book.

Project management aspects and people

Both books share overlapping aspects of project management that must be addressed throughout the project life cycle. The *PMBOK® Guide* calls these project performance domains, whereas PRINCE2 calls them practices. Both books cover people aspects of project management, such as leadership and team building.

Processes

So, overall, for the first time ever, the latest editions are both similar in their coverage of project management. However, there still remains one key difference between the two books and that is processes. In the latest edition of the *PMBOK® Guide* all the process groups which had always been described in detail since its first launch have been dropped. This is a radical departure from previous editions but a very welcome one.

Whenever I used to read previous editions of the Guide, I always found myself falling asleep reading about the inputs, tools/techniques, and outputs (ITTOs). I found the level of detail describe a huge hindrance to understanding what someone should do on a project. As a student once remarked on a [PRINCE2 course](#) of mine, after he had completed a 5-day PMP® course (the [PMP® qualification](#) is primarily based upon content from the *PMBOK® Guide*) he said he didn't have a clue what he should actually do on his project.

Thankfully though PRINCE2 has kept its own 7 processes. These have been simplified since the previous version, and they now form a very simple, logical, and clear set of activities that should be done by the project management team at different points during the project. PRINCE2 leaves aside the 'how to do it' part when it comes to the processes, leaving that to practitioners to decide when they tailor the project management method to suit their project context.

Comprehensive team roles

For defining a detailed list of responsibilities for a broad range of project management roles PRINCE2 is again the preferred choice simply because the *PMBOK® Guide* doesn't define most of these roles. By defining these responsibilities for a broad range of project management roles it is more likely that the right decisions are taken by the right people throughout the project.

Final thoughts

Finally, the challenges involved in managing modern projects are many. There are lots of books and methodologies available to assist and this article has focused on just 2 of these. Professional with an interest in project management, or practitioners seeking to take their understanding to the next level would benefit from reading both books.

Any professional requires a broad range of tools in their tool kit. Project management is no different. Both the latest editions of the *PMBOK® Guide* and the PRINCE2 manual should be added to the project professional's toolkit. They complement each other nicely, and although they cover many of the same topics they do so from a slightly different angle.

References



[1] PeopleCert (2023). Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2®. 7th Edition. Nicosia. PeopleCert.

[2] Project Management Institute (2021). A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge: PMBOK(R) Guide. Seventh Edition. Pennsylvania: Project Management Institute, Inc.

[3] Project Management Institute. (2017). Project Management Job Growth and Talent Gap 2017 & 2027. Available: <https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/job-growth-report.pdf>. Last accessed 23 October 2023.



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