# Project Maturity Assessments: Chasing the Scoring

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**Projects go through critical stages of maturity as they are developed, and each step is instrumental to the project's completion. A project maturity assessment and score can provide senior stakeholders an analysis of internal processes to identify and correct any significant risks as the project is being executed.**



If an organization has a project that is struggling, the last thing the project team likely believes it needs is people interrupting their day for a deep dive focusing on where things went wrong. That's because they still need to complete their day-to-day tasks. And while a detailed look at project data can require time and additional effort, a maturity assessment can be instrumental to a project's success.

## What Is a Maturity Assessment?

A maturity assessment involves evaluating key components of project execution focus areas that are considered critical. Each of those focus areas is instrumental to the success or failure of the project and each is graded based on a distinct set of definitions and criteria. Grades — or scores — for each of the focus areas are based on the project's current state. A numerical score from a range is assigned, usually with the lower score (i.e., "1") being the least mature, and an increasing score indicating increased maturity. However, not all organizations and not all projects should aspire to have a top score. While a scoring matrix is provided against the industry standard, the assessment should also provide

a target score based on the organization's size, complexity, structure and vision.

As an example, a medium-sized operational organization undertaking a single large-scale expansion in the next two to four years may not require the same project maturity as a large organization with plans to implement multiple capital investment projects or programs over the next five to 20 years.

Assessing both current maturity as well as target maturity tailored to the organization establishes the baseline, which is compiled into an overall project maturity scoring model.

## The Path to Project Maturity

When conducting a maturity assessment, an organization invests in analyzing its internal processes and tools for gap identification. Once an organization invests in a project maturity assessment, the logical next step is to improve the score. However, to improve the project's maturity, organizational maturity needs to improve as well.

A company that has just received an outside assessment score often wants to know how quickly it can get to the target score to see progress. But progress to maturity is rarely a straight line linked to implementing new software or a new process. Instead, the journey to project maturity is a winding path and rarely moves as quickly as the senior stakeholders want it to. If the organization wants "better data" and "better reports" from an outside assessment, it misses the maturity model's point.

Maturity means embracing a long-term vision of incremental improvement of the organization. While the initial project spearheads the improvement process, that project's success is not the end goal of the improvement process. Instead, the goal is an improved organization with more robust processes and tools that sets the foundation for future project success. Expectations of success should be scalable and tailored to the organization's business plan and long-term vision.

Not all organizations need to be in the top percentile of project maturity, and the assessment should provide a tailored score in alignment with long-term business goals.

## Project Maturity Is Not a 'Quick Fix'

Organizations that engage an outside firm for a maturity assessment because a particular project is off the rails will want to get the project quickly back on track. Project maturity, however, is not a "quick fix."

A maturity assessment will identify gaps and recommend initial steps, along with:

- Where the project stands.
- Any significant risks.
- What stakeholders need to do in the short term to make corrections.

Those initial steps, however, will not get an organization to project maturity. Instead, organizations need to see the assessment as a long-term initiative to improve how they execute projects overall. Along the way, they should consider how they are working with the people associated with projects to be more effective project managers and stakeholders.

## Developing a Detailed Action Plan

What is the next step after an organization has received a project maturity assessment and score? The initial review only scratched the surface of the processes, data and people of the project — a retrospective analysis of what has happened against industry standards of a typical project. A maturity assessment has answered the how. The real action plan — a deep dive of data inputs and analysis of the processes — will answer the who, what and why of the project.

In coordination with the senior stakeholders, the action plan is tailored to the long-term vision for project execution. What does maturity mean long term? What does success look like? The initial maturity assessment should consider the organization's size, complexity and project execution needs and provide the scoring against a suggested desired state. The next step will provide a detailed action plan to advance and is itself a project to develop the organizational-specific road map to maturity — a detailed plan for improving the maturity of your organization in project execution. It will come with a timetable of deliverables, complete with a timeline for senior stakeholders when new scoring is a good idea.

Most projects assessed have a fundamental flaw within the project controls arena. Whether the project has a solid technical team or is contracting the project controls roles, better integration of cost, schedule, change and risk management is proven to improve project cost and schedule performance by up to 20%. The flaws, however, are often outside the project controls team's core purview. A deep dive into the project execution will determine the sources of the breakdown, which can include the information systems or processes used, the communication patterns within the project, or changes outside the project that are driving failures within the project.

The maturity assessment reviewed a particular problem project, which was prompted by a need for the project to succeed and the desire from stakeholders for immediate results. The initial assessment is a retrospective view of how the project got into trouble. The next step is developing an action plan as the path forward to what needs adjustment and why. If done well, it will provide a road map and timing for those fixes, complete with an indication of if the systemic problems can be fixed within the project timeline.

For example, a project that is off the rails and only has a few months remaining of construction is not a viable candidate for improving project maturity. That's not to say it can't be saved. There are many drivers that come out during action plan development to identify what can be done, including:

- Schedule and change analyses to identify updated estimates at complete cost.
- Update schedule completion timelines.

Maturity improvement, however, is a long game and is about improving the organizational foundations for project execution. The one project in trouble is the catalyst that will drive the change needed for all projects.

## What Project Tools Are Needed?

When an organization takes steps to improving the maturity from an outside assessment, staffers want to do it themselves — after all, the assessment has identified what departments or areas have a low score. If the scoring is low in cost management, an easy, quick conclusion is the project needs an earned value management tool to improve project reporting. Or if the project is behind schedule, it may need a better scheduling tool. These quick conclusions lead to a review of different tools, a rushed selection process and hiring of a third party to bring in new software. Bringing in this type of consultant to build new processes and implement a new tool is often the bane of an organization. Many fear that in addition to executing the project, new software requires a transition that may jeopardize the project deliverables and key business objectives.

There are hundreds of case studies of software implementation failures resulting in poor user adoption, increased implementation costs and ultimately lost revenue because the project still requires oversight. Software implementation can become additional work for the organization on top of the project's tasks not yet completed.



A third-party implementation team requires administrative inputs and the goal of the outputs — a significant investment of the organization or project's time for implementation in addition to the cost of the outside implementation team.

## Utilizing an Integrator Consulting Team

What if there were a better route to maturity? What if there were a better balance to bringing in a consultant — one where the consultant isn't auditing the team to "fix" the project, or an implementor the project team needs to direct for all inputs and outputs? What if an organization could hire a consultant who would learn the team, processes and data to develop an implementation plan and path forward?

These goals can be accomplished with an integrator consultant — one person or an elite team that can support your struggling project while identifying key areas of improvement to advance the project maturity of your organization. An integrator, as opposed to an implementor, provides a balanced solution for a struggling project. This team has practical application experience in the world of projects. System agnostic, it is not tied to a particular software or tool but is a specialized team with program management best practice experience under its belt to tailor the solution to the project and organization's needs.

Adding an integrator team to a struggling project is like onboarding a new hire. The project team will require time to educate the consultant similar to when any other new team member is added to the project. This creates a parallel team working with the same data sets to develop a detailed recommendation of what immediate changes can be implemented and dovetail this into a longer-term initiative to improve project maturity. The project team, while struggling, can still focus on project execution, but it need not stop everything and jeopardize the project even further. The team additions have access to all the same data as the project team, they attend all the same meetings, and there may be immediate recommendations to improve project reporting that can be tackled by the consultant, the project team or a collaboration of both. In this way, the project gains immediate insight from the consulting team as the consultants work in parallel with the project data for a detailed analysis of long-term deliverables.

An integrator's objectives, beyond the immediate outcome of the current project, include moving the organization forward in the maturity model for current and future projects. An elite team comes with deep technical knowledge of project and program management experience, industry standards, and various systems and software experience to tailor the solution to the organization's current and desired state.

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Regardless of industry, if a core business isn't executing projects and implementing project management methodologies, a safe option is to look to an organization that excels in project execution and project controls. The ideal partner won't be unduly influenced by internal and legacy information and understands the organization's current maturity, what level of maturity is reasonable for the project size, complexity and duration, and what specific steps are required to get there.

Once an approved plan is in motion for maturity improvement in project execution, the organization understands the implementation timeline. Completing the deliverables, however, does not immediately increase the maturity score — implementing new software or processes merely sets the foundation for improved maturity. After implementing the improvement deliverables, the organization then requires run-time with the techniques and tools to see that the outcomes meet the stakeholders' expectations. Thus, a period of continual improvement ensues, optimizing the solution.

## Conclusion

Implementation and run-time are why project maturity is not a quick fix, but rather a long-term initiative to improve how an organization executes projects; maturity comes with consistent and repeatable process delivery. A best practice is to have four to six months of consistent reporting before the organization should think about a renewed assessment to rescore the maturity model.

Capital project delivery structures are more difficult when project structures are inefficient and lack standardization. Long-term organizational maturity needs to improve in line with project maturity.

Not all projects are executed perfectly. If a project is in trouble, a maturity assessment and score can help an organization understand the status of its project development, identify any significant risks and deliver solutions to put it back on the right path. Implemented improvements should allow the organization to complete the project on time and on budget.

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