

How can you reduce time to market without losing control?

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Why management by exception speeds up product development more than traditional stage gates

Many organisations want to reduce their time-to-market without compromising on control, but much of the lead time arises from awaiting a decision rather than from the project development work itself. By taking a different approach to project control, you can significantly reduce that waiting time.

Where does the real delay occur?

When development projects take longer than expected, the reasons often cited are technical complexity, limited resources, or a lack of expertise.

These are important factors, but they aren’t the whole story.

A significant proportion of the lead time arises **between activities**. Projects await information, approvals, budgets, or a decision from the steering group. Although the team is ready to carry on with their work, the project comes to a standstill.

So to reduce lead times, it makes sense to look not only at the technical activities, but also at the way decisions are made.

Why stage gates create delays

Many companies still organise product development using a traditional stage-gate process. A project goes through a series of pre-defined phases. At set moments, a steering group decides whether the project can proceed to the next stage.

This approach provides structure and control. At the same time, it creates a mechanism that often goes unnoticed: waiting time.

From a flow perspective, stage gates are a form of batching. Decisions are brought together and taken at pre-set times. As with any batch, this results in queues, and queues inevitably increase the total lead time.

This doesn’t mean that stage gates are unnecessary. They are often useful when it comes to major investments or strategic changes of direction. The main question is whether each part of the project needs to wait for a scheduled review.

What product development can learn from manufacturing

Manufacturing companies used to face a similar challenge.

In the past, quality was mainly checked by inspecting finished products. With the introduction of Statistical Process Control (SPC), the focus shifted to the **production process** itself.

As long as critical process parameters remained within pre-defined limits, there was no reason to intervene. Action was only taken when an anomaly arose.

The same principle can be applied to product development.

From stage gates to management by exception

In a traditional stage-gate approach, the health of a project is primarily assessed at formal review points. Management by exception is based on a different premise.

At the start of a project, a number of key indicators are defined, for example relating to planning, development budget, or product cost. These indicators are **monitored continuously** via a project board or digital dashboard.

As long as everything remains within the agreed tolerances, the team can continue to work independently. Management support is only requested when an indicator falls outside the agreed

limits.

As a result, problems are no longer left to accumulate until the next review meeting: they become visible **as soon as they arise**.



Practical example: responding more quickly to problems

Suppose your project team discovers during the prototyping phase that a crucial component is turning out to be considerably more expensive than expected.

In a traditional stage-gate approach, this issue is often not discussed until the next scheduled review. By that time, weeks may already have been lost.

In a system based on management by exception, cost overruns become apparent immediately because a pre-determined limit has been exceeded. Management can provide support or make a decision straight away.

The sooner an anomaly becomes apparent, the **easier and cheaper** it usually is to resolve.

Less monitoring, more support

This way of working also changes the role of management.

At present, managers often spend a lot of time on projects that are under control anyway. Management by exception makes it possible to focus attention on the cases that really need support.

As a result, the management team's role shifts from monitoring to **facilitating**, helping to deal with obstacles that the project team can't resolve itself rather than assessing each project periodically.

At the same time, this creates more scope to monitor external developments, such as changing market demand, strategic decisions, or new priorities.

What does this mean for your organisation?

Not every organisation needs to change its entire development process straight away.

Many companies can introduce management by exception **gradually** alongside their existing stage-gate structure. By continuously monitoring a few projects using clear tolerances and criteria for exceptions, you will quickly gain an insight into what really determines the health of a project. At the same time, the organisation will learn to respond more quickly when an anomaly arises.

Here are some examples of questions to ask:

- What indicators really provide insight into the health of a project?
- What anomalies require immediate attention?
- How quickly does your organisation respond when an exception arises?

By experimenting with a few projects, you can gain experience without jeopardising ongoing development projects.

Maintaining control while improving flow

Companies are constantly looking for ways to reduce their time to market without losing control over development projects.

At Sirris, we note that organisations often devote a great deal of attention to making technical activities more efficient. However, there is at least as much to be gained from the way in which decisions are made.

Management by exception is based on a simple principle. Control is achieved not by regularly halting projects for a review, but by making deviations **immediately apparent** and responding swiftly when necessary.

By holding up fewer decisions, you can achieve **shorter lead times** and **bring new products to market more quickly**.

Conclusion

Project control need not hinder innovation. By focusing management's attention on exceptions rather than on every project phase, organisations can make decisions more quickly, reduce waiting times and make their development process more efficient.

Recommended reading

Mastering Lean Product Development: A Practical, Event-Driven Process for Maximizing Speed, Profits, and Quality by Ronald Mascitelli.

This book remains a valuable reference work for organisations wishing to adopt a more flow-oriented approach to their product development.

Would you like to speed up your development process?

Would you like to find out how you can reduce waiting times in your development process without losing control? Sirris' experts can help you optimise decision-making processes and organise your product development more quickly and efficiently.

Contact our expert Pascal Pollet

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