Insights

PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN REMOTE MODE :
HOW TO CAPITALIZE ON THE COVID-19 CRISIS TO DIGITALIZE YOUR PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICE ?

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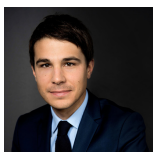
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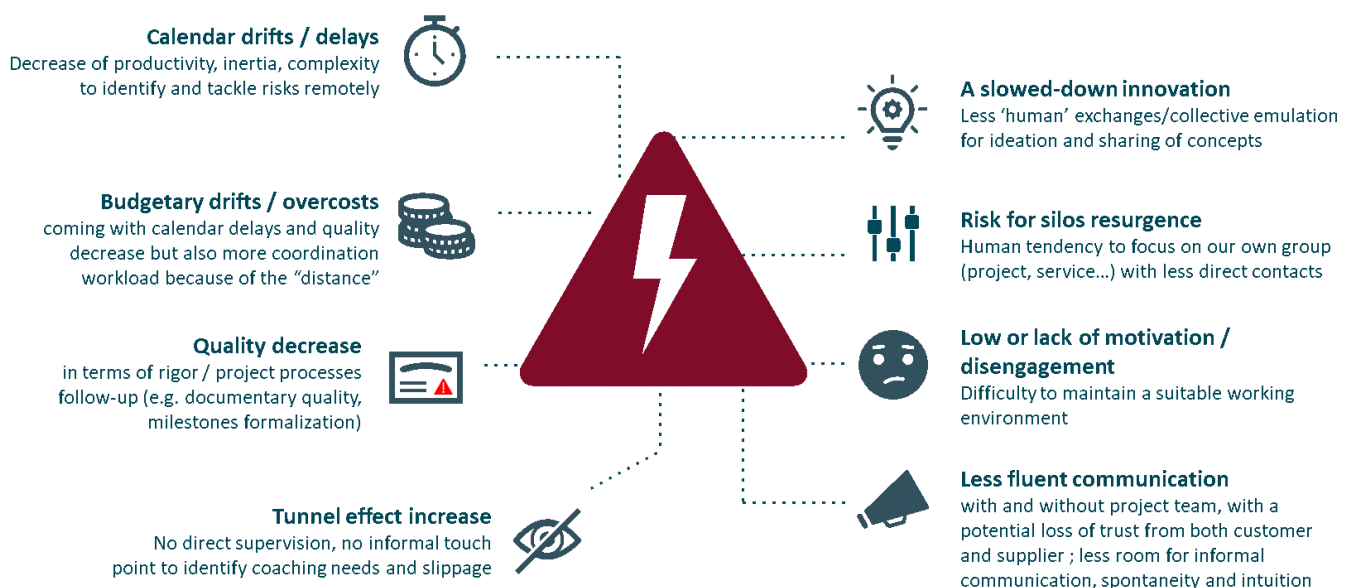**Cécilia Combey**
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The current covid-19 crisis has strongly shaken all companies' organization and activities. One of its most striking events: it has brutally forced sometimes 100% employees to work in remote mode. And this modus operandi should not only persist but also become the new standard of a new era we are entering. Working in remote was already settled in some firms. But the crisis has accelerated it and companies were not prepared to such a rough and extensive transition.

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In Program / Project Management, where everything is a matter of communication, collaboration, intuition, interdependency, the remote mode induces a number of pitfalls (e.g. putting organizations back in silos, tunnel effect, slowed innovation) that need to be adequately tackled (by new channels, ways of working, etc.). CYLAD shares its point of view on what are the main stakes and challenges for Project Management in 'remote mode' and how to face these challenges through digitalization of the Projec Management office along with good practices to be deployed through the teams
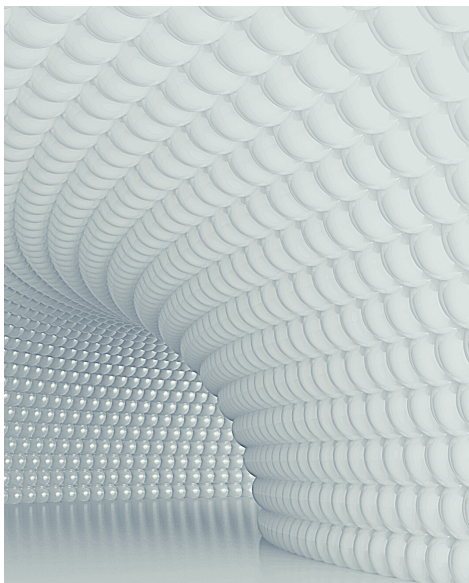
The brutal switch to full remote mode is very tricky for project managers and teams where human interactions and proximity ('plateau' mode) are key. And even companies where project management is well established can easily fall back in the old ways / defects observed in companies where, in normal conditions, no (efficient) project management is settled.

The main typical pitfalls generally observed are : calendar / budgetary / quality drifts, tunnel effect increase, a slowed-down innovation, a risk for silos resurgence, a lack of motivation from the teams and less fluent communication at all levels.

Calendar drifts / delays
Decrease of productivity, inertia, complexity to identify and tackle risks remotely

Budgetary drifts / overcosts
coming with calendar delays and quality decrease but also more coordination workload because of the "distance"

Quality decrease
in terms of rigor / project processes follow-up (e.g. documentary quality, milestones formalization)

Tunnel effect increase
No direct supervision, no informal touch point to identify coaching needs and slippage

A slowed-down innovation
Less 'human' exchanges/collective emulation for ideation and sharing of concepts

Risk for silos resurgence
Human tendency to focus on our own group (project, service...) with less direct contacts

Low or lack of motivation / disengagement
Difficulty to maintain a suitable working environment

Less fluent communication
with and without project team, with a potential loss of trust from both customer and supplier ; less room for informal communication, spontaneity and intuition

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Thus, how to implement an efficient Project Management / Organization in remote mode?

At CYLAD, our answer is :

1. **Identify and understand the specific project management stakes and points to watch when working in remote mode, and to tackle these challenges,**
2. **Secure you have the appropriate tool suite / accelerate the digitalization of your Project Management office,**
3. **Define and implement good practices through all teams.**

1 Specific Project Management stakes / watch points in remote mode

Across the 3 main questions Program / Project Management shall address (How to feed projects portfolio?, How to manage the project?, How to deal with change management?), multiple stakes and watch points can be identified when it comes to work in remote mode.

How to feed projects portfolio?	• **Keep on innovating**: less informal brainstorming opportunities, less chances to identify and channel new ideas
How to manage the project? — Plan	• **Maintain up-to-date planification** without regular / quick touch points and/or plateau mode (very complex without integrated / synchronized planning) • Rely on a **trustworthy productivity rate** for project teams in remote mode • Handle **multifunctional deep dives**, e.g. planning compression or recovery plan, usually requiring face-to-face workshops
Steer	• Manage **efficient project routines** remotely • Deal with the **loss of direct supervision** / manage individual performance • Ensure **core decisions are applied**
Manage risks & action plans	• **Catch project risks** despite lack of informal meeting points • **Handle perception bias** as for project risks because of the distance • **Overcome inertia** to solve issues / drive actions forward (vs. 'plateau' mode)
Analyze	• **Avoid / anticipate** calendar, budgetary and quality **drifts**
How to deal with change management? — Engage project teams	• Fight against silos / **sustain transversality** • Keep the project team's **sense of belonging alive** and active participation • **Keep motivation** (no more face-to-face to spot slippage) • Develop **competencies / skills** • **Handle conflicts remotely** / fight against the 'negativity' effect
Communicate, train & deploy	• Use the **appropriate communication channels** and control parasite ones • Contain risks of **loss of confidence / uncertainty** with both customer and supplier • Secure **stakeholders' buy-in** with low informal touch point • Deal with **remote training sessions / coaching needs**

One additional and transverse stake is to secure the deployment and/or the effective & efficient use of the appropriated digital tools for all project use cases.

2 Digitalization of the Project Management office

If digitalization in regular conditions is a catalyst for so many Project Management stakes, it becomes a must have when project teams work in remote (or in different sites, countries...).

To each need / PM use case, a proper tool should be deployed to foster collaborative work and ease information flow in order to support teams working in remote.

Below is listed a selection to existing tools for each PM use case.

In the digitalization process, 4 key principles have to be followed to optimize tool selection :

- Focus first on tools already in place / within the company's catalogue
- Check the compliance of a selected tool with corporate security rules
- Foster self-explanatory / friendly tools, especially if deployed remotely as well
- Streamline / limit new tools deployment not to drown

Whatever the tool suite chosen and deployed, it needs to go hand in hand with good practices effectively deployed through the teams, all along Project Management use cases, to bring its full potential.

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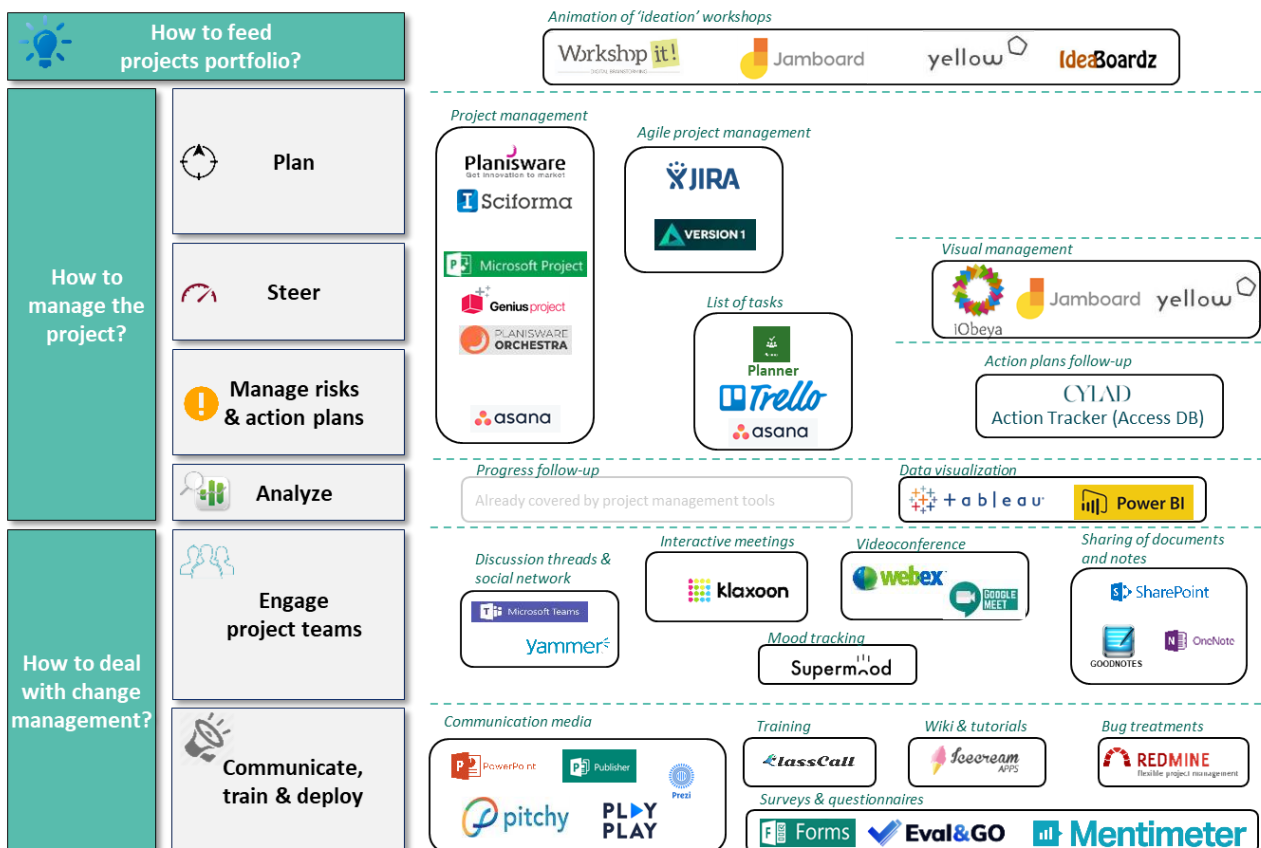
3 Implementation of « remote » good practices

To each specific « remote » stake identified, one or several good practices to be deployed:

How to feed projects portfolio?		• Innovation	✓ **'Ritualize'** brainstorming sessions (with the appropriate digital tools) ✓ Open **virtual idea boxes**
How to manage the project?	Plan	• Up to date planification	✓ Deploy an **integrated planning solution** ✓ Foster **more** rigor on overall planification rules: more reliable / frequent planning / status update, more systematic issue highlights, etc.
		• Reliable productivity rate	✓ Re-assess workload hypotheses / estimations considering the specificities of remote mode on productivity (e.g. more coordination workload, more progress meetings)
		• Multifunctional deep dives	✓ **Apply rigorous methodology for strong upfront preparation**, especially breakdown into smaller pieces / into bilateral problematics an, if possible, formalization of drafts, adjusted to remote work
	Steer	• Efficient project routines	✓ **Re-organize project routines** to comply with remote (e.g. shorter, more frequent, more processed) and individual constraints ✓ **Agree on key principles:** proper participants to useful meetings, camera on, by default mute, live notes / minutes of meeting, systematic round table to get everyone's view etc. ✓ Adjust existing **visual management to remote mode** (e.g. with appropriate tool set), especially used in VPM and/or 'Agile' projects ✓ **Prepare more deeply routines dedicated to project milestones validation**
		• Supervision on teamwork	✓ **Review project OBS** (Organizational Breakdown Structure) if relevant ✓ Give **more autonomy** if possible, schedule **additional individual follow-up meetings** if necessary
		• Core decisions application	✓ **Formalize more than usual key decisions** (from steering committees, milestone validation conditions) and **widely communicate**
	Manage risks & action plans	• Project risks catching	✓ **'Ritualize'** discussions on project risks ✓ **Formalize even more** the risk status and update at the end of every project meeting
		• Proper perception on project risks	✓ Define and deploy a **risk assessment grid** based on objective criteria
		• Issues solving / actions progress	✓ Implement a **'flash' meeting** as soon as a 'complex' issue is raised (e.g. multiple actors, technical topic) ✓ Fine-tune **granularity of recorded actions and follow them with extreme rigor**
	Analyze	• Calendar, budgetary and quality drifts anticipation	✓ **Re-design steering indicators**, especially to integrate more detailed metrics on individual performance, progress status, risks follow-up ✓ **Analyze project status on shorter loops** / increase reporting frequency ✓ **Implement indicators optimized visualization / shared dashboards** for the full team

How to deal with change management?	Engage project teams	• Transversality	✓ Remain alert to the contribution of **proper participants to each routine / communication**
		• Sense of belonging	✓ Set-up **remote informal "events"** (coffee, lunch, parties) ✓ Take care to make **round e-tables** to secure every participant can give its opinion (even introvert profiles)
		• Motivation	✓ Deploy a **mood survey** ✓ Keep **regular individual contact** with each team member
		• Competencies / skills	✓ Adjust **'internal' training with remote sessions**, including specific training for « manage a team in remote mode » ✓ **Reinforce « technical » knowledge** of project teams
		• Conflict management / negativity effect	✓ **Humanize team members and yourself**, socialize before getting down to Business ✓ **Prefer phone to email** for bad news / negative messages
	Communicate, train & deploy	• Communication channels	✓ **Adjust communication plan** by capitalizing on deployed tools and securing the **use of proper tool for each public** and largely broadcast to minimize parasite channels, especially... ✓ ... plan **short and frequent communication** to the overall project ecosystem ✓ ... **compensate informal communication by other channels / more routines** (/!\ time and energy consuming)
		• Confidence with customer / supplier	✓ Foster **transparency, clear and simple communication** without any implicite messages

We hope these highlights will help you save time on a short term perspective as well as think and better prepare the new era coming, era where remote work, with its pitfalls but also its advantages in a context of internationalization, would become more and more the norm.

On these topics, CYLAD can be your hands-on business partner. We have especially developed an easy-to-use maturity grid to sound out the situation and quickly know where focus has to be made. Let's talk about it.