



Ministry of Education, Universities and Research

Universities, Higher Art, Music and Dance Education and Research Department

Research and Development Coordination Office

Section VII - UPOC

NATIONAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME "RESEARCH AND COMPETITIVENESS" (PONREC) 2007-2013

A PONREC OBJECTIVE

"RITARDI.0" (ZERO DELAYS)

INTRODUCTION

One of the topics that best characterises the current debate on Public Administration and its role in Italy's development processes is without doubt the efficiency of administrative action, the ability to adequately respond to the claims of its various stakeholders and the time involved in different procedures, particularly regarding the disbursement of funds to beneficiaries.

It is now taken for granted that, on average, Public Administration moves according to complex, extremely lengthy procedures and times, totally inadequate in meeting the demand for quality and speed expressed by the external systems of reference, whether public or private.

The debate on this issue is certainly age-old, detailed and highly profound, but it is just as true that there is still no sign of any definite solution, to the point that in many quarters the situation is now considered unsolvable.

Despite this, the issue remains current and worthy of discussion once and for all: PA's role in Italy's development is still so strategic (for the enormous quantity of public funds dedicated to this objective, if nothing else) that it cannot be left to mere academic debate, but rather calls for a final awakening of public administrators and a rapid turnaround in seeking to implement solutions with an immediate impact.

The National Operational Programme "Research and Competitiveness" (PONREC) 2007-2013 lends its full support to this issue, with 6.2 billion euro to be allocated and disbursed by the end of 2015 for research and innovation in the Target "Convergence" Regions (Puglia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily).



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If we consider that the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) alone is currently handling around 700 projects, with close to a thousand stakeholders involved and allocated funds of around 3 billion euro (it should be mentioned here that by December 2015 approximately 24,000 expense accounts will be subject to budget control), and that each of these projects calls for particularly itemised budget management and control, it seems perfectly clear that the quality-speed combination of procedures risks remaining a mere untenable chimera unless it is accepted that a different, even cultural, approach to the problem has to be defined and attempts made to ensure that what appears to be just a pleasant dream actually comes true.

Knowing this, some time ago PONREC decided to focus on this topic, starting with a solid, real analysis of the phenomenon of delays in project management procedures and concentrating its efforts on all the “in-house” aspects (i.e. those governable directly) of administrative action under its own responsibility, defining and launching a series of solutions arranged in a systematic, streamlined framework.

PONREC’s aim with this document is therefore to describe the series of activities initiated which, for their nature and approach, can legitimately be defined as a real PROJECT.

And like all projects worthy of the title, ours sets itself an ambitious goal, bordering on visionary, but one which we firmly believe to be achievable: to have a “fully operational” set of procedures in place by the end of June 2014 that will ensure the strictest compliance with the various deadlines, and at the same time cancel out all delays.

Along with the end result, the project defines a precise time plan, complete with interim results, all perfectly transparent and therefore verifiable and measurable.

Hence the name of the Project (RITARDI.ZERO or “Zero Delays”), sufficiently clear in its objective, definitely ambitious but no less deserving of being pursued by all possible means.

A further characterising element of the Project is the accepted knowledge that the PA, and the PONREC office of the MIUR, albeit the lead player in the entire process, cannot hope - on its own and in full - to analyse every aspect of the phenomenon, and - again on its own and in full - identify every valid solution.

For this reason the current format of the Project is subjected to a full public consultation (via online dissemination) through which ideas/remarks/proposals can be gathered from any interested party, with a view to defining a full, actively “shared” version of the Project as soon as possible, and therefore one which, in our opinion, will be more suitable to achieving its objectives.



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ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON: WHY THE DELAYS?

1.1. The predominance of a rules-led approach rather than a result-led approach

One of the long-standing problems of our Administration (and this is one point for analysis which, as we see it, is common to other central and outlying administrations) is the poor capacity to adapt from an organisational and procedural point of view to the need for speed and quality of service expected by the general public and by businesses.

They have never become “customers” of the Administrations but, vice versa, have always been considered mere “users”, thereby essentially indicating them as the “outsiders” in the definition and management of processes that form all administrative action.

MIUR’s thinking, especially in the last two years and also in the wake of experience gained from PONREC initiatives, has identified as a key critical factor the circumstance that the internal structure is dominated by the central nature of task assignment and by the principle of strict specialisation/compartmentalising of duties in the internal distribution of the workload.

The fragmentation of skills and activities into elementary duties has, in fact, had a paradoxical consequence: the need to build complex organisational processes and systems that allow the linearity and singularity of administrative action to be restored. When the tasks to be completed are fragmented into miniaturized duties, it is important to introduce coordinating roles and bodies, also to satisfy the operating standards and periodic controls required under European regulations. This constitutes a block on output that could otherwise be successfully timed to meet the expectations of the many stakeholders.

And not only. Perhaps an even more serious consequence of the compartmentalisation of duties as described is an obvious and increasing absence of liability for the end result to be achieved: the breakdown of an administrative process into endless mini-duties has led to the expansion of a “duty-led” approach, based on which each party is answerable only for their own part of the task, with no-one being held responsible for the end result and without managing to really identify the weak links or shortcomings in the chain, resulting in a game of “passing the buck” behind which failings and inefficiencies flourish undisturbed.



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Vice versa, encouraging a “result-led approach” calls for a complete review of administrative action, capable of promptly combining compliance with regulations with the ability to achieve target objectives. It imposes a capacity on an individual administrator to “look beyond” formal compliance with the rules and may even call for a “policy” of selection and career development of public service staff different to that adopted thus far.

1.2. *The prevalent approach of interpreting tasks to be completed using a “vertical” rather than “transversal” logic.*

Added to the rigidity described above, and attributable to a duty-led approach adopted by PA, are the restrictions associated with implementation procedures for planned action that are inspired mainly by a mechanistic logic.

Each procedure involved in the PON (National Operational Programme) implementation is interpreted as a stand-alone process, i.e. an environment featuring:

- specific input, defined by the extent of funds to be allocated through a tender and/or notice;
- a specific authorised user target, for a series of institutional, economic and financial factors, and experience in self-candidacy for the allocation of funds;
- a procedure marked by a sequence of activities that establishes the investigative, assessment and decision-making path to which each candidate is subject.

From the critical analyses launched in recent months on the PON operational experience, it clearly emerged that the mere juxtaposition of one procedure and another (e.g. industrial research of high-tech clusters and P&D laboratories) has led to excessive fragmentation of operating paths, with the result that in many cases the differences found between one procedure and the next trace back to minimal aspects.

It follows that we have suffered both an “emerging damage” (internal processing times for each procedure are marked by a high “consumption” of dedicated human resources) and a “loss of profit” (the internal organisation has not achieved the necessary flexibility and the broad spectrum of skills - let alone the appropriate and hoped-for methods - that would have allowed the MA to assess staff availability as and when required by the gradually emerging workloads.



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1.3. The excessive emphasis given to formal aspects and the methods used to manage the assessment process, factors which have a profound impact on the timing of preliminary investigations

For the submission stage in R&I invitations to tender, bidders are currently required to submit their general details (name, tax code, registered office, operations centre, entity type, etc.) for every project of interest to the bidder within the same tender. Consistent with the objective of simplification it would seem appropriate to set up a single database to record general details, together with a repository for the documents of public and private entities participating in initiatives promoted by the MIUR.

During the specific bid assessment stage, the appointed bodies currently work offline, compiling cost sheets and/or assessment sheets in formats that are not always standardised. This leads to problems in later stages, material errors, etc. that could be avoided if it were possible to enter information online in standard forms, based on the information already input by the bidders.

1.4. The complex and costly management of bidders

The critical nature of the factors described above increases if we consider that, more and more often the projects handled by the MIUR, and PONREC in particular, are characterised by widespread differences in the bidder partnerships. The number of partners involved, in fact, leads to intrinsic governance difficulties, even when one of the entities concerned has been identified as the coordinator responsible for the chain of activities of all the partners and acting as sole contact for the Administration.

Contrary to popular belief, a highly complex project partnership is not a slowing factor per se in the administrative procedure. There is no doubt that the number of entities results in a real difficulty in the bidders' implementation, each responsible for a portion of the overall project to be co-financed and, consequently, lengthens the time and extent of the formalities required of the Offices to manage them.

But it is also true that, without a decisive clampdown on the factors listed above, the presence of numerous partners becomes extremely difficult to govern, and risks being viewed - wrongly - as one of the reasons for the delay phenomenon.



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THE SOLUTIONS ADOPTED AND PENDING ADOPTION

In the vision of a PA model worthy of a country that has clearly begun to face its transparency challenge, intended as an element capable of creating the relationship of confidence that the general public and public institutions have long since lost, some time ago the PON MA implemented a series of project management actions that aim to achieve the effectiveness and efficiency objectives that undoubtedly characterise this approach, the keywords for which are: governance capacity, procedural simplification and technological innovation.

The Project Officer

In this respect, the MA has aimed to change the project management role of the Administration from one that is essentially “passive”, in effect limited to acknowledging the action of the various stakeholders with a limited and sporadic ability to intervene and stimulate, to a distinctly new role: one of active participation throughout the life of any one project, with a precise and well-defined responsibility, and a profound capacity to ensure that all the various contractual and planning tasks are performed correctly and on time.

Based on this logic, the MA has decided to establish a new figure previously not envisaged at administrative level: the Project Officer (PO).

The role of the Project Officer is one of operations management, with wide-ranging active responsibility for the most effective, regular and orderly performance of all planning and contractual tasks, particularly the strict compliance with all planned deadlines.

In addition to having an in-depth knowledge of project management that allows him to ensure that deadlines are met and guarantee project quality, through continuous interaction with all the stakeholders, the PO must have a propensity towards solving all problems and hence towards the effectiveness and efficiency of the action per se.

Procedural simplification

In this context the MA has launched a series of actions to guarantee a more regular, orderly and effective performance of planning and contractual tasks, particularly the strict compliance with all planned deadlines.



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To this end, specific work groups were set up with the aim of defining standardised tools and processes for each chain of activity.

The outcome of this task led to the introduction of procedural simplification.

Ways to monitor and control the activities of all stakeholders involved in any manner in the overall planning procedure have therefore been implemented, specific dialogue and interaction has been intensified and activated between the Administration and those stakeholders, and more streamlined and easy-to-use tools have been adopted to guarantee the necessary information for project management and control in compliance with European regulations.

The tools simplified are:





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Technological innovation

With reference to improving the technology used by the Management Authority in performing its duties, a brief description is provided below of the IT solutions currently adopted and those that will gradually be adopted as part of this project.

New SIRIO system

For the screen-based presentation of financing applications relating to PON tenders managed by the MIUR and for the subsequent preliminary assessment and ongoing management of the projects, the MA uses a web application known as SIRIO (Italian Online Research Information System). The system is used by all parties involved in the procedures, both within the Administration and external stakeholders, i.e. the bidders, technical experts and the banks.

SIRIO is at present undergoing a series of development maintenance actions consistent with the project goals, and in particular:

- **SIMPLIFICATION** - The user interfaces used by the various parties involved will be upgraded to the new format with the simplified flows currently being defined by the MA for the WPR (Works Progress Report) assessment procedures. For example, the cost statement tables generated by the beneficiaries will be captured in a structured format (replacing the upload of Excel files) and the various appraisers - from the experts to Level I controls - will limit their input to editing only the items affected by any review (rather than working on Excel spreadsheets copied from those of the beneficiaries).
All cost, disbursement or other summary tables will be generated automatically. In addition, on entering the project code, all form fields referring to general data already recorded on the system will always be filled automatically.
- **PROJECT OFFICER DASHBOARD** - New functions will be specifically installed to provide support to the Project Officers (POs) in performing their respective duties. For ease of use, all the functions will be accessible from a single "dashboard" on which every PO will be able to monitor their projects. The first function, due for release in the near future, offers the PO a constantly updated progress status for the assessment of each WPR by the various stakeholders, at the same time allowing the scheduling and sending of notification or reminder e-mails, either automatically or manually, with all appropriate customisation. The e-mails will be saved in the related project folder.



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In addition, the dashboard can also display all useful contacts, the general schedule of the invitation to tender and the specific schedule for each project. The project schedule can also be edited by the PO. Again from the dashboard it will be possible to request report generation (works progress reports, estimated completion times, etc.) and upload all documentation relevant to the PO to the project's digital folder (partial and final results of the project, closing documentation, etc.).

For transparency purposes, a number of the functions described above can also be made available to the project managers, in "read only" mode and limited to information relating to their own duties.

- **MONITORING** - Integration of the operating functions for monitoring, control and reminders on the physical progress status of the project compared to deadlines for the tasks of parties involved in the processes, both internal (e.g. management of advances/disbursements, supplementary investigation details, etc.) and external (e.g. WPRs, preparation of technical and scientific expert reports). For this reason the development and enhancement of functions is under way to track the micro and macro tasks of the various offices.
- **TROUBLE TICKETING** - The use of a Trouble Ticketing (TT) system to optimise the handling of problems relating to the "in progress" phase of all tenders, with Project Officer supervision over the Service Desk activities. Requests originating from stakeholders external to the administration that are involved in the project implementation process (beneficiaries, experts, banks, etc.) and internal stakeholders (the various Offices involved in the different project development stages) comprise the input for the Service Desk system.
The channels for setting up the definition/opening of a TT are: e-mail, phone, fax, ordinary mail, i.e. reports from staff regarding delays identified during monitoring or TTs flagged with an expiry date.
At present a TT system of this nature is only active as support for end users on how to use the IT system or for reporting malfunctions.
- **DOCUMENT EXCHANGE** - Document exchange management within the Administration aims to eliminate recourse to computerised protocol assignment and to speeding up communications.
The documents will be uploaded to the related digital folder on the SIRIO system, which will be made ready for any new users and the necessary credentials for uploads and consultation. In addition, it will be possible to store a number of documents repeated across multiple projects (statements of the legal representative, tax compliance certificates, etc.) in a centralised manner, avoiding the upload of duplicates.



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Application cooperation with other PA systems.

The CAD (Italian Code for a Digital Administration) envisages that administrations are able to share and exchange data through interaction and “application cooperation” between IT systems and dataflows in accordance with standards that guarantee security and confidentiality.

In the case in question, application cooperation will be used to capture data directly from the organisations that issue documents such as Tax Compliance and Antimafia Certificates.

Cooperation platform for informal communications

It is considered that all parties involved in the life of a project could benefit from the availability of a virtual cooperation space in which information can be exchanged quickly when the use of a formal channel such as ordinary mail or e-mail is not necessary. In this space, the Project Officer - as administrative contact for the project - could act as moderator.

IT platforms are now available on the market that offer instant messaging, VoIP and videoconferencing services and which could be employed by users both internal and external to the organisation in web mode, through a single client allowing selection from among the various means of communication and easy transfer from one to another.

The introduction of these tools will make it possible to share contacts, agendas and other documents as well as cooperation in real time which will allow the PO and other parties involved to work simultaneously on the same documents and at the same time communicate with each other in a more instant, flexible manner.

Users will be able to communicate safely using their preferred device (PC, tablet, smartphone) and a compatible interface wherever there is a network connection.

Innovative use of social networks

In this context, it also seems worth exploring the opportunities offered by social networks such as Twitter and micro-blogging platforms such as Tumblr, Branch.com and Seeclifix, which could be used to their best effect to facilitate dialogue between the various project stakeholders to discuss or prevent problems, providing the operational tasks with new and effective means of action.



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On this point, the necessary studies of these opportunities are in progress with the aim of finalising a dialogue structure as soon as possible which, we repeat, could prove particularly interesting and effective.

THE TIME PLANNING OF TASKS AND REQUIRED INTERIM RESULTS

To maximise the likelihood of achieving the objective, the MA has set a structured path, divided into a sequence of steps, that should allow the verification of interim results through ongoing, in-depth dialogue with the PON stakeholders.

The steps identified, in order, are:

a) delay analysis

this is an ongoing task, already launched, that will promptly identify the causes, however small, of delays. Experience gained thus far indicates that the final delay is often the result of small initial delays. For example, we could mention the mandatory introduction of digital protocols that forced a significant workflow interruption upon the Administration in terms of dedicated staff and specific equipment. In the transition phase (still in progress) protocol delays even of several weeks were recorded, with obvious repercussions on the entire process. Remember that in PA no document can be officially processed until it has been assigned a protocol reference.

An itemised analysis is therefore appropriate of the various procedures, related steps and the various transversal tasks (e.g. controls) to identify potential areas of action.

Such areas could also relate to the overall flow of documents between the various Administration offices, with the introduction of stable, structured interfaces and hopefully a shortening of the chain.

b) Investigations to introduce simplification

Once individual areas of action have been identified, a careful trade-off has to be performed to identify potential solutions. These solutions could be at project organizer level (e.g. the problem of guarantees) or at MA level (the aforementioned problem of controls or response times to requests for project changes).

The potential solutions will have to be simple but not simplistic as they cannot drift from the need to comply with Italian and European regulations, and they must realistically take into consideration their practical implementation in a public context.



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Support tool development

Once the most promising solutions have been identified, it will be necessary to develop all the support tools required to make them operationally achievable. This ranges from the development of new formats (e.g. for guarantees) and the development of new internal procedures to the need to adapt/develop support manuals (e.g. SIGECO).

c) IT system upgrades

Naturally, the new setup has to involve a significant upgrading of functions and performance, simplicity and speed of use of the IT systems.

These tasks have already begun but it will be several months before they are completed.

d) Pilot testing

Both in terms of software and procedures/support tools, the new system will obviously need to be tested before it becomes final.

During this phase, interaction with other stakeholders (banks, experts, etc.) both within and external to the PA would be advisable to identify potential improvements which, once introduced, will allow the MA to make the system fully operative.

e) Constant monitoring

To avoid unexpected delays, an “alerts” system has to be available which gives real-time warnings of the onset of situations that could potentially give rise to delays and allow verification of whether these are spot events or imply a snowballing of system-related problems requiring action (or better still, prevention).

f) Self-assessment

A highly ambitious project, that also lends itself to use as a pilot project in other programmes, has to include self-assessment offering “in progress” measurement of the results achieved, the problems encountered and any other action (e.g. on the overall regulatory plan) considered worth proposing.



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The Project time plan

STAGES	TARGET TIMES												
	2013						2014						
	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
a) Completion of delays analysis:													
- on different procedures													
- on transversal activities													
b) Completion of prelim. investigations for procedural simplification:													
- at organizer level													
- at interface contact level													
- at MA level													
c) Support development (manuals, formats, etc.) for simplification													
d) IT system upgrading:													
- pilot testing of new procedures													
- collection and analysis of feedback													
- development of any adjustments													
- operational start-up of new system													
e) Monitoring													
f) Self-assessment													

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

With this project, the PONREC MA cannot claim to be able to fully analyse every aspect of the “delays” phenomenon that characterises the procedures under its own responsibility, nor can it claim to have fully identified every possible solution and measure to overcome and solve the critical issues found.

For this reason, the Project illustrated here takes on the role of a “baseline project” which, as such, is subject to extensive public consultation, through which further suggestions, comments and ideas can be gathered from every possible stakeholder. This feedback, subsequently analysed and systematically positioned in the overall picture, will allow the Project to become complete and executive.

To this end, this document is published on the web site www.ponrec.it in editable format, allowing at least a 30-day period for any interested party to formulate constructive positions on the project.

Likewise, the Project will be subject to a specific communications campaign to raise the level of sensitization on this issue, and guarantee as extensive a participation as possible in achieving a goal of such important strategic interest.



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It is worth emphasising that, in this methodology, the PA must not resort to “top down” analyses and solutions that often later prove unsatisfactory for the very reason that they are overly distant from the needs and sensitivity of the real situation outside the PA, but must instead encourage maximum involvement and as wide a participation as possible from its users, in the firm belief that only in this way will it be possible to achieve such ambitious innovation objectives.

Besides, it is increasingly evident in all sectors that innovation is a team process with precise “social” characteristics, starting from analysis of the needs and demands of the reference user population, actively involving that population and reporting back with real, measurable results.

“I ADOPT THE PROJECT”

We would like the “working together as a team” nature of the Project to be made clear also from another point of view.

There is no doubt that, in an operation aiming to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its action, the PA takes on the role of leader and accepts near-total active responsibility in this respect.

But it is also true that there are numerous stakeholders other than the PA that, in the planning procedure, have duties and obligations that contribute to its advancement (from beneficiaries to appraisers, from budget control bodies to the offices responsible for disbursements).

So, it is considered that every one of these parties has to feel involved in pursuing the specified objective and recognise that they hold a stake in the overall responsibility for its achievement, particularly with regard to the quality and timely performance of their respective duties.

In this context it is worth following through with the idea of asking each stakeholder indicated to formally “adopt” the content and purposes of the project, openly stating their direct commitment to giving maximum contribution, to the extent of their duties, to reversing the trend of administrative action discussed in the introduction.

It is of course clear that this commitment naturally lies in their assigned tasks and duties.

It is equally true that the Administration’s natural task is to do all in its power to ensure that the assigned duties are fulfilled correctly.



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But, in addition, a public and openly-stated commitment is considered worthwhile: a kind of “label” accepted by each stakeholder and which could also act as a reward-related element both at project assessment stage and when assigning duties.

For this purpose, among the actions envisaged, the Project involves the set-up of a formal “statement of adoption” subject to acceptance and signing by every stakeholder, with subsequent public disclosure of the results.