Flanders Make - Improving Project Management in a Research Environment

Flanders Make is a strategic research centre for the manufacturing industry in Belgium. Their growing project portfolio and diverse funding requirements were placing increasing pressure on project management practices. In response, the organisation adopted P3.express, a minimalist project management methodology designed to provide structure without unnecessary complexity. This article explores how Flanders Make's PMO integrated P3.express into its operations to support researchers in managing projects more effectively.

About Flanders Make

Flanders Make is the strategic research centre for the manufacturing industry in Belgium, supported by the Flemish Government and the European Regional Development Fund. Its mission is to strengthen the long-term competitiveness of the Flemish manufacturing sector by conducting high-quality, industry-driven, pre-competitive research in areas such as mechatronics, product development, and advanced manufacturing technologies. The centre supports innovation by acting as a bridge between academic research (notably across the five Flemish universities) and industrial application, helping companies to develop and optimise products and production processes.

Operating across three co-creation centres and university core labs, Flanders Make offers extensive testing and validation infrastructure, and supports both regional and international collaboration in innovation and European research projects. Today, the organisation sustains a community of approximately 1,000 full-time researchers working on a shared industrial research agenda.

The organisation manages a wide portfolio of projects, including around 50 'covenant' projects (long-running, publicly co-funded initiatives) and additional industry-driven collaborations (e.g., B2B, EU-funded). The scale and diversity of these projects heighten the need for robust yet flexible project management frameworks.

The Challenge

Flanders Make's growth brought increasing strain on its traditional project management framework. Until recently, the organisation relied on a dense handbook in a wiki software detailing numerous processes and templates. Yet, this approach led to persistent difficulties in practical use, especially among project leads who are researchers rather than trained PMs. "Most of them are not professional project managers; their goal is still to do the research. They see project management as an additional role," explains Steve Vandenplas, Flanders Make's PMO Manager. "Our project management approach was a huge collection of processes and information. Information was difficult to find and often not relevant to the project" adds Elisabeth Van Cotthem, PMO Support Officer, "project leads had to check which processes applied to where they were in a specific project."

As Flanders Make coordinates around 50 long-running, covenant projects, often running in parallel with B2B and EU-funded initiatives, the

lack of contextual guidance became a major bottleneck. The central issue: project leads needed the right information about project management practices at the right project stage; they needed a clear roadmap for the project management activities.

Adopting P3.express as a solution

Faced with growing complexity and increasing demands on its project leads, Flanders Make began rethinking how project management support was delivered within the organisation. The objective was not to abandon all underlying project processes completely, but to make them more accessible and usable for the people who needed them most: researchers tasked with leading projects in addition to their technical roles. The issue was not about lacking data on project performance; it was about making it easier for project managers to understand what was expected of them at each step and how their work connected with others involved in the same or related projects.

In early 2024, the PMO explored new ways to present project information that would reduce cognitive load and offer practical, timely guidance. Instead of relying on a project management document organised like an encyclopedia, with many processes listed, they looked for a format to guide users through the project lifecycle. This search led them to P3.express, a minimalist project management system that emphasises clarity and minimalism.

What stood out about P3.express was its minimalist, step-by-step, cyclical approach to project delivery. "We liked that it was lifecycle-based," says Elisabeth Van Cotthem. "That was important to us because our project leads often don't have time to study a full handbook, they need to know what to do next, based on where they are in the project." P3.express also offered a

common language and reference framework that both new and experienced project managers could use to coordinate more effectively and work in alignment with the broader organisation.

P3.express provided a framework onto which Flanders Make could map some of its internal procedures. In this way, the content became more intuitive. For Flanders Make, P3.express offered just enough structure to orient project leads without becoming a burden. It helped define not just what to do, but why each step mattered. This was an important feature for project leads who may be unfamiliar with the purpose behind formal project management practices.

By mid-2024, following a series of workshops with external experts, the organisation began the process of aligning its internal project management content with the P3.express structure, starting with its covenant projects. The goal was simple: make project guidance easier to follow, and more likely to be used.

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Implementation Process

The shift to P3.express began with a series of collaborative workshops in the summer of 2024. Flanders Make invited external experts to help map its existing processes onto the P3.express lifecycle. These sessions focused on aligning the organisation's internal content, especially for its covenant projects, with the sequence of activities

defined in P3.express. We started by loading a copy of the P3.express manual in our local wiki (Confluence), then added their specific project information to that copy. "The content was already there," recalls Elisabeth Van Cotthem. "The workshops were about mapping it. Once we did that, we could place the right links at the right points in the cycle."

The new system was rolled out in early 2025 as part of the organisation's annual project management communication campaign. This campaign serves to inform project leads of process changes and reinforce compliance with internal and external requirements. Instead of introducing the changes through formal documentation or slide decks, Flanders Make adopted a hands-on approach: new project leads were trained using the actual interactive handbook. They were guided through the steps relevant to their current project stage, often using their own project as the starting point for discussion. "We want to keep it light," says Van Cotthem. "We don't want to overwhelm people with information they won't need for months. We train them on the part that's relevant now."

This just-in-time training model made it easier to integrate the new approach into daily practice. Each project lead could focus on the current phase of their project, with the option to explore additional steps as needed. Because the personalised P3.express manual is hosted in Confluence, users can access supporting templates, examples, and checklists directly from within the process diagram. The implementation focused first on covenant projects, longer-term initiatives where governance requirements and stakeholder complexity are higher. However, the intention is to gradually extend the model to other types of projects.

Early Results: Less Bureaucracy, More Clarity

Early feedback from users has been largely positive. Project leads appreciated the clearer structure and the ability to access relevant information more quickly. The inclusion of short explanations for each activity was particularly helpful for those less familiar with formal project management. "It makes a difference that each step explains why it exists," Van Cotthem notes. "For a kick-off meeting, for example, it's not just 'do it,' but 'this is what it's for.'"

The rollout itself went smoothly. There was no major resistance, in part because the change was not perceived as adding new burdens, but rather as simplifying a process. The PMO also benefited from the improved structure: it became easier to answer questions by pointing project leads to the exact part of the handbook relevant to their situation. "If someone has a question, I can just share a link," says Van Cotthem. "Everything they need is there, and with further links if they want more detail."

While it is still too early to measure long-term impact, initial signs suggest that the new structure has made it easier for project leads to find, understand, and apply the project management processes they are expected to follow.

Challenges and Next Steps

While the initial rollout of P3.express for covenant projects was smooth, extending the model to other types of projects has introduced new complexities. Flanders Make operates in a multi-stakeholder environment, where not all projects follow the same governance rules or internal workflows. This variation presents challenges when trying to create a unified yet flexible handbook.

One key difficulty lies in distinguishing between general project management steps and procedures that are specific to certain funding authorities or internal departments. For example, projects funded by the Flemish agency VLAIO or European programmes often have different reporting requirements or approval processes than those initiated and funded directly by Flanders Make. "People who lead multiple project types need to see at a glance what's different and what's the same," explains Steve Vandenplas. "But at the same time, we can't create confusion by suggesting that internal procedures apply to external partners."

The PMO is currently working on a way to present this information clearly. The goal is to layer project-type-specific information on top of the shared P3.express structure without overwhelming users.

Conclusion

For Flanders Make, the adoption of P3.express has been less about changing what project managers do, and more about improving how they access and apply that knowledge. By reorganising internal guidance into a step-by-step lifecycle, the PMO has made the project management process more approachable, especially for project leads who are not specialists in the field.

This approach aligns well with the organisation's broader role as a networked research centre. While Flanders Make coordinates and supports project execution, much of the work takes place in collaboration with external core labs, universities, and industry partners. In such an environment, prescriptive systems are rarely effective. What's needed instead is a shared structure that provides enough clarity to align efforts without limiting local autonomy. "We're not a directive PMO," explains Steve Vandenplas. "We don't manage the projects directly, we support them, and part of that is giving people tools they actually want to use."

Flanders Make's journey shows that with the right framework, even large-scale, decentralised organisations can simplify project management without sacrificing control. For other research centres or complex organisations facing similar challenges, P3.express offers a compelling path forward.