

To Gate or Not to Gate



Some people believe that a phase-gate system is the only effective way to generate new products. Others feel that it is overly restrictive and that it will ignore opportunities for disruptive innovations, producing only incremental improvements. Though they seem mutually exclusive, I think both parties are correct!

While a company's vision and strategy are the responsibility of corporate leadership, the people who do the heavy lifting must have a high level of control over product definition and process execution.

Consequently, the most effective way to provide autonomy to a project team while assuring that a new product is aligned with the company's vision and strategy is through infrequent but well-defined control points where corporate leadership can determine whether a project is on course. Whether these control points are called reviews, screens, filters or gates and whether the periods between them are called stages, phases or something else is inconsequential and strictly a matter of semantics.

However, far too many companies have instituted so-called "Stage Gate®" processes that are overly restrictive, cast executives in the role of judges and place excessive emphasis on financial factors. These embodiments do stifle creativity, disregard disruptive opportunities and rarely result in truly innovative products. Sadly, they taint the reputation of a methodology that is fundamentally sound.

A sound NPD process is sufficiently flexible to apply just as much rigor as is justified by a project's risk and no more. In a collaborative corporate culture, executives play the role not as judges but as coaches, mentoring team members to either complete the project successfully or, when necessary, reject it. Furthermore, a well designed process does not rely heavily on financial characteristics early in the process as doing so will almost guarantee the rejection of a truly innovative concept due to its inherent risks and unknown return.

If your company's process is rigid; if executives act as judges, passing pet projects through while unjustly challenging others; if it relies heavily on financial metrics, it will almost certainly fail. Designed and executed properly, however, a process that features a high degree of team autonomy combined with collaborative executive guidance is highly likely to succeed, no matter what you call it.

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About J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C.

Jack Welsch has had over 4 decades of experience in engineering and new product development at all levels and has been awarded over 35 U.S. patents. He has been directly involved with the phased and gated development process since 1979 and has spent much of his time and energy in the continuous improvement of the process. While most of his career has been spent in manufacturing companies, he has taught the business aspects of product development as an adjunct instructor, at both Lehigh and Wilkes Universities. In addition to his roles as Principal of J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C., he is Chairman of Wilkes' Industrial Advisory Board.

J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C. is dedicated to helping firms improve their new product development process. Learn more at www.jhwelsch.com/npd.