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# Guide to Independent Reviews

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# Guide to Independent Reviews

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## About this guide

This guide demonstrates the value of independent project reviews as an important component of an overall project assurance regime. It also aims to assist departments in implementing provisions pertaining to independent reviews as

stipulated in the Treasury Board *Policy on the Planning and Management of Investments* and the *Directive on the Management of Projects and Programmes*.

Readers who have comments or recommendations to inform the next iteration of this guide are invited to send an email to [questions@tbs-sct.gc.ca](mailto:questions@tbs-sct.gc.ca).

# 1. What is an independent review?

An independent review is a critical assessment of a project conducted by qualified and objective individuals (or reviewers) at arm's length from the project. Such a review supports enhanced project decision-making and oversight by applying expert analysis and by providing evidence that is impartially obtained.

An independent review **aims** to:

- arrive at an accurate assessment of project status at the **earliest** opportunity
- meet the objectives of the individual who has sponsored the review (that is, the review sponsor)
- make timely findings and recommendations to support project success based on an objective view of the evidence being presented to the review team

It is imperative that the independent review is not constrained by the initial objectives set out by the sponsor. Reviewers must be enabled to explore any aspect of the project that evidence suggests may be problematic. To constrain the reviewers would diminish the independence of the review and could result in non-resolution of problems that may impact the success of the project.

A review is **independent** if:

- the reviewers **do not have a conflict of interest** – real or perceived – with the project (for example, they have no previous or subsequent work attached to the project and therefore no stake in its approval)
- the reviewers **are not prejudiced** by the normal biases of those with a vested interest in the project or its outcome (for example, they are able to maintain objectivity and stay at arm's length from those with a stake in the project)

The last point is particularly important because both the review team and the review sponsor must be cognizant of the unintentional biases that may be present. For example, project proponents may unintentionally present evidence in a more positive light than those with no vested interest in the project. This is due to normal decision-making biases, such as **optimism bias**.

The review team must view the information presented to them with an objective lens. The review sponsor must be open to accepting the findings and recommendations presented by the review team as being an impartial interpretation of the evidence obtained.

## 2. Why conduct an independent review?

The independent review has become an essential tool in helping to ensure project success. A review should be sponsored when there is value in establishing a better understanding of the project (for example, prior to a project gate). It is important that the review sponsor recognize that the reviewers' assessment will offer insights that may not be readily apparent. This is vital as it is not possible to manage what cannot be seen.

The fundamental value of an independent review is derived from the reviewers' **findings** and **recommendations**, which provide:

- **insights** into risks and issues that may not be obvious to those involved in the project's day-to-day activity
- an opportunity for the review sponsor and senior management to decide if specific **actions** are required to ensure the project remains on track to achieve its objectives
- evidence to help determine whether the project warrants further investment when making gating **decisions**

The review findings and recommendations can also be instrumental in helping to "de-risk" a project. Table 1 demonstrates some of the risks that an independent review can help to address.

**Table 1: the value of conducting independent reviews in de-risking a project**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>How would an independent review help?</b>
<b>Insufficient information for decision-making</b>	An independent review supports enhanced decision-making by providing objective information about a project's health beyond what might be readily apparent.
<b>Impact of common biases</b>	An independent review provides an objective lens to reduce the influence of normal decision-making biases.
<b>Not leveraging available expertise</b>	An independent review relies on the expertise of the reviewers to offer objective recommendations. Acting on these recommendations helps to ensure that the project remains on track to meet its objectives.
<b>Delayed understanding of project status</b>	An independent review offers an objective assessment of the project earlier than may otherwise be available. With earlier insight, problems can be addressed before they start to impact project outcomes.

The benefits of an independent review depend on the ability of the reviewers to accurately depict a project's reality. Reviewers can only do so when given the latitude to explore any facet of the project, as needed. This ensures the independence (and therefore the benefits) of the review is not adversely impacted due to certain areas being placed off-limits, even when the evidence suggests they ought to be examined.

After being made aware of the findings, the review sponsor has a responsibility to fully consider both the findings and recommendations. An appropriate response is required, either through the initiation of necessary corrective measures or the provision of a rationale for not acting. In so doing, the independent review can have the intended positive impact on project success.

### 3. What guiding principles influence the quality of an independent review?

#### ► In this section

The quality of an independent review is largely influenced through adherence to the following four principles:

#### A. Ensure and maintain independence

The review team is made up of qualified and impartial independent reviewers who have no real or perceived conflict of interest.

#### B. Build trust

The independent review is undertaken in a respectful and sensitive manner so as to encourage all stakeholders to communicate openly and honestly (that is, to speak truth to power) without fear of reprisal or judgment.

#### C. Consider risks and outcomes

The independent review assesses the risks to successful delivery and their impact on the achievement of the intended business outcomes.

#### D. Adapt based on findings

The independent review team has the latitude to adapt their approach in order to explore areas that have been identified as problematic through the course of their review.

### 4. What are the key roles in an independent review?

Key roles in an independent review are:

- the **review sponsor**: the person for whom the review is undertaken

- the **review team**: experts at arm's length from the project who are engaged to conduct the review
- **interviewees**: key project stakeholders who provide reviewers with information and insights

Each contributor plays a key role in the success of the independent review.

The **review sponsor** requests the independent review, determines the focus and oversees the review from a logistical standpoint, while being mindful not to interfere with the independence of the review team. While the review is typically commissioned by the project sponsor, the review sponsor may also be another senior project stakeholder (such as the Chief Financial Officer on behalf of the departmental investment board).

The review sponsor is responsible for:

- ensuring funds are available to conduct the independent review
- developing the requirements for the statement of work
- establishing priorities for the review team
- engaging the project team and stakeholders to ensure active and honest participation
- being available throughout the review to discuss any findings that emerge and solve problems where necessary
- sharing the key findings and recommendations with project governance and oversight bodies, the project manager, and other key stakeholders
- ensuring that findings and recommendations are appropriately addressed

The review sponsor **must** promote the open and honest disclosure of information to ensure that the review team is able to uncover accurate and pertinent information to expose underlying problems. They must **neither control nor limit** the review; a controlled or limited review is less likely to uncover problems that could adversely impact project success if left unresolved.

The **review team** comprises a lead reviewer, review team members and subject matter experts (as needed). All review team members are independent from the



project team and other project stakeholders. This independence allows the reviewers to offer an impartial point of view. A key to review success is the extensive experience of the review team.

- The **lead reviewer** liaises with the review sponsor. The lead is responsible for developing the review plan, managing the review team, assessing and communicating the review findings, and formulating recommendations. The lead also participates directly in the review itself, along with the review team members.
- The **review team members** gather information by examining project documents, attending workshops and conducting interviews. Such examination provides them with insight with which to develop findings. Review team members document and share this information with the lead reviewer.
- A **subject matter expert** may be brought in to provide specialized knowledge that enables a clearer picture of impacts particular to the project (such as policies, technology and environmental implications).

**Interviewees** play a key role in the review's effectiveness. The review team determines which individuals in what key roles are to be interviewed.

Interviewees typically include but are not limited to:

- project leadership
- project manager and team members
- business stakeholders
- internal service providers (such as Shared Services Canada)
- other departments implicated in the project (particularly for joint or enterprise projects)
- external stakeholders (such as suppliers or solution integrators)
- others with a stake in the project

In addition, a **review coordinator** is typically designated by the review sponsor. The review coordinator is a departmental resource assigned to provide logistical support during the course of the review.

# 5. What are the types of independent review?

## ► In this section

There are three types of independent reviews: (1) full review, (2) quick review, and (3) targeted review.

### Full review

A full review represents a thorough review of project health, including an assessment of the project environment, project management practices, governance and oversight, risk management, and stakeholder engagement. The full review is the most comprehensive review as a result of the longer engagement period.

### Quick review

A quick review assesses areas of risk in project components without incurring the costs and time commitment of a full review since it is more limited in scope. The quick review is highly focused; it entails consultation with a limited number of stakeholders, conducted through a series of individual interviews, a workshop, or some combination of the two.

### Targeted review

Much like a quick review, a targeted review focuses on specific targeted areas. However, given that it consists of a deep dive into the problem area, it would typically require a similar amount of time as a full review.

**Table 2: attributes of the different types of independent reviews**

	Full review	Quick review	Targeted review
When is an independent review most appropriate?	When there is a need to inform a gate assessment	When independent assurance is required between gates	When there is a known problem that would benefit from an in-depth assessment

<b>What is the typical duration?</b>	4 to 6 weeks	1 to 3 weeks	3 to 4 weeks
<b>How many reviewers are involved?</b>	3 to 5	1 to 3	3 to 5
<b>What are the deliverables?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent review presentation</li> <li>• Independent review report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent review presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent review presentation</li> <li>• Independent review report (if needed)</li> </ul>

As set out in the *Directive on the Management of Projects and Programmes*, the type and timing of independent reviews must be reflected in the project gating plan and updated as needed as the project evolves.

## 6. When should an independent review be performed?

### ► In this section

The scheduling of an independent review will depend on why the review is needed. An independent review adds significant value when a project:

- is approaching a key decision point (or gate)
- will benefit from an independent assessment as a check on the project's health between gates
- is encountering unexpected challenges that warrant an independent assessment

The need for independent reviews, as well as the frequency of reviews, is proportionate to the project's size, complexity and risk profile. For higher-complexity projects, there is an increased benefit to conducting independent reviews in support of gate decisions.

## Gate review (in advance of a gate)

Gates require an accountable individual to make decisions about whether and how the project should proceed. Independent reviews should be conducted in support of gating decisions to provide decision-makers with unbiased, credible insight and advice. Higher-risk projects should conduct independent reviews at multiple gates as part of an effective risk mitigation strategy.

## Health check (between gates)

Independent reviews are recommended between gates to evaluate project health and to provide additional information for management and oversight. Independent reviews conducted between gates enable management to gain the necessary insight for early course correction.

## Ad hoc (as a concern arises)

Independent reviews that support gating decisions and health checks are typically planned in advance. However unplanned, ad hoc reviews may be warranted in cases where a significant concern has arisen. Such cases may become evident as a result of a gate assessment, a previous independent review, or an unforeseen threat to project success or change in strategic direction.

# 7. What are the key considerations when undertaking an independent review?

Although every independent review is unique, a review will typically cover a wide range of topics, such as:

- **Business case:** The value proposition as articulated in the business case must remain relevant and attainable as the project moves through its life cycle.
- **Benefits management:** Benefits must be at the forefront of decision-making to ensure the successful delivery of the project output and the achievement of organizational priorities.

- **Governance:** Due consideration must be given to the effectiveness of the governance arrangements, including roles and responsibilities of board members.
- **Stakeholder management:** Stakeholders must be identified and actively engaged so as to promote a common vision of the project and to ensure buy-in.
- **Resource management:** Key project roles must be filled, and the individuals in those roles must have the necessary skills and experience proportionate to the project's complexity and risk.
- **Risk and issue management:** There must be evidence of active management of risks and issues.
- **Business readiness:** The business must be engaged with the project and be prepared to assume responsibility for the capability as it is implemented.

While these are some of the key considerations in a review, they are not exhaustive and are not intended to constrain the review. Every review must be tailored to the nature and scope of the project, the project's environment, and the particular stage in its life cycle. Tailoring the review includes adapting the focus of the review as a clearer picture of the project's reality emerges. Adapting the focus allows the review team to provide key insights and recommendations with which to address issues that exist, whether they were previously identified or not.

For questions (or lines of enquiry) that pertain to key decision points (or gates) in a project's life cycle, see Appendix B of the [Guide to Project Gating](#). While these lines of enquiry are specified by **gate**, they can also be adapted to suit **health check** and **ad hoc** reviews, depending on the timing of the independent review within the project life cycle.

## 8. What are the attributes of an effective independent review?

The effectiveness of the independent review is directly proportionate to the quality of the findings and recommendations that result from the review.

The review **findings** and **recommendations** must:

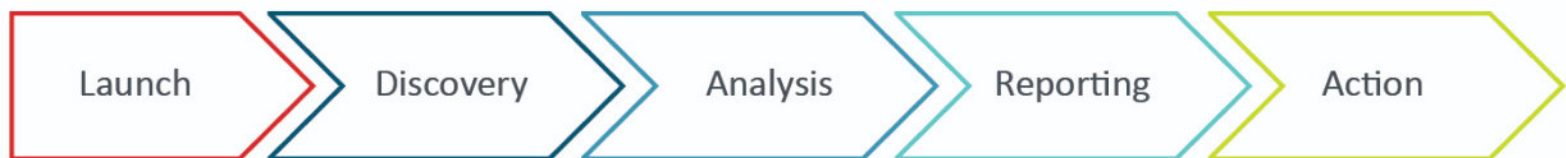
- be well documented and sufficiently thorough and complete
- include conclusions that are well supported
- be constructive and usable
- add value to the successful completion of the initiative
- provide perspectives and insights that are of value to the review sponsor and project management
- include recommended improvements that can be acted upon

## Appendix: review methodology

### ► In this section

This appendix describes the five steps to undertake when conducting an independent review. To illustrate the steps, the process for a full review is described; however, these steps may be scaled as appropriate to accommodate a quick or a targeted review.

**Figure A1: the five steps to conduct an independent review**



### 1. Launch

- The review sponsor hosts a kick-off meeting with the independent review team to explain why the review is occurring and any specific areas of focus.
- The review sponsor ensures that the independent review team has been provided the necessary project documents either prior to or immediately following the kick-off meeting.
- The review team determines which individuals in what key roles are to be interviewed and proposes a schedule.
- The review sponsor formally announces the independent review by engaging with stakeholders to get their support and commitment to the review's timeline.

- The review sponsor assigns an internal independent review coordinator to provide logistical support.

## **2. Discovery**

- The review team reads necessary project documentation and conducts all agreed-upon individual interviews and workshops.
- The lead reviewer may optionally request a presentation, workshop or demonstration, hosted by the project team, to provide additional insight.
- The lead reviewer may brief the review sponsor on any emerging findings, including any findings that were not the original focus of the review, on a regular basis or as needed.

## **3. Analysis**

- The review team conducts interviews as the primary source of intelligence-gathering by which to gain valuable insights to establish their findings.
- The review team analyzes information gathered during the discovery phase to inform their findings.
- The review team may request supporting interviews and/or project documents to address gaps or confirm findings.
- The review team finalizes their findings and develops recommendations to move forward.
- The lead reviewer shares a summary of the review team's findings with the review sponsor.

## **4. Reporting**

- The final report with findings and prioritized recommendations is provided to the review sponsor.
- The review team presents their findings to key stakeholders and governance bodies as directed by the review sponsor.
- When the review sponsor is not the project sponsor, it is contingent upon the review sponsor to share the results of the review with the project sponsor. This

is because the project sponsor (who is accountable for the success of the project) is responsible to develop, and follow through on, an action plan to address the findings and recommendations in the report.

## 5. Action

- The project sponsor must consider the review findings and recommendations and respond appropriately.
  - While most often the project sponsor's response will take the form of an action plan to address the challenges highlighted in the review, it may also be appropriate to provide a rationale for not acting.
- The project sponsor confers with and shares the progress against the action plan with senior governance and oversight bodies. If the project is under Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) oversight, the independent review report and action plan is also to be shared with TBS.
- The review is a matter of public record and is subject to the *Access to Information Act*. It should be appropriately stored according to information management policy.

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