

The Office – PMO Sustainability

"Not again", exclaimed Carol the PMO analyst after hearing about an announcement just made by the CEO from a friend. "There is another re-org just announced which will affect us all since IT has now been merged with Finance under the banner Shared Services and headed up by Trent Cash, the old Finance Manager. Suzanne Teck, the current head of IT isn't mentioned, neither is the PMO. Finance never liked the PMO or Suzanne. Better start looking for a new job I guess again!!"

We wrote some time ago about a PMO's contribution to sustainability from an environmental perspective. We could probably also write a compelling article about the PMOs contribution to financial sustainability in a business. Instead we thought we would provoke some discussion by asking the question "How sustainable is the PMO?"

The Oxford Dictionary definition of an "endangered species" is:
"A species of animal or plant that is seriously at risk of extinction"

That definition must apply to many PMOs, especially the Enterprise PMO. Project and Program Management Offices are by their nature focused on delivery of a Project or Program, so while they have a defined life and role, they are for a period of time reasonably sustainable. It's the Enterprise PMO or Portfolio Management Office we are discussing here*.

Let us consider some serious characteristics "endangering" the "typical" Enterprise PMO:

- Usually Opex funded (and hence a target for cost cutting)
- Usually aligned to a senior stakeholder (so a victim of re-orgs)
- Usually lacking a clear mandate (so success or otherwise is often difficult to determine)
- Usually under resourced and/or resourced with too junior people (so struggle to deliver relevance)
- Often provide Quality Assurance (process, deliverables etc.) so adopt a "police" culture. In such cases they are generally avoided by Project Managers
- Often caught in the middle between Business needs and organisational capacity, especially if involved in project approvals

* We know there are some Enterprise PMOs called "Project Management Office", "Program Management Office" or similar but we won't go there, hopefully you get what we mean.

- Often the bearer of bad news in terms of reporting
- Often not the “owner” of the Enterprise Project Management Tool(s)
- Sometimes involved with Benefits realisation, possibly embarrassing senior managers in the business

To survive in any business, and to ensure the PMO survives, the PMO Manager typically spend a huge amount of time building relationships with key business managers, and more importantly marketing the value of the PMO. This is time that could be better spent providing real value to the business through analysis, support and leadership. With a successful PMO, it is often the absence of problems they deliver. Sadly, it is only when problems arise from their extinction the value is recognised or appreciated.

Organisations often report difficulties the organisations face as a result of continually culling and later reintroducing PMOs. Challenges the organisation as a whole faces, regardless of where in the organisation the PMO lives include:

- Retaining staff and staff satisfaction
- Retaining knowledge of policy and process
- Retaining knowledge of project history
- Retaining knowledge of systems (configuration etc.)
- Providing adequate support to Project Managers and other system users
- Ability to influence Sponsor and PM behaviour, and hence deliverable quality
- Consistency and timeliness of governance information

The above list should be seriously considered prior to any re-organisation involving a PMO. The work they do will need to be done by somebody else within the organisation or not done at all. The consequences of the loss of their work are often not well understood.

Nature shows us that species facing extinction must either change and adapt, or move location to a more favourable environment.

So what do we tell the Carols of the world? Do we agree their life in a PMO role will only last two years maximum? Do we advise them to join a Project or Program PMO instead? Do we advise them to consider a different career, perhaps move back into Project Management? Or do we advise them to keep fighting and adapt, do the best job they can and continue to believe in the value a good PMO can provide to an organisation.

In the long run, it is our belief that what we do matters. We believe our work aligning projects to strategy, supporting governance, improving project delivery and helping deliver business value is worth the investment in our effort.

About the author

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