

Creating an Elite PMO¹ Solving Challenges through Collaboration

Matthew London

Abstract

It's been said that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Enter: today's project managers and project management offices (PMO). Individuals and teams alike, however educated and capable can't always proactively forecast where a project and its team members could run amok. While there's still no panacea that can resolve all the problems a project may encounter, there are strategies that equip an organization's PMO to combat them. The strength of these strategies rests in an organization's human resources—its employees—to create tools, processes and governance procedures to handle evolving threats while also exploiting emerging opportunities. Who composes this team? Ideally three to five people with experience in tool development, business process knowledge and project management.

Each person's particular knowledge, when managed properly and proactively, can contribute a specific layer of project management insight so that reactive project management becomes a thing of the past.

Introduction

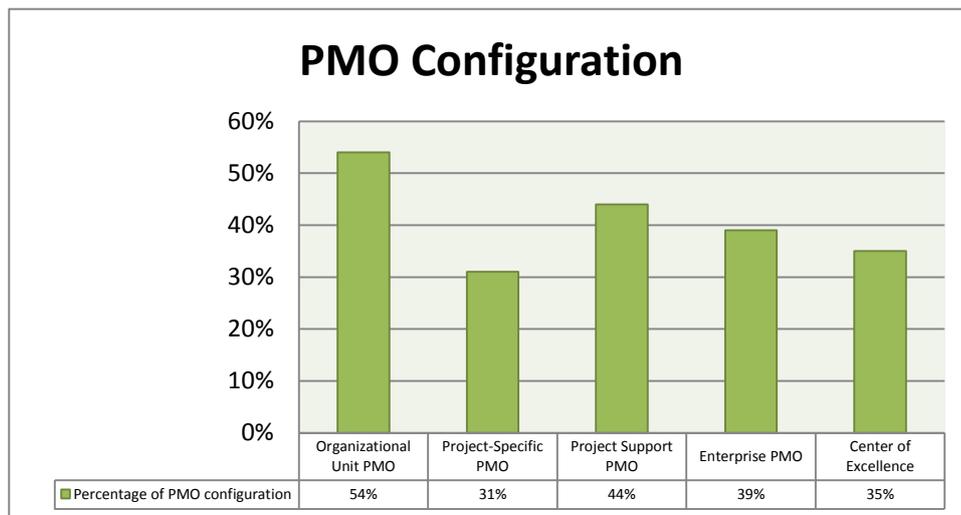
You may have heard the term "fire fighters". These people are the resources who resolve issues that arise without warning, the issues that were not foreseen in risk logs or project plans. These resources are hailed for their quick ability to handle urgent priorities and get the projects back on track. The downside is that project managers are often held liable for the problems the firefighters fix. All project managers have been in this situation at some point and it is not a pleasant experience. There is a term for this situation: reactive management.

Read any management article and you will see terms such as "proactive," "innovative" and "collaborative" to describe approaches for how a project manager can move from reactive management to proactive management. Stakeholders look to the PMO to implement correct governance, processes or tools to assist project managers embracing these traits. Large enterprises must have an elite PMO behind them that brings innovative processes, governance and tools to better enable project managers. While PMOs should create the services for their project managers, often times an alternative approach is needed: resources within the PMO need to be motivated. This is where the PMO Triangle comes in.

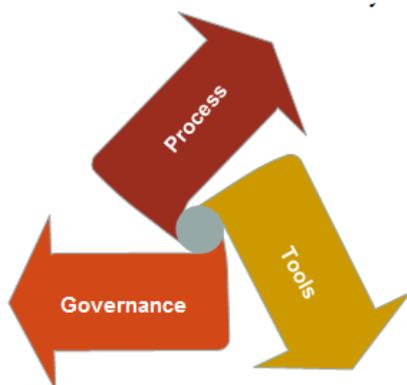
¹ *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 8th Annual UT Dallas Project Management Symposium in Richardson, Texas, USA in August 2014. It is republished here with permission of the author and symposium organizers. For more about the annual UT Dallas PM Symposium, [click here](#).*

The “PMO” in PMO Triangle – What is it?

Before we discuss how an organization can make their PMO elite, let’s first review what types of PMO configurations exist. Once we understand the main configurations, we can then see how it can be elite. The Project Management Institute (PMI) describes five configurations of PMO organizations in its 2013 Pulse of the Profession article on PMO frameworks. They are: Organization Unit, Project-Specific, Project Support, Enterprise-Wide and Center of Excellence.



The goal of these differing configurations is to assist PMOs, either at the unit or at the enterprise level to manage and execute projects at the highest performance standards. Each one of these configurations provides its own benefits, but the true success of any configuration resides within the culture of the organization that implements the PMO configuration. One of the biggest challenges PMOs face is that the value the PMO creates is not marketed to senior executives within a company properly. This tends to create a perception that the PMO is nothing more than a “template factory” creating barriers for projects. This problem is nothing more than a perception issue that ineffective PMO services have created. Luckily it can be resolved, but leaders within the PMO, agnostic of configuration, must make a concentrated effort to market the PMO correctly.



The services an effective PMO offer reside in three key areas. Those areas are process, governance, and tools. Unfortunately the services offered in those areas may not align with the needs of the organization and are in not in alignment to provide value. Consider this example: Though having a software development lifecycle (SDLC) is beneficial and arguably a must-have for any organization with information technology (IT) projects, if the SDLC is not engineered to fit the organization, the SDLC will fail. Thus any value the PMO was trying to offer is hindered, and confidence from the organization is lost.

Another example of failed services can be seen within the tools area. Most PMO organizations use project software as the backbone for managing project schedules.

However, if a PMO designates a specific tool to be used within an organization, but does not properly equip and train his or her staff using the tool, they are again missing the value that they could have offered the organization. There are many of other situations in which PMOs can and do fail in adding value, but this paper is not about the failures. It is about the opportunity for any PMO to bring value to the company in which they serve by implementing a simple, yet effective framework.

PMO Triangle

What is it?

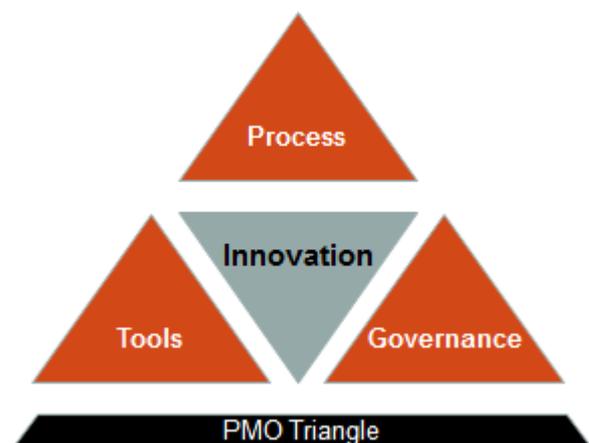
Project managers often hear and use the “iron triangle” example or triple constraints to discuss the key areas of a project that must be managed. Managing the constraints adds value to the project and allows the project manager to be proactive.

There is another type of triangle that a PMO can utilize to bring value to an organization. We will coin this triangle the “PMO Triangle.” The constraints for this triangle differ from the iron triangle, but the idea is the same. Instead on external constraints of a project, the PMO Triangle focuses on the internal constraints an organization faces. The three constraints embedded with the PMO Triangle are the service areas mentioned previously: process, governance and tools.

In order for a PMO to truly be elite, it must focus on these areas and devise strategies to enhance the services that are offered. In order to do that, the PMO can no longer assume “out of the box” services will be acceptable. Organizations are focused on customer service through customizable experiences and products. PMOs need to embrace these customer-centric models and implement the same business model. This will not only bring value to the organization, but also allow the PMO to be an innovative force for the company and adds credibility to the organization and enhances the company culture.

What does it look like?

I know what you are thinking, “The PMO Triangle sounds like a great idea, but it’s just an idea”. While the idea does sound like a utopia, luckily it is an actual model that can be used to build PMO services organizations expect PMOs to have. This model leverages specialized resources that are focused on specific segments of the PMO Triangle. Thus the PMO Triangle is more than a concept. It is an actual team within the PMO. This team is a staff of three to five individuals who have specific skills in the areas of process, governance and tools.



Obviously those areas are very broad, so PMO leaders must evaluate the needs based on the demands. For this paper we will assume a PMO needs to have processes, governance and tools that help project managers accomplish their job successfully.

So now that we have pared down the utopian dream of the PMO Triangle into a feasible idea, we now need to break the model into a usable solution. The first part of the model is the process resource. This individual is the person who understands how the business operates and functions. Ideally, this resource has been with the company for five to ten years and worked with several business units, allowing him or her to see a broader view of the organization and all the back-channel problems that are not shown on the daily reports, and appropriately create and tailor processes. This resource brings a different perspective that challenges previously implemented PMO processes that do not add value.

The second section is focused on the governance area of the PMO Triangle. This resource's background is focused on leading project management governance methodologies; he or she needs to be familiar with PRINCE2, PMI and Agile-based frameworks. These globally recognized frameworks allow the governance resource a palette to use that organizations can immediately buy into. This resource implements standardized methods that have a proven track record of being successful and customizable. The knowledge this individual has on governance not only brings value to the projects, but also the organization. The compliance, audit and overall governance that this resource implements can lower the overall risk exposure that organizations possibly face, especially if no structure is in place and bring order to a potentially chaotic environment.

The final part of the PMO Triangle is focused on tools. PMOs within an organization are viewed at times as "template factories." In other words, they are staffed with knowledge workers who create templates that allow project managers to bypass creating risk registers, stakeholder RACIs and other key project management artifacts during the lifecycle of a project. A majority of PMOs have the tool resource staffed accordingly, but the key to bringing value is found in proactively customizing tools to match the needs of the project managers that the PMO serves. Just look at the estimations of projects. If there is not a solution that can be used to make estimations easier, such as a parametric model, then the tools resource within the PMO can create a tool that brings value to the project managers and company.

How can it be implemented?

Now that the PMO Triangle framework is fully understood, we can staff accordingly and move toward bringing innovation to the organization. In order for value to be realized and the framework to be used to the highest performing levels, the input into the model must be on going. What this means is that PMO leadership must interact with senior leadership to identify and understand the organization's problems. The feedback gathered is a vital input into the framework of the team. A regular cadence of identifying issues needs to be created by PMO leadership. Once the issues and

problems from the organization are captured, they need to be rated and ranked in a matrix. This matrix will then be reviewed by the PMO Triangle team.

Once a matrix list of problems is developed, PMO leadership must schedule weekly or monthly brainstorming sessions with the PMO Triangle team to review the items. The brainstorming sessions is led by a facilitator within the group. This facilitator presents the group with the top three to five problems the organization has identified and asks the group to brainstorm around solutions to the problem. The time box for this brainstorming session should be between one and two hours. The session should be held in an environment where the team can freely share their thoughts and ideas. All ideas are heard and plausible solutions are documented. As is the case for any brainstorming session, no judgment or evaluation is to occur during the session.

However, once the meeting concludes, the group then leverages the Delphi technique to agree on the potential worthy of actionable designs and solutions. The goal is to select two or three ideas that can have substantial designs created by the team. The end result is implementable solutions that leverage the unique perspective and skills the PMO Triangle brings around innovative processes, governance procedures and tools.

Benefits of the PMO Triangle

It is safe to assume that multiple perspectives bring greater value to resolving problems. That is why the PMO Triangle is so valuable. It brings together a unique set of resources that turn a PMO into not only a value-driving force, but also an innovative force that proactively solves organizational problems. There are plenty of benefits to the model, but the main ones are: the career growth the resources experience; the increased reduction of risks for organizations; and positively moving the perception of the PMO from a barrier-creating template factory to an organization that high-performing individuals desire to work for. The primary value in the PMO Triangle is its agile framework; all types of PMO configurations can leverage its approach. It empowers PMOs to move from being reactive to proactive. Thus allowing project managers to avoid issues and reduce the dependency on having “fire fighter” resources save the day.

References

Morris, R. (2011, June 3). Project Management That Works!. : *The Iron Triangle of the PMO: People, Processes, and Technology*. Retrieved January 10, 2013, from <http://www.pmthatworks.com/2011/06/iron-triangle-of-pmo-people-processes.html>

PMO Frameworks. (2013, November 1). *PMI's Pulse of the Profession*, 6.

A guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK guide), fifth edition (5th ed.). (2013). Newtown Square, Pa.: Project Management Institute.

About the Author



Matthew London

Texas, USA



Matthew London, MA, MBA, PMP, PMI-ACP, PMI-RMP has over eight years of experience in project and program management. He has managed complex projects and programs for Fortune 500 companies and has experience in multiple industries. Currently, Matthew is a manager at EY; he holds degrees from Dallas Baptist University, Southern Methodist University, and Texas A&M Commerce University. Matthew can be contacted at mlondon84@gmail.com.