PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue VI – June 2021
www.pmworldjournal.com

Interview with Peter Taylor
by Yu Yanjuan, PMR
Interview

PMOs Are Applicable to All Scales of Project Business

Interview with Peter Taylor [1],[2]

Author, Advisor, Speaker, Trainer
Author of *The Lazy Project Manager* and other books

Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan

Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)

Introduction to the interviewee

Peter Taylor is a speaker, author and trainer. His publication includes *The Lazy Project Manager* (an Amazon bestseller in the field of project management), *Making Your Business Agile*, *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, *Leading Successful PMOs*, *The Presentation on Presentations*, *The Project Manager Who Smiled*, etc.

As a speaker, he is described as "perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today". He has made presentations to tens of thousands in nearly 30 countries.

He is also an experienced senior Program / PMO and transformation specialist with the

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[1] This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/

[2] How to cite this interview: Yanjuan, Y. (2019). PMOs Are Applicable to All Scales of Project Business: Interview with Peter Taylor; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue VI, June.

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ability to define overarching priorities and ensure project and program activity satisfies high level business objectives. His key strengths include: embedding robust governance to ensure successful delivery of £multi-million change programs and working with stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle to ensure delivery of tangible business benefits; introducing best practice processes aligned with an organisation's culture and maturity. Working across multiple industries including Manufacturing, Health, Pharmaceuticals, FMCG, Aerospace and Finance.

Peter Taylor is based in the United Kingdom, but has readers, followers and fans worldwide. Learn more about Peter at http://thelazyprojectmanager.com/peter-taylor

Note: This is my 2nd interview with Peter Taylor and this one is focused on the topic of PMO. Link to the first interview with Peter Taylor
http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/Home/article/detail/id/478.html

Interview

Part I - Definition and role of PMOs

Q1. Do you think it is necessary that every organization has a PMO?

Peter Taylor (Taylor): It all depends on what you might mean by 'PMO'. It is a lovely three-letter acronym, but it can many things to many people, and often with vastly different purposes.

That said, if we consider a 'PMO' (decide what that 'P' means in your own organisation – project, program, portfolio, people, product…) is about overseeing change, then all organisations can benefit from scale of PMO to help the agents of change be successful.

Q2. You mean that PMOs are also applicable to small companies?

Taylor: So how small are we talking? How about 'one'? Can the sole project manager also be the whole PMO? Well not really in truth, because a sole project manager cannot act like a PMO of many people since they can't act objectively with regards to their own project performance and they can't spend time investing in self-development and in method improvements and so on.

So not 'one' then. Can a PMO be implemented in a small company that has limited resources, a small team of project managers only – perhaps two or three? Well perhaps not a 'PMO' as such but certainly a virtual equivalent with shared responsibility of some of the basic PMO functions that could be allocated to the remaining project resources – perhaps one person could focus on the training of project managers, another on method enhancements, and another on community aspects, etc. In this way, a lot of PMO duties could be delivered to a reasonably high level.

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I think a PMO can be applicable to all scales of project business, but it might not be a permanent, dedicated unit, but more of a 'part-time PMO'. The biggest risk to such a PMO is the ability to offer the objective insight and support to all project managers, and the business. The smaller the team, the harder it may be to do this in a constructive, objective, non-emotional, positive way – not everyone has the skill to do this and with a close team of peers, it isn't always easy to do (or easy to receive at times).
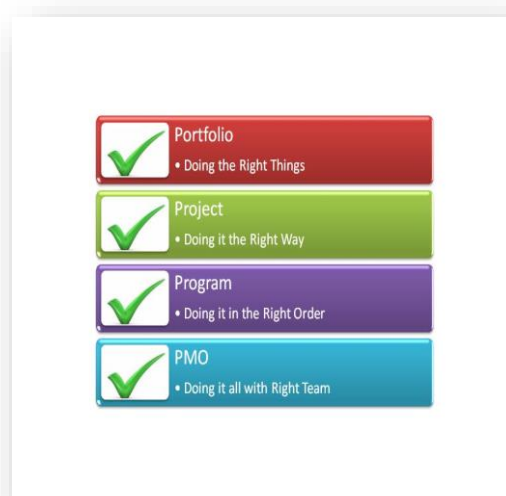
Q3. How do you define a PMO?

Taylor: The Project Management Office (PMO) in a business or professional enterprise is typically the department or group that defines and maintains the standards of process, that are generally related to project management, within the organization.

But I am afraid it is not that simple.

The abbreviation, PMO, can stand for Program Management Office (confusingly also a PMO) or Portfolio Management Office (increasingly confusingly also a PMO). There is even talk of a Project Office (PO), a Project Control Office (PCO), a Central Project Office (CPO), and a Project Support Office (PSO). Up to you to choose – what do you have in your company? What are you leading? What are you part of? What is it that you are currently planning?

You may well have a completely different flavour of PMO from the above, and you may well not even call it a 'PMO'.

Project Management is all about doing something (a project) in the right way and the 'right way' is all about method and discipline and quality and control. Program Management is all about doing those things (the projects) in the right sequence or order. Portfolio Management is about doing the right things. My simple definition of a PMO is as follows: PMO is doing all the above with the right team (the right things, in the right way, in the right order).

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Q4. How should a PMO position itself in an organization? In other words, what are the roles of a PMO?

Taylor: Here are the three roles of a PMO:

- The PMO strives to introduce economies of repetition in the execution of projects.
- The PMO aims to reduce project risk through common practice and quality assurance.
- The PMO links business strategy to project-based execution of that strategy.

Part II - Value of PMOs

Q5. How do you see the value of a PMO?

Taylor: A PMO can operate in a number of ways: Supportive; Controlling; Directive.

- Supportive – The Supportive PMO is all about helping out project managers by providing some level of support in the form of project expertise, templates, guidelines, best practices (or at least proven practices), knowledge and project expertise, typically based on personal experience and/or a network of experienced people throughout the organization. At the very smallest scale a supportive PMO could be just one person potentially.

- Controlling – The Controlling PMO is applicable where there is a desire to have a stronger discipline on all project activities, methods, procedures, documentation etc.

- Directive – The Directive PMO goes beyond control and actually takes over the project or projects by providing the necessary project management experience and resources. Project managers from the PMO itself are assigned to each new project and reporting of project progress is direct to the PMO itself.

Q6. What is the necessity and importance of having an enterprise-level PMO?

Taylor: The key here is that any PMO set-up that you have needs to embrace the whole organisation. If you have multiple departments or regional PMOs, which are not aligned 'enterprise wide', they will, almost inevitably, start to deviate in their processes, approaches, methods, standards, and governance.

The very purpose of economies of scale and standards of project delivery will become slowly lost over time as each PMO evolves slightly differently. An over-arching 'enterprise' oversight will ensure that this does not happen.

Q7. In your book, you said, "A PMO isn't the mother of all project managers." What does that mean?

Taylor: What I was referring to is that the PMO should not generally be considered the 'mother of all project managers' but rather the body that helps develop the best project managers out there facing the in-house stakeholders or the external customers on a day-

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to-day basis. Project managers are the ones on the coal face, the ones that are experiencing the meeting of theory and practice. At the end of the day, the project responsibility and ownership still lie with the person best equipped to do the job, the project manager. The PMO is there to support, guide and aid.

Part III - For PMOs to deal with VUCA

Q8. What should PMOs do to help organization deal with challenges brought by VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity)?

Taylor: A PMO can lead the drive to a more adaptive enterprise through the three pillars that such organisations require:

- Becoming outcome driven: designing and building operations to support the desired end result;
- Being truly collaborative: harnessing the power of the collective without the barriers of tradition;
- Achieving a team-focused approach: driving alignment and openness.

At the same time, a PMO should erase the following blockers to such an agile mindset:

- Hierarchy: The enemy of open collaboration is centralised hierarchical governance;
- believing in a protectionist approach;
- Traditionalism: The "we have always done it this way" argument supported by referencing historical successes whilst ignoring future challenges;
- Secrecy: The complete opposite to the "power of the many" belief, operating on a "need to know" basis only for those in power, controlling information and communications;
- Enterprise system rigidity: When the technology forces the behaviour of an organisation, we may be in a "new normal" now, but when we return to work, it will be under the process discipline of the tools we have used before.

This topic is fully explored in detail in my new book 'Make Your Business Agile: A Roadmap for Transforming Your Management and Adapting to the 'New Normal' (Routledge)'.

Part IV - PMO Leader Competency

Q9. What are the top qualities of a successful PMO leader? Would you please offer some details on "PMO Leader Competency Framework"?

Taylor: Great question! The 'to be expected' core skills of PMO leaders are:

(1) Business competencies
- Knowledge of the organisation
- Core business application systems and process
- Legal aspects

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- Compliance standards
- HR aspects
- Business skills or acumen

(2) Personal competencies
- Networking and Influencing
- Communication – oral and written
- Decision making
- Problem solving
- Facilitation

(3) Leadership competencies
- Stakeholder management
- Coaching
- People skills
- Conflict management
- Organizational aware
- Team building

(4) Technology competencies
- Application environment
- Standards, Policies and Procedures
- Personal responsibilities

In the research for the book, I uncovered five critical skills that a good PMO leader had beyond the 'to be expected' core skills. The five critical skills are: Being passionate about projects (and project management); Communicating with conviction; Negotiating well for the business and the PMO; Being enthusiastic about leading change; Believing in uniqueness.

On that last one "Believing in uniqueness", I came to the conclusion that your PMO will almost certainly be different to every other PMO in some way, great or small.

If you have led a PMO before then take this as a key learning point: The next PMO that you will lead will be different. The people will be different, the projects will be different, and the business will be different; the result of which is that the PMO will be different. As such, you need to proceed in a way that acknowledges that there is no simple, single, out of the box approach to develop a PMO. Yes, there are tools you can use and there are applications that you can use but the shape and strategy of the PMO will be unique to the actual situation that you are in.

Here are a few things to remember as a PMO leader:

- Do things for the right reason;
- Consider but don't be influenced by others emotions;
- Know your own opinions, informed by others but formulated by you;
- Be flexible in how you think and in what you do;

- Unlike pretty much every other business unit, the PMO will be special in what it aims to deliver to the business and how it goes about delivering it;
- Be passionate about what you do, communicate what you do, negotiate acceptance of what you do, and be enthusiastic about what you are leading.

Part V - PMO measurement

Q10.   How do we measure the performance or success of a PMO? Any factors or metrics?

Taylor: Well, this is a big, big topic that we could go into a lot of detail on, but I won't. The key is to satisfy the following two points:

(1) Operational/Day-to-day/Project-to-project measurements of performance success – your own business will dictate or guide what your PMO needs to track

a. Project Profiling
b. Project Reporting
c. Dashboard (Portfolio – RAG status – trending)
d. KPIs
e. Scorecard
f. Funding ROI
g. Escalation

(2) PMO Team measurements

h. A good PMO is not measured by the PMO leader. No, it can only be measured by the project managers that they lead. A good PMO leader will take the massed skills and knowledge of such project managers and take them in the right direction for the business and for the projects.

Part VI - Lessons for PMOs to learn

Q11.   According to your observation, what should we pay attention to in PMO management?

Taylor: Consider the following 10 key lessons for any PMO.

Lesson 1 – Get help

As has been already discussed, the reality out there in the 'PMO land' is that there is not a plethora of wise and experienced PMO managers, directors, leaders, heads etc. and so it is sensible for anyone who is engaged to help an organisation set up a new PMO or advise on improvements to an existing PMO to reach out for some help.

The book "Leading Successful PMOs" is aimed as one source of aid, inspiration and guidance, so 'well done' for starting the process with the right attitude.

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In addition, professional consultancy is another way to improve your chances of success with that PMO project.

And there are communities you can connect to – on LinkedIn, through the project management bodies such as PMI and APM etc. Do your research before jumping on too deeply.

Lesson 2 – Get the right leader

Having the right 'head' of the PMO is also critical, in *Leading Successful PMOs* the top five attributes for a great PMO leader were explored. The good PMO leader must champion project management and project managers across their organisation as well as believing in the business strategy. They must communicate with conviction and negotiate fairly but strongly for the PMO and the projects. They must be enthusiastic about leading change and critically must have the strength of belief in their own uniqueness and that of the PMO they lead.

Lesson 3 – Measure the PMO value

A 'balanced' approach to a PMO was advocated in *Leading Successful PMOs* with one way to achieve such a balance was to consider structuring your efforts under the '5 Ps':

- P = People
- P = Process
- P = Promotion
- P = Performance
- P = Project Management Information System

The point here is that it may be tempting to just think of the PMO as all about the process, the means to ensure that good project management is achieved through methodology and quality assurance etc. but that ignores the people side.

And it may be that your consideration is towards the project management community and your focus is drawn towards the people (projects are all about people after all) and so you direct your efforts as a PMO leader towards training and team building etc., but this ignores the project mechanics.

You may also accept the need to build a good tracking and reporting system, supported by an investment in a project management information system, to deliver the visibility of project health and progress towards business goals. But without the inclusion of a promotional program, it could well be the case that all of the good work that you and your team achieve in the areas of process and people will go unnoticed and unappreciated by both your peers and the executive.

It is my belief that the best PMOs balance all of this to achieve the most effective development of capability, representation of capability and sharing of capability and

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achievement.

Measuring the PMO value will ensure that you are ready to articulate the true value of your PMO to the business as needed, and it will also allow you to continuously improve the PMO's performance.

Lesson 4 – Lock the value in

The value of the PMO should be 'locked-in during the delivery period and should be regularly re-assessed and continually measured by a good PMO leader.

Lesson 5 – Move with the business

Regularly 'take the pulse' of your PMO and take the view of that PMO by the business. If something has changed, you may need to return to the business case and re-validated and/or update accordingly.

You need to ask yourself and the PMO:

- Has anything significantly changed in the business that requires an adjustment by the PMO?
- What is the view, within the business, of the value of the PMO?
- Are there any key opponents to the PMO operation?
- Are the methods you have established well adopted and adhered to, and have recommended improvements been acted upon?
- Has the level of project maturity risen?
- Are project managers reporting the same issues as before?
- Has there been a change in the PMO sponsorship role(s); personnel or approach?
- Has project 'health' improved or stagnated?
- Is the PMO approach the right one?
- Is the PMO model the right one?

You may need to survey the PMO stakeholders to understand in more detail what it is that needs extra effort and focus. Alternatively, it may be that you just need to get together with your PMO team and revisit the PMO purpose.

Whatever the situation, you must ensure that the PMO is in step with the current business needs.

Lesson 6 – Connect to strategy

A PMO can operate at three levels of 'strategic maturity' within an organisation.

The first being the custodian of strategic intentions through the ownership of the projects themselves, each of which should in some way relate directly or indirectly to a strategic intention of the organisation.

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This can be considered as 'Strategy Management' whereby the PMO acts as the governing and advisory body to the executive by:

- Validating that all projects that are initiated fit one or more strategic initiative;
- Tracking the current and valid alignment between projects and strategies;
- Making recommendations for 'stalls' and 'kills' for projects that no longer align with current business strategic thinking.

The second is 'Strategy Delivery' where the PMO translates the key strategic objectives into new projects to add to the existing portfolio (and perhaps to remove some from the portfolio if such objectives have changed). This 'Strategy Delivery' is supported by the 'Strategy Management' capability.

It may be that the PMO also takes some direct ownership for the execution of large and complex programmes (or projects) that are specifically critical to a key strategic initiative, such a relocation activity, for example.

The final is 'Strategy Creation', which refers to having a role in helping organisations decide on which strategic options to pursue (and then to translate them into projects – Strategy Delivery- and to manage their success – Strategy Management).

This is a rare situation that a PMO has reached this position of trust and influence inside an organisation, but it is the potential future for the enterprise PMO that is successfully delivered and embedded with the right sponsorship within such an organisation.

Lesson 7 – Size Matters

If you do projects, then a PMO is generally a good idea (PMO can mean many things to many organisations of course and we have to take that into account). But if you only do a few projects, because setting up PMOs demands significant investment from an organisation, then the cost of failure is greater accordingly. A much larger organisation with a large project portfolio and equally large project community will be able to absorb and manage such a demanding project far more easily (and with reduced impact of failure).

Lesson 8 – You do not have infinite capacity

The PMO is, if not here to stay, at least here for the foreseeable future, and more and more executives are supporting PMOs within their organizations.

There is a strong argument for a 'green' PMO to try and get as involved as possible inside the organisation but there are dangers in taking on too much. The PMO is well respected these days for the most part but there is also the risk that it is seen as a solution for everything that is not 'operational' and that it can deal with anything even loosely associated to project work.

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When your PMO is well established, then consider these other matters but for now be wary of making your PMO a bottomless resource for anything and everything that the business pushes in your direction.

Lesson 9 – Make things better

Marissa Mayer, the new CEO of Yahoo, tasked with rescuing this once mighty company, has done many things in her first few months in charge including the creation of 'PB&J'.

'PB&J' is an online service which actually stands for 'Process, Bureaucracy, and Jams'. This service allows employees to complain about organisational blockages and excessive overheads that slow action and decision making.

It is critical that a successful PMO should be a 'balanced' PMO, and this includes getting the balance right between people and process. Both are critical to project success and both come under the remit of the PMO.

But it is the responsibility of the PMO to 'make life better' for the people – the project managers, so that they can effectively and efficiently do their jobs - and for the business, so that the projects are seen to be under control and delivering benefits.

One of the critical tasks in setting up or improving a PMO is to review the method or framework that the organisation uses to guide their project managers. And in many cases, it is often a need to add in quality reviews and some control points or stages to improve this control. But it is always a concern that anything added should add proportional value – quality assurance should deliver quality (and not be a burdensome universally hated overhead that delivers no real benefit to anyone). One way to do this is to think carefully when you design such a process. The other is to make sure that you have a 'PB&J' in place for the PMO team to let you know when you have got it wrong.

Lesson 10 – Learn the Lessons

The question that is often asked amongst many of us in project management is 'why didn't we learn from that experience?' and the same is true when it comes to PMOs.

Albert Einstein said 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. So why do we accept 'insanity' as the path of project management?

For example, in a meeting, you are presenting, you go to write something on the flipchart or the whiteboard but the pen is dry. How many of you put the pen down on the rack again, pick up another one and carry on with the key, interesting, important point you were making? Thereby, the same dry pen is left for the next person – or worse, for yourself to do the same thing again a little later in the meeting. Do you expect the pen to magically refill itself? Of course not, madness! Do you put the pen in the bin and ensure that a new one is put in its place, or at least note someone that new pens are required? Of course not, madness! So why don't we learn lessons when it comes to project experiences? It is not the process of binning the empty pen and replacing the pen but in

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letting others know what and why you did that and how it can benefit them in the future and why they should also pass on this piece of knowledge. It is less 'lessons learned' than 'lessons shared'.

It is a critical role of a PMO to make sure these lessons are both learned and shared in a practical way and to include the PMO members in that process as well.

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About the Interviewer

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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring will also serve as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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