

# Relevant challenges and lessons in the implementation of a Project Management Office in a legislative power

## The experience of the National Chamber of Representatives of Argentina (2016-2019) <sup>1, 2</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the functioning of the Project Management Office (PMO) under the authority of the Administrative Secretary of the National Chamber of Representatives between 2016 and 2019. During this period, the Presidency of the Chamber saw its role strengthened in the strategic planning of the government program, in the coordination of management action, in the monitoring of the fulfillment of the government's priority goals, and in accountability to the citizenry. The text examines in-depth the experience of the Planning and Control Management Unit (UPCG), a project management office (PMO) created in 2017 that allowed maintaining the strategic coherence of the government program and focusing it on the achievement of results during the government period. It also identifies opportunities for improvement in the development of the functions exercised and provides lessons for other countries and legislative institutions interested in strengthening these capabilities.

**Keywords:** project management office, strategic planning, coordination, monitoring, accountability, methodology, communication.

### 1. Case study: the experience of the Project Management Office in the National Chamber of Representatives of Argentina (2016-2019)

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## 1.1 Immediate context

The National Chamber of Representatives of the Nation is one of the two Houses that compose the National Congress of the Argentine Republic. That is, the National Chamber of Representatives and the National Chamber of Senators form the Parliament and are the legislative power of the country. The representatives elected are in office for four years. Every year the legislative body chooses the Speaker of the Chamber of Representatives that it is the one who proposes the authorities who will hold the Secretaries and will be the Speaker's assistants in the institution management<sup>3</sup>.

During 2015 the economic crisis affecting Argentina and its fiscal deficit had made it clear that it was necessary to improve human and financial resources management. At the same time, society was demanding political leaders to manage public resources in a transparent way and to account for the way they are used, as well as to provide better services delivery.

As a response to this demand, the new national government administration that took power in December 2015 had expressed, among other measures, the need to establish a state modernization plan proposing a substantial change inside each public body. While other governments in the region were already working on the New Public Management agenda, Argentina had failed attempts during the nineties<sup>4</sup>.

Even though the National Chamber of Representatives, as a public body, does not aim at maximizing profitability or providing direct services to the community, the urgency of improving the allocation of resources by promoting responsible management and accountability became evident. For such purposes, the President of the National Chamber of Representatives created the "Program for Parliamentary Modernization, Innovation, Transparency and Democratic Strengthening 2016/2017"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The Secretaries are political authorities, which means that they are appointed and removed by the speaker of the Chamber at its will or if the speaker changes. There are four Secretariats: Parliamentary Secretariat, Administrative Secretariat, General Secretariat of the Presidency, and General Coordination Secretariat.

<sup>4</sup> The demand for decentralization and privatization of government functions demand had increased coordination between central governments and service providers, to guarantee their adherence to central government policies and complementarity in producing the inputs needed to provide services. The experience of OECD countries shows that the shift away from the central government's provision of services has been coupled with an oscillation between greater policy implementation autonomy for service delivery agencies and greater central government control (Gonzalez, Lafuente, 2018). The experience of Latin American countries at the end of the 1990s has advanced towards strengthening fiscal policy and results-based management (World Bank, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the Program was deepening the modernization process that had been carried out in the previous administration through the "Modernization Program of the Honorable Chamber of Deputies of the Nation" (2013/2015 Program). Although the guidelines of the 2013/2015 Program are maintained some changes are introduced. Somehow, the modernization process that later developed in the Administrative Secretary began to be glimpsed in the 2016/2017 Program, since that secretariat is entrusted with: *"streamline processes under the systemic approach conducive to the improvement of management, in order to facilitate the administration of*

Historically, the administration of the National Chamber of Representatives had been at the service of political activity and had not considered efficiency values or criteria. The modernization and achievement of results had not had an impact on the efficient use of spending and resources, nor had it been carried out with performance management tools.

In December 2015, a new administration took power, and the authorities of the National Chamber of Representatives were changed. In this context, one of the first measures put into practice was to promote an organizational diagnosis carried out by the Administrative Secretariat since its mission is to guarantee the functioning of the National Chamber of Deputies, assuring the responsible management of its resources promoting public management transparency and accountability. Specifically, at that moment, it oversaw managing 6200 employees, 13 buildings, and a budget of 3.647 million pesos, equivalent to 280 million dollars. This diagnosis detected the non-existence of internal processes or mechanisms of control and planning, low communication among the different organizational units generating isolated silos, double efforts, inefficiency in the use of resources, large amounts of paper used in errands, almost no systematization, and low professionalization of human resources. The Administrative Secretary recognized that many of these challenges required multisectoral approaches.

## **1.2 Structure, Functions and Processes of the PMO**

To fulfill public policy promises made in the campaign, the Speaker and President of the Chamber appointed the Administrative Secretary to push forward most of the reforms. To this end, the Administrative Secretary considered it was essential to separate the urgent from the important and form a team focused on the latter to lead the government agenda. First, she hired and appointed a group of advisors to analyze and propose administrative initiatives to order, modernize, and make resource management and allocation more efficient. However, she soon realized she needed support to manage their coordination as the organizational units' authorities of the Administrative Secretariat had also begun to complain that they were receiving similar requests for information from different people. Inspired by the management system implemented in the City of Buenos Aires government and leveraged in the Presidential Resolution (PR) 951/16 that created the "Program for Parliamentary Modernization, Innovation, Transparency, and Democratic Strengthening 2016/2017" dependent of the General Secretary of the Presidency, the Administrative Secretary promoted the creation of the Planning and Control Management Unit (UPCG) within the structure of the Administrative Secretariat of the National Chamber of Representatives of the Nation in January 2017.

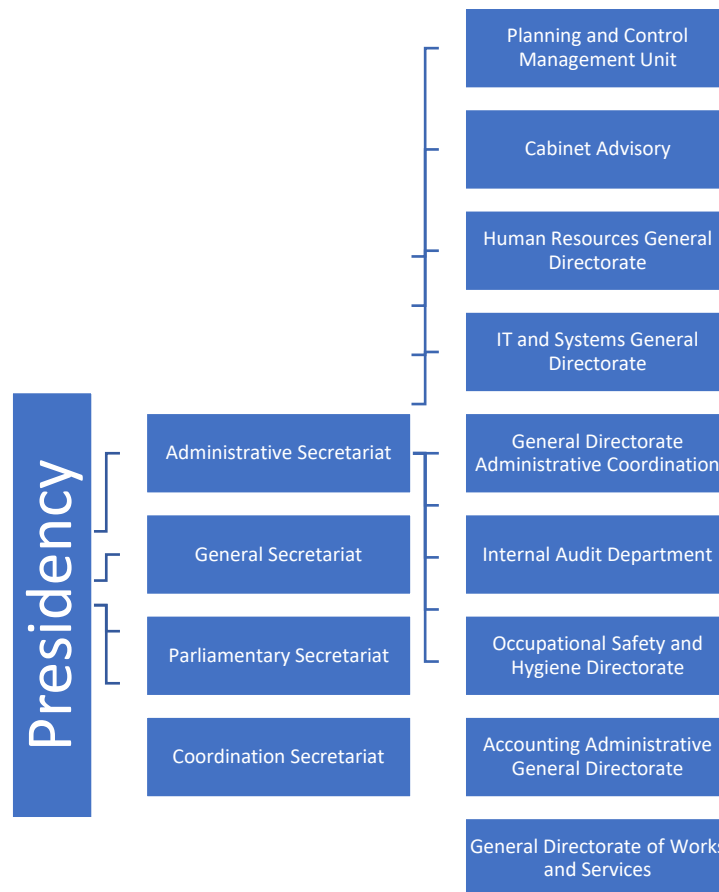
The Planning and Control Management Unit (UPCG) was designed in function to the needs of the highest authority, the Administrative Secretary and its structure and functions resulted from a combination of functions that were already being performed without this specific structure, such

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*information and the systematization of processes; promote transparency; streamline the management of the secretariat transparency; streamline the agency's management; promote the efficient delivery of services, and strengthen the culture of continuous improvement".*

as the organizational diagnosis, the organization of follow-up meetings between the highest authorities of the areas and the Administrative Secretariat, the leadership of strategic projects and communicational initiatives.

According to its mission and specific functions, it corresponded to the Planning and Control Management Unit (UPCG) the design, formulation, and monitoring of the general action plan of the Administrative Secretariat. It depended directly on the Administrative Secretary, which made it a key player in the implementation of the strategy.



**Figure 1:** Organization chart of the Administrative Secretary in December 2019

It is the office responsible for monitoring, controlling and assessing the management of the operations and projects carried out by the organizational units that make up the Administrative Secretariat. In this sense, it incorporated a result-oriented management model in an innovative way within a governmental environment.

Taking as a reference the definition of the PMO Value Ring that establishes that there is no Project Management Office (PMO) with predetermined functions but the functions or services it provides

vary according to the needs of the stakeholders of an organization, the Planning and Control Management Unit (UPCG) can be considered as the Project Management Office, from now on the PMO.

The PMO leader was the main interlocutor between the highest authority of the Administrative Secretariat and the heads of the organizational units, reporting the issues related to governance developments directly. The head of the PMO was responsible for the daily actions performed by the organizational units aligned with the governance general plan and their contribution towards reaching their goals, providing, therefore, technical assistance in defining their initiatives. She accounted for the course of the projects, warned about possible detours, and recommended corrections. She was aware of the talent and skills of the human resources available, advising the appointment of project managers and team members.

There PMO had three offices: the Planning and Control Management Office, the Project Office, and the Internal Communication Office.

### **Planning and Control Management Office**

The Planning and Control Management Office was responsible for the **multiannual strategic planning** of the Administrative Secretariat, which had set the governance course for a four-year period. In agreement with it, it led and coordinated the elaboration process of the yearly **operational planning** for each of the organizational units. In this way, it was involved in defining the projects and operations; and together with the head of the PMO set the priority of each project and suggested indicators and goals to the highest authority of each area. In addition, each organizational units' highest authority was committed to two priority projects or initiatives called "commitments" for which they signed an agreement. However, the most relevant function was the coordination of the **control and monitoring tasks**. Cabinet meetings, indicators, control boards were some of the words that began to be heard.

Four types of centralized monitoring were implemented.

- i. Compliance with the goals and indicators of the annual operating plan for each of the organizational units, including the PMO.
- ii. Compliance with the priority projects of the Administrative Secretariat in terms of budget, scope, and time.
- iii. Compliance with the two "commitments" of the annual plan assumed by each organizational unit.
- iv. Compliance with initiatives that arose outside the planning process or resolution of unexpected problems.

When time, budget, and scope were not being met and goals were not being achieved, the head of the PMO would intervene to analyze what was hindering progress and make adjustments to overcome the obstacles. These interventions included providing management tools to the sectors,

through the collaboration of PMO analysts with the organizational units' teams and the organization of meetings between critical stakeholders, project rescue, and project managers' suggestions and removals.

To contribute and ease the commitment of goals and projects, several relevant tools were used.

On the one hand, different types of meetings were organized. First, depending on the urgency and importance of the goals and initiatives, bilateral meetings between the authorities of the organizational units or priority project leaders and the head of the PMO or the Administrative Secretary were organized. At these meetings, compliance with priority projects was analyzed, explanations were provided, possible alternatives to remove bottlenecks were discussed, and corrections were decided upon. New goals or deadlines agreed upon at the meetings were then monitored. Second, the Planning and Control Management Office organized meetings on-demand between organizational units to unblock issues or resolve urgent matters or tasks. Third, with the assistance of the Communication Office Cabinet meetings between the authorities of the organizational units and the Administrative Secretary were organized every trimester where the Administrative Secretary reinforced the priorities and promoted the team integration.

On the other hand, multiple efforts were made into establishing an efficient monitoring and assessment system. Among the main initiatives, we can find the setting up and development of a management indicator system through a *control panel (SIGER)* that measured and monitored the annual plan and projects of each organizational unit to guarantee their effective fulfillment based on quality, time, and cost criteria.

### **Project Office**

The Project Office was responsible for developing and ensuring the execution of the best practices and standards of Project Management (PMBok) within the scope of the Administrative Secretariat. That is, to develop and implement guidelines and training in Project Management, develop and manage procedures, templates, and any other organizational process asset related to projects, provide **methodological support** to project managers and leaders of each organizational unit, manage the resources shared by different programs and projects in order to optimize resources - organizing lessons learned workshops-, design and implement **project management training**, and finally **design and implement projects** that promote administrative innovation to implement the strategy.

The Project Office was formed by two teams: a methodological team that assisted and advised all the directors or project leaders or Project Managers of the Chamber, and was in charge of their training, and a Staffing team dedicated to leading and managing specific and priority projects, which could also be projects rescued from other organizational units.

With the help of an external expert, the Office developed a methodology for project management based on the Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBok). The methodology reached a total



of 43 projects in 2017, of which 75% submitted an Initiation Act, a management plan, and a Progress Report. In 2018, the methodology reached a total of 32 projects, and in 2019, 36 projects. In terms of processes implemented during 2017, 14 of the processes established in the 5th edition of the PMBoK were implemented, 18 in 2018 and 23 in 2019.

This implementation was largely possible due to training. In 2017, 70 agents from 12 organizational units were trained and 14 directors or project leaders received follow-up or individual coaching at their workplaces, which proved to be very effective for the implementation of the projects. During 2018, 128 agents were trained, and during 2019, 30.

### **Communication Office**

The Communication Office was responsible for the development, execution and control of the Internal Communication Strategy of the Administrative Secretary. It gave **visibility and communication support** to the projects of the different organizational units of the Chamber and developed a medium long-term internal communication strategy for the Administrative Secretary to strengthen the institutional identity and work culture of the institution. It was also responsible for the implementation, execution, and development of communication channels of the Administrative Secretary with Support Blocks; Representatives, and trade union associations. Furthermore, it regularly developed teambuilding and integration sessions aimed at organization leaders as well as middle management to foster teamwork and cross-communication in the organization.

As regards financing, it must be considered that since it the Chamber is a governmental body, both availability and management rules of economic and financial resources are ruled by law and are relative to the budget item allocated in the Budget Act valid for the whole State management. In this respect, the PMO promoted a **result-oriented budget allocation**. The procedure designed and implemented implied that each organizational unit of the Administrative Secretary defined its allocation requisites based on operational planning, which provided the highest authority with the necessary information to decide on the initiatives to be financed during the following years. In this sense, far from elaborating the budget by merely adjusting one of the previous years according to the estimated inflation, a process was established that associated the budget to real and concrete needs.

The PMO had in its DNA to **guarantee the continuous improvement** of the result-oriented model and also of the administrative operation by identifying and promoting opportunities for continuous improvement. In this sense, it had an internal consulting function from which it worked on the ideation and promotion of new initiatives.

Finally, although they were not the most usual functions, the PMO was in charge of reviewing proposals that came to the Administrative Secretary, acting as an advisor and at the end of the government it was also in charge of preparing the handover to the new administration.

### **1.3 Talent Acquisition, Retention and Development**

Setting up the PMO team required a careful staff selection to meet the technical and professional demands of the office and the organization's requirements. First, it must be said that a high percentage of the organization employees belonged to its structure as permanent staff. This means they were full-time staff who kept their position independent of the management change related to the government turnover. Because of this, the PMO team was made up searching for talents that were already part of the organization. The selection was mainly based on workers who had broad experience inside the organization. Many of the chosen agents have previously played a leading role in previous administrations and have wide experience in administration and management. The office was made up of professionals from different areas: accountants, industrial engineers, economists, sociologists, psychologists, communicators, designers, business managers, among others. This great profile variety enormously enriched the work team.

It is important to emphasize that the PMO, apart from methodically searching for skilled personnel, offered a training program based on transmitting the technical skills needed for managing projects. In order to put on the same level, the skills of the different members of the PMO as regards project management, courses about project management, change management and evaluation of public policies were organized where the knowledge, material and information necessary for this process were provided. This task was performed with external technical experts and always in agreement with the projects that were in development. Considering the good functioning of the training sessions, it was decided to extend the courses to the rest of the organizational units.

Due to the organizational culture of the Chamber and its diverse staff accustomed to administrative and political variations but not to changes in the work approach, the need to professionalize all agents involved in project management became evident. An institution-wide project management program was launched in 2018. It was designed by the Project Office as part of the training program in charge of the Human Resources Directorate as it was intended to be permanent and sustainable to achieve effectiveness and the expected results. For this to be effective, a specific agreement was signed with PMI Argentina Buenos Aires Chapter, which was in charge of designing the courses that were offered within the organization. The Program consisted of basic and PMP Certification courses. An example of the importance given to this program by the organization can be seen in the significant investment of money that its execution demanded. The objective was to promote the institutionalization and sustainability of the Project Management methodology implemented so far and to acquire the latest trends applicable to Project Management and related topics, which at the same time would contribute to a greater appreciation of the management model by employees. To those ends, in 2019 the basic courses were taught by Project Office staff who had already been sufficiently trained.

As part of a priority project of the Administrative Secretariat aimed at defining human resources roles and positions during 2018, progress was made in the preliminary design of the following roles associated with project management: Strategic Project Coordination, Project Office Management, Project Director (as equivalent to Manager), Project Coordinator, SCRUM



Specialist, Project Control Specialist, Junior Project Coordinator, Area Project Support, Junior Area Project Support. These roles existed informally, but were not subject to a fixed salary range, nor did they allow those who held them to be promoted to other ranks with due salary recognition.

## 2. An analytical look: conclusions of the case study

### 2.1 What have been the main innovations introduced by the PMO?

As mentioned, the leadership and management model in the 2016-2019 period was characterized by a more decentralized system of power that required greater coordination, which was assumed by the Administrative Secretariat through the PMO. In this sense, the **design and communication of a comprehensive strategic plan under the leadership of the Administrative Secretariat** stands out. The initiatives and projects carried out up to that point had not been the result of a formal strategic planning process<sup>6</sup>.

The **implementation of a PMO is in itself an organizational innovation**, since, although there were organizational units with similar functions in the organization, they did not carry out said function in practice since their roles had been rather political. In addition, although planning and monitoring activities were carried out in the Administrative Secretariat, they were carried out mainly within each organizational unit, and bilaterally between the authority of each unit and the Administrative Secretary. Also, the design of the PMO is innovative in two aspects. On the one hand, it is not a technology project management office that originated in a systems area, but it manages a portfolio of strategic projects for the organization, independent of their nature. On the other hand, it controls the Internal Communication Office, which powers coordination, planning and makes results visible.

Although project management is not pre-existing, the **hierarchy and professionalization through the creation and implementation of its own methodology based on the Project Management Book of Knowledge was an innovation both for the institution and for public administration in general**. The changes introduced by the PMO affected not only the main authorities of the Administrative Secretariat but also the authorities of the organizational units- directors, department heads-, but also certain employees who work directly in support of the provision of internal services, many of which performed the functions of project manager. This idea of projecting the state placed the figure of the **Project Manager** at the center as a person who may not have a formal position in the organization but who can assume responsibilities. As will be seen, although it was one of the main innovations of the model, at the same time it was a source of challenges to be addressed.

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<sup>6</sup> In line with traditional models, planning was established at the time of preparing the budget or if there were subsequent needs, each organizational unit agreed on its budget needs based on its individual plan-many times without being in communication with other officials and organizational units..

## **2.2 What contextual factors have facilitated the implementation of the PMO?**

The management model proposed by the PMO was adopted in a very specific context, described in the introduction, which included several favorable conditions that helped facilitate its implementation.

- a. The new government had come to power with the promise of improving transparency in the state. One of the most relevant public policies in this regard was the approval of the Public Information Law, which was used by the Administrative Secretary as an excuse for advancing in the organization, systematization of processes and information, and accountability to the purposes of being able to comply with the publications and responses to requests for public information.
- b. A leadership committed to results and familiar with management tools embodied in the Administrative Secretary. The new team of senior officials and senior and junior advisers to the Administrative Secretariat had brought first-hand experience with results-based management tools. They had this expertise from their work in different offices of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, and in the private sector, which allowed them to conceptualize and guide the adoption of the new tools.
- c. The Administrative Secretary had interference in appointing the appropriate officials to key positions in her Secretariat and removing those that did not work, and at the same time approving the hiring of specialized advisors and specific services both to guarantee the implementation of the PMO- such as experts in project management, change management, coaching, teambuilding activities, among others.
- d. A healthy fiscal situation. Even though the budgets approved in the budget law were falling in real terms (approved credit grew by 26% on average between 2016-2019 and inflation always grew higher, reaching 47% in 2019), the organization had a healthy fiscal status. The savings went from 100 million in 2015 to 341 million in 2019. Therefore, the PMO was implemented in a context of increased resources that enabled the expansion in the capacities of the Administrative Secretariat and the PMO (including the formation of the team of planning and control analysts and communication with 18 new officials) and in the organizational units responsible for the achievement of results.

At the same time, it is undeniable that the PMO has also had an influence on saving resources. Many of the savings' measures carried out were given priority and were closely monitored. As for evidence of the resulting improvements, the "Efficient Fleet" project can be mentioned, which, through the planning, monitoring and control of expenses associated with contracting insurance, parking spaces, fuel and the purchase of spare parts for the fleet of cars, saved more than \$73,000 a year. Another success story is the development of the Ticket System, which exclusively introduced online management for representatives to obtain bus and plane tickets. This project allowed printing costs to be reduced by around 123,000 USD, in addition to allowing the

user/representative to consult and issue their tickets from anywhere in the country. It is estimated that this project, together with the negotiation of rates with the airlines and the regulatory provisions, achieved savings of more than 185 million pesos.

### **2.3 What aspects and decisions were determinants for the PMO's success?**

The leadership of the model was assumed by the highest authority, the Administrative Secretary, who was especially involved in the implementation of the PMO through the exercise of routines related to planning, monitoring and control, participating in follow-up meetings and also those with the entire Cabinet, approving the allocation of resources in the budget, participating in the launch or closure of priority projects, and acting as a sponsor in the presentation of the initiatives to implement the model carried out by the PMO in the organization, among the most outstanding.

*"...Florencia (the Secretary) greatly promoted the integration of the team. Before, many directors did not talk to each other, everything was discussed with the Administrative Secretary. Now it is a round table..." Head of Department (CIPPEC, 2019)*

The creation of the PMO at a formal level made it possible to implement the model since, being an organizational unit, it had the power to contract and propose new processes in the organization. Hiring qualified, motivated and fresh-faced employees gave the PMO dynamism and value.

The physical location of the PMO next to the Administrative Secretary's office empowered PMO members who did not have a formal responsibility position in the organization. It allowed them to be heard and carry out their tasks with greater ease and agility. In an organizational culture where the formal position is what grants respectability and power, this was important since it also began to happen with the members of each of the organizational units.

*"... anyone on my team has the endorsement to go and speak to another area to ask for help, to ask for advice, and that on the other side they will receive it, they will attend to it." Deputy Director (CIPPEC, 2019)*

The PMO also shared a physical space with the Administrative Secretariat's legal advisory team, through which all the documents and administrative acts that required its approval passed - protocols and regulations of processes, contracting of goods and services and personnel - which allowed a fluidity between the two and almost complete access to information by the head of the PMO, which allowed her to be aware of almost all topics.

The diversity and expertise of the team were important since the PMO had former officials from the previous administration committed to the new tools, which helped to legitimize them as technical tools with a less ideological burden. An important aspect was that most of the members of the PMO had a university degree and a higher level of qualification than the average of the organization, which contributed to the organizational units having a perception of added value by the PMO.

The PMO sought advice when it did not have sufficient expertise, which was key not only to train its members and generate installed capacity but also these experts functioned as external validators of the model that contributed to strengthening the consideration of the organizational units regarding the model of management. In this same line, the choice of the PMBok guide as a body of knowledge validated by an international community of project experts was important to achieve legitimacy.

The functions of the PMO were implemented gradually and through pilot tests. For example, the good practices of the PMBok guide were implemented at the beginning in the cross-cutting projects led by the Project Office. This pilot test demonstrated that it was possible to apply Project Management in a public environment and contributed to the involvement and support of the Secretary who showed interest in all the projects, and not just some, being managed professionally.

*"...it was not badly received...the measures were gradual, something that was good for me, and the changes were not abrupt or sharp...I perceive that people are happy...and that they have been taken into account is essential for them." Director (CIPPEC, 2019)*

The Project Office functioned as an innovation lab. It was involved in many novel initiatives such as the creation of its own project methodology based on PMBok, the incorporation of the change management methodology, among others, as well as specific projects or strategic initiatives that had to be carried out for the first time, such as the reconstruction of the missions and functions of the entire organization and the collection of administrative information to be published for compliance with the Law on Access to Public Information, the linking of projects with the traditional budget, the preparation of the preliminary strategic plan, the development of an accounting system, etc. An important aspect was the always open attitude of the head of the PMO and the effort made by the Project Office so that once executed for the first time, these functions would be institutionalized in each responsible organizational unit according to the missions and functions.

Having the Internal Communication Office within the PMO contributed to the generation of strategies to impregnate employees with the benefits of the new tools. It allowed adding value through the design of materials, guides, and other artifacts such as wall calendars of the different organizational units, preparation of support materials for presentations and projects, the creation of the different portals (Project Management Portal, the Accountability of the Administrative Secretary, Gender Portal), and the preparation of speeches and presentations for the Administrative Secretary as well as the organization of accountability events, among the most relevant.

## **2.4 What were the strengths of the PMO?**

Leadership style. The first noteworthy point is that before 2015, the Administrative Secretariat was a position held by men, and between 2016-2019 it was exercised for the first time by a woman. Although the specialized literature on the subject of leadership and gender is not unanimous in

maintaining that there are differences between the modality of female and male leadership (Díez Gutiérrez; Terrón Bañuelos; Centeno Suarez; Valle, 2003), it is pertinent to name him since the fact that the process has been led by women in all its lines- the Administrative Secretary, the head of the PMO and the heads of the three offices were also composed it, women- seems to have motivated the members of the organization to look for different ways of working more horizontally, personal and open. In the first place, it produced a significant change in the relationship with the staff of the Administrative Secretariat, accustomed to a "masculine style" of management, associated with attributes such as domination, competitiveness, verticalism, high control, rationality, aggressiveness, among others. Secondly, the new administration driving style characterized by horizontal and transversal work, open communication, availability for dialogue and the search for consensus, the promotion of cooperation and teamwork generated confidence and willingness of workers to incorporate the new proposals (CIPPEC, 2019).

The PMO's diverse, motivated team with a considerable degree of technical expertise was a key factor in the implementation of the new tools.

The implementation of professional project management, strategic planning and the annual plan, follow-up meetings, and Cabinet implied in their processes transversal work which helped employees to get to know each other and interact more with people, which helped to create a better work environment.

Internal communication played a critical role as already mentioned, either as support for the cultural change behind the introduction of the management tools in all its stages (planning, monitoring, and accountability) and with support in concrete activities of initiatives and strategic projects to each area, beyond giving them greater visibility. The changes introduced in the field of communication reflect the advantages offered by multidirectional communication in terms of the verticality of the transmission of messages. The democratization of information improved synergy and allowed the emergence of new contributions to project innovation.

Although there is no evidence in the literature that monitoring has brought better policies, the fulfillment of projects evidence that coordination and control had been successful. As for the monitoring of projects in 2017, it can be said that in 2017 only about 20% showed a significant deviation and only 3 projects had to be canceled. For the year 2018, 80% compliance with the Annual Operating Plan was recorded.

The most valuable monitoring and control tools promoted by the PMO were:

1. Organization and presence in the follow-up meetings between the authorities of the organizational units, Project managers with the Administrative Secretary, which contributed to unlocking and facilitating the management and appropriation of the minutes as valid documents of the decisions taken in these meetings that contribute to clarify and order the work.

2. Generation and development of control boards and a repository of data and information on the operation of the entire Secretariat. In this sense, the quality of the data declared by the sectors seems to have been reliable.
3. Specific monitoring of purchases and contracts as a central aspect of an efficient management mainly detecting deviations in time at each stage of the contracting.
4. Organization and participation in meetings of the different areas involved in the same project contributed to achieving the fulfillment of goals.
5. Direct messages between the Administrative Secretary and the highest authorities of each organizational unit were used by the Administrative Secretary as a double check to reduce the biases that the PMO could print on them.

The centralized information management in the PMO served for the preparation of presentations, reports, and publication of information in portals that served for the accountability of government management. Also, to the extent that think tanks made requests for information, the status of the draft ordering and systematization were useful in justifying delays in compliance. Much of the information produced for accountability served for the debate and analysis of think tanks.

Beyond engaging in the activities of planning, monitoring, and control of the portfolio, the PMO had functions of ideation and execution leading strategic projects of the plan that at the same time functioned as living examples of professional project management.

## **2.5 What were the weaknesses of the PMO?**

The leadership of the PMO as a coordinating area was often seen as a threat. This was due to different reasons.

On the one hand, the organizational units began to feel some stress for feeling that they were being monitored, that they had to meet goals, open the information of what was happening in each unit. The PMO somewhat exposed the inefficiencies that existed in each unit which led to some authorities resigning and others being removed by the Administrative Secretary. Because of this, the supporting role that these offices are suggested to have been overshadowed by this “accusatory function” towards the Administrative Secretary.

On the other hand, while the implementation of a more transversal management model has the advantage of being more agile since communication does not necessarily have to go through all the people involved in the chain of command, it redistributes the exercise of power and responsibility. In this sense, the PMO concentrated power as a coordinating office empowered by



the Administrative Secretary. The emergence of the PMO generated fear in some areas of losing its power. A reflection of this was the attempt of one of the areas to absorb the Project Office and the subsequent boycott of the PMO initiatives by the highest authority of one of the sectoral areas that were key to the implementation of key technological projects for the fulfillment of the plan and that responded directly to the President of the Chamber. It also created a more blurred boundary as to where the line should be drawn between the responsibilities of the PMO and those of the organizational units. For example, the 2016-2019 strategic plan was developed by the PMO and then validated by the organizational units or because many units encountered difficulties in preparing the annual plan, the PMO prepared them, and then they were validated by them.

The planning activities were among the most complex to carry out. On the one hand, it was not possible to define concrete and measurable goals for the plan strategic objectives, which prevented the monitoring of their progress and subsequent evaluation. On the other hand, as the organization did not have defined positions, roles, and responsibilities for human resources and formal incentives for promotions and sanctions, no one wanted to commit themselves as responsible for the fulfillment of goals and projects for fear that they would not be met. This generated that many projects began to be executed without having completed the planning, which then also conditioned the monitoring and control. In the best case, the highest authorities of the organizational units appointed themselves Project managers, making it difficult to implement the methodology and generating bottlenecks. As time went on, the authorities of the organizational units and employees began to realize that they would not receive sanctions for non-compliance and began to appear employees without charge as Project managers.

The traditional planning process inherent in the budget formulation was not reversed. The integration between budget formulation and planning did not manage to happen completely, which could have been achieved with more time. Although the budget formulation system was improved, projects were distinguished from operations, staff was trained and the budget area was worked on, the formulation was not recovered for the next stages of execution and monitoring. This was partly since both the imputations of budget execution, planning, and monitoring and control were carried out by different systems and partly because the budget area although it did not resist the new initiatives did not find the incentives or benefits of doing so.

There are also indications that the process of defining priorities could have been improved as there was a high degree of change in the degree of priorities. Although the PMO does not collect data on this, it is estimated that approximately 50% of priority goals had to be renegotiated within each year, for example, by extending deadlines to meet them. In addition, almost half of these renegotiations included the provision of additional resources that were not initially contemplated. While this is not an exact science, the relatively high number of renegotiations raises questions

about the accuracy of the original formulation of priorities and/or the quality of the implementation trajectories defined for them.<sup>7</sup>

Monitoring and control efforts seem to have been a more useful tool for the Administrative Secretary than for the organizational units themselves. According to the CIPPEC Report carried out at the end of 2019, several officials interviewed emphasized that it was a task that they had to fulfill, but that it was not of much use and took away their time. The low use of the monitoring and control system (SIGER) was partly because it was "unfriendly" and partly because there were difficulties in loading data and understanding goals and indicators. The PMO began working on a simpler, user-friendly, and online dashboard, but its implementation was suspended with the change of management.

*"I think that a high percentage understand that it is not very useful, that is, 60% of people understand that it is not useful. And the other percentage doesn't understand the goal well, or the system..., and we have another percentage who understand that it's useful, that understands the system and doesn't have time, or thinks they don't have time, or thinks it's not a function of them loading into the system. They don't consider it their job... They don't see it as a work visibility tool but see it as leaving them exposed. They always take control on the negative side." Head of Department (CIPPEC, 2019)*

While the tools provided by the PMBOK are among the few, except for Prince2 and the Logical Framework Approach, which are flexible and applicable to the public sector, many processes were perceived as rigid or inapplicable. For example, it was difficult to measure the total cost of a project since there was a difficulty in measuring the hours that each team member was assigned to a project since with some exceptions there were no full-time allocated resources; there was no historical record of the duration of similar or previous project activities which made it difficult to estimate schedules. Although the Project Office began to work on the incorporation of more agile tools, it was not possible to evaluate their use given the change of government.

One of the biggest difficulties was with Project Managers. On the one hand, not having a formal position in the organization many organizational units did not respect them as such. On the other hand, as there were no incentives to take a greater responsibility many, being permanent staff, easily left the position which generated a permanent rotation of leaders, except in those who depended on the Project Office. The Project Office worked on a monetary incentive initiative for the Project Manager and project planning analysts (Additional per Project) that was approved by presidential resolution at the end of 2019 prior to the change of administration. However, the incoming authorities did not continue with the proposed model and therefore the measure was not implemented to know if it was effective.

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<sup>7</sup> Alessandro, M., M. Lafuente and R. Shostak. 2014. The management model of the state of Pernambuco (Brazil). IDB-TN-638. Washington, DC. p-28.

The lack of planning routines in the organizational units meant that the authorities always designated the same responsible for the implementation of the tasks of project management, planning, monitoring and control, purchasing, etc. Although the PMO was in charge of training different referents of the areas and also assigned members of the area to support in these tasks, it was not possible to reverse the situation in the short period of implementation.

The model communication does not appear to have been a weak aspect. According to the report on "Evaluation of the Results Management model" carried out by the UPCG in August 2019, it shows that 89.4% say they know all or part of the model; 90% of the participants claim to know, in whole or in part, the advantages of the different instances of the model; and 74.5% said they were totally or partially involved in one or more instances. However, the report also concludes that "... it emerges as necessary to have greater participation of the areas to understand the difficulties they are going through and how it would be possible to overcome them." According to CIPPEC Report (2019), the perception of certain officials interviewed is that the anxiety to implement and quickly produce transformations in administrative management may have hindered the difficulty of adopting the proposed tools. However, this had logical reasoning that was based on the fact that on the one hand the Administrative Secretary is re-elected annually, and on the other hand, the response of the bureaucracy is less as the end of the administration is near to come.

## **2.6 Institutionalization**

The leadership of the Administrative Secretary and her support to the PMO were crucial but also implied that the model was closely associated with her and not with the institution. In fact, there was less response from organizational units to the PMO as the end of management loomed.

The PMO was responsible for developing and approving regulations to document the processes related to the management model. The regulations associated with the 2016-2019 strategic plan, the annual planning procedure, the policies for project management and budget formulation, the official use of good practices of the PMBok, and the Additional or Monetary Incentive per project were approved.

Because in the agency the non-compliance with the regulations is hardly sanctioned, the risk of non-compliance or reversal was high, so the PMO placed special emphasis on anchoring the model in strengthening the competencies of employees so that they incorporated it as a working method. For this, it carried out training in planning, monitoring and created a Project Management Program as part of the training plan of the Human Resource Directorate. Also, and very important, although it was not the desired but the viable and possible option<sup>8</sup>, it was possible to approve the additional projects as an incentive scheme for project management and the positions of Project Manager, Project Leader, and Project Analyst. This scheme supported the operation of the entire model as it

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<sup>8</sup> The proper policy would have been to implement a career plan in the organization, but it was unfeasible due to political and union pressures that would block any evaluation of workers' performance.

required the accredited training of the project management team, the approval of the projects in the annual plans and budget formulation, and the demonstration of compliance with objectives and results in time and budget, revaluing the monitoring and control functions.

The PMO adopted the change management methodology for all the initiatives carried out, working on all the edges so that the change was effective.

The PMO tried to make the model transcend through the establishment of mutual collaboration agreements with other organizations. Collaboration agreements were signed with the Project Management Institute Buenos Aires and with the Government of the City of Buenos Aires. Also, virtual training in project management was developed and shared with the National Training Institute. In April 2019 the PMO received the visit of the President and CEO of PMI GLOBAL, Sunil Prashara, in recognition of the professional management of projects at the HCDN. Furthermore, it participated in the PMI Professional Award and the PMO of the Year Award (World Project Management Offices), being chosen as the best project office in Argentina in 2018. The Planning and Management Control Unit competed in this event with public teams and private from 64 countries.

The PMO had in its DNA to guarantee the continuous improvement that through a method and an internal team was responsible for guaranteeing. Specifically, satisfaction surveys and workshops were conducted to collect and document the experience of authorities and employees regarding the working methods implemented to facilitate their adoption and ensure that they were adopted beyond the regulations.

### **3. Lessons Learned**

It is possible to implement a PMO that generates results in a political organization; however, its survival is difficult since it depends largely on the leadership styles of each government and the political agreements that are woven at the time of the transition of government.

The experience of implementing a PMO in such a politicized body was epic. Government decisions are generally governed more by political logic, short-termism, and personal gain than by organizational and long-term logic, which makes it difficult to institutionalize efficiency criteria and remuneration by objectives.

The leadership of the Administrative Secretary or whoever holds power is critical, not only through support for the PMO but also through the practical exercise of the model. The fact that resource management depends on its authority is positive for the generation of incentives in organizational units. However, if there were a conviction of the leadership of the highest authority of the Agency, in this case, the President of the Chamber, the direct dependence of the PMO on it would facilitate coordination and increase the impact.

The fact that the PMO had interference in the Administrative Secretariat and not in the Parliamentary Secretariat, which is the core function of the organization, and other secretaries made it difficult for the model to have a better chance of surviving changes in administration.

The implementation of a PMO that guarantees the achievement of results in a legislative body allows the division of labor: that politicians are dedicated to politics and do not have to worry about the management that remains in the hands of the PMO. This seems to be the greatest benefit to rescue at the time of the creations of these structures of coordination, planning, monitoring, and control.

The creation of the PMO generates redistribution of power within organizations which can generate tensions and resistance that hinder its success. Therefore, there must be clear boundaries between the role of this and the rest of the organizational units.

Resistance to change on the part of officials and agents in the various areas existed, but it was not rigid enough to be considered an obstacle to prevent the implementation of the proposed reforms. Although the first impression of the workers was one of skepticism and distrust, as the activities developed and they understood how the new management model worked, resistance subsided.

Gradual implementation seems to be the most successful strategy. Beginning with a diagnosis of needs and based on this shape the missions and functions of the coordinating unit using the PMO Value Ring tool to make it a unit that adds value.

The time window available to a government administration to implement a new management model is quite small since at the beginning it requires a diagnosis, then it begins with implementation and the last year and employees begin to feel that the government has little left and begin to loosen. Therefore, it is important to prioritize deployments.

External advice is recommended at the beginning of the implementation since it also gives legitimacy to the tools by reducing the ideological prejudices that may appear.

The institutionalization of project management processes and practices, effective after implementation, allowed the necessary adjustments to be made for effective execution. This decision of the Administrative Secretary was correct. The proposed management model was an absolutely innovative experience for the Administrative Secretary, therefore, it was not advisable to crystallize the model into a standard before checking its operation. In summary, it was effective and necessary to adapt the methodology to the organizational culture, analyze its development in practice and, based on this, make modifications and adjustments. An example of this is Administrative Act 138, issued in August 2019, which approves the "Project Management Policies of the Administrative Secretariat" and the "Project Management Glossary of the Administrative Secretariat" (CIPPEC, 2019).

The PMO should make an effort to internalize the tools and be useful for the organizational units and not for mere compliance with the PMO or the authorities. To this end, it is effective to provide

training, simplify documents and tools that do not lead to duplication of efforts, the specialization of members of the organizational units in this type of tasks, in-situ support to project managers and leaders, and the granting of performance incentives.

The transversal and project-based way of working improve the work environment in the organization, since it allows many workers to leave daily activities and get involved in initiatives that begin and end up being able to change projects, which the younger generations value.

The functions of the PMO should be anchored to processes already installed within organizations or that are not questioned by common sense. An example of this is that internal communication tasks were the only ones that continued to be carried out once the change of government occurred at the end of 2019. Beyond the fact that innumerable initiatives were worked on to institutionalize the tasks of planning and monitoring, and project management by tying them to the budget formulation process and the training plan of the Human Resources Directorate, and regulatory regulations were issued, the exercise of the functions of the Planning and Control Office and the Project Office was dismissed.

It is important that those who lead the PMO value excellence and are enthusiastic. It is difficult to go forward breaking structures if there is no belief in the ideas. While the traditional strategy tells us that the viable must be defined first, then the feasible, and finally the desirable, the PMO proposed a more ambitious strategy that was to go from the desirable to the feasible and then to the viable.

Technicians or management specialists in the public sector are not as valued as other sectoral technicians such as construction engineers, hydraulics, chemists, architects, safety and hygiene technicians, lawyers, among others. Therefore, work must be done to improve its valuation if the public sector is to manage better.

The lack of survival in the exercise of the functions of the PMO, except for the functions carried out by the Office of Internal Communication, reflects a combination of involuntary and voluntary errors, and external factors. Undoubtedly, the institutionalization measures that were carried out were not enough. In general terms, the lack of a political strategy to ensure the survival of the management, the acephalia of the head of the UPCG/PMO at the time of the transition, and the disinterest and undervaluation of the new authorities in this type of work were combined. Although the specialized literature establishes that an adequate measure is related to establishing a body of permanent advisors who do not depend on the change of government, this experience shows that even if these officials exist, this is not possible. Also, the fact of associating the model with an economic incentive seems not to have been enough for other actors - unions and employees to request and support the implementation. In this sense, it may have played against the beginning of the pandemic and the economic and budgetary difficulties that the country faced at the beginning of 2020.



## 4. Conclusions

Government decisions seem to be governed more by political logic, short-termism, and self-interest than by organizational and long-term logic, which makes it difficult to institutionalize efficiency criteria and remuneration for objectives. However, the experience of implementing a PMO in such a politicized body is epic. The efforts and results achieved in terms of ideation, planning, monitoring and control, and communication carried out in such a short time are very valuable. Even with the efforts that were made to institutionalize the model, the dynamics of the transition and the leadership of the new administration that dismissed the benefits of the model mortally wounded the transformation that had begun. Surely with a little more time, political agreements, or with an authority that would have valued the planning, monitoring, and control services, although some functions had been modified or prioritized over others according to the needs of the new authorities, the model would not have disappeared. This is because the challenge of delivering results in the short term and at the same time generating transformations is the great challenge of the leaders of our time.

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## About the Author



### **Paloma Martin**

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**Paloma Martin** is a specialist in Innovation Management. She has been involved for more than fifteen years with diverse NGOs helping children, young people and women, providing them with tools for their development and leadership. With experience, she discovered that building leadership through innovation management to multiply impact is what truly drives her. She found that project management was the most effective way of doing it. For the last seven years she has collaborated with different government agencies, mostly in her area of expertise, implementing and teaching project management tools.

She began to work at different government offices in the city of Buenos Aires and later jumped to the National Chamber of Deputies, where she created the first Project Management Office in a legislative branch in the world. Because of these achievements, the Project Management Institute selected her to lead the Public Project Community and she provided an institutional space for education, exchange practice, and networking. Through the implementation of project management in the National Chamber, women who did not have formal positions within the organization could become project managers and thus demonstrate their leadership. As part of this leadership, she has devoted herself to empowering future women leaders and candidates by training them project management, and budget elaboration and analysis with a gender perspective.

She is currently a Graduate Student at the University of Maryland in MPM and a TA for the Public Leadership Program for undergraduate students.