

The Project Coordinator A PM Alternative

For the most part, the application of computer-based project management is being handled by two, virtually opposite, organizational structures. Today, we are most likely to see this process exercised either by a Project Management Office (PMO) or by individual project managers. Neither mode is entirely free of significant problems. A third alternative is often overlooked. This is the Project Coordinator mode.

Note: In this discussion, I use the title "Project Coordinator" to describe a position that specializes in project planning and control, and provides support for multiple projects and project managers. Certainly, several other titles can be used for this function.

The Accidental Project Manager

I spend some time every year at various project management conferences and often hang around in the exhibit hall. My interests are not only in the tool solutions that are being offered, but also in observing the people in their quests to implement a computer-based PM process. I frequently hear similar stories. They go like this:

"My organization is not big enough to support a PMO. So our projects are lead by project managers who are highly competent in their technical specialty, but have little knowledge of or patience for modern project management practices (computer-based project management)."

Let's face it. The process of putting together project plans, then tracking those plans, making changes, and digesting the voluminous output is not the type of activity that motivates most project managers to hazard the morning traffic. Furthermore, the other aspects of their job are generally much more satisfying and rewarding. (Speaking of rewards, do these project managers even have the PM tasks listed in their job descriptions? If not, they will not be measured and rewarded for success in this area, as much as in the other areas that are defined in their job descriptions.)

Worse yet is the realization that most of these project managers are not really conversant with the computer-based project management practices and are intimidated by the entire process. Where there are opportunities to attend training seminars, there is always an emergency that gets higher priority.

The PMO

The conditions that I described above are so prevalent that more and more organizations are moving to the centralized project office model. This is most frequently referred to as the Project Management Office (PMO). There is much to be said for this approach. The responsibilities of the people in the PMO are clear. They are engaged, measured, and compensated for managing and supporting projects. They are expected to have specialized expertise pertaining to the management of projects.

In the pure PMO model, the people in the PMO are not expected to perform the actual tasks that make up the scope of the project. Nor are they expected to possess the expertise to do so.

The PMO will appear in the organization chart as a separate function, headed by a senior person having status equal to the heads of the other functions. For instance, if the Finance function has a Chief Financial officer (CFO) and the Engineering office has a Chief Engineer, then the PMO might have a Chief Project Officer (CPO).

Why Not Have a PMO in Every Organization?

The PMO model just described works very well in an organization that does most of its business in project form and has a lot of projects. There are situations where the PMO might not be the preferred model. And there are other cases where the resistance to a PMO is so great that another approach must be taken.

The resistance, when it exists, may be financial, cultural, or both. Frankly, it is difficult to produce evidence that shows the “value added” of the PMO. That’s not to say that the value isn’t there. But how do you show it? When money is tight, and projects are performing poorly (because of the lack of a PMO or a skilled cadre of project managers) it’s hard to present a business case for investing in a PMO.

The cultural issues revolve around the technical leadership vs. project leadership issues. There is a natural resistance to diverting part of the responsibility for the project from the technical leader to a project leader. The team approach, that has become successful in most applications, must be learned, and the cultural changes come slowly.

So what we end up with are technical people who are given the title of Project Manager and are made responsible for the full management of the project and all of its aspects.

The Challenge for Project Managers

Here’s a scenario that I’ve seen on numerous occasions. It is applicable to every possible industry and application.

For this example, let’s say that the firm specializes in designing and installing communication systems. The project managers are responsible for working with the client to design a communications solution, for making the estimate and executing a contract, for procuring the components, and for directing the installation and testing of the system. They are also responsible for planning, budgeting, tracking and communicating status, applied time, and costs.

There are six project managers with similar responsibilities, working out of the same regional office. They have copies of Ultimate Project Manager XIV available to them on their computer stations and have been directed to use UPM for planning and control purposes.

What’s wrong with this picture? Well, to start with, where are the standards and practices associated with using this tool? And even if there was a defined process, can you really expect these “accidental project managers” to use the tools and to execute the process? Were they all born with the know-how? (We seem to assume this.)

But let's be generous here. Let's say that some of these people actually can do the project planning and control, and work with UPM. Is this their highest priority? When they are also responsible for design and execution, for solving technical problems, for procurement and contract management, and for keeping the client or sponsor happy – will they take the time to handle the planning and control tasks?

My experience has been that (in cases where the planning and control tasks were actually done by these project managers), it was on their own time, usually as take-home work.

So what is the alternative?

An Effective Alternative: The Project Coordinator

If we are going to have the work directed by the technical managers (the people most knowledgeable of the project deliverables), we need to make available to them all of the support functions that they will need to efficiently and effectively execute the project. In most areas, we are probably already doing that. We may have an estimating function, a purchasing function, certainly an accounting function, perhaps a quality assurance function, and so on. In a small operation, these may be one-person functions, but at least they are identified responsibilities, filled by competent, trained individuals.

These “subject” experts make themselves available to each of the project managers as needed. They develop and maintain the standards for their discipline. They keep up-to-date on the developments in their area. They maintain a database of “re-useable data” to be shared on all projects.

Why not have the equivalent expertise available in the project planning and control area? This would be a person who has been trained in the discipline of project management. This person would be conversant in the technology involved in the firm's projects, but the contributed expertise would be planning and control.

The Project Coordinator will work with the project managers and others on each project team. The PC will guide and assist the project team in the development of the project plan and would be the lead operator of the software that will process this plan. The PC will be a mentor for others who wish to develop a competence in planning and control and in use of the tools. The PC will obtain and process status data and maintain an updated plan. The PC will evaluate status and performance and make recommendations for appropriate corrective action. The PC will develop and maintain standards for planning and control and for use of the software.

The project managers maintain full control of their projects, but rely on the PC to assist, guide, and communicate and to facilitate the planning and control process. The project managers are relieved of this tedious work and are free to focus on their area of expertise.

Feedback from users of this approach indicates that (after some early resistance to the concept) the project managers and other team members come to completely embrace and value the Project Coordinator function. It takes some time to change the culture and expectations and to develop trust. But fairly quickly, this changes to full appreciation for the expertise and contributions of these individuals.

Working with the Project Coordinator

Perhaps a good example of the success of the PC concept is an experience that I had about 35 years ago, when I introduced this role to some divisions of the General Electric Co. The organization was an internal architectural-engineering group, working in several technological areas. While I was comfortable with the technical environment, my role was to provide for planning and control for the entire group.

There was a senior electrical engineer that was responsible for all of our steel mill projects. Frankly, I knew almost nothing about the heavy electrical components that go into these mills or about the design of these systems. Yet, every time that the EE would get a new steel mill project he would ask me to come over to help him produce a project plan. I would ask questions and help organize his thinking. We would go back and forth, each adding what we knew, and somehow a decent plan would evolve. I'm still not sure just what it was that I contributed to the plan, but both he and I knew that the plan could not have been produced without me.

That was just one of hundreds of situations in which I was personally involved in bringing structure, repeatability, and planning expertise to project managers, enabling them to prepare and status their plans, to have their plans in the computer, and to be relieved of the necessity to learn and operate the planning software.

There are thousands of additional experiences such as mine. It is the recognition of the value of this function that has led to the growth of the PM profession and the growth of the PMO as a department function. In situations where a full-blown PMO is not justifiable, establishing a project coordinator position is a worthy alternative.

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