

Is the Project Management Office Evolving or Devolving?

by
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Michael McWha's [Commentary: The incredible shrinking project management office – four challenges to the traditional mandate](#) in the Washington Post's **Capital Business** suggests that traditional project management offices are “losing ground” for four reasons:



1. Project delivery: More projects are being managed by business units or by part time project managers.
2. Performance measurement: Traditional efficiency and ROI measures are increasingly less important than difficult-to-measure impacts on knowledge worker performance.
3. Portfolio management: internal funding decisions are increasingly being made above the level of individual projects.
4. Project manager development: Given the rising importance of part time project managers, demand for PMO-supplied project management is being reduced.

I have no hard evidence to support or refute what McWha says. In my own career I've experienced several different models of Project Management Offices (PMOs) ranging from those having centralized control over multiple project schedules, resources, and staff, to those operating through a centralized support organization doing paperwork, reporting, and administrative support for a distributed group of project managers reporting through different departments. Depending on the circumstances you can make a case for either approach.

One consideration is whether you have the resources and management skills — and clout — to support either approach. As a consultant I've usually been in a position to manage or be part of a team that supplements a client's existing project management resources. In some case those resources might be meager and my team supplied everything from basic systems support to day to day management and administration.

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I've also been part of teams that had to learn and adjust to local standards, systems, and procedures even when they weren't well suited to project management and oversight. As the saying goes, welcome to the real world, Neo.

In years past it always seemed to me like it was usually the IT department that had a firm handle on the formalisms of project management, whether those formalisms were traditional project management and scheduling approaches or more contemporary and flexible approaches such as those represented by Lean and Agile methodologies.

Nowadays it seems it's more common to see less of a divide between IT and business, especially in smaller or newer organizations. Younger project staff especially seem more willing to use collaboration and networking tools for sharing information in real-time or via online documentation or networking files. It's not unusual, for example, to see tools such as Google Drive, DropBox or GitHub used not just by IT but by non-IT staff as well, even when "approved" systems such as SharePoint are available.

This improving ability to share and collaborate goes a long way, I think, to overcoming one of the biggest causes for project failure — the lack of a cohesive approach to problem solving based on a shared understanding of goals and objectives. At the same time, improvements in communication and collaboration don't reduce the need for leadership. Leadership needs to be familiar and comfortable with software and network based tools that allow for rapid sharing among team members, even when these tools seem to fly against traditional bureaucratic or hierarchical traditions.

Perhaps the "flattening" of organizations and increasing expectations for information sharing have been overlooked by McWha in his list. Or perhaps they are the reasons why the role of the traditional project management office is changing.

If you've ever run a PMO, you know how much of your time and energy are devoted to gathering, analyzing, and distributing information. Perhaps we are seeing that the project management organization is changing because how people communicate and share information is also changing.

If you found the above interesting, these related articles might interest you as well:

- [*Progress On Open and Collaborative Project Management*](#)
- [*Balancing Structure and Flexibility in Collaborative Project Management*](#)
- [*Some Requirements for Using a Mobile Device to Interact with a Project Plan*](#)
- [*Developing a Collaborative Approach to Improving Project Management Practices, Part 1: Culture*](#)