The Project Office—Revisited

Could your company function smoothly without the CEO, CIO, CFO, and all the rest of the internal experts? No? Then why do we expect project management to function smoothly without an expert, and an office, of its own?

by Harvey Levine

PROJECT MANAGEMENT'S recent popularity can be seen in many quarters: over 46 percent annual growth in membership in the Project Management Institute is just one indicator of how popular this movement has become. Similar growth can be seen in project management certification candidates, formal project management educational programs, project management Web sites, and articles on project management. The growth in opportunities for project management trainers and consultants has certainly been appreciated by this writer, but has been accompanied by increasing frustration about the way that project management is being implemented in those organizations that have recently come to embrace this discipline.

Here are a few simple questions. Answer them truthfully. Then think about the answers. Is your company running without a CEO? Who do your engineers report to? Do you have an accounting or finance function? Who do they report to?

Even in this day of flat organizations and multidisciplinary teams, I'd bet that almost all of you have replied that your organization does have a CEO, that engineers report to an engineering manager, and that there is a chief financial officer (or similar title) heading up the finance function.

Is this bucking the trend? Or does it still make irrefutable sense to maintain hierarchical structures within our organizations? Without defined leaders in these important functions, who will define the department's mission? Who will set the standards? Where will the leadership and mentoring come from?

You won't find many organizations without structured functions for Information Systems, Human Resources, Marketing and Sales, Procurement, etc. (where applicable).

Yet in many organizations there is one vastly important function that has been declared exempt from this rule.

Most of our organizations have discovered the impact of "projects" on the success of the enterprise, and have acknowledged "project management" as a distinct and valuable discipline. What they have yet to recognize is the importance of implementing project management under the same centralized structures that have become the paradigm for most other disciplines.

As an emerging discipline, it is even more essential that we provide the structured leadership for project management that we would for any other function in the enterprise. Through this centralized leadership, we can meet many important needs that would not be served without the Project Office function. The Project Office creates a cadre of people skilled in the art and science of project management. These people view their job totally as project management, eliminating the conflict with other responsibilities. Measurements (and rewards) can be developed more along the lines of critical project success factors. These people reside outside of the individual technical functions, removing home territory biases. The Project Office becomes a repository for project experience, models and standards, to be shared with all the project leaders. And the Project Office maintains awareness of the "big picture," seeing the whole project and all of the projects. Therefore, the Project Office is more readily able to monitor trends and see global problems. The Project Office is in a better position to provide information and reports to senior management, and to make recommendations to resolve conflicts and problems.

The Gartner Group (among others) has documented the justification for the Project Office (or the Project Management Competency Center). In an IS organization, they cite four classes of services that can be provided by such a group: *project management services*—trainer, consultant, practitioner of project management practices and techniques; *methods, processes and metrics*—guardian of corporate methodology and standards, estimating guidelines and metrics (emphasis on sharing and exchange rather than on corporate edicts); *best-practice brokerage*—documents successes and blunders (search outside the enterprise for best practices worthy of adopting internally); *reuse*—of project plan templates, estimates, etc.

In the December 1996 *PM Network,* Joan Knutson, president of Project Mentors, wrote about "The Age of Project Mentoring." She sees a shifting role for the project manager as a "mentor." I just add this vital function to the expansive list of roles and capabilities to be found in the Project Office.

If our projects are to be successful, we must create an environment that will recognize project leadership as a separate and distinct discipline, and provide a structured organization to house these essential skills and to foster the development of standards and expertise. If you do

The Roles and Benefits of a Project Office

Through the Project Office we:

■ Clarify the role of projects and project management in the enterprise

■ Establish a standard project management methodology, including tools and communication

■ Develop forms and templates to facilitate the development of project estimates, plans, and reports

■ Provide for training in project management and project management tools

■ Provide guidance and mentoring; develop a cadre of trained and competent project managers and project control specialists

■ Audit the implementation of project management in the enterprise and provide assistance in complying with standard project management practices

■ Perform a watchdog role to assure that good project management practices are being applied

■ Gather project experience and data for use in future projects and to improve project management methods

■ Provide a neutral, centralized office for planning, negotiating and analyzing projects, and for reporting throughout the enterprise, and

■ Provide a central, customer-focused office to care for the concerns of the client/sponsor.

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not embrace the Project Office concept, then examine what you are doing now for project management, and ask if you are supporting all of the important functions listed in the sidebar.

Leaping Over the Common Barriers. The implementation of a computer-based project management capability imposes a need for special skills. It is often assumed (erroneously) that all managers and senior practitioners possess these skills. In the typical IS organization we tend to designate people such as senior systems analysts as project leaders, assuming that they will capably undertake the role of work manager, resource manager and project manager. Yet this overlooks several impeding conditions: Their project management skills are weak or non-existent. Project leaders view themselves as a technical leader and concentrate on management of the technical content of the work. Furthermore, the measurements (and rewards) may be more aligned with technical success and management of resources (which are more easily and visibly measured than "project" success). The project leader is embedded in a functional unit, while the work crosses functional boundaries. It is difficult to eliminate or overcome biases, or for the project leader to convince other functions to put aside high-priority work for their projects.

Similar theories exist in engineering, manufacturing, and other types of organizations. Just change the job titles.

It has been my experience that a computer-based project management capability cannot be developed and implemented by committee (unless that committee is operating under the leadership and direction of a recognized project management function). The imple-

mentation of a computer-based project management capability involves five phases: Methods (practices), Tool Selection, Training, Implementation, Audit. All of this must be accomplished under the direction and coordination of the Project Office.

When we recognize the role of the project manager (vis-à-vis the functional manager) we can readily see why this takes a special set of skills and conditions. Here are some of the key things a project manager must do: get all key players on the project team; manage task interfaces; clearly identify task completion; communicate task completion; manage responsibility interfaces; question blurry responsibilities; clarify delegation levels; balance needs of project, client, organization; identify stakeholders and their definition of project success; balance project objectives with other objectives; act as a catalyst, and when necessary, a devil's advocate; promote effective communication and wide participation in decision-making; and manage conflicts.

Obviously, we cannot take it for granted that any senior person or even any manager will have the skills and temperament for project management. Some of these skills can be learned, but many important qualifications are embedded in a person's personality. Unless we recognize that project management is a distinct discipline, requiring a special set of skills and capabilities, we cannot expect to implement a successful project management function in the enterprise. And until we recognize that these skills must be located in a structured function, with dedicated and empowered leadership, any project management skills that are available will flounder like a ship without a rudder.

CALL IT A PROJECT OFFICE, or a Project Management Competency Center, or Project Mentoring; the name doesn't matter. But development of a separate, recognized, structured organization with personnel skilled in project management is essential to having a successful project management function, and in turn, bringing your projects to successful completion. For most of us, project success equals success for the enterprise. Can we afford to do less? ■

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