




The elusive Federal PMO: Where are they hiding?

Friday, 18 June 2010 15:25 |  |  | 

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Where are all the PMOs in the government?

Federal project management offices, or PMOs, have been quietly evolving over the last decade. In 2002, there were only a handful of fully functional project management offices across the civilian sectors of the federal government. It is clear that, today, many federal agencies are re-embracing project management, and realizing the potential that the project management office holds. In 2010, every executive agency has at least one PMO, and many agencies maintain five or more PMOs. Yet these PMOs are hard to identify, and often buried within the organization.

What is a PMO? In federal speak, the PMO is known either as a program management office or a project management office. Program management offices tend to be focused on a single program, whereas a project management office consolidates aspects of managing projects into one business operation. We'll stick with the latter.

Federal PMOs tend to come in one of four flavors, as shown in the diagram below. Yet within each model exist highly customized operations, of the type that must exist within a larger bureaucracy.



With dozens of PMOs in existence, why isn't there more collaboration across these federal entities? For one thing, there is very little activity focused specifically on federal PMOs. The Project Management Institute (PMI) hosts government forums that touch on PMOs, but only tangentially. Web searches bring up only those PMOs with public facing web sites. The lack of information available externally is also mirrored within agencies. Recently, two PMO directors from the same federal agency met for the first time. In their exchange, they mused over each other's services, methodologies, and practices. And therein lies the deeper issue of these hidden PMOs: investments in project management are being duplicated over and over again as disparate directorates and offices seek to establish their own PMO.

There is no guidance for federally based PMOs. There are no formal roles or position descriptions, no clear set of processes or services, no decisive policy from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), nor any reports focused on this topic from the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Yet the scope and scale of PMOs across the federal government is steadily on the rise. PMOs are fast becoming mission critical, tackling high profile projects.

Two PMOs that stand out as examples of high quality organizations include:

Nuclear Regulatory Commission IT PMO. Housed in within the agency's operations, this PMO has spent the past three years building a considerable array of tools and techniques. These tools include a completely online project management methodology, with governance toolkit and related enterprise architecture documents.

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Department of the Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network. This PMO delivers on collaboration. The FINCEN PMO maintains a collaborative workspace, and a team of project managers focused on bringing together their stakeholders toward a success project conclusion.

For federal agencies to be successful, it may be useful to evaluate the number of PMOs, and their functions within the organization. Undoubtedly there will be opportunities for information sharing, considering that there are dozens across the federal government, each working diligently toward more effective agency investments. In many instances, individual PMOs can share their methods, tools, practices, and pockets of expertise for the benefit of the whole. Yet, if the overall function of a PMO is being duplicated over and over in a single environment, agencies will need to begin managing the overall investment in project management.

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ISSN 2154-7866
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