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Bridging the Gap Between Agile & Project Management

By Curt Finch

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Can project managers and agile development teams really work together, or will there always be a conflict of processes and attitudes? On the surface, the constraints of the PMO seem to be diametrically opposed to the flexibility inherent in agile methodologies. In fact, Rick Freedman recently blogged, “*I’ve had people in my Agile Project Management classes tell me that their perception of agile is that the key message is “everything you know about project management is wrong.”*”

Yet it does not have to be this way. Setting up an agile PMO can bridge the gap between these two groups and help organizations to execute projects more successfully. Doing so is not as impossible as it seems and the benefits far outweigh the effort. Let’s consider the skills and strengths that each team brings to the table.

Agile Benefits

Agile development is extremely popular, partly because it encourages constant communication with customers throughout the development process in order to minimize scope creep. I recently spoke with an executive at a large financial institution who believes that this is one of the key benefits of agile. When customer advocates are allowed to see what you are developing very early in the cycle, you can correct as needed before it’s too late.

In a 2008 article, “*The Agile PMO Role*,” Tamara Sulaiman asserted that “*agile teams are cross-functional, self organizing and self managing.*”ⁱⁱ With characteristics like these, it’s not difficult to see how agile development teams can be extremely effective. Likewise, the PMO has a number of key strengths to contribute to the organization.

PMO Benefits

The primary focus of the PMO is on metrics and progress tracking, which are crucial components of successful project execution. It can also help facilitate communication between developers, project managers and executives. In the previously mentioned article Sulaiman describes how traditional agile methods can fall short:

“Your development teams have implemented Scrum and are now working toward release. You’ve got the Scrum of Scrums working so that teams can communicate with each other about cross-team dependencies and impediments on a daily basis. But there’s a gap, isn’t there? As a manager, how do you effectively and efficiently measure progress, manage risk and keep your eye on the big picture across these agile teams? Wouldn’t it be great to have an easy way to communicate budget and schedule information at the program level to the organization?”ⁱⁱⁱ

While the agile worker is concerned mainly with innovation and fast delivery, the PMO can help to keep the rest of the organization informed as to what is going on. Scope changes, delays or quality issues can arise at any time, and they must be communicated to all of the stakeholders so that timelines can be revised.

In addition, standard PMBOK methodologies (e.g. compliance management) are often more successful at managing corporate initiatives than other methods. The executive at a large grocery store chain once told me that in his company, it is absolutely necessary to meet deadlines without allowing any deviation from scope for legal reasons. While agile is all about creativity and discovery, it does not always meet the needs of project-oriented organizations with specific requirements. If you have to meet a new HIPAA regulation right away, for example, you don't have much use for discovery. This is where the PMO can help the most.

Working Together

Combining the strengths of these two groups is a strategic move that will help any organization to reach new heights of profitability. For one thing, project risk can be more effectively managed when the PMO is keeping an eye on things, and agile teams can achieve greater levels of transparency than before. In addition, the PMO can benefit from increased flexibility and dialogue with the customer, not to mention the fact that they will have more time to focus on their leadership role. A recent article entitled “Agile Project Management” makes the following point:

“Agile methodologies free the project manager from the drudgery of being a taskmaster thereby enabling the project manager to focus on being a leader – someone who keeps the spotlight on the vision, who inspires the team, who promotes teamwork and collaboration, who champions the project and removes obstacles to progress.”^{iv}

An Agile PMO

One of the best ways to get two different teams to work together is to highlight their similarities instead of their differences. Believe it or not, the agile team and the PMO do have things in common. They are both interested in prioritizing projects to ensure that the organization is investing in the right ones. Even as the economy improves, this is something that organizations must continue to do, and both agile teams and project managers can work together to achieve it.

When it comes to a difference of opinion, compromise is necessary. Creating an agile PMO in your organization will take a bit of diplomacy and mediation. The executive I spoke to at the aforementioned financial institution warns, “Don't be pure PMI or pure agile.” Rather, find ways to get each team to give a little ground. Project managers can compromise by being flexible and willing to update plans and schedules as necessary. Agile developers can compromise by tracking their time to task in order to keep the PMO updated on their progress. If the organization uses a project tracking solution, a work request module would be especially helpful by providing a mutual feedback loop.

Organizations can really benefit from the agile PMO if they are willing to put in a little effort to make it succeed. The right management processes such as open discussion and compromise will enable managers to capitalize on the strengths of each group, resulting in successful project execution and increased ROI.

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Curt Finch is the CEO of Journyx (<http://pr.journyx.com>), a provider of Web-based software located in Austin, Texas, that tracks time and project accounting solutions to guide customers to per-person, per-project profitability. Journyx has thousands of customers worldwide and is the first and only company to establish Per Person/Per Project Profitability (P5), a proprietary process that enables customers to gather and analyze information to discover profit opportunities. In 1997, Curt created the world's first Internet-based timesheet application - the foundation for the current Journyx product offering. Curt is an avid speaker and author, and recently published the book "All Your Money Won't Another Minute Buy: Valuing Time as a Business Resource". Curt authors a project management blog at www.project-management-blog.com, and you can follow him on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/clf99>.

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