

PROJECT MANAGEMENT: One Size Does NOT Fit All!

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Today many organizations are taking a formal approach to project management, and those that don't are probably thinking they need to adopt these standards. As organizations begin down this road, it is important to understand that there is more than one way to manage a project. The challenge with implementing project methodology is that one approach typically doesn't fit all initiatives, and lack of adoption can often be traced to forcing a one-size-fits-all approach onto all projects and teams. Forward-thinking organizations now consider multiple methodologies and determine which best fit their projects and business objectives.

Large-scale strategic projects involving multiple departments and many staff members for several quarters require a different approach to projects that involve two people for two weeks, but both are still projects. We must also factor experience and maturity into the equation. Some organizational areas have more experience and therefore more project management maturity than others, but all areas will need to deliver successful outcomes. This means that organizations need to have different project approaches and support tools for different parts of their organization, and those elements need to work together. In this white paper we want to explore how that can be achieved, and how it can help an organization mature its overall project management capabilities.

COMMON FUNDAMENTALS

Let's start with the basics. Why does an organization engage in formal project management in the first place? There are likely several reasons, with three of the most common being:

- The need to plan, prioritize and approve work
- The need to track and report on progress
- The need to encourage collaboration

Let's look at each of these individually. At the simplest level, any work performed by an organization that doesn't fall into regular operations is considered a project, regardless of if any formal project management discipline has been implemented. Such work comes from multiple areas of the organization and is of varying size, complexity and duration. Critically, it is also of varying importance and urgency. There must be a way to control and channel this work to ensure optimal effectiveness and efficiency, and that's where planning and prioritizing comes in.

For larger projects, there needs to be an intake process that ensures the work undertaken is appropriate and that the most important and urgent work is carried out first. While small

initiatives involving just a few people for a short period can be absorbed, committing to large projects means not doing something else. There must therefore be a formal planning process that establishes milestones and assigns resources, and a series of approvals before work begins to confirm project tasks are carried out by the appropriate personnel. Once work is underway, there must be a way for the organization to monitor and validate progress. Standard reporting metrics help ensure all projects are compared against common criteria and that performance is assessed as objectively as possible. This will allow for better decision making when challenges or problems arise that require intervention, and for making appropriate adjustments when circumstances require a shift in focus or direction.

Finally, a standard approach to projects helps establish a baseline for team members to work from. This common baseline makes it easier for individuals to collaborate and create a true team environment—an essential part of successful project execution. This approach also helps break down organizational silos by creating a common approach regardless of which department or area team members have come from. This project environment, and the collaboration

it enables, also supports a culture of accountability for work and ownership of the project outcomes among teams, encouraging teams to feel invested in the success of the initiative.

In any environment, structure conveys a sense of stability and permanence. For projects, a formal project management approach leads to greater adoption rates among individuals and business areas. When the defined approach has been invested in by leadership, there is broader and more rapid acceptance that project management is a discipline supported by the organization. A formal approach also allows individuals throughout the organization to recognize their roles and understand their accountabilities, and that leads to a better comprehension of the value they add and contributions they make to a given project, further supporting adoption.

However, while a common set of project management fundamentals is important, there is also a need to support significant differences. Specifically, intake and prioritization are two areas that shouldn't follow a one-size-fits-all approach.

Elements of a simple project approach



KEY DIFFERENCES

We noted earlier that some endeavors that may initially appear as general operations should indeed be handled as a project. Therefore, a project can range from an activity as straightforward as implementing a small software patch to a major rollout of a new HR system, which involves its own unique set of challenges as well as buy-in from stakeholders throughout the organization. It should be obvious that while all projects share a common foundation, there must be significant differences in the formality, structure and approach that is applied to those two extremes and the continuum that connects them.

Size is not the only difference organizations must anticipate when developing a formal project approach. They must also recognize that different organizational areas will be at different levels of maturity and will therefore need to have

different degrees of structure. In some cases that may be a simpler set of processes to support greater adoption and accessibility, and in other areas there may be a need for more rigorous processes to reduce flexibility and help ensure compliance, especially for projects that have a high degree of external monitoring, impact regulatory requirements, etc.

The complexity of projects will also factor into different approaches. A large simple project may require less formality than a small complex project. If the outcomes are unclear or the issues are complex, a different approach will be required compared with a project that has clear expectations and a clear path to success, but requires a lot of work to get to that success. Different approaches may be required depending on where work is coming from, and also who work is visible to. It is likely obvious that a transformational initiative proposed

by executive leadership will require a greater level of reporting and tracking than an improvement project within a single department. What may not be so obvious is that the stakeholder groups will also help determine the approach. A project that has multiple groups of stakeholders will need to be more structured and formal than one with only a small subset within a single department.

Understanding not just the need for different approaches, but also when to use each of those approaches is critical to organizational project management success. This can't simply be determined by a formal decision tree—it requires active and dynamic management and we'll look into who performs that role later in this white paper. The variables that drive differences in project delivery will shift over time, and those will need to be reflected in an evolving approach to project management.

Departmental maturity will grow with every project that is undertaken, and if the approach used by the department doesn't also evolve, the rate of adoption will be impacted. The first large project involving multiple departments that

an organization undertakes will be viewed as complex regardless of the specifics of the project. The fifth will be much less so, and by the tenth, the ability to manage across departments will likely be no more of a complexity than any other factor.

Maturity and evolution of approach must feed into one another, allowing for the introduction of new tools, techniques and approaches, and the expansion of existing methods into new areas. These new elements must be successfully adopted and leveraged by practitioners before being expanded upon. However, the maturity foundation must be solid, or the organization will begin to overreach.

There must also be recognition of the fact that the need for differences will always remain. Regardless of the level of maturity an organization reaches, or how close to 100% adoption of project processes it nears, there will always be some projects that require a different approach from others and that needs to be reflected in the organization's project management structure.

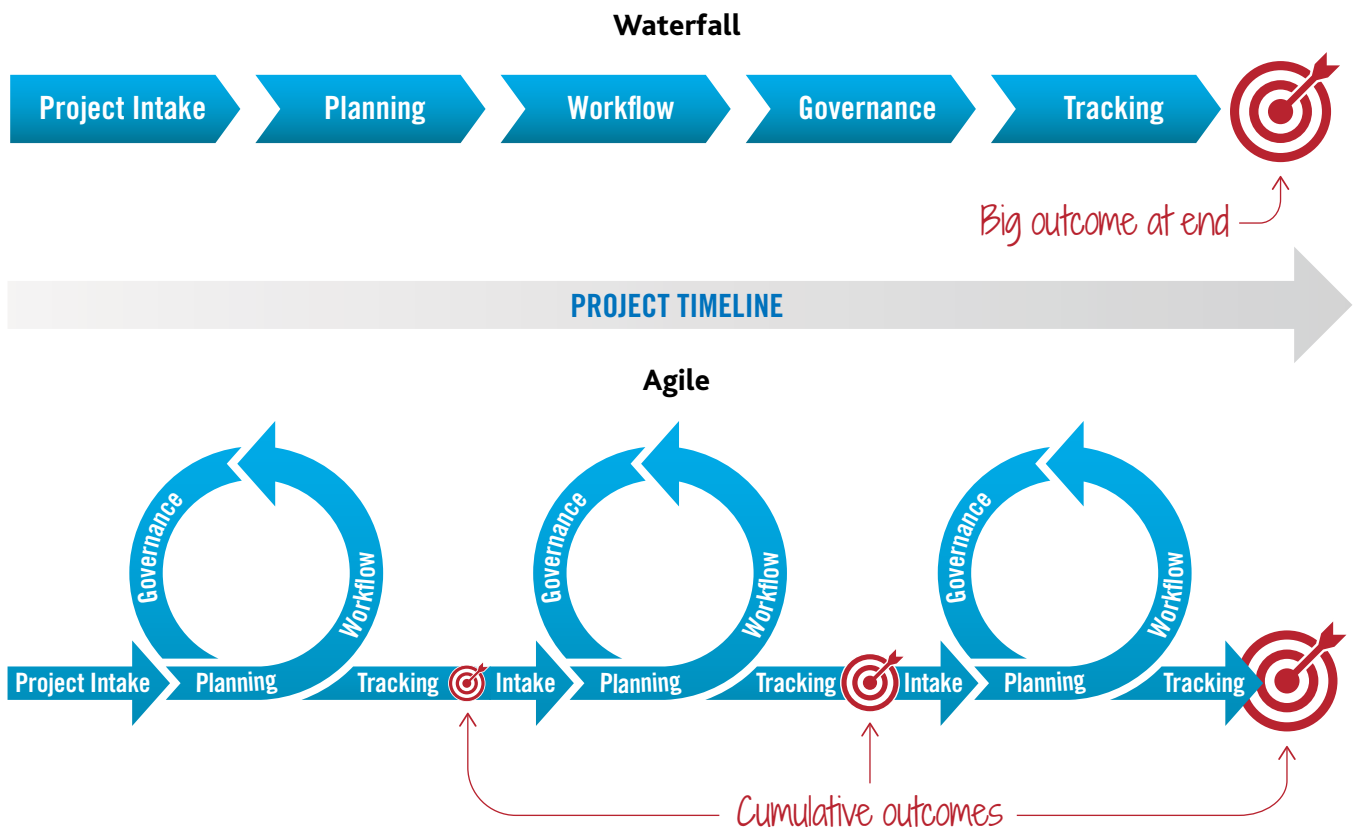
UNDERSTANDING METHODOLOGIES

At the most fundamental level, there are two broad categories of project delivery methodology. The traditional approach involves defining the work to be performed, planning it out, and then executing that plan. Project management focuses on ensuring the work is defined and planned at an appropriate level, that the right people are assigned to the work, and that the budget and schedule are appropriate for what needs to be delivered. During the execution phase, project management focuses on risks, issues, variances from the plan, etc. This approach is often known as Waterfall, as each phase of the project is completed prior to the next one starting with work cascading through the phases.

In the last 15 years, another approach has been widely adopted as an effective alternative—Agile. While you might hear it talked about as a distinct methodology, **Agile** more correctly refers to a category of methodologies that includes **Scrum** and **Kanban**. Still, there are fundamental differences between **Agile** and **Waterfall** project management. This started life in the software development industry where attempts to define the requirements of the solution to be implemented up front were often unsuccessful. This was in large part because recipients of software projects did

not know, or could not define, exactly what they needed and didn't fully understand what was possible. Agile was an attempt to solve that problem by moving straight into the development phase of the project and focusing on generating outputs—software—as quickly as possible. This allowed end users to look at light or partial versions of the software and provide feedback on what they liked and didn't like, allowing the team to focus on those areas and resulting in a better output than a Waterfall approach could produce.

Agile is more than just a focus on earlier delivery. It empowers the project team to define much of how the project will be managed and has matured into a very different, but equally sophisticated approach, to Waterfall. It has also morphed beyond software development and can be found in many organizational areas. Today's organizations will likely have both Agile and Waterfall projects, and perhaps even hybrid initiatives that combine elements of both, and there will be varying levels of formality and structure to both.



Determining which methodology to use for a specific project depends on many factors, and some of the more significant considerations include:

- **Complexity and uncertainty:** Generally, the more complex a solution is to implement, and the less certain the requirements are, the more appropriate Agile is to use.
- **Formality and documentation:** Both approaches can be documented heavily, but projects requiring higher levels of audit-style governance and structure are more appropriate for a Waterfall approach.

- **Organizational, stakeholder and team preference:** If teams are more comfortable using one approach over another, that approach should be encouraged as it drives adoption, comfort, and ultimately success.

With this many variables in place in project management—a common formal structure, multiple categories of required differences, and two major methodologies—there is a need to manage the various moving parts. That’s where the project management office (PMO) comes into play.

THE ROLE OF THE PMO

Just as there are many variables impacting how projects are delivered, there are many different models for how a PMO operates. There is no right or wrong approach, and the PMO’s role will inevitably evolve as it—and the organization it serves—matures in their project delivery capabilities. However, there are some common characteristics of PMOs, and early in their lifecycles, they are often accountable for communicating and managing the characteristics we have discussed in this white paper. They will:

- Develop, communicate and educate on the methodologies in use, creating a common platform of understanding for all involved in projects.
- Encourage buy-in and adoption through the explanation of benefits, support for early phase initiatives, and assistance in overcoming hurdles.

- Develop and support the variables to standard approaches for projects of varying complexities, size, formality, etc.
- Help teams determine the 'best fit' methodology (i.e., Agile vs. Waterfall) and structure within that methodology for individual projects.
- Act as a project control function, overseeing intake, status reporting, and progress tracking as well as acting as a project consolidation and escalation point to leadership.
- Facilitate the planning and prioritization processes to help the organization deliver the highest value output with available resources.

The PMO may start life as a single individual and expand as project management develops across the organization. It may also include project managers although there is no requirement for this. Project managers may be better aligned within their organizational areas, with the PMO simply providing oversight across those areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Essentially, all projects are designed to achieve the same thing—a successful outcome. It's not just the completion of the stated work for the approved cost and within the expected timeframe that's important, but also the achievement of improved organizational performance because of that work. Ultimately, organizations want to achieve those results with as little risk exposure as necessary and for as little cost as possible. That's where different project management approaches come in.

Choosing the right approach that minimizes risk and cost is an act of balancing of methodology, formality, structure, governance, etc. There is also a balancing act between the "best" approach for the organization, while still encouraging adoption and compliance. The best approach in the world will fail if no one believes in it or supports it. On the other hand, if the organization is able to balance the need for a robust project delivery approach with the need to develop sustainable adoption of that approach, the long-term benefits will be significant.

Not every organization invests in a PMO, but those that do are likely to enjoy greater adoption and faster project management maturity. A well-implemented PMO can champion project management and serve as a catalyst for improving adoption rates among organizational areas. It can also foster faster competence and confidence development within project teams, allowing the organization to mature more rapidly. As an independent arbiter, it can help resolve problems without any perceived bias, and as a project management subject-matter expert (SME), it can help avoid some of those problems from occurring in the first place. As organizational project delivery maturity increases, the PMO should be at the forefront of leading the most developed organizational areas forward to new techniques and approaches, fostering a center of excellence (CoE) mentality which will further support growth across all areas.

Successful outcomes will drive greater adoption rates, expanding the approach into more projects and more organizational areas. That will allow for more rapid organizational maturity growth, which will further increase the ability to deliver successful projects. Perhaps most important of all, the organization will improve both competence and confidence in its ability to deliver projects. That will lead to a willingness to invest in projects that will transform the organization more rapidly and enjoy increasingly greater levels of success. At the same time, it will foster an engaged and committed employees who understand what they are doing, why it matters, and how they support the organization's ultimate success.

The logo for TeamDynamix, featuring the word "Team" in a dark blue serif font and "Dynamix" in a lighter blue sans-serif font.

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TeamDynamix cloud-based work management software gives service organizations in non-corporate environments the ability to align, work together, and simplify their work management processes. TeamDynamix transforms IT from order taker to strategic innovator. Colleges and universities, K-12 districts, state and local governments, and nonprofits use the TeamDynamix project portfolio and service management platform to work together smarter, faster, better.

The logo for Project Management.com, featuring the text "Project Management.com" in a dark blue serif font, a stylized "PM" icon with radiating lines, and a small "powered by PMI" logo.

About ProjectManagement.com

Since 2000, our mission has been simple: To make project managers more successful. ProjectManagement.com is the experience bridge that fills in the gaps—providing help to project managers in a number of ways. It is a community, your community, for project managers in Information Technology and other industries. We are your one-stop shop for PM answers, helping get you “unstuck”—and confidently meet every new challenge that comes your way with over 4,000 articles from industry experts, over 1K Deliverable Templates to save you time and more than 550K peer connections and experts to offer specific advice.

The logo for the Project Management Institute (PMI), featuring a stylized globe icon to the left of the letters "PMI" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, with the full name "Project Management Institute" below it.

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