



## Is an Agile PMO Possible? By Curt Finch, CEO of Journyx, Inc.

It often seems that a lean, agile development environment will always be at odds with the structure and constraints of the PMO. Rick Freedman described the situation well in a recent blog post:

Many firms have committed so completely to PMBOK process flows and CMM best practices that many of the core concepts of agile development, such as “barely sufficient” documentation and change-friendliness, seem like heresy. In fact, 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.”<sup>ii</sup>

Yet it does not have to be this way. The agile PMO can bridge the gap between these two very important groups and help organizations to execute projects more successfully. While it does require a bit of change management, it is not as impossible as it seems and the benefits far outweigh the effort. First, let’s look at the skills and strengths that each team brings to the table.

### The Benefits of Agile

Agile development has exploded in recent years for a number of reasons. For one thing, it encourages constant communication with customers throughout the development process, which helps to minimize scope creep. I recently spoke with an executive at a well known financial institution who believes that this is one of the key benefits of agile. It allows customer advocates to see what you are developing very early in the cycle, and you can then correct as needed before it’s too late. This also enables companies to adapt themselves to the needs of the market very quickly. In a 2008 article, “The Agile PMO Role,” Tamara Sulaiman asserted that “agile teams are cross-functional, self organizing and self managing.”<sup>iii</sup> With characteristics like these, it’s not difficult to see how agile development teams can be extremely effective.

### The Benefits of the PMO

Likewise, the PMO brings significant advantages to the organization. Its primary focus 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. Sulaiman puts it this way:

“Let’s say you are a manager or leader in an agile organization. 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?”<sup>iiii</sup>

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 when they do, they must be communicated to all of the stakeholders so that they can revise timelines and adjust their expectations.*

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 necessary to meet deadlines and not allow any deviation from scope from a legal standpoint. While agile is all about discovery – discovery of what the customer really needs as well as the discovery of what is possible – 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, you don’t have much use for discovery. This is where the PMO can help the most.

### The Value of Working Together

Combining the strengths of these two groups is a strategic move that will help organizations reach new heights of profitability that they never thought possible. 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.”<sup>iv</sup>

### Steps Towards 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. For one, 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. Agile developers might compromise by tracking their time to task in order to keep the PMO updated on their progress. At the same time, project managers can compromise by being flexible and willing to update plans and schedules as necessary. 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.

### About the Author:

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