

# Organisational project management: An historical approach to the study of PMOs

Monique Aubry <sup>\*</sup>, Brian Hobbs <sup>1</sup>, Denis Thuillier <sup>2</sup>

*Université du Québec à Montréal Business School, Department of Management and Technology, Montreal (Quebec), Canada, H3C 3P8*

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## Abstract

This paper aims at providing a grounded theoretical foundation on which to base a better understanding of organisational project management. This paper delivers empirical evidence that project management offices (PMOs) and organisational project management can be understood as part of an historical process within an organisational context, departing from the traditional boundaries of positivist project management theory. The history of PMOs in four organisations is documented and analysed. The evolution of the organisations and their PMOs is punctuated with events, tensions and changes. An historical process provides a better basis for the development of a theory on PMOs and more globally on organisational project management.

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## 1. Introduction

Rethinking project management! This paper is aligned with the present vitality found in the movement to rethink the field of project management [1]. The project management research literature is opening up to new paradigms departing from the more traditional positivist approach. There are already propositions on the table to build new theories of project management [2,3]. Theorizing project management at the organisational level is also being pursued [4,5]. However, an integrating link at the organisational level that would integrate all parts of project management as a true field of organisational management is still missing. We argue that the concept of organisational project management is the missing link [6].

The investigation of PMOs is proposed here as a starting point for the development of a theory of organisational pro-

ject management. Organisation-wide project management activity can be more readily investigated in organisations with PMOs because project activity tends to be concentrated and more visible in these organisations. The complexity of PMOs has already been documented through the description of the variety in both the forms and the functions of PMOs [7,8]. This paper presents the results of in-depth investigations of organisational project management in four organisations, each of which has undergone successive restructurings. A total of eleven organisational transformations have been analysed. An historical approach is employed in order to capture the richness of the organisational transformations and their underlying processes.

## 2. Methodology

This research is based upon a constructivist epistemology; it represents a major change relative to the more traditional and positivist approach to project management research [9,10]. In this epistemology, the phenomenon is in the reality and the researcher in part of the interaction that takes place between him/her and the object of study. It modifies the more traditional researcher role by “listen-

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 514 987 3000x4658; fax: +1 514 987 3343.

*E-mail addresses:* [aubry.monique@uqam.ca](mailto:aubry.monique@uqam.ca) (M. Aubry), [hobbs.brian@uqam.ca](mailto:hobbs.brian@uqam.ca) (B. Hobbs), [thuillier.denis@uqam.ca](mailto:thuillier.denis@uqam.ca) (D. Thuillier).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 514 987 3000x3721; fax: +1 514 987 3343.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 514 987 3000x7783; fax: +1 514 987 3343.

Table 1  
Profile of respondents

Organisation ( $n = 4$ )		#1	#2	#3	#4
Period studied		12 years	10 years	8 years	4 years
Number of transformations ( $n = 11$ )		4	3	3	1
Number of interviews ( $n = 49$ )		13	16	15	5
Role	Project Manager	3	3	1	1
	PMO Manager	0	5	2	1
	Manager in PMO	4	2	0	0
	Executives	2	1	1	1
	HR	1	0	2	0
	Financial	1	1	1	0
	Other managers	2	1	1	1
	PMO's Employees	0	3	7	1
Age	Mode	More than 40 years	More than 40 years	30–40 years	More than 40 years
Education level	% with post-graduate degree	23%	44%	40%	40%
Experience in project management	Mode	5–10 years and more than 10 years	More than 10 years	5–10 years	More than 10 years
Experience in the current job	Mode	2–4 years	2–4 years	1 year	2–4 years

ing” to the reality [11]. In the case of PMOs, this position is worthwhile as theories are almost inexistent and the complexity found in the reality cannot be explained using existing simple models and a positivist approach. Just as organisations are complex social entities, so too are the specific organisational project management structures that encompass PMOs.

In this perspective, the PMO could be seen as a socially constructed entity that is part of a complex organisational system. Taking this approach will give a completely new vision of the PMO. Instead of having an ad hoc picture we will follow the evolution of this entity along with the evolution of its parent organisation from an historical co-evolutionary perspective.

Van de Ven [12] proposes the concept of engaged scholarship defined “as a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in studying complex problems”. Inspired by Van de Ven [12], the methodology proposed here brings together the different points of view of key people involved with PMOs using a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments that permit to uncover some of the essential elements and properties of organisational project management. A true interplay between qualitative and quantitative methods is necessary for the emergence of dense, well-developed, integrated, and comprehensive theory [12,13].

Four organisations from three economic sectors (financial services, telecommunications, and video games) were investigated. All the organisations in the sample do projects for internal customers; all have high levels of product innovation, and all have at least several thousand employees. The data collection covers a sufficient number of years for the history and the evolution of the PMOs in each organisation to be revealed. The time period under investiga-

tion in each of the four organisations was, respectively 12, 10, 8 and 4 years. Each set of observations includes a period prior to the implementation of the first PMO in order to understand the context that prevailed at the time. A total of 49 persons have participated in interviews and most of them have completed questionnaires. Table 1 presents the profiles of respondents.

### 3. The histories of organisations and their PMOs

This section presents the results of the investigation of PMOs in the four organisations. The investigations show that in order to understand a PMO one should take into account the context in which the PMO is located and the evolution of this context. The intention is not to delve into the details of the data analysis but rather to present evidence that a momentary snapshot of the PMO is insufficient.

A total of 12 PMOs were identified in the four organisations. A detailed analysis was done of each. An attempt was made to group the PMOs into types, but significant differences among all the PMOs made the production of a typology difficult, if not impossible. Each PMO is described below in a summary fashion and has been given a name in order to provide an image that characterises it in a simple manner.

The histories of these organisations and their PMOs are characterised by periods of relative stability punctuated by periods of rapid change. Two of the organizations studied have had PMOs for over a decade. Each has changed their PMOs several times. The rhythm of change is approximately three to four different forms of PMO per decade, which is consistent with the survey results [7,8]. A total of eleven organisational transformations were identified and analysed. These were used to divide the histories into periods.

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