Series on Program Management Success in Government

Program Management Development Practices within the Office of Systems, Social Security Administration

July 2014
KEY FINDINGS


This study aims to bring to life the success of Program Manager Development Practices, also known as the Career Development Program, instituted in 2007 within the Office of Systems, at the Social Security Administration. The Office of Systems, Social Security Administration (referred to as Systems in this study) has demonstrated a lengthy history of commitment to program/project management success, resulting in, among other accomplishments, the development of highly skilled, trained and qualified program managers.

Many factors are responsible for the development of program and project managers within Systems, but each shares a common thread: an unrelenting commitment to the principles and application of program management. Stemming from consistent leadership and executive-level support, enhanced by an effective training curriculum and culture of open and honest communication, program management within Systems has long been positioned for continued growth and success. The formalization of program manager development that occurred in 2007 is one step among many that began long before and continues today, which has helped to further the growth of program management within Systems and elevate it to its admirable height among federal agencies.

The history of program manager development within the Office of Systems is one of slow and steady growth owing in large part to its leadership. Executive-level “buy-in” has been consistent from the start, dating back decades, and plays a large role in the development of program manager practices. Funding for program manager training is consistently prioritized and successes are showcased publicly. From the Deputy Commissioner on down to entry-level programmers, the value of fully developed program managers is recognized and understood.

Executive-level support is critical, furthermore, because it has resulted in continued investment in program and project manager training. Money tends to flow from the top down. This financial investment has resulted in high quality program managers, who in turn share their knowledge and experience by mentoring their junior-level counterparts. Through this knowledge transfer process, coupled with the creation of an ever-evolving, internal training system that emphasizes the value of program management through coursework and increasingly difficult project assignments, Systems has been able to produce an equally impressive workforce.

Underlying these tangible factors is a culture of communication that encourages openness and honesty. The formalization of program manager practices, which began in 2007, has served to further open up lines of communication generally and between Systems and its “user” population. Initiated top-down for years but amplified by this formalization, openness and honesty are something currently strived for at all levels from the
ground-up with the intent of pre-empting problems and crises — the more the various parts understand one another (developers, users, etc.), the greater the likelihood of success on any given project.

In order for success to be properly understood and shared across organizations, problem areas must also be taken into consideration. Although program manager development has been viewed as largely successful, other factors may impede its continued growth. The most immediate and pressing danger is budget constraints. Despite executive-level buy-in, the reality is that Commissioners are faced with the difficult task of allocating a finite amount of funds, and prioritizing program management development is becoming increasingly difficult. Budget constraints, furthermore, have prohibited the growing of replacements for senior-level program managers who are retiring in increasing numbers.

The remainder of this report highlights these key findings in greater detail and concludes with a set of best practices, which may be shared with other federal government agencies in the spirit of growing the discipline of project management and increasing adoption of organizational project management activities.

According to PMI’s 2014 Pulse of the Profession® report, organizations that have a defined career path for those engaged in project management also have significantly more projects that meet their original goals, are completed on budget and on time, experience less scope creep, and have fewer projects that are deemed failures.
DETAILED FINDINGS

Overview of Program Manager Development in Systems

Systems performs most IT project work in-house with a predominately federal workforce utilizing SSA-owned and operated infrastructure and systems. It is from within this workforce of about 3,200 that it cultivates and develops IT program managers. Program and project manager development has historically involved a combination of successively more challenging projects and appropriate classroom training.

Systems’ commitment to program and project management excellence is undeniably strong and, as this study suggests, it has been for quite some time. This commitment has been institutionalized over the past two decades through various guidelines and regulations, and generally accepted practices have resulted in an enviable development of exceptional program and project managers. This report focuses on the development of two specific practices within the Career Development Program instituted in 2007: formalization of programs to obtain professional project management certifications for individuals managing large IT-projects—namely, the Project Management Professional (PMP) credential and the FAC-P/PM certification.

The PMP plan included three main components: (1) establishing and documenting experience, skill set, and educational requirements; (2) developing fully documented project management certification packages for each program manager candidate (that would result in certification); and 3) ensuring program managers meet ongoing certification requirements and are informed of changes within the program manager community and job requirements. Concurrently, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) required managers of major investments to be certified according to the Federal Acquisition for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM).

According to PMI’s 2014 Pulse of the Profession report, organizations that have more project managers with a credential also have significantly more projects that are completed on time, on budget, meet their original goals, and have fewer projects that are deemed failures.

In 2007, Systems could boast 15 PMP credential holders; today that number has surpassed 50—an increase of 5% to 20% of the total number of program managers within Systems.

In 2008, 11 project managers achieved FAC-P/PM status; today that number reaches beyond 30—an equally impressive jump from 4% to 12%. These numbers will continue to increase as Systems prepares to certify not only senior but lower level managers as well.

1 SSA Program Manager Development Practices, April 2011
2 Conversation with OS-SSA employees, 4 December 2013
3 SSA Program Manager Development Practices, April 2011
Unique History of Success: Slow and Steady Growth of Program Management

Systems first began implementing Earned Value Management (EVM) practices in 2005—its first formal nod to program and project management. However, the Agency’s history with program management extends back much further. Understanding this history helps understand the seamless nature in which program and project manager development practices could be weaved into Systems’ “way of doing business.” As one interviewee notes, “I’ve been here a long time. Under various names, the Agency has always done program management. Over the past 5 to 10 years, it’s become more structured, more formalized, with more coursework and certifications, but the processes we’ve had in place have always been the program management constructs.”

“Program management has been institutionalized for decades. It’s just becoming more formalized, forcing people to follow [guidelines], be more diligent about doing everything you’re supposed to do.”

With EVM, we found ourselves getting more and more involved in the program management arena. The two are very closely linked,” says one interviewee. For example, EVM heightened Systems’ exposure to external program management sources, and a decision was made to begin to “hire in” experts to run more complicated projects because that level of experience was lacking and a foundation needed to be built. Eventually Systems began to “grow their own” experts. Training, specifically coursework in preparation for the PMP credential exam, was introduced in 2006 and offered to senior program managers.

Interviewees concur that the evolution of program management within the agency was a natural, steady growth, one that at times preceded federal policy. As program management started to settle even 20 years ago, “we did things differently… Systems was CMM Level 3 certified — very process-oriented — but we [knew we] had to move forward,” explains the same interviewee. “We are not an agency satisfied with the status quo. We are always looking to make things better, more efficient, improve the way we work and that includes our program manager process.”

As a result, what happened in 2007 was a case of formalizing and expanding upon existing initiatives as opposed to a case of starting from ground zero. Prompted by the Office of Federal Procurement Policy memo titled “The Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers,” Systems set out enthusiastically to develop a formal structure around these requirements to ensure, according to another interviewee, that “we were doing what we were supposed to do and in the most effective way possible.” This included a formal curriculum designed specifically to assist senior managers to meet FAC-P/PM certification requirements.

At this point in time, “It’s part of the culture. Everybody knows that’s the way we do business.”
Program Manager Development Practices Addressed a Specific Need

Despite the natural flow of events described above, these practices were put in place to address a specific need. OMB-300s, the agency’s major IT investment projects, owing to their high risk and visibility, require a certain level of qualifications to run effectively; yet senior program managers were limited in number. “We needed help from the junior program managers but we had no way of training them,” recalls an interviewee. “You cannot do the work required on an OMB-300 and train new people at the same time,” she continues. Unlike mentoring, which is what effective managers are supposed to do, training requires significantly more time, effort, and energy than the handful of seniors had to spare. In lieu of simply asking junior and mid-level program managers to pursue training, Systems felt it would be most advantageous to institute a process whereby they could get them trained and qualified to assist them and, in doing so, lessen their own workload.

Top-Level Support was Consistent, From the Very Beginning

Executive-level buy-in, support, and involvement in program manager development have always been forthcoming and are deemed essential to its success. In the case of Systems, executive-level support flows from the Deputy Commissioner of Systems on down. “People are going to do what they think is important to their boss,” says one interviewee. “So if the top execs are pushing program management, then program management is going to succeed. Everyone will see it as important.”

Program manager development was no exception. Systems understood the need for highly qualified managers and decided on a top-down approach to institute the training. Senior program managers, meanwhile, worked to facilitate agreement among their colleagues. Explains one interviewee, “We put in place the process and made sure the right players were involved.”

Executive support came in a variety of forms. One critical area was, and continues to be, funding for training. If the Deputy Commissioner believes in program manager development, it will receive priority within the budget. Buy-in from the top means the money is more likely to be in place. “That is where the top execs make a difference. We’re scrounging for money right now with this austere budget situation. We’re looking under every rock...when a top exec is willing to fund these programs year after year in spite of tight budgets, you know there is a high level of commitment there,” says one interviewee. Also critical is the support shown by senior managers in the form of time off to attend trainings, which can mean up to a three-week absence from the office — the work remains and meetings have to be attended, often covered by superiors.

Why this unwavering support? One interviewee explains: “It could be partly due to the fact that some of our execs have come up through the program management ranks. They know firsthand the value of program management.” He continues: “Any of our execs who have been project or program managers have lived the life and therefore respect what exactly a program manager has to do to be successful. They also understand how a good program manager can drive the project to successful completion and keep it within budget. Some, who have not experienced the life, tend not to completely understand or grasp just how much knowledge and work it takes to manage a project. For those who came through the ranks, they are more easily agreeable to set aside
money to allow us the opportunity for formal training. Those who didn’t, sometimes lean toward on-the-job training as the answer. While mentoring is important for the success of program managers, formal training is critical.”

But it is not just support from individuals that helps sustain program management; the organization’s mission is to manage projects; every deliverable is in the form of a project. This makes program management an easier sell at Systems, than for example, an organization that does not manage projects on a daily basis.

A Dedicated, Eager Workforce that Required Additional Training

Prior to 2007, junior- and mid-level managers counted on experience more so than formal training to qualify to work on projects. “At that point in time, a mid-level manager had maybe some training but for the most part had just been doing it for a while,” recalls an interviewee. Training was limited to the Systems Development Life Cycle (CMMI Level 3) with its repeatable processes and procedures, but lacked a focus on the soft skills and leadership essential for effective program management. Furthermore, until 2007, managers operated with a “checklist mentality,” which through various software templates, allowed managers to meet Agency regulations via a step-by-step plan but without any guidance or room for creativity, another component of successful management — especially in the current budget environment of having to do more with less.

Among the many positive attributes of the Systems’ workforce are dedication, commitment, and an eagerness to learn and be of value. According to one interviewee, “New employees are eager to learn what we do, the way we function, and how they can impact that.” After 2007, top-level buy-in soon translated into workforce buy-in as well. Mid- and junior-level managers were quick to embrace the new structure because the value of their increased training was readily apparent. Increased training meant those under them could take on more and meatier projects and tasks, with increased knowledge and creativity. Another interviewee explains: “Mid- and junior-level managers live the criticality of having strong program managers on their teams every day so when upper management opened up the training to more levels of program managers, they were eager to get their people signed up. This gave the mid- and lower-level managers the opportunity to schedule their program managers, which allowed the novice and intermediate ones to grow in their skill sets, thus becoming even stronger in their positions. This in turns shows in the success of their projects and the ability to do more on their own and with less supervision. Senior managers were able to mentor more effectively, leaving the training to other sources.” And as recognition for their success grew, so did respect for managers across the organization.

“Even in program manager training, I’ve seen a huge spike in interest. The word is getting out and people generally want to be an asset to the organization.”
A Culture of Communication that Encourages Honesty and Openness

Communication within Systems flows with great regularity and in multiple directions, underpinned by an emphasis on honesty and openness. Constant and effective communication serves to pre-empt problems and prevent failures. Program managers understand the value in this kind of communication. Says one interviewee, "If I keep telling you everything is okay, everything is okay, and then I give you a website [that doesn't function], you're not going to be happy, and you shouldn't be." Failures elsewhere have been attributed to lack of openness. In this particular example, “They made it so uncomfortable for someone to say, 'We have a problem,' that no one was willing to say, 'We have a problem,'” she continues.

After 2007, communication opened up even further. One area that was in need of more effective communication was the relationship between Systems and its user population. The story goes that once the initial discussion took place whereby Systems understood the business requirement, they would disappear and complete their assignment in isolation. The new development practices changed the way their business was conducted. As one interviewee explains, "Although it was written for Systems, it was shared with other organizations." Senior managers understood the need to talk not just the “what” and “how” of a request, as they did in the past, but understand the “why.”

Further improving communication was the creation of a training seminar with business representatives. The goal was to make them understand the steps involved in every program and where they fit into the process and the doling out of responsibilities. The result was a deeper understanding of the context surrounding the need for software and other deliverables, which resulted in fewer mistakes, greater timeliness, and ultimately greater success on projects. As they learned what each task entailed, business sponsors were more supportive of the Systems team’s work and time to completion, which resulted in heightened support for these tasks and more cohesive, timely and complete projects.

Program manager development after 2007 also brought about more formalized communication processes, such as regular meetings between top- and mid- and junior-level managers, as well as frequent encounters with Deputy and Associate Commissioners to keep them in the loop. Again, although openness and honesty were always encouraged, after 2007 the emphasis was taken to new levels. It was even incorporated into program manager training programs; specifically, the need to express doubt early on in a project and not wait until a project is nearing its due date. “We are training everyone to know you only fail if you fail to let anyone know you’re failing. Don’t try to be a hero,” says one interviewee.

“We’ve been very fortunate that they [mid- and junior-level managers] have embraced program management. People have come to me and said, ‘I never really knew what that meant, but how can I be part of it?’”

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Training is Internal, Advanced and Ever Evolving

Opportunity and support for program manager training were always present in Systems but soon became available in a more formal manner. As noted earlier, the program introduced three specific components. The first was to establish and document management experience, skill sets, and educational requirements. Previously, there was much less emphasis on documentation. The second component involved developing certification packages, in answer to the point above — the wide variety of backgrounds meant one size would not fit all. Ensuring program managers meet ongoing certification requirements and are kept informed of related changes was not new, but again, delivered in a more predictable, formalized manner. And last, FAC-P/PM meant formalizing a course curriculum that had already been developed and one that currently exceeds all of its requirements.

As noted earlier, Systems tends to grow its own program managers from within. Anyone interested in a program manager career must complete a progression of experience, training, and core competencies in order to advance. Introductory courses teach newcomers the foundation and principles of program management; they are then assigned a small project to manage and begin to develop a defined set of skills. The second step is to complete appropriate leadership training via workshops and courses in areas, including coaching and mentoring, customer service, coping with change, effective staff meetings, winning relationships, problem solving, goal setting, strategic planning, successful negotiating, and team building.

PMP credential training is essentially a prep course offered to more experienced project managers to help them improve their project management skills and to prepare for the next step, which is FAC-P/PM certification. This requires managing bigger projects and pursuing a defined curriculum. FAC-P/PM certification may precede appointment to manage the Agency’s major IT projects (Exhibit 300s, for example) or may follow within one year of the date of appointment. At the most senior level, Systems offers FAC-P/PM training, as well as a variety of FAC-P/PM and PMP continuing education courses.

Systems program manager training continues to evolve and reach beyond the goals set out in 2007. It currently includes a series of program manager workshops, leadership skills training, and targeted program manager skill development. “We’ve come to recognize more and more...how critical it is to have a good project manager if we want to succeed in getting our programs done on budget, on time and with the requested functionality,” says an interviewee. “And so our program manager training program has evolved over the years to meet those needs.”

The point to be made here is that Systems’ program manager training is based on an advanced, ever-evolving curriculum whose aims reach beyond preparing employees for certification, laying a foundation for future growth and development and producing top-quality program managers.

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4 SSA Program Manager Development Practices, April 2011
Processes are Living, Changing Documents

As the standards for program managers have changed, so have the processes they employ. Before 2007, processes used were generally more rigid; changes allowed for more flexibility so program managers could apply their individual skills and experience to projects and also take into account environmental and other unexpected changes. The standards around how to develop a project reflect one major shift in thinking, itself reflective of an increasingly Internet-based world. On the one hand, the Internet has meant an unprecedented level of risk in the form of hacking into systems; security is an issue that has to be dealt with more deeply than ever before and built into processes program managers must be trained to understand and work through.

Increased Web involvement has also called for a move away from a mainframe operation and requires a more agile development process, one more iterative and with greater risk, as opposed to the “waterfall” process used earlier. This evolution is explained: “Before was a waterfall process...step one gets done before step two. Now steps one, two, three may still take six months but in the third step I may start the design of a smaller piece... that used to be against the rules.” In essence, this shift allows for Systems’ users to see the intermediate steps and give feedback (even red light a project), which in turn saves time and money. “Now we can go back and not lose six months of work, maybe just two weeks, and be that much quicker to market.”

Systems concurrently developed processes to ensure greater program manager success, such as quality assurance specialists and multiple systems process improvement organizations to maintain an eye on and keep track of each program. Data is collected and tracked in order to be able to produce lessons learned from each.

Lessons Learned are Captured Formally

Tied to program manager development was the idea of being able to capture lessons learned in a formal manner, so as to be able to share these lessons not only within Systems, but also across Agency components as well. Also tied to communication, program managers became required to formally meet with the project team (business, development, users, etc.) and deliver a checklist of sorts — what went well, what went wrong, and how to improve upon future projects. This formalized way of doing business soon became invaluable and helps future projects to avoid the earlier mistakes. In addition, according to one interviewee, “When you actually sit down and discuss what you’ve learned, you come to a realization that you have, in fact, learned some things.” It helps to make learnings not only more explicit but also available to the entire team.

Program managers are the first to admit there is still room for improvement in this area. Lessons learned are difficult to spread beyond the project team. Team members on other projects or in other areas rarely feel the problems of another area apply and hence are resistant to paying attention. “They don’t take the time. They don’t look at the history books,” points out an interviewee. Hunting down germane “lessons” is also difficult; the SSA is a large agency and unless someone knows how to search very specifically, they will produce a ton of information, most of which won’t necessarily apply to them. As a result of this hurdle, part of what the Program Manager Community of Practice (PMCoP) hopes to accomplish is to be able to share lessons learned more broadly, among “a cohort of people that care and will gain insights from other people’s experiences,” explains another.
**Program Manager Development Beyond Systems and SSA**

Program manager development within Systems is slowly but consistently trickling to other SSA components. A good deal of executive movement within the SSA means former Systems leaders are likely to be found in other components and they bring their program manager expertise and discipline with them. In addition, the recent creation of a Program Management Community of Practice (PMCoP) is pivotal in this movement, as it brings together interested parties from across the entire Agency. (PMCoP is the subject of more discussion in the final section of the report.)

Outside of the SSA, owing to their high degree of training and certification, Systems’ program managers have partnered with various agencies, often serving as mentors. The list of agencies includes the Internal Revenue Service, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Federal Aviation Administration, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). One example of successful collaboration is the e-Verify project undertaken with DHS and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and developed by Systems. The project was highly visible and high risks associated with it. Since OMB was responsible for the appropriated funds of DHS, they had a high degree of oversight. This in turn prompted the Agency to classify this at the highest level and required PPM3 level certification by its project managers. As one interviewee explains it, “Our job was to make sure they could get their pieces and parts done. Paperwork, contract, internal agreements, money set up properly, etc. OMB was in the middle to make sure DHS did what it was supposed to do.”

The goal of Systems’ program manager development is not to duplicate success, but rather to mentor others to be good partners and illustrate the value of program manager training. We try “to help others understand how they can work with us better,” to anticipate our needs and ultimately lessen our workload. “It’s not that they can take the same expertise and apply it within their organization, it’s more that they can work with us better,” that same interviewee continues.

**Obstacles that Prevent Greater Success**

Despite the general acceptance and continued growth of program manager development practices within Systems, a handful of obstacles were identified, which presented hurdles for those wanting to advance the discipline. Some of these areas are seen to be improving, while others have yet to encounter effective solutions.

**Colleagues in other components provide pushback.**

Advanced training and certification meant Systems program managers began to assist with projects elsewhere in the Agency. But they often encounter resistance, as others less familiar with program management do not recognize the value of having a program manager on their projects or simply resist working within its more formal structure. They are often in a hurry and believe program management adds time. They are often operating in a contract-based environment, which has a different mentality, milestones, and expectations. There is also lack of familiarity with IT projects generally. “The value of reporting the kind of data we report isn’t appreciated by people who haven’t had to manage it,” says one interviewee. Egos also come into play occasionally; not everyone is equally receptive to mentoring. “A lot of times we are the lead, even though we are not labeled the lead, we have to become the lead because in order for us to be successful we have to make them successful,” adds another interviewee. Other components resist applying principles they see are relevant only to Systems and hence question the usefulness of someone from outside of their component.

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5 E-Verify refers to the development of the web-based service that lets participating employers quickly verify the eligibility of their new employees to work in the United States.
Fortunately, pushback can most often be counteracted with education and exposure to program management success. Although the perceptions is that projects take longer to complete with a program manager on board, skeptics are said to recognize that in the end it not only works better, but also problems are less likely to happen and can be fixed quicker.

**Measuring success across components requires attention.**

According to interviewees, Systems is not yet where it needs to be in terms of measuring the impact of projects on its end users. Currently, measurement tends to focus on functional outputs (whether requirements are being delivered) but they are trying to identify measures to assess benefits realization as projects progress and as they are delivered. The difficulty is reported to stem from a lack of collaboration across components, something outside of Systems’ control. For example, “For us to know if what we created for Operations was successful, Operations needs to put in place a system of measures to observe that and we’re still working towards that,” he continues.

Program managers, on the other hand, emphasize the distance traveled since 2007. They point to the Post Implementation Review Process (PIR) as one example of improvement. PIR examines certain major projects from the viewpoint of benefits analysis (ROI and BVS) and more generally, whether the project did what it intended to do. Although an insufficient number have been completed to be able to produce a quantified response, Systems insists that there has been improvement in tracking artifacts because reviews are completed earlier. “This has given us a way to ensure projects are following the processes and procedures (life cycle tasks) more definitively. We also have a stronger process to follow the business requirements throughout the project up to and including final test cases so we have a better feel for whether the project is doing what it was intended to do at multiple steps along the life of the project.”

Also established after 2007, was a practice of Post Release Review. Since every project has multiple releases, examination should take place after each release, not just at the project’s completion. Testing of requirements is also said to be more formal and robust today than ever, something that was not required before 2007.
BEST PRACTICES

Program Manager Career Development within Systems can best be described as a project that developed a process, which has been sustained and improved upon over the past six years and continues to move the discipline of program management forward. As one interviewee asserts, “We still use it today for developing strong, well-educated program managers.” As such, it was not difficult to glean resulting best practices. The following section highlights these benchmarks.

- Program Manager Development appears to be solidly in place, well-monitored, and constantly evolving; its success has led to the formalization of additional career ladder components and this is likely to continue. According to an interviewee, “We are continually looking for ways to formalize our processes and document them. We put requirements in place and then requirements to ensure they are followed.”

- Training clearly provides a strong foundation for successful program managers, which in turn results in successful programs and projects, especially in the case of major IT investments such as the ones handled within Systems. Despite constrained resources, Systems’ top-level executives continue to push for improved training and training opportunities for all program managers with the belief that it is an investment in the future of their organization. As another interviewee explains, “As the retirement wave continues to thin the ranks of our most experienced project managers, we need a cadre of well-trained, experienced younger managers ready to fill the gaps. Training is a critical element to growing the next generation of project managers.”

- While preparing employees for FAC-P/PM certification means program managers have the necessary management, training is also seen to play a more powerful role: It demonstrates to employees an investment in their development and growth, which in turn creates a sense of value throughout the organization. “Training is always a hot button, often the first thing to get cut, but it’s so much more than helping your people know the right stuff,” says an interviewee. “It’s the investment in them as well.”

- Training leads to knowledge, which leads to experience. As a result, mid- and junior-level program managers are able to take on tasks with greater independence and self-confidence.

- The intentional creation of a communication culture that rewards openness and honesty and discourages waiting to reveal concerns or problems has resulted in continuously successful outcomes. On a general note, problems that are dealt with early on are more likely to preempt a crisis (and as a result, lead to cost-savings not deficits). More specifically, the increased level and modified nature of communication between developers and users has resulted in greater understanding between the two arms and subsequently, greater project success.

- Processes are living documents that can and should be reassessed and modified frequently in order to grow and improve within the organization and be a better source of mentorship to those in other organizations.
THE FUTURE GROWTH OF PROGRAM MANAGERS IN SYSTEMS

Project Management Community of Practice: Program Managers Spread Interest

The PMCoP was recently created and piloted within Systems but with goals reaching far beyond its walls. In fact, one of its main objectives is to draw interest from other SSA components by educating employees about what program managers actually do, and in doing so, eradicating the many misconceptions that abound. It allows for sharing of knowledge—namely, what has worked/not worked on a project so others may learn from successes and mistakes. It aims to attract the junior- and mid-level program managers and people on the “fringes,” those who know the least.

The community meets in a series of informal meetings, without any one lead speaker (although program managers of all levels act to cultivate discussion), less like a classroom and more like a friendly get-together of colleagues. “If the first taste in their mouth is bad, they won’t come back for more,” says one interviewee. After only a handful of meetings interest is said to be growing.

Additional ideas are being talked about to further advance program managers within the Agency:

- A Program Manager Fellowship is being discussed, brought to attention by the Assistant Deputy Commissioner to formally recognize the senior-most program managers and further elevate the practice.

- Systems is considering expanding its program manager career path up to the GS 15 level. Currently, most Systems program managers are classified GS 13, 14 or 15 (division directors or technical experts), but very few are GS 15 program managers, and those who reached that level did so owing to technical more so than program management accomplishments.

- With a desire to further enhance the expertise of their program managers in the federal government, the Federal Acquisition Institute is requiring wider certification of program managers, beyond seniors/Level 3 to those who do lower level work, in order to work on large (OMB-300) projects.
CONCLUSION

Although the lengthy history of commitment to growing a Career Development Program within Systems cannot be easily or quickly replicated elsewhere, aspects may be cultivated over time. Program Manager Development Practices combined in 2007 to form the start of a lengthy and continuously growing career ladder in Systems, which has resulted in highly skilled, trained, and qualified program managers who are sought after throughout the Agency. Through increasing awareness of their role generally (for example, PMCoP), as well as sharing best practices and specific success stories emanating from this career development, additional federal government agencies may begin to understand their value-add to any and all projects, big or small, within IT or beyond.
A NOTE ON THIS STUDY

There are two important items to keep in mind with this case study: First, although technically deemed a project, the Career Development Program differs from other projects undertaken in this office in that it did not produce a particular product; rather it produced a process for developing strong, well-educated program and project managers still being used today. To put it into further perspective, explains one senior program manager, "It was never a project that included work being done by a project manager to deliver a given widget." Second, agencies within the federal government often use "program" and "project" interchangeably. Where possible both terms will be used to avoid confusion.

Systems has strengthened program manager development in a myriad of ways over the years, two of which are particularly deserving of attention: adopting a formalized program manager credentials policy within the administration for its employees who manage large-scale IT programs and producing a detailed compliance plan in response to a federal requirement to have program and project managers of major investments be further certified by the Federal Acquisition for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM).

This study examines the evolution of this commitment within Systems, paying particular attention to the Career Development Program. It dives deeply into the factors that sustain program management success from the perspectives of program managers and others who support the growth of this discipline. The ultimate goal of this research, therefore, is to share insights gleaned from Systems’ program managers and other experts and ultimately to grow program manager development inside other federal government agencies; or, as one interviewee notes, "To get others to drink the Kool-Aid."
METHODOLOGY

PMI hired M/A/R/C® Research Inc. to design and conduct a series of in-depth telephone interviews with individuals deemed responsible and relevant to program management success within the Office of Systems, Social Security Administration. Program Manager Development Practices was deemed a success and, as such, selected as the subject of this study by a joint effort between PMI and the qualitative research team at M/A/R/C®.

A total of six (6) in-depth telephone interviews were conducted between 4 December 2013 and 15 January 2014, and incorporated the following roles:

- Former EVM PMO Director
- Deputy Associate Commissioner
- Senior Advisor
- Management Analyst
- Assistant Deputy Commissioner
- Program Manager, Office of Electronic Services & Technology
ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Project Management Institute is the world’s leading not-for-profit professional membership association for the project, program and portfolio management profession. Founded in 1969, PMI delivers value for more than 2.9 million professionals working in nearly every country in the world through global advocacy, collaboration, education and research. PMI advances careers, improves organizational success and further matures the profession of project management through its globally recognized standards, certifications, resources, tools, academic research, publications, professional development courses, and networking opportunities. As part of the PMI family, Human Systems International (HSI) provides organizational assessment and benchmarking services to leading businesses and government, while ProjectManagement.com and ProjectsAtWork.com create online global communities that deliver more resources, better tools, larger networks and broader perspectives.

PMI recognizes all those who agreed to be interviewed for this study but, having promised anonymity, whose names shall not be revealed.