Federal Project and Program Management Community of Practice (FedPM CoP) — How Sharing Best Practices Can Lead to Success

A Supplement to the report, PMIAA: Strengthening the Government Delivery Foundation.

“Be the go-to source of information and best practices for program and project managers, and venue to collaborate and discuss matters with colleagues.”

~ FedPM CoP long-term vision

Introduction

Recognizing the value of a community focused on project practice capability and how such a community could help improve the performance of departments across the U.S. federal government, the leaders of the Federal Project Management Community of Practice (FedPM CoP) provide the opportunity for program and project managers to share information and avoid reinventing the wheel. This bottom-up approach demonstrates the high level of interest and commitment of federal employees and embedded contractors in building their program and project management skills, capabilities, and network. The approach also recognizes that talented program and project managers across government have important “know-how” and lessons learned that can be harnessed to help other program/project professionals improve performance. Even though the FedPM CoP has been in existence for only a short time, the response to the availability of this community has been very positive, with significant participation across agencies and recognition from federal policymakers.
Identifying the federal project management community and leading change

With the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (P.L. 111-5) of 2009, federal agencies assumed responsibility for billions of dollars of investment and faced an immense task of implementing this initiative in short order with high expectations of transparency and rapid results.

In 2013, as their agency’s work to implement the Recovery Act drew to a close, Scott Hine and Christie Rewey, both from the Project Management Coordination Office for the Department of Energy’s Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, identified the need for a government-wide project management community of practice (CoP) that might help their agency and others share experiences, practices, and data from the wealth of knowledge that exists across government.

In a parallel initiative and unknown by Hine and Rewey, Fawn Freeman, at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was developing a community of practice designed to accomplish many of the same goals. In 2014, Freeman and colleagues at the EPA initiated a CoP mainly focused on information technology projects. Even though the community was small by federal agency standards, it captured the interest of approximately 60 members from about 15 organizations. The Federal Project Management Community of Practice—as the group was known at that time—hosted knowledge sharing on the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) MAX.gov website to limit access to federal employees and select contractors only.

In the summer of 2015, Hine and Rewey resumed their efforts to create a federal CoP and learned of Freeman’s organization. After contacting Freeman to learn more about the group, they agreed to accept the role of leading the CoP, and leadership transitioned from Freeman to Hine and Rewey later that summer. Today, Hine is the executive sponsor, Rewey the lead coordinator, and Priscilla Bumbaca coordinates some of the CoP’s activities. These leaders have significantly expanded upon the original infrastructure and mission—including the widening of the CoP’s scope to include program management as well—while carrying on the core principles that originally led to the community’s founding.

The CoP represents a new capability that not only needed to be created but has also been adopted and used by its stakeholders to deliver improved outcomes. Its creation and development represents an organizational transformation requiring the FedPM CoP leadership to communicate exactly what they are trying to achieve to their potential members—tens of thousands of federal employees and contractors working, officially or unofficially, as project managers. The CoP’s founding principle reflects that program and project managers all work for taxpayer-funded organizations with common goals—the improvement of society and continuity of services. To do this, project and program managers need an avenue for sharing information with each other across organizational boundaries to avoid having to recreate existing materials and relearn the lessons of others.

The CoP principles resonate on a large scale. Program and project managers use myriad information management systems, but many organizations still lack robust ways of capturing some of the most valuable information of all—knowledge gained through human experience. It is vital to harvest these lessons before they are lost in the torrent of shifting missions and systems. With ever-expanding responsibilities and constant change for program and project managers, the FedPM CoP creates a vital forum for the transfer of expertise across the thousands of program and project managers who work for the American people.
The FedPM CoP did not form as part of a directive and it does not have sponsorship funding or even a budget. Rather, the FedPM CoP formed, and continues to grow, organically, with staff performing all tasks as duties collateral to their federal jobs. There is no specific executive-level direction pointing toward a desired future state. So, the FedPM CoP leadership needs to establish a vision that describes the targeted future state of the CoP, as well as what they expected to accomplish when they got there.

For the CoP to grow and be sustainable, it has to be perceived as valuable to the entire federal project management community and enable the improvement of federal projects and program performance. The resulting FedPM CoP vision became to: “Be the go-to source of information and best practices for program and project managers, and venue to collaborate and discuss matters with colleagues.” The vision serves as the "guiding star" for any current or future improvement strategy and work the community leadership would undertake.

The pathway to establishing the CoP had three phases:

1. Establishing a critical mass of membership that enables the community to function;
2. Establishing work groups and facilitating community work products; and
3. Delivering value to federal government organizations.

Regarding the goal of the FedPM CoP, Scott Hine states, "We want to help other federal agencies to improve their project management performance."

**Establishing the FedPM CoP membership and a functioning community**

In implementing the CoP, the first task was to attract and engage enough members to generate meaningful outputs. Prospective members needed a reason to join, and, to accomplish this, the FedPM CoP leadership conducted surveys to identify knowledge areas of relevance and interest to the community. Once identified, topics were grouped into common areas of knowledge (see Figure 1). Working groups then formed and aligned their efforts to activities targeted toward knowledge sharing, solutions, and recommendations for addressing problem areas identified by community members. The leaders hoped that the working groups’ outputs would not only serve the CoP members’ interests, but also improve project and program performance across the government.

Another task of this initial phase focused on developing the community infrastructure and resources. This work included identifying subject matter experts, exploring partnering opportunities with related institutions, collecting relevant artifacts and data, and establishing a repository to enable sharing among members and agencies. Some outputs from these work activities have included:

- Establishing the FedPM CoP Resource Library, including providing free online access to the Project Management Institute’s *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*;
- Providing regular newsletters to update members on CoP activities;
- Scheduling regular meetings and engagement with members;
- Providing training and speaking opportunities; and
- Utilizing the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) online newsletter, *FAI Today*, for communicating with current and prospective CoP leaders.
Continuing to build content and interest

Experts from within and outside of government have spoken and participated in FedPM CoP gatherings. These experts lend their knowledge and real-world experiences to further develop the topic areas and assist the working groups. Collaboration with the FAI and external organizations, such as Project Management Institute, leveraged the knowledge, experience, and resources of these important partners. The ongoing development of the CoP website on the OMB MAX.gov platform supports information sharing and offers a resource library. To facilitate communication and sharing of practices, the CoP leadership set up quarterly CoP-wide meetings, monthly working group meetings, periodic in-person networking events, online discussion boards, and a speaker series. Figure 2 depicts the current engagement model with federal and nongovernment organizations.
The CoP leadership wanted to provide a forum for members to voice their views openly and informally at the practitioner level. So the CoP developed mechanisms to collect various inputs and data, aggregate them, and send the aggregated information to the appropriate recipient or working group for validation across a diverse group of expert participants. This process allows members to speak up and be heard without individual attribution, if desired, and does not represent the position of any agency.

Honoring project and program management excellence is important not only to recognize outstanding workforce performance, but also to create an incentive for sustaining superior performance. Prior to the FedPM CoP, this recognition did not exist formally in the U.S. government. To create a sense of achievement and recognition of excellence, the FedPM CoP created the first and only government-wide project/program management award. The CoP also plans to unveil a “wall of fame” to recognize achievements of the government program management workforce.

Interest in the community has grown rapidly, expanding outreach and attaining 200 members from 35 organizations in 2015 (see Figure 3). Today, nearly 900 members from over 80 organizations actively engage and participate.

**CoP outcomes**

The FedPM CoP started as a movement to get people connected. Quickly, those connections led to collaborative problem solving and information sharing. The more the community has grown, the more important it has become to identify specific outcomes the community aims to achieve through focused effort. The FedPM CoP has identified the following as some of its targeted outcomes:

- Harnessing interest and shared passion;
- Sharing learning and knowledge, formally and informally;
- Potential maturation of processes and increased organizational agility;
- Broadening of personal, professional, and interagency networks; and
- Deepening engagement of community members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>Today</th>
<th>2020 and beyond</th>
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<tr>
<td>60 members</td>
<td>200 members</td>
<td>Nearly 900 members</td>
<td>1,000+ members</td>
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<tr>
<td>~15 organizations</td>
<td>~35 organizations</td>
<td>80+ organizations</td>
<td>100+ organizations</td>
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<td>Initiated by EPA</td>
<td>DOE leads</td>
<td>Active participation</td>
<td>Reach 100K professionals</td>
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<td>Small, IT-oriented group</td>
<td>Expanded outreach</td>
<td>Awards</td>
<td>Engage in policy changes</td>
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<td>- Face-to-face meetings</td>
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<td>- Working groups</td>
<td>- Job enrichment</td>
<td>- Online portal</td>
<td>- Certification program</td>
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*Figure 3. FedPM CoP continues to grow.*
A vision becomes a mandate

The foresight and thought leadership of the FedPM CoP was recently affirmed as providing a valuable resource to the federal project management community. In December 2016, the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act (PMIAA, P.L. 114-264) was signed into law. PMIAA was enacted to enhance accountability and best practices in project and program management throughout the U.S. federal government. OMB’s PMIAA implementation guidance not only provides support for a federal project/program management community of practice, it establishes a mandate.

A key component of the new law is the establishment of an interagency Program Management Policy Council. The council is to be comprised of senior-level Program Management Improvement Officers from the largest federal agencies. The chair of the FedPM CoP will also participate in the Council. The Council is expected to perform several functions:

- Act as a forum for sharing knowledge of successful approaches and best practices;
- Identify best practices, review high-risk programs, and identify discussion topics of importance to the workforce; and
- Provide a voice on issues affecting the development of organization project and program management throughout the U.S. federal government.

During public comment on PMIAA implementation, the FedPM CoP facilitated the gathering, collation, and submittal of member comments. Hine thinks this is a valuable aspect of the FedPM CoP and its working groups. The CoP can act as a vehicle for communicating recommendations that influence policy in a collective, peer-reviewed and non-attribution fashion. With a seat on the Council, these validated recommendations can be presented as input from the community.

The future

The rising trend of the FedPM CoP’s membership is a positive sign that the federal project/program management workforce needs a community and values what the FedPM CoP has delivered to date. Data show that new members are finding the group through many different vehicles: word of mouth, search engines, and the MAX.gov website. As of May 2018, membership of the FedPM CoP has reached nearly 900 members engaging over 80 federal organizations. As the coordinators have heard from several new members, those members knew the CoP ought to exist and wish they had heard of it sooner.

Hine, Rewey, and Bumbaca continue to work to build the CoP and advance their vision for it. They are continuing to engage with FAI and other groups involved in building project/program management capabilities. A seat at the council will enable the FedPM CoP to engage in discussions that influence policy, enrich job experiences, and deliver value to the people of the United States. The leadership also offers advice and insights to agencies looking to build specific capabilities. “The FedPM CoP leadership is available as a resource to anyone who wants to establish a PMO or a CoP,” says Rewey, FedPM CoP coordinator. “We are willing and eager to help.”
Analysis – Implications of the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act

If properly structured and utilized effectively, CoPs can drive adoption and continuous improvement of practices for delivering projects and programs. Organizational project management (OPM) CoPs enable individuals to identify gaps or issues in practices, processes, tools, and techniques, and then to leverage the community to uncover solutions and enhanced practices. CoPs also encourage experience and knowledge sharing so that lessons learned can be incorporated into practice continuously and in real time.

The establishment of CoPs focused on organizational project management is one of the key enablers identified by Project Management Institute (PMI) for implementing and improving OPM capabilities. Recommended characteristics of OPM communities include:

- Formation of groups around identified topics;
- Collecting, archiving, and communicating related topic information;
- Organizational endorsement and support;
- Meaningful engagement and participation by members (e.g., meetings, workgroups, shared practice sessions);
- Encouragement for participation by senior management and alignment with personal development objectives;
- Sharing of internal and external knowledge and experiences; and
- Formal definition, implementation, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the community (benefits and added value).

The importance of a CoP is reflected in the PMI’s Pulse of the Profession® research (2015, 2017):

- Organizations that are more effective at knowledge transfer improve project outcomes nearly 35%.
- 34% of unsuccessful projects are adversely affected due to untimely or inaccurate knowledge transfer.
- Only 37% of government entities across the globe have a formal knowledge transfer process.

PMIAA should leverage and more effectively enable this proactive capability building, engagement, and change management.

It is also vital that CoPs drive some form of value or benefits. Benefits are also important in acquiring and sustaining executive sponsorship. Any new capability without clearly identified and agreed benefits is often viewed only by its cost. Since meaningful and lasting support is typically monetary, benefits should be defined in monetary terms as well. The outcome of improved OPM performance ties directly to the value contribution. Benefits such as quantifiable improvements in project or program performance that can be attributed to something gained through participating in or recommendations made by a CoP provide a measure of success. From a governance perspective, the advice these working group practitioners could provide policymakers could be highly valuable as well.
Developing and maintaining a successful CoP

There may be a need for different types of CoPs in addition to the FedPM CoP. For example, agencies managing complex engineering projects and programs may benefit from an integrated CoP structure. Bringing together the project/program and engineering disciplines can help them more effectively align practices and identify new approaches for delivering complex engineering solutions. Wherever they may form, CoP leaders should ensure their communities address the following points:

- **Demonstrate value** - Benefits drive change and garner organizational support. Benefits that outweigh the costs of implementation (or in operations in the long term) form a positive business case for an organization’s investment. Intermediate benefits and quick wins are instrumental in accomplishing the various phases of the CoP, such as building membership and acquiring sponsors, but there should also be a more strategic focus on delivering sustained benefits to the sponsoring organization.

- **Define clear objectives and a vision** - Having a clear objective or purpose defined (e.g., a vision of the future state and the outcomes to be achieved) is essential to align the work related to building the CoP with the intended benefits. It is this vision and the benefits of achieving it that provide a basis for developing requirements for the new capabilities needed by the organization as well as the yardstick against which success is measured and sponsorship is maintained.

- **Establish a plan and support infrastructure** - With the vision and requirements for new capabilities defined, a plan for implementation and benefits realization establishes the foundation for the work to be done.

- **Engage with members regularly** with calls, face-to-face meetings, social media, and newsletters. Members and their agencies are the people who realize the benefits.

- **Collect feedback** - Survey members’ interests and areas of expertise to constantly assess the effectiveness of the community in terms of added value and meeting the expectation of the participating organizations and members.

**Contact information:**

For more information on the Federal Program and Project Management Community of Practice, please visit [https://go.max.gov/fedpmcop](https://go.max.gov/fedpmcop). (OMB Max.gov registration is required.)

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