G00234267

How to Mini-Manage Mini-Projects and Still Minimize Risk

Published: 18 September 2012

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One of the hallmarks of Level 3 maturity organizations is the ability to differentiate among projects, mini-projects (or self-managed work), work/ change requests and full projects.

Key Challenges

- The sheer number of small projects and mini-project efforts often represent considerable cost and resource capacity consumption to IT organizations. Project management office (PMO) leaders are charged with supporting project portfolio managers in aligning investment decisions with resource capacity.
- Prioritization processes that attempt to include all "projects" with deliverables often result in unwieldy governance processes clogged with excessive numbers of low-value, low-risk efforts.
- As a result, PMO leaders are challenged to introduce the flexibility needed to keep pace with business change into their standard set of processes and tools.
- The urge to bypass all prioritization and project controls on mini-projects poses considerable aggregate risk, even though individual mini-projects may not.

Recommendations

- Don't just allocate mini-projects' aggregate costs, but also track them in portfolio categories — such as business unit, business process, strategy, application or something else.
- Gain acceptance of, and adherence to, a project portfolio management (PPM) process framework by establishing a mini-project process that's light and easy.
- However, be sure to review mini-projects initially for risks other than project size (effort). If other risks are high, a lightweight mini-project process may be inadequate.
- Do not risk treating mini-projects as routine requests, but find ways to cut process overhead and even project management involvement that is needed only on full projects.

Introduction

Distinguish Requests From Projects

Work/change requests (or minor enhancements) are generally less than two or three person months, and add little or no new functionality.[1] Compared with true projects, such requests are not typically subject to the same kinds of approval — featuring analysis of strategic fit, risks and more — as are projects.

By contrast, we have identified smaller projects as being less than 20 person months and large projects as being more than 100 person months, and have consistently advised the use of "just enough process" (see "The PMO IT 'Control Tower': Filing a Flight Plan" and "'Just Enough Process' for Applications"). For many of those smaller projects, the essential complement of the project management process is applied, including fairly senior approval of staff allocation.

However, between the routine work request and small projects are a significant number of other efforts that more-capable IT organizations may not manage as either work requests or projects. These "in-betweeners," sometimes referred to as "mini-projects," are prioritized at a less senior, line-manager level within senior management guidelines.

PMO leaders are challenged to introduce the flexibility needed to produce results into their standard set of processes and tools to keep up with business activity and change.[2] In addition, PMO leaders are charged to support project portfolio managers in aligning investment decisions with resource capacity.

Analysis

Enable Flexible, Scalable Processes

Mini-projects are generally too numerous and insufficiently significant (in cost and other risks) to be subject to the full array of processes for approval, staff allocation and other project management processes. In addition, there are too many of them to include in a governance process or the project portfolio dashboard without hopelessly clogging them up.

Mini-projects are handled differently in other ways too. They:

- Have few formal meetings.
- Touch relatively few users.
- Are typically focused in a single business unit.
- Have only two or three phase gates, including:
  - An initial risk review to see whether closer scrutiny is merited — for example, to ensure targeted accountability for work on a critical system.

    - A simple list of the three most significant risks and how they will be mitigated (avoided).
- A statement of scope, ranging from a single page to a simple email to the sponsor and key stakeholders:
    - A firm commitment to a due date should be contained in schedule.

Address organizational change by defining who will be affected by this work and what will change to help ensure that the mini-project does not break anything accidentally, fail to provide training, or attempt to implement changes at the same time as other, more important, changes.

Case Study

PPM leaders at a provider of insurance and health services in the American Southwest (referred to here as "Southwest Insurance & Health," or SIH — not its real name) had repeatedly experienced two severe project failures, prompting the organization to drive toward PPM process improvement. Over an extended period — more than two years — SIH satisfactorily reached Level 2 in PPM maturity, with an emphasis on a single, standardized PPM process for any effort with more than three team members.

However, SIH stalled at Level 2 for three years, without developing alternate processes, and with only project coordinators in the PMO. Project managers sincerely wished to avoid further project failures, yet late delivery — and late cancellations — recurred, because they had devised ingenious ways of skirting cost, schedule and risk control procedures on small and mini-projects, and habitually continued to skirt them on larger, riskier projects, in what they view as "passive resistance" to an excessively bureaucratic PMO.

SIH's experience exemplifies a syndrome we observe in many clients.[3] In the name of "consistency," many IT organizations apply essentially the same complement of procedures to almost all projects, with perhaps some exceptions for the largest, riskiest projects. One client, laboring under excess, repetitive reviews and approvals on a two-month project, recently observed with Emerson, that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."[4]

Righteously Resist "Foolish Consistency"

Such "foolish consistency" causes righteous organizational resistance to project management processes when those processes apply excessive overhead to small projects. Such resistance occurs particularly to mini-projects, which may have only a few people working on them for a couple of months, but are projects in the sense that they reach completion and deliver significant, new functionality beyond a simple change or a single feature (see "Determining When a Project Is Really a Project").

Although individually these mini-projects do not appear in the project portfolio dashboard or prioritization queue, in the *aggregate,* they do represent a significant outlay of resources. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate how mini-projects — although only a small fraction of the size of midsize and large projects — add up to a comparable level of effort, because of the sheer number of them. Even

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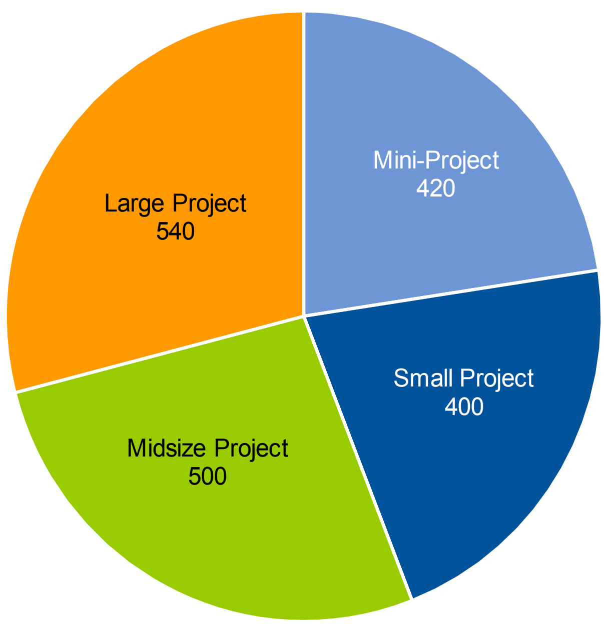
though the mini-projects in this example average only seven person months of effort, there are 60 of them, so that, together, they total 420 person months of effort. This is not much less than is spent on midsize projects, even though midsize projects on average are seven times larger — 50 person months versus seven person months. However, there are only 10 midsize projects in this representative portfolio, totaling 500 person months of effort.

Table 1. Example of Person Months Spent by Project Size, Mini to Large

Project Type	Average Person Months	Number of Projects of Type	Total Person Months of Effort (by Project Type)
Mini-Project	7	60	420
Small Project	16	25	400
Midsize Project	50	10	500
Large Project	135	4	540

Source: Gartner (September 2012)

Figure 1. Sample Distribution of Effort by Project Types: Mini, Small, Midsize and Large (in Person Months)



Source: Gartner (September 2012)

Therefore, project portfolio managers we speak with are increasingly directing PMO leaders to set strict limits on how much time and effort are spent on mini-projects, and to assign and track them in

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portfolio categories — whether business unit, business process, strategy, application or something else.

More-capable IT organizations do not risk treating them as routine requests, but still find ways to cut process overhead that is only needed on full projects. In this way, righteous resistance is replaced by acceptance of a wisely consistent, flexible process that better fits different kinds of projects.

Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"ITScore for Program and Portfolio Management"

"Determining When a Project Is Really a Project"

"The Lean PMO: Promoting Lean Practices From Project Initiation Through Closure"

"Toolkit: Estimating Initial PMO Staffing Needs"

Evidence

[1] "Determining When a Project Is Really a Project"

[2] Analysts completed 263 client interactions on the topic of PPM governance from July 2010 through June 2012. Dozens of these were on establishing lean, "best fit" project management processes.

[3] Analysts completed 153 client interactions, gaining information and providing advice relating to demand management, from July 2010 through June 2012. In addition, from July 2010 and June 2012, there were 61 client interactions, gaining information and providing advice relating to project prioritization.

[4] "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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