PMO Flashmob: Inside PMO

PMO Managers Lunch Series

Beyond Portfolio Reporting: The Challenges and Reality of Portfolio Management

Winter 2015

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The Overview

1. Portfolio Management is still not understood well enough within organisations
2. The PMO has to become more business focused - more dynamic, strategic and analytical
3. Theoretical portfolio management guidance accounts for only 30% of what is implemented
4. “Doing the right projects and doing the projects right”, the basics of programme and projects still need attention
5. The PMO need skills in relationship management and data analysis - a true combination of hard and soft skills
6. The PMO is both an enabler and a disruptor
7. Portfolio PMO needs a paradigm shift

> PMO Managers have to work through the "even though we didn't ask for this, now we've got it, we now understand that's what we want." with their senior executives."

PMO Flashmob: Inside PMO

Early December in London's Fleet Street and PMO Flashmob - the PMO networking group - hosted the first 'PMO Managers' Lunch'. These events bring together PMO Managers, from a number of different industries, to talk in-depth about a particular PMO topic. At this lunch, the subject was "**Beyond Portfolio Reporting - The Challenges and Reality of Portfolio Management".**

As organisations look to improve on the returns from strategy development and increase maturity in programme and project management delivery capability, portfolio management has increasingly taken centre stage as a business function to support that. Portfolio management is seen as the 'glue' or 'bridge' between strategy and strategy execution (delivered by programmes and projects). The PMO or Portfolio Office is the place where portfolio management practices become a reality for an organisation.

The biannual PMO Managers Lunch is a PMO Flashmob Plus event. With PMO Flashmob there are great conversations amongst different types of PMO people and this event gives us an opportunity to bring together leaders of PMOs - PMO Managers to discuss PMO topics that are relevant today.

It is an opportunity for PMO Managers to talk to other PMO Managers in different industries. We also wanted the opportunity to understand what is happening in PMOs today – PMOs in the real world.

We were also conscious that there is not a lot of PMO benchmarking available either formally or informally and this is an informal benchmarking opportunity which brings insights that others from within the PMO community can share and learn from.

This article provides those insights from the first PMO Managers Lunch held on 3rd December 2015 in London's Fleet Street.

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PMO Managers:

John McIntyre - Ticketmaster
Chris Walters – Vodafone
Brett Dalby - Met Police
Rachel Cook - Lloyd's of London
Jane Cosgrove - DHL
Lisa Chellar – Equinix
Stuart Collins – BBC
Harri Sharples – Deloitte
Anke Bysouth – CAFOD
Simon Harwood – IFDS
Julie Black – Ofgem
Ken Burrell – Financial Services
Hosts: Lindsay Scott & Eileen Roden

Over three hours, PMO Managers discussed the realities of portfolio management in their respective organisations, beginning with how portfolio management started within their organisations.

The Management of Portfolios was published in 2011-2012 which started a lot of people talking about portfolio management. We were interested to know where the drivers have come from inside your organisation – was it from the business or was it from good project management professionals, in the widest sense of that term – for example people armed with best practice sitting within the PMO? Are we driving portfolio management on behalf of the business or is the business driving it as something they want and need?

For some it was a **top down** decision. With problems in performance and senior executives unable to see what delivery commitments are being made, a structured portfolio management view provides some headway to making change visible across the organisation.

Another example highlighted portfolio management driven by the organisation structure with several portfolios existing within the business. An overall enterprise level portfolio office, which is managed by the governing body, looks at the twenty most strategic initiatives. Business units within the organisation also then have their own portfolio offices. Due to the size of the organisation, one business unit has six portfolio offices, which reflects the different types of work they are doing i.e., business transformation, new products, regulatory, client led projects etc.

For others, portfolio management was driven **bottom up**. Recurring problems within the programmes and projects drove the PMO to investigate and start to understand and address the root causes of failures.

> "It was the middle management level with demands from executives above on how things were going to happen and pulling information from the people below on what's actually happening. The middle management layer has said we need to come up with a model which manages upwards and manages downwards and it's grown from there"

The group had examples of initial portfolio management implementation stemming **from the side** too; the PMO and middle management layer. One example highlighted that the senior management executive were quite immature when it came to understanding what they needed from a portfolio management office. One approach, by the PMO Manager, was not to wait until senior management understood it – but rather push on and show it to them so they could understand more about what they wanted.

Another PMO Manager's experiences, in an early Enterprise PMO (pre- Management of Portfolios), was that "the implementation was a top down push because the executives wanted a better view of the change that was happening but after a while it was driven from the side i.e., we could show them what else could be done. In terms of portfolio management, even though it wasn't called that, we concentrated on portfolio reporting. It was simply checking with the executives that 'this is how we're spending the corporate's money, is this what you want?' Sometimes the answer was yes and sometimes the answer was no. This was driven from the side, from the PMO, showing the executives what could be done in terms of MI (Management Information) reporting."

For PMO Managers tasked with implementing portfolio management within organisations it serves as a reminder that, "as PMO people we often wait for permission and it very rarely comes in this format (CEO backing)".

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Lack of Understanding around Portfolio Management

The bottom up and sideways drive of portfolio management is partially in response to the lack of understanding about what portfolio management actually is and what it can achieve for senior executives and their organisations.

The majority of PMO Managers stated that their organisations didn't specifically ask for 'portfolio management' instead articulating ideal outcomes:

"They knew what their strategy was and then approached PPM practitioners to articulate that they wanted projects and programmes of work that would meet these strategies. They knew what they wanted to enable the strategy to be realised. In terms of the processes in order to do this, the senior executives left it to the PMO to work out how that should be done."

"There seems to be an immaturity about what people understand by portfolio management which means it is doomed to failure – a contentious point – but portfolio management is great on paper but in practice it is very rarely done and when it is done, it doesn't show value. There's a real challenge there."

> "PMO Managers have to work through the 'even though we didn't ask for this, now we've got it, we now understand that's what we want' with their senior executives.

Another example highlighted the problem of perception around programmes and portfolio. "Is it a programme or should it actually be run as a portfolio? One inherited PMO was supporting a programme but actually the investment of vast millions and strategic importance meant it should have been run as a portfolio. The interesting situation comes when discussions are needed with the people who are running programmes and talking about bringing in portfolio management practices. The initial reaction is that it is welcomed because there is an ego boost there; portfolio is one higher in the hierarchy than programmes."

With portfolio management, there is a danger of saying that you need to 'sell' the idea and get people on board with it yet there are PMOs that have people who are trying to describe too much at once and it's overwhelming. The idea of portfolio management is actually very simple - selecting the right programmes and projects to achieve the strategies.

"Yet there is an idea that you would sell the portfolio PMO vision in order to get total buy in which is misinterpreted by people to mean *show me the whole process and examples of portfolio reports* which doesn't really mean anything at the initial stage of implementing portfolio management and that's a worrying approach."

"Sometimes using the word "portfolio management" is also not right because the PMO is not doing the theoretical stuff but the PMO knows the value they are trying to give to the organisation which is not necessarily being recognised."

In summary, perhaps definitions and what is meant by portfolio, programmes and projects is pretty key yet they are not very well understood.

In another example the PMO Manager had to work with the seemingly impossible:

"PMO Managers have to work through the 'even though we didn't ask for this, now we've got it, we now understand that's what we want' with their senior executives."

One thing is clear, in order to obtain the senior executives backing and support for portfolio management; the PMO has to hold conversations, provide information and be able to answer questions from a strategic business perspective.

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Talking the Language of the Business

Successful PMOs leave the theoretical language of Management of Portfolios (MoP®) and Portfolio, Programme and Project Office (P3O®) to one side.

They concentrate on providing information that enables answers to questions from senior executives like, "how can I improve my bottom line?", "how can I make my customers happier?" and "how can I prioritise the right things for our business that takes us forward with the strategy that I've just told you about?"

The role the PMO plays in portfolio management brings them closer to business areas such as finance, strategy planning and legal whilst still focusing on programmes, projects and change. A wider remit naturally means a focus on developing wider business skills. PMO Managers here believe development in business areas, even pursuing a MBA, would stand them in better stead for the challenges ahead in managing portfolio PMOs.

> "The PMO is custodian of reasonable practice, trying to influence the decision makers and the doers to align in a particular way.

Thinking about other departments the Portfolio PMO should have a particular closeness to - the finance department - the question was asked, "How many of us are actually close to them?" Two examples bring different insights:

"I found that it's very difficult to start conversations about projects starting or being canned - with the finance department because we are very comfortable with uncertainty but the finance department don't like certainty at all."

Another response, "I've found that it's the opposite way around, I'm expecting finance to know and they're saying 'we're looking at a multi-million pound business and we're not looking at four projects thinking do we start them or not start them'. I have to break down their ramblings into 'are we going do this or not."

So as we implement portfolio management do we have to develop more relationships with the business side rather than just the delivery teams from a PMO perspective?

One PMO Manager first talked about the type of relationships the Portfolio PMO should be cultivating with both sides, "The portfolio office gives a voice to the business, a conduit. Having been a Project Manager before, I know what it's like trying to get decisions from my project board and being able to wander past the portfolio office and say 'could you lot help me out'. If we can build those kind of relationships it will help the business."

In thinking about the Portfolio PMO and relationships further up the hierachy - having the CEO conversation about portfolio management - one view is that it should be 'give me a view how well and how quickly I can implement the strategy'. No more, no less. But is it all about speed?

"There are restraining factors so there is a great big list of things you can do which will satisfy the strategy. You can't do them all so you have to time phase them. That answers the question on how quickly I can get to the strategic outcome and can I get to it completely, and if not, is it the right strategy? That's what the CEO needs to ask – will I ever get there before the business changes to totally invalidate the strategy?"

The Portfolio PMO has the opportunity to take the conversations from the already familiar ground of programme and project delivery to strategy planning and beyond. One specific example shows how one PMO gets involved at this higher level:

"The PMO initially was about project control until the business was trying to work out what they were going to spend in the coming year and the PMO were asked to look at it. The initial deliverable was an Executive Summary that stated with 100% confidence that 'you're not going to be able to deliver everything that was on the wish list'. This led to a state where the PMO tried to find the answers on 'how do we fix this?' At that point the PMO started looking at portfolio management. Initially there was some education needed, and then looking at how it could be implemented within the organisation. The PMO today runs the Strategic Planning process as a project with a Project Manager at the beginning of the year, working with all the executives. They carry out compatible analysis, SWOT analysis, working out what they want to do, then working out through the capacity models and crunching it, trying to tease together the projects they really want to do."

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Theoretical Portfolio Management as a Guide

If portfolio management is still little understood in its current form and PMO Managers are attempting to enable portfolio management and provide the 'glue' from the side, how are they doing this?

Each PMO Manager agreed that the current thinking and best management practice is there just as a guide. It is the combination of theory (about 30%) and experience, driven by business needs, that allows them to start implementing portfolio management. One PMO Manager put it down to 'skill, risk and innovation', after all; there is no practical manual on how to set up portfolio management, PMO Managers carrying out this role today are at the forefront, creating their own metaphorical manuals.

In most cases, the initial, real job of the PMO Manager is not to dive in with a vision, portfolio processes and templates but rather a three step programme of work that can take up to 18 months. It is a commitment that shouldn't be undertaken lightly.

The first step is gaining an understanding of exactly what programmes and projects are currently running within the organisation – and what has already been approved to start. Secondly, understanding what the business strategies are – because in some organisations, strategic planning is still something which is neglected. Finally, understanding the links between the two - which projects and programmes will meet which strategies? Often, the PMO Manager will need to facilitate these discussions, articulate the implications to the executive before portfolio processes like evaluation; prioritisation and benefits management can be implemented.

Previous experience from the PMO Managers says that senior executives who want all the answers day one have the wrong approach to successful and sustainable portfolio management. Yet true Portfolio PMOs are still a young concept. There is no right, proven and tested approach.

The PMO to date has either been an administrative, controlling or a custodian of good practices. For many, this foray into becoming more dynamic and strategic is a recent step and it is not without its challenges.

"It's not about reading a book and implementing it. It's about looking for the business needs and saying I think we can help with that. Then by hiring the right people, trying to help solve those needs."

"It's also about having an open mind and being able to say, 'I'll have a go at this, I'll try applying it, it might work, it might not.' That is where the gut feeling comes in, it's about doing what's right at the time"

"I think a lot of what we should be doing is challenging our thinking about something. It's about taking an idea and becoming innovative with it. For example, an invention is an idea, but innovation is about taking that idea and applying it to something else, a different situation."

> "There is no manual for portfolio management. There might be some common ground but fundamentally it's back to being circumstantial and actually it is down to the individual – that might be individual team or individual organisation and a combination in terms of what is the right way to set up portfolio management"

"When we talk about maturity we often talk about organisations and processes but professional judgement is just as important, my belief is that people in the Portfolio PMO tend to have a well-developed professional judgement capability. There is one side about having professional judgement where you have learnt lots of things and you can make decisions, but people who work in PMO have the second side too, the, "Well I've got all of this stuff in textbooks, that people have said will work or might work, I've practiced all of this stuff and make a conscious decision to try and see if it works, but I step back and analyse it, to make a more informed decision next time."

It was also acknowledged that access to events such as these; the PMO Flashmob and wider PMO, PPM conferences, webinars and so on are part of that process of challenging current thinking.

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The Basics Still Present Challenges

PMO Managers today are still focused on what would seem like the basics.

There are still concerns about the success and maturity of programmes and projects. The impact of the lack of effective sponsorship. Processes like benefits management and project prioritisation are not fully in place. Concerns about meeting the current levels of service as transition from a controlling/analytical PMO to a more strategic, portfolio management which brings extra pressures on existing staff capability and capacity. Still not having the right technology in the form of PPM tools – or the resources required to manage the increasingly complex data that portfolios, programmes and projects provide.

When discussing technology required, each of the PMO Managers agreed that the way forward should include recruitment of a Data Analyst into the team - a nod to just how much data and information plays in making change visible across the organisation. Some specific examples which highlight these concerns:

"A key issue at the moment is actually programmes; the organisation is making the move from managing large projects into programmes and the practices are quite immature. In some respects, project management process uptake is also immature for example having agreement about what the project RAG status should be. Furthermore, sponsorship of projects is also deemed to be immature too."

> "The challenge for me is that the PMO continues to deliver services and functionality but the most important is the ability to grow the team, not just to deliver the benefits and services but just to sustain them. It's one thing creating ideas and implementing them but it's the existing services as well"

Another PMO Manager added, "We have a strategy and all the projects are aligned to the strategy and we know what we are going to do next year but we haven't considered benefits at all. Not even thought about it. Which is horrifying"

Portfolio PMO Managers can feel frustrated when they know that portfolio management principles will really help fix some of the problems they're seeing:

"The PMO is such a broad scope that a challenge for me is ensuring what I'm delivering is at the right level for the organisation – what the business needs of me right now - because I might have an expectation about where to take the business, for example I'd love to do strategic prioritisation and optimisation because of the failures we've got, it's just not going to happen. Or is it a case of identifying pockets within the business that do need that level of support? It's about making sure the product offering within the PMO is manageable as well, especially with a small team."

Benefits management was also an area that was frequently mentioned. In one case "portfolio management was born out a previous change programme which had been running, a key lesson learnt was performance and benefits management were not being probably managed." This has subsequently led to this PMO utilising a full time benefits management specialist.

One PMO Manager started to talk about their initial work in benefits management with benefits mapping, "We started our benefits mapping this year especially in the efficiency area because we had a commitment to a development and we needed to demonstrate that we were achieving those particular benefits." The need for benefits management driven by the business.

Another perspective is the limiting role the Portfolio PMO can play in benefits management, "For example, current focus on benefits management in the portfolio and the fact that many of the benefits will not be realised until five, ten years in the future. The delivery of the benefits is so far in the future that the portfolio office can't do anything. It can select the projects but then it walks away because there is a massive lag until benefits can be realised."

Another example echoes the same sentiment, "We couldn't possibly say we are following MoP© because in terms of where we are getting to we couldn't possibly produce lovely charts about risks and benefits because I've never done benefits well nor seen any organisation do benefits well at all."

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The Role of the PMO and the Resources Needed

The current work carried out by the PMO in portfolio management was obviously of interest to the PMO Managers - what exactly is your PMO doing in relation to portfolio management and what resources do you need to be able to carry out those services?

The event itself with the title "Beyond Portfolio Reporting" indicates that we knew Portfolio PMOs were carrying out the basics of reporting on the portfolio. Reporting seems to have become the de facto starting point but in this paper so far we have seen that jumping into the processes and templates is not necessarily the way to go.

Working closer with the business planning and strategy development is key. Without understanding what strategies are planned, there is a feeling that a lot of retrofitting is happening, "I think where you possibly start from, with portfolio management, is by taking a bunch of projects and then slotting them into strategic pigeonholes and what you're aiming for is to have the strategy first and then fill the pigeonholes with projects." In businesses today it seems easier to work from the programme and project angle first because these are better understood by both the PMO and senior executives.

At its basic, portfolio management in this particular organisation highlighted the simplicity, "In my experience, portfolio planning is at the level where we are looking at what we need to spend as a business. There are a lot of relationships with corporate development around how we are going to grow and invest in etc. We are well supported in terms of having portfolios and programmes. The funding gets agreed and then the PMO works hand in hand with individual programme owners and then track those programmes against the investment that has been made. This part is the operational portfolio where the strategy is set and then coming down a level aligning what we're trying to achieve in those different programmes.

A key area in being able to make portfolio management work is around communication, and more specifically relationships with different areas and people. The PMO Manager has to be able to hold their own when it comes to conversations, especially if portfolio management is not wholly understood by the very people it is aiming to help.

> "We definitely need that role in a PMO, and we need that person with the technical skills. We need a person that can code because the data is getting more and more complex. We need someone who can pull it together in a meaningful way or actually code and automate things.

The role the Portfolio PMO plays is of course dependent on the organisational design it has. Very few organisations have a Portfolio PMO in its purest sense, and as prescribed in P3O©. Instead the general consensus appears to be more of an enterprise PMO structure, still overarching programmes and projects and providing visibility of activity. Yet the final pieces of theoretical portfolio management and the link to strategy is still hit and miss.

Where parts of portfolio management activity exists, beyond reporting, it is in areas such as assessing the impacts of work commitments, tracking those impacts, project prioritisation and scheduling. As we have already seen, benefits management is patchy.

The role Portfolio PMOs can play is summed up here: "I think the great PMOs are the one that bring common sense, shining a light on the organisation's investments, highlighting projects that are spiralling out of control and all of the science of macros to do this and macros to do that are all OK but sixth sense, gut feel and experience are saying, "This project is on fire as it can be". Then it's a case of getting in there, prodding and poking."

This led to a conversation about the types of resources that will be needed in the PMO in future if portfolio management was to be advanced. "In my opinion the best PMOs are the ones that have got in their DNA an ability to be a sniffer dog, a terrier. Not just find it but evidence it. You need to have some substance behind why you're saying that. I'm a big believer in when I'm building a team, I'm not as interested in qualifications but in the answer to the question, "Give me an example of when you've found something out just because you've got a sniff of something and you don't accept what's being said, or the reporting is telling you." Yet it could be argued that these skills are already required today, regardless of the type of PMO it is.

One thing all PMO Managers agree on is the need to be able to manage the vast amounts of data. "Recruited a proper data analyst, with skills in SPSS etc. It's about data so I wanted specialist skills" and "We also have a data, technical guy, dedicated to the reporting too". The concerns are also compounded by the lack of PPM tool available too. A lot of the PMO Managers around the table were not using any kind of specialist tool which allows them to make an effective job of tracking, reporting, scenario planning or forecasting.

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The Future of the Portfolio PMO

It has already been well documented that the main success factor for the different types of PMOs is strong executive support. Portfolio PMOs need this support because ultimately it is these executives who drive the health and wealth of the organisation by linking strategy planning to strategy execution. Senior executives need to keep asking the questions that matter most to them, which in turn keeps pushing the PMO to find the answers.

It is also clear that the PMO is still in evolution – 'where it is going' and 'what it is becoming' as a business function changes as the business need changes. With the Portfolio Office the remit can be to guide and facilitate; pulling information and enabling the right decisions from executives to happen. On the other hand, is the role of the Portfolio Office more disruptive than that? The Portfolio Office can have a part to play in changing business processes for example like the strategy or business planning cycle?

"Maybe the next paradigm shift is that portfolio management is seen to be the same thing as business planning. A series of paradigm shifts are needed, the next shift has to be that business planning is not an annual, or three, or five year thing. It has to be more dynamic to deal with volume and increasing change in organisations, and that can be portfolio management."

> "What is interesting listening to all of this today is the lifecycle of portfolio management examples here aren't older than 18 months, so we're only 18 months into seeing whether these things actually work so if we go another 2 or 3 years and we find out they don't, what is there on the other end?

The Portfolio PMO has to remain independent if it is to really able to hold up a mirror to the organisation:

"The PMO has to be Switzerland, you cannot have an opinion about what is right and wrong in the organisation, you just have to give the right information to the right people so they can make those decisions...One of the worse things that can happen is people don't want the PMO to have that responsibility or the reverse which is where people find the portfolio office a powerful thing and therefore want it in their division rather than centrally. The PMO has to be independent."

The PMO Managers liked the analogy of comparing the success of a Portfolio PMO to that of a Sat Nav:

"The direction of travel is - we want to leave here and we want to end up there. The thing is, nowadays we can get information en route which you know what, because of circumstances you're better off going right here, going over there for a bit and coming back a bit, and you might need to go some of the places you needed to go to, but you still end up where you wanted to end up but you've got to learn to adapt along the way."

"A Sat Nav is a good analogy because of the stories in the press about people ending up in lakes because they're blindingly following the Sat Nav. That's where the local knowledge comes in. Then you can override it", "It's about having a goal, using your instincts, using the information around you, being flexible and intuitive". "The PMO should never take ourselves too seriously and always be prepared to can ourselves. Because if we see ourselves as that Sat Nav, stuck to the dashboard, making a u-turn when things have gone wrong and no-one else wants to."

"You're there to support the business. That doesn't mean you let the business run over you if its making a bad decision, ultimately you're there to support the management team with the best you have got and then challenge them."

"The role we play is, 'we can't make the decision, that's your choice, but all we want you to see clearly is what might happen and if they say 'I can see that and I'm going to do it anyway', that's absolutely their choice"

Portfolio management, with the relatively simple strapline of "doing the right projects" has led PMO practitioners into new unchartered waters, where approaches and techniques are in their infancy, not yet tried and tested. Over three hours it became clear that these PMO Managers are working in an area which has the potential to provide real answers to questions that executives face each day. In order to be successful it is, of course, going to take risk, skills and innovation on their part. They're also going to need their own wider PMO community and forums to tap into how others are writing their Portfolio PMO manuals.

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The Questions Which Need Answers

The following questions were used as prompts throughout the three hour session.

Current State – Where We are Now

1. When did your organisation first start thinking about PfM?
2. What were the drivers for it?
3. What did the organisation have before i.e., strategy planning, and why was that not enough?
4. What was it for the organisation was looking for – was it PfM or portfolio planning?
5. Was it called PfM – or something else?
6. What does the organisation think PfM is and has it changed over time?
7. Which part of the organisation did the need come from?
8. Where does PfM sit in terms of priorities for the organisation?

1. How did you make it happen – new systems, processes, culture, behaviour?
2. Was it bottom up or top down?
3. Was it a big bang or incremental?
4. What were your elements of PfM?
5. Where did you get help from?

1. What were the critical success factors?
2. What were the deliverables?
3. What were the challenges / barriers?
4. What enabled you to be successful?
5. What were the objectives when you started – and did those change?

1. Lessons learnt – what would you do differently if you started again?
2. Were they PfM virgins or had they done it before elsewhere?
3. What role did you play? And what is your ongoing role?

Future State – Where We are Now

1. What's driving the need to move on from where we are now?
2. What are the challenges / barriers going forward?
3. What changes to systems, processes, culture, behaviours are needed now?
4. What does maturity mean to PfM in your organisation?
5. What is the organisation's appetite for PfM going forward?
6. What is the scope for PfM going forward?
7. Has thinking about PfM been revised since you started?
8. Where do you get help from today?

1. Will PfM ever work in your organisation?
2. What is the business currently articulating is a business problem which PfM could potentially address?
3. Is there a number of wider questions PfM could address that previously you hadn't thought of
4. Thinking generally and openly, what's your thoughts about PfM, your org and you?

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About PMO Flashmob

PMO Flashmob is a networking and learning group dedicated to people who work within the field of PMO (Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Offices)

Networking events take place in London and the North of England. We host both social gatherings and more structured learning events called PMO Mini-Masterclasses.

PMO Flashmob was created in 2013 and continues to support and champion the PMO community.

For more information on PMO Flashmob visit: www.pmoflashmob.org