Making the Change: Excel to a Process Improvement Solution
Case Study
Introduction

This whitepaper discusses the challenge (and success) of an enterprise PMO practice’s transition from Excel to a Process Improvement software solution. The paper highlights how the solution’s template-based-architecture enabled this company to meet pressing strategic goals in a comprehensive process improvement initiative.

Complications – The Lay of the Land

Complicating this PMO challenge was a process improvement scope that included over 40 global processes spanning multiple departments and locations. With the global nature of the project, the PMO leaders needed a quick way to get new project managers up to speed on various process improvement methodologies. They didn’t have the luxury of deploying an in-depth training program exposing team members to all tools and options so they could essentially design their own project roadmaps.

A comprehensive template enabled the team to work applicable tools, and mark unneeded tools as ‘Not Applicable.’ Because of the expansive nature of the program, they needed a way to provide just-in-time training and examples to improve consistency and project quality. The project reporting using Excel was not providing the consistency needed, and relied on team members manually updating the work status of their projects. A project execution solution that could guide work consistency and automatically update their project work status would be ideal.

Success would require making ‘working in the system’ far more beneficial for the project managers in order for them to prefer to work from the project templates... essentially making the ‘Right Way the Easy Way.’ A lot of time and energy had been invested to gain consensus and buy-in for the PMO intellectual property including: selection evaluation criteria, project execution sequence and tools, financial templates, operational and financial metrics templates, status report format, project status update reports, and dashboards. It was important to not have to reinvent the wheel and restart the change-management and adoption process.

The PMO also had spreadsheets for consolidated management reports and charts that would provide stakeholders with transparency into the progress and results of the program. These 26 charts and reports required nearly two weeks per month to create. The PMO team and stakeholders were already comfortable with how project and program information was summarized for them in the existing chart designs.

The PMO team knew they needed to leverage the work already invested in Excel. Attempting to recreate their program in a different tool would add too much uncertainty into an already high-risk program.

The PMO needed to accelerate Project Timelines, and their Excel spreadsheets were the clear “bottleneck.”

The Challenge

The strategic imperative was to fundamentally reengineer a global sales process to adapt and succeed in a changing and competitive marketplace. Division sales were lagging and the business needed to dramatically transform the sales process and reduce resources. The business process transformation would impact over 1,000 resources and needed to be completed in one year.

The PMO Director was faced with challenges including: training and supporting the team, prioritizing processes, streamlining project status updates, increasing Tollgate efficiency, capturing process metrics, and improving executive reporting and dashboards. Key issues identified were:
1.) **The team was inexperienced in process improvement, and geographically dispersed.** The PMO needed to provide these team members with broad training in process improvement methodologies, and provide tool-specific refresher-training during project execution, to minimize the risk of project delays.

2.) **The team needed to boost productivity.** The most critical sales processes needed to be prioritized, and needed to optimize a ‘common process’ once, and then realize the benefit across multiple locations.

3.) **The team and stakeholders needed ‘True’ (Real-time) Project Status.** It was a struggle to get teams to update their status, and because project reporting was disconnected from project execution, PMO leaders were often second guessing the status accuracy. Because Excel is file-based, team members worked on their own computers and one person was responsible for updating status for the team. PMO leaders wanted team members to be able to see and build upon each other’s work and mark completion for themselves. Status updates needed to be more decentralized and efficient, such as: “marking a task complete automatically updates your project status.”

4.) **Project Tollgate Efficiency needed to improve.** Less than 50% of the projects were getting through the first tollgate without a rework cycle. PMO leaders saw this as a symptom of the teams not having robust project execution templates, and not knowing the tollgate evaluation criteria. Evaluators were also frustrated by getting information metered to them via PowerPoint presentations, instead of being able to have access to project working papers and deliverables to review the team’s logic and decision making.

5.) **Capturing Process Metrics:** Process cycle time, customer service index, sales funnel tollgate ratios, revenue targets, cost reduction targets, etc, were not being collected consistently enough to enable benchmarking of ‘common processes’ across multiple locations. It was very difficult for multiple people to update the same spreadsheet and aggregate information for comparison across multiple locations.

6.) **A need for more Consolidated Reporting and Dashboards** of PMO results for steering committee reviews. This single function was consuming over two weeks of effort each month chasing down project status and metric information, (invariably one or more of the project teams would make a format change that adversely impacted the ability to aggregate and roll-up dates, while the process owners and stakeholders in different locations wanted to see the information organized in a special way.)

Using Excel spreadsheets to track project progress and produce reports and charts had become a bottleneck. The team needed to move from Excel (in 90 days or less) to a solution that would help them overcome their primary challenges.

A major concern about moving to a web-based PMO solution was the risk of losing productivity in the transition from the old methods to a new solution. With a pressing deadline, there was little time for trial and error, and there was no time for a false start. Action was required, and it had to be successful.

*Project work is being performed over 25% faster than when everyone was working from Excel.*

**The Brick Wall – Our Way or No Way**

Researching available solutions, the PMO team ran into roadblocks immediately. Some solutions, though customizable to a certain extent, were built around a set of assumptions that would require the PMO team to rebuild their project practice from the ground-up. On top of the adjustment time that would require, the change management and training issues in this approach would waste time and further jeopardize their projects. A few PPM systems could be “customized” to meet the team’s needs if the provider made source code modifications, but this would create a legacy of support complexity for future upgrades to new product releases. The team did not view this as a viable option either.
The team began to realize that the PM solutions in the market seemed to fall into two camps. They were too simplistic and limited in features, or so configurable that the time required standing up the solution could easily take three to six months of consulting effort.

*PMO leaders were able to tweak the default configurations and templates to accommodate evolving business needs.*

**Finding Balance Between Simplicity and Effective Process Improvement**

The balance was found with Template-based architecture, a design that configures and executes projects from templates easily created by business users. The unique benefits the template-based solution would provide included:

1.) The PMO leadership could configure the project execution Templates themselves, with task-specific knowledge transfer and tools. This would minimize the upfront training burden, and improve project quality, because team members would have access to examples for improved tool execution.

2.) Further, this would speed up project cycle-times by helping ensure that work was performed correctly the first time, avoiding those time-consuming rework loops.

3.) The template-based PPM solution facilitated Project Selection, by providing a ‘project candidate’ section in which projects could be evaluated for strategic importance and Benefit vs. Effort portfolio evaluation. This approach would ensure that the most important processes were reviewed first, and reduce the risk of multiple teams working on a ‘common process.’

4.) Automatic Tracking of project progress would enable a ‘true’ project status because project execution was linked with project reporting. For example, if a team member was out of the office for training, the system would automatically extend the current task end–dates, which would also push out the start dates for successor tasks. The ‘dates engine’ avoided team members having to log into the system to change dates, ensured accurate and timely task handoffs, and ultimately enabled very accurate PMO reporting.

5.) Project Tollgate efficiency was improved by designing quality into the project execution process with task-specific guidance, along with examples and tools to improve consistency and quality. Prior to each tollgate the team members could self-audit their project progress by reviewing in advance the tollgate evaluation criteria. Because the teams performed their work from the web-based roadmap task page, the process stakeholders could easily review project documents and streamline review cycles.

6.) Metric collection could now be collected both at an individual project level, and at a global level to benchmark the implementation and adoption of common processes at multiple locations. The web-based solution enabled multiple individuals to easily update metrics for custom reports and trend chart dashboard modules.

7.) Automatic Reporting: For the PMO team, one of the previous pain points was consolidating information from all of the various project Excel files and creating consolidated reports for the steering committee. The solution delivered this automatically (for example, each project team could enter their project data into a common financial template in their own currency and the consolidated reporting could roll up the project financials so that the steering team could review project results for any desired criteria… geography, process value stream, continuous improvement project type, methodology template used).
Solution payback has been measurable in weeks, not months.

Getting Started is Easy

In delivering a Template-based solution, the SigmaFlow professional services team worked closely with PMO leaders to configure, (in a day,) the team’s proven project execution templates, financial templates, process metrics, and various custom reports and dashboards for the executive steering committee. The PMO team was more than pleasantly surprised at how well the template-based-architecture was able to configure the solution to their specific needs.

To accelerate adoption, onsite, role-based, ‘train-the-trainer’-level instruction was provided for the US-based system administrator, project leaders / mentors, and team members. For international team members, the PMO leaders provided web-training sessions in the context of work to be performed:

- Selecting the appropriate project execution template for your project,
- Creating project deliverables using the task-specific workspace with guidance and tools
- Updating project and process metrics
- Preparing for project tollgates
- Closing out projects and capturing process knowledge, lessons learned and risks that could benefit other project teams working on similar processes.

The team opted to purchase the solution as a ‘cloud’ subscription offering, to avoid internal IT delays associated with server procurement. (The SigmaFlow ‘cloud’ offering included hourly disaster recovery backups which their internal IT didn’t support.) Another benefit was that the SigmaFlow team would manage software upgrades. They were also pleased to know that it was a viable option in the future if they ever wanted to move the system behind their firewall to take advantage of Active Directory Single Sign-On and system integration.

Once live, the PMO leaders were able to tweak the default configurations and templates to accommodate evolving business needs. Because SigmaFlow is 100% configurable from the settings section and didn’t require any customization of the product source code, the PMO leaders knew they would have a seamless upgrade path for future product releases. This was in sharp contrast to the other solutions the team reviewed, which required customization of the source code of the product that would have to be updated and maintained for each and every future product release.

The template-based solution enabled the mentor to team member ratio to expand to 1-to-35.

A Clear Path to Success – Efficient and Effective

Well into the strategic improvement project, the PMO team is finding efficiency gains are paving a clear road to achieving their goal. The team is on track and is finding that most results are exceeding preliminary expectations. Solution payback has been measurable in weeks, not months. For example:

1.) Creating PMO Reports previously took over two weeks per month to create and deliver. This work is now fully automated and thus eliminated. Data accuracy is dramatically improved because the data is coming directly from project execution, not updated after-the-fact. The report data aggregation and rollup is now occurring systematically. The system automatically distributes reports that are filtered and sorted to each process-owner’s requirements. The productivity savings is estimated at over $50,000 per year.

2.) Project work is being performed over 25% faster than when everyone was working from Excel. This efficiency enables two significant advantages. First, the business receives the benefits of the new process several weeks or months sooner, and secondly the team members are now freed up and can tackle additional
projects. Without this productivity boost, the process improvement program would never have been completed on time. Factors contributing to this productivity improvement include:

- Process improvement project candidates are being better prioritized
- Program level transparency is reducing the risk that multiple teams could be working on the same common process
- Improved project execution speed and quality, are enabled by project execution templates with task-specific guidance and tools
- Improved tollgate yields are enabled by transparency into the toll gate evaluation criteria, and by reviewers having easy access to project documents.

3.) Expanding the PMO mentor’s span-of-influence. Previously the mentor to team member ratio was 1-to-10. Without the template-based architecture the deployment would have hit a ceiling and not have been able to be completed in time. The template-based solution enabled the mentor to team member ratio to expand to 1-to-35 with much smoother efficiency than existed previously with the smaller ratio and using Excel. The factors that are being attributed to the smoother operations include:

- A template with task-specific guidance and tools elevates team effectiveness. Previously team members would rely on mentors for answers that can now be answered immediately within the task workspace via linked reference materials and examples. The previous training PowerPoints covered multiple topics, which are now streamlined into task-specific modules that save the team from having to sift through unnecessary content when researching how to best perform a task.
- For process questions that weren’t currently answered by the task reference, the references in the primary template were updated so that the answer was available for the next iteration. The goal was for the task content to become a task-specific knowledge base that evolves over time to capture the company’s tacit and tribal knowledge.
- PMO mentors could now run reports to review which template task had the greatest deviation between the planned duration and actual duration. They could then work on this task’s content and examples to improve the deviation, (essentially reducing the water level to see the rocks that needed to be removed,) enabling mentors to significantly improve the template execution efficiency.

4.) Formalize the process for capturing project and process lessons learned by building these steps into the project control phase, and making this information easily accessible by the SigmaFlow PPM search functions.

The team has also recognized that their project practice is improving — in fact, it is experiencing continuous improvement. Projects are now group managed in programs to improve performance and create transparency against strategic goals. The team is handling more projects than ever before and financial metrics show that project success is consistently higher than ever before.

Stakeholders are also taking notice. The dashboards and reports they rely on are now always available, instead of arriving periodically, and the information is up-to-date. They have additional charts and reports now, making it easier for them to stay “in the know.” The resulting feeling of empowerment has brought new confidence and respect to the PMO team.

From a leadership perspective, the PMO Director is leveraging the capabilities of the template-based-architecture to expand PMO influence. The “buzz” of satisfaction has prompted new areas of the organization to reach out to the PMO, requesting that the team become more intimately involved in helping these areas reach their objectives through better project assessment, prioritization, and management.
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Summary

The template-based-architecture of the project portfolio management solution met the needs of a transition from Excel spreadsheets to a packaged solution. The PMO is successfully on-track with their program to improve the global sales processes. The team is empowered by working in a collaborative environment.

The positive results and enhanced visibility of the solution have been recognized by stakeholders and have increased PMO credibility and confidence, opening the doors to an expansion of the strategic role the PMO plays in the organization. In fact, areas within the organization that have previously kept the PMO at “arm’s length” have now begun reaching out to the PMO to request more involvement from the team in their functional areas.

About SigmaFlow

As a leader in Business Process Excellence software, SigmaFlow delivers standards, consistency and productivity for Process and Project Execution, through Template-Based-Architecture that easily enables users to configure the solution with their proven practices and formats.

Thousands of professionals at hundreds of organizations such as Avaya, Babcock & Wilcox, Canadian Natural Resources, Cenovus Energy, Central Garden and Pet, Chemetall, Encana Natural Gas, Gas Technology Institute, Henkel, Meijer, Newmont, Pratt & Whitney, Tamko Building Products, Valspar, Walgreens, Wyndham, and Xylem are deriving improved results from SigmaFlow software today.

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