

Lessons Learned – The SRO Role in Major Government Programmes



The Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) role is important and pivotal in ensuring that projects deliver their expected outcomes and benefits. The role was first proposed for IT-enabled projects in the McCartney Report in 2000; prior to this, it was often difficult to identify the individual with responsibility for the successful outcome of a major project. In recognition of its importance, the role is now mandated across all UK Government projects. The SRO role is widely regarded as an essential innovation that increases the chances of project success by helping to establish clear objectives and better decision making both internally and in the management of any third party suppliers involved in delivery.

As the individual responsible for ensuring that a project or programme of change meets its objectives and delivers the projected benefits, the SRO should be the owner of the overall business change that is being supported by the project. This allows the SRO to ensure that the change maintains its business focus, has clear authority, and that the context (including risks) is actively managed. This individual must be senior and must take personal responsibility for successful delivery of the project; they should also be recognised as the owner throughout the organisation. The definitive definition of the role appears on the OGC website and is based on the recommended approach in Managing Successful Programmes (MSP).

OGC has carried out a review of the effectiveness of the SRO role and has made a number of recommendations to the Programme and Project Management (PPM) Council. OGC has also identified other recommendations that it intends to incorporate into its Programme and Project Management products.

In summary, the SRO role can be made to work more effectively by addressing a number of factors, including:

- Better understanding of the role
- Selection of the right people to act as SROs
- Giving SROs real accountability and business authority to resolve issues
- Ensuring SROs have relevant delivery skills and experience, including commercial awareness
- SROs dedicating sufficient time to the role
- Improved continuity of the role through the project life-cycle
- Improved tools, guidance and development opportunities for SROs
- Provision of adequate supporting resources

Selection, Appointment and Recognition

The SRO role can be a solitary one and is often not appropriately recognised by the SRO's Sponsoring Group - in the largest projects this is usually the organisation's Management Board. This lack of appreciation and engagement by the SRO's Corporate Management can contribute to a feeling amongst some SROs that the role is something of a "poisoned chalice" i.e. SROs could easily fail (to the potential detriment of their careers) whereas success is not widely recognised. Ideally the role should be sought-after, to the point that it might become a pre-requisite for staff destined for senior roles, allowing them to demonstrate their competence in policy delivery.

Departments should ensure the individual's performance targets include performance in the SRO role. This reinforces the point that the SRO role is an extension of the Management Board's authority and provides an opportunity for good performance to be recognised.

Lesson 1: Departments should incorporate performance in the SRO role in individual performance targets.

SROs should be selected using open, consistent and relevant criteria. The role is often primarily focused on business-related change management but SROs for most projects require some knowledge of Project and Programme Management, and often of procurement and IT, sufficient at least to enable them to lead the relevant specialists effectively.

Some in industry, particularly the IT industry, express concern that suppliers do not have sufficient contact with SROs and that the SROs are lacking in knowledge of commercial issues. Sponsoring Groups should be aware of this when appointing SROs and ensure that incumbents are provided with opportunities to enable them to develop realistic and credible relationships with their opposite numbers in industry, often termed the Senior Responsible Industry Executive (SRIE).

At Departmental level, involving the PPM Board Champion and, where appropriate, the Commercial Director and the CIO in the

selection of SROs for major projects or those on the Major Projects Portfolio, would ensure SROs have the required skill set – or are supported in their areas of relative weakness where necessary.

Lesson 2: PPM Board Champions and, where appropriate, Commercial Directors and CIOs should be involved in the selection of SROs for strategic projects.

SROs generally divide into two classes:

- a those who have responsibility for developing the policy and are given the SRO role to drive delivery. This group generally has less experience of managing large projects.
- b those who are appointed to carry out the delivery role (for the largest projects often as a Chief Executive) and have extensive experience of delivery but little policy responsibility or experience. One of the difficulties these SROs face is their inability to affect the original policy development they are required to deliver.

In some cases the SRO regards the role as being their day job since their main responsibility is to effect business change and the programme is the means to that end. Others allocate only a small percentage of their time to the programme, relying more directly on a full-time Programme Director.

In appointing an SRO, Sponsoring Groups should note the skill set of the individual, and the amount of time they are able to devote to the role, and make provision for the appointment of a full-time Programme Director who can operate within the environment created by the SRO, if appropriate.

“Over half of Senior Responsible Owners (SROs) are in their first SRO role, and nearly half spend less than 20% of their time on such duties. Lack of relevant experience, combined with a regular turnover of post-holders, adds unnecessary risk to the management of IT-enabled change.”

[The quotes used in this bulletin are taken from a range of recent National Audit Office (NAO) reports]

One of the major concerns expressed by the National Audit Office, Parliamentary Accounts Committee, and the OGC is the rate of turnover of SROs. The average duration in post for the biggest projects is around 18 months, whereas most projects last between 3 and 10 years. There is a clear correlation between continuity of SRO and high delivery confidence of projects, so high turnover represents a serious threat to the success of projects.

“Departments should appoint a Senior Responsible Owner at the outset of an IT-enabled business change on the presumption that he or she will remain in post until the programme or project is delivered, with performance and reward linked to agreed targets and milestones.”

Establishing an expected time in the role, on appointment, would also help SROs and their Sponsors to focus on the objectives to be achieved, while ensuring the SRO does not feel trapped by the role.

Lesson 3: Departments should appoint SROs for a defined minimum period and the timing of subsequent changes in SRO should be linked to the achievement of an appropriate project milestone.

Development and Support

“Lack of experience and focus is compounded by the limited amount of support given to Senior Responsible Owners, with a striking 38% of Senior Responsible Owners having no involvement with a Centre of Excellence and 20% rating their support as poor.”

There are several training and accreditation initiatives associated with the SRO role, including those offered by the APM Group, the National School of Government (NSG) and some Departments. Many SROs are not aware that such training is available and there is a general reluctance to use what is available, perhaps because SROs are a relatively senior and experienced group.

A structured approach to personal development is relevant for inexperienced

“Some 13–23% of Senior Responsible Owners had not used relevant OGC guidance.”

SROs on smaller projects and could still be of benefit to more experienced SROs by allowing them to develop further skills appropriate to their SRO role.

SROs should be encouraged to make use of key tools designed specifically for them such as the PQT (Procurement pre-Qualification Tool) to assess the project’s readiness to start procurement, and the JSI (Joint Statement of Intent) to codify the purpose of the project with any strategic supplier partner.

Lesson 4: Departments should encourage inexperienced SROs to undertake a course appropriate to their (and the Department’s) needs. The course developed by the Home Office and the APM Group is a good example.

Some experience of undertaking project assurance activities such as Gateway Reviews would benefit SROs, and help them understand the value of the reviews that will be carried out on their own projects. Although some SROs may feel unable to commit the necessary time to becoming a Review Team Leader, it is possible to give them some exposure to the Review Team Member role and OGC can support them in gaining this experience.

Lesson 5: Departments should encourage SROs to gain assurance experience by taking part in appropriate Gateway Reviews.

SROs could also benefit from personal mentoring. Mentoring, from someone experienced and external to the project can be helpful, especially when SROs are facing a new type or scale of project.

It has not been widely sought in the past but attitudes to mentoring appear to be changing and it should now be seen as more relevant and acceptable.

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One source of mentoring might be from other successful SROs within a Department. If external support is deemed more appropriate, then this could be found via the OGC's pool of consultants whose careers often include successfully undertaking major SRO roles.

Lesson 6: Departments and their SROs should consider using mentors external to the project to provide advice and support.

To reduce any feeling of isolation, and to allow cross fertilisation of ideas, it is useful to consider SROs as a community and for Departments to proactively provide support to this group. Many SROs think that well-structured networking events at which they could compare experiences with SROs of similar projects from other Departments would be of particular value.

Lesson 7: Departments should support their SROs in attending networking events for the wider SRO community.

Want to know more?

If you would like to find out more about the development of the SRO role or have suggestions for future subjects you would like us to report on, then please contact the OGC Service Desk as shown at the end of this bulletin.

[“Review of the Senior Responsible Owner Role in the Major Projects and Programmes of Government”](#) paper, on which this Lessons Learned issue was based, is available.

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OGC 1 Horse Guards Road,
London SW1A 2HQ

Service Desk: 0845 000 4999
ServiceDesk@ogc.gsi.gov.uk
www.ogc.gov.uk

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T: 0845 000 4999
E: ServiceDesk@ogc.gsi.gov.uk
www.ogc.gov.uk

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T: 020 7271 1318
F: 020 7271 1345

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