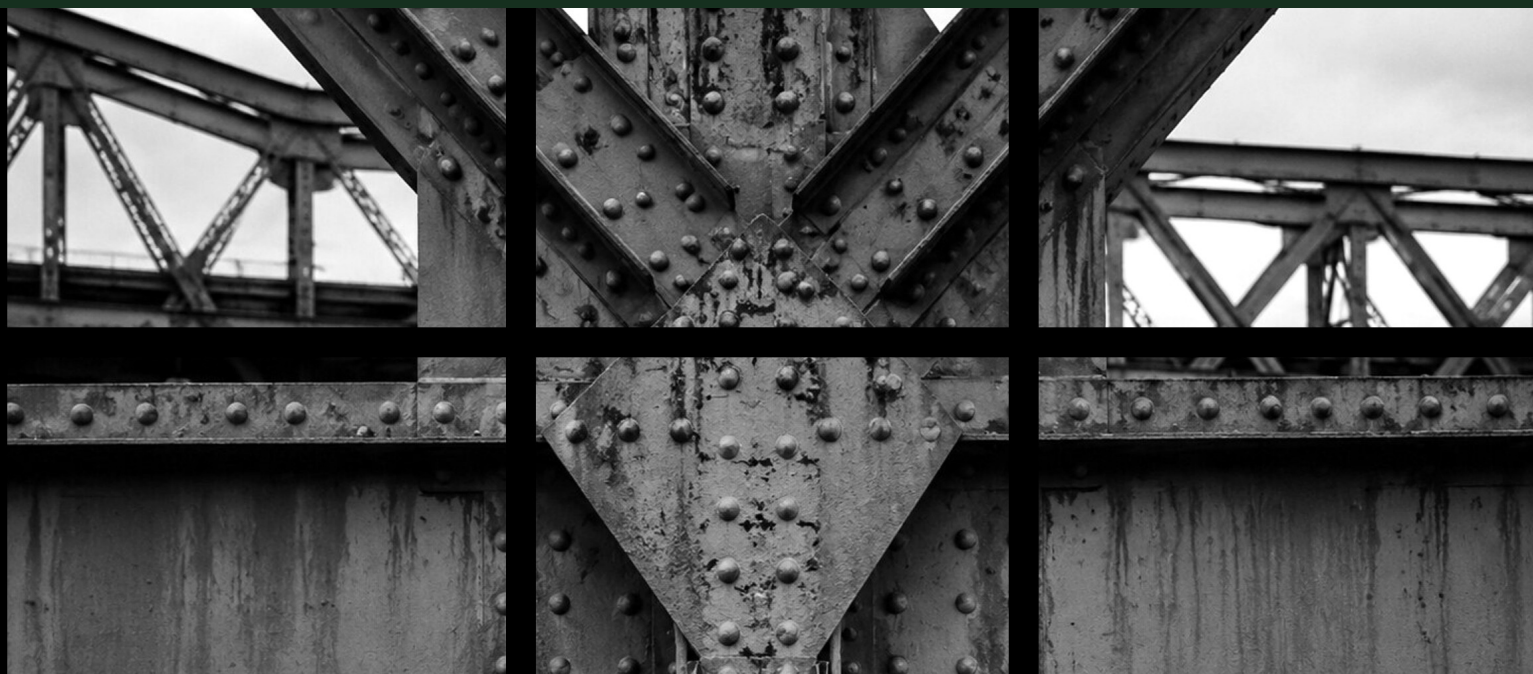


BEYOND THE DASHBOARD

The PMO Empire — Why Growth in the Office Has Not Meant Growth in Value

An evidence-led assessment of why programme offices expanded through the 2000s without a matching return — and how to re-found them on decisions rather than reporting



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1. Executive Summary

Over the past decade the programme management office has moved from novelty to fixture. Few large organisations undertaking serious change now attempt it without one, and many run several. Yet the growth in the number, the size, and the output of these offices has not been matched by any comparable growth in the value they can be shown to add. Headcount has risen. The monthly reporting pack has thickened. The library of templates and standards has expanded. The delivery record, in too many organisations, has stayed roughly where it was.

This paper argues that the disappointment is structural rather than accidental. Offices proliferated for reasons that had little to do with delivery: governance anxiety, the spread of accredited methods, the arrival of portfolio tooling, and above all the organisational reflex to answer uncertainty with more reporting. Having been created to gather and present information, most offices were never granted the one thing that would let them turn information into value — the authority, or even the reliable proximity to authority, to change a decision.

The paper separates three quite different functions routinely collapsed under the single label, shows where the value leaks in each, and takes seriously the strongest case for the office as a control and assurance function. It concludes with a recommendation: stop measuring the office by the completeness of its information and re-found it on decision support and the ownership of benefits. An office that cannot name a decision it improved or a benefit it helped secure is an overhead, however well it reports.

2. The office that grew while the question went unanswered

Consider a programme office that has done everything asked of it. Over three years it has grown from two people to fourteen. It maintains a consolidated plan, a combined risk and issue register, a resource-tracking spreadsheet of some intricacy, and a monthly reporting pack that now runs past sixty pages and takes the better part of a week to assemble. Every project reports a status. Every status rolls up into a portfolio dashboard. The dashboard goes to a board that meets once a month.

Now sit in that board meeting. Ninety minutes are scheduled. The first fifty are spent receiving the report — page by page, status by status, each project lead narrating aloud a version of what the pack already says in print. By the time the board reaches anything resembling a choice, both the time on the clock and the attention in the room are nearly gone. The two genuinely hard items on the agenda — whether to halt a project that has

been consuming cash for two quarters without converging, and whether to move three scarce specialists from one workstream to another — are deferred, as they were deferred last month. The office has produced an impressive account of the programme's condition. It has not helped anyone act on it.

The cost of that account is not only the office's own headcount. Every return the office consolidates is first produced by someone on a delivery team, and the hours a project manager spends translating real work into the office's format are hours not spent on the work itself. A programme can reach the point where its practitioners spend more effort accounting for progress than making it — where the reporting system, built to observe delivery, has begun to compete with it for the same scarce time. That is the reporting reflex at its most expensive: not the analysts in the office, but the drag it lays across everyone the office is meant to be watching.

This is the pattern that recurs wherever offices are judged disappointing: not idleness, not incompetence, but immense diligence pointed at the wrong target. The office has optimised the description of the work and left the direction of the work untouched. To understand why so many offices arrived at the same destination, it helps to look at how they were built.

3. Why the offices multiplied

The growth of the office through the 2000s was over-determined. Several forces pushed in the same direction at once, and none of them was delivery.

1. Governance anxiety. The early years of the decade taught boards to want visible control. Where control is demanded and delivery is uncertain, an office that produces evidence of oversight is an attractive thing to stand up — it demonstrates that something is being done, whether or not it improves the outcome.
2. The spread of accredited methods. As structured methods became the default for programmes and projects, someone had to own the method inside the organisation: to hold the templates, police their use, and answer the auditors. That ownership naturally accreted into an office.
3. The arrival of tooling. Portfolio and project tooling promised a single version of the truth. In practice it required administrators to feed it and produced dashboards that positively invited aggregation — and aggregation invites headcount.
4. The reporting reflex. This is the deepest cause. When a programme is in trouble, the cheapest available response is to ask for more reporting. Reporting lives in the office, so the office grows each time confidence wobbles — a ratchet that only ever turns one way.

Each of these forces is understandable on its own terms. Together they built offices optimised for the production and presentation of information, and largely indifferent to whether that information ever changed what the organisation did.

4. Three offices hiding under one name

Part of the confusion is that the single label is made to cover at least three different functions, each with its own reason for existing, its own value logic, and its own way of failing. Collapsing them into one office — or worse, into one job description — is itself a source of the disappointment.

Arche type	Primary output	How it creates value	Characteristic failure
The reporting office	Consolidated status, dashboards, the monthly pack	By giving decision-makers a truthful, timely picture	Describes the programme faithfully but changes no decision
The standards office	Templates, methods, assurance of compliance	By raising the floor and making work consistent and auditable	Enforces documents that no longer change any decision — compliance as theatre
The delivery office	Planning, dependency and resource management, active problem-solving	By materially helping the work move	Starved of authority, and the first function cut when budgets tighten

The three are not equally valuable, and they do not fail in the same way. The reporting office has the weakest claim to value and, not coincidentally, the strongest tendency to grow. The delivery office has the strongest claim and the weakest institutional protection. Most real offices are an unplanned mixture of all three, with the reporting function quietly crowding out the other two, because reporting is the part that is easiest to ask for and easiest to expand.

5. Where the value leaks

Trace each archetype to the point where its value escapes.

The reporting office leaks value at the join between information and decision. Its product is a picture, and value appears only if the picture changes an action. But the office is typically given no decision remit, and its reporting habits actively destroy the detail on which action depends: a project rated amber tells a board nothing it can use, because the single word conceals whether the trouble is a slipping supplier, a design flaw, or a sponsor who has changed their mind. Aggregation, the office's proudest craft, is precisely the operation that removes the information a decision would need.

“Aggregation, the office's proudest craft, is precisely the operation that strips out the information a decision would need.”

The standards office leaks value when compliance detaches from purpose. Consider the fate of a single mandated artefact — say, a highlight report required from every project every fortnight. At its inception it may have served a real purpose: a new portfolio, unfamiliar teams, a genuine need to surface trouble early. Two years on, the same report is produced by managers who could recite it in their sleep, transcribed into the pack by an analyst, and consulted by no one who makes a decision. Nobody decided it should become pointless; it simply outlived the conditions that gave it meaning, and no one owns the job of retiring it. Multiply that by every template, every register, every recurring return an

office has accumulated over a decade, and the standards function's characteristic failure comes into view — not bad documents, but good documents that have quietly stopped mattering and are maintained anyway.

The delivery office is the one archetype whose value logic is sound, because it helps the work move. Its leak is not internal but political. Because its contribution is woven into delivery rather than displayed in a pack, it is the hardest to evidence and therefore the easiest to cut. When budgets tighten, the office that was genuinely helping is trimmed to protect the office that was merely reporting — an exactly inverted priority that organisations reach with depressing regularity.

6. The strongest case for the office, taken seriously

None of this refutes the case for a programme office, and that case deserves stating at its strongest rather than as a straw man. Large change carries systematic optimism bias; those closest to a project are the least able to see its trouble clearly; and an independent function that applies consistent scrutiny — gated reviews, honest assurance, a standard against which every business case is tested — is a real defence against expensive self-deception. Consistency has value in its own right: a board that reads every programme in the same format can compare them, and comparison is the beginning of portfolio thinking. These are genuine goods, and an organisation that abolished its office in a fit of impatience would soon rediscover why it built one.

The answer is not that assurance is worthless but that assurance is a floor, and a floor achieved at a fraction of the cost most offices now carry. More to the point, assurance delivers value only when someone is empowered to act on what it finds. An independent review that identifies a failing project changes nothing if the governance around it defers the decision to stop, month after month, exactly as our board deferred it. The problem was never that organisations sought control and consistency. It was that they built the apparatus of oversight and withheld from it the authority to matter.

The problem was never too much oversight. It was oversight without the authority to act — the apparatus of control, built at scale, and then wired to no decision.

7. Why the office resists the cure

There is a reason these offices resist re-chartering, and it is not merely inertia. An office measured by the completeness of its reporting has every incentive to expand that reporting, because each new return is evidence of diligence and each additional analyst is evidence of importance. Asking such an office to shrink, report less, and expose itself to the harder test of whether it improved a decision is asking it to trade a comfortable and defensible metric for an uncomfortable and exposing one. The change will not come from inside the office. It has to be imposed by the people the office serves — the board and the sponsor — because they are the only parties whose interest lies in decisions rather than in reporting.

8. Re-founding the office on decisions and benefits

The remedy is not to abolish the office but to re-charter it around the two things it has been allowed to neglect: the decisions it should be improving, and the benefits it should be helping to secure. In practice this means a small number of deliberate changes.

- End every report in a recommended decision. The unit of output is no longer a status but a recommendation: this project should continue, this one should stop, these resources should move — with the reasoning attached. A picture that carries no recommendation is not finished work.
- Report by exception and shrink the pack. A board's scarce attention should meet only what needs a decision. The sixty-page pack that took a week to build becomes a handful of pages that surface the few things genuinely in question, and the effort saved is redirected from describing the work to helping it.
- Give the office standing at the point of decision. An office that assembles the evidence but is not in the room, or is in the room only to read out the pack, cannot convert its work into value. It needs a seat where projects are continued or stopped, and a remit to use it.
- Attach benefits ownership. The office should track not only cost and schedule — the things easy to count — but the trajectory of the benefits the programme exists to deliver, and should be heard, loudly, when that trajectory diverges from the business case. Cost and time are proxies; benefits are the point.
- Measure the office by decisions improved and benefits secured. Not documents produced, not reporting timeliness, not headcount supported — but the choices it sharpened and the value it helped bring home.

It is worth returning to that board meeting to see the difference in the concrete. Under the re-chartered office the sixty-page pack arrives as six: one page per project still in question, each ending not in a colour but in a recommendation and the two or three facts behind it, and a front sheet naming the decisions the board must take that day. The ninety minutes invert. The first fifteen are spent not receiving status — which every member has already read — but on the two hard questions the old meeting kept deferring. The failing project, which under the reporting regime consumed a further two quarters and the better part of a million pounds before anyone found the moment to stop it, is stopped in the first quarter its trajectory is honestly shown. The three specialists move. Nothing in this required a new tool or a new method; it required only that the office's output be a recommendation rather than a description, and that it be put in front of people willing to decide.

A caution attaches to the final change. An office measured on decisions improved will, like any measured function, be tempted to claim credit for decisions it merely witnessed. The measure works only if the claim is specific and testable — a named decision, the recommendation the office made, and what followed — rather than a general assertion of influence. Value that cannot be pointed to is value that cannot be trusted, and an office serious about being measured this way should welcome the scrutiny rather than resent it.

9. What a transition must not lose

There is a way to get this wrong, and it is worth naming so it can be avoided. An office told to shrink and to stop producing documents can, if the instruction is crude, take the assurance floor down with the bureaucracy — dropping the gated review, the independent challenge to the business case, the consistent format that lets a board compare one programme against another. That would be to repeat in reverse the original error: throwing out the genuine control along with the theatre.

The discipline of the transition is therefore to prune by purpose, not by volume. For every document, every meeting, every report the office maintains, one question decides its fate: does anything downstream change depending on its contents? A gated review that has, on occasion, stopped a doomed project earns its place. A monthly return that has never once altered a decision does not, however professionally it is produced. The aim is not a smaller office for its own sake but an office in which the ratio of effort that changes a decision to effort that merely records one has been deliberately, and sharply, raised.

10. Recommendation

The empire should not be conquered but re-founded. An organisation reviewing its programme office should resist the two easy answers — leaving it to grow by the logic of the reporting ratchet, or abolishing it in frustration — and instead re-charter it deliberately: reporting by exception, standards pruned to those that still change a decision, delivery support protected rather than cut first, and the whole function anchored to decision support and benefits ownership and measured accordingly.

The test is simple enough to apply at the next board meeting. Ask of the office not how complete its reporting is, nor how current its dashboard, but this: name a decision you improved this quarter, and a benefit you helped secure. An office that can answer is worth every seat it holds. An office that cannot is an overhead wearing the costume of control — and no amount of further reporting will change that.