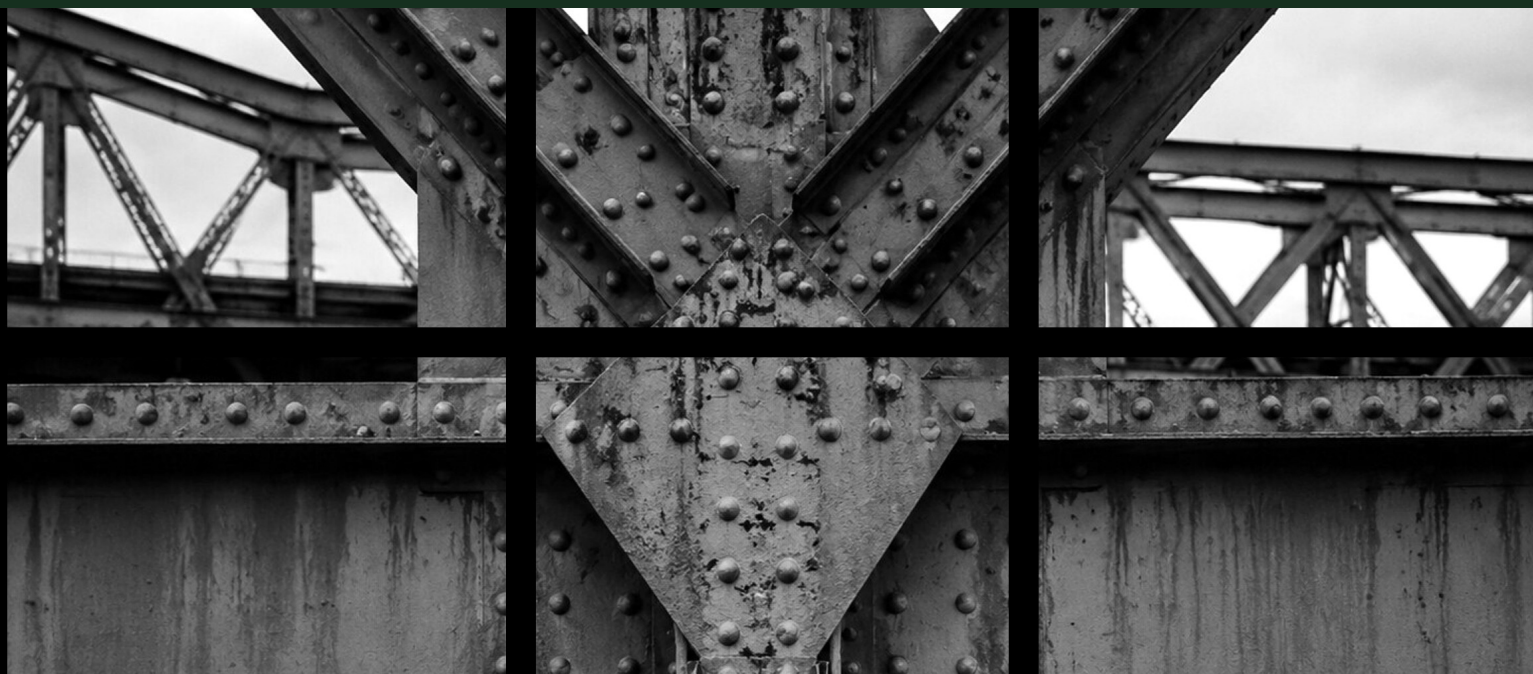


BEYOND SKILLS

The PMO Talent Problem Is Not a Skills Gap — It Is a Misunderstanding of the Work

What programme offices reveal when roles, authority and judgement are separated



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“A PMO cannot become more capable while its people are rewarded for making weak information look complete.”

1. The competent office that could not answer

The programme board had received its papers on time. Every project had supplied a red, amber or green status. The master schedule had been updated, the risk register sorted and the minutes circulated before lunch. By the standards normally used to judge a programme office, the team was performing well.

Then the sponsor asked which of two implementation dates was more credible.

The nine-person office could repeat the dates. It could identify the milestones that had moved and the workstream that had turned amber. It could not explain which assumptions separated the two forecasts, how the supplier sequence affected them, or what would have to be surrendered to protect either one. The planning officer knew the schedules but had no authority to challenge them. The reporting analysts knew the variances but not the operational consequences. The PMO manager had been selected for administrative command and was expected to turn collected information into judgement by instinct.

That scene captures the honest problem with PMO capability. Organisations say they need better skills, but they usually mean that the same people should perform the same inherited work more efficiently. The deeper issue is that the office has been staffed around activities while the programme needs it to support decisions.

The PMO talent problem is not primarily a shortage of courses, qualifications or industrious people. It is a misunderstanding of what the work is.

2. Textbooks describe functions; programmes expose judgement

The conventional description of a PMO is familiar: planning, reporting, risk, change, finance, governance and administration. It is orderly and useful. It gives leaders a list of boxes to fill and managers a basis for writing job descriptions.

It also conceals the difference between handling information and exercising judgement.

A report can be assembled by collecting returns. A useful report requires someone to decide which variance matters, test the explanation and state the consequence. A schedule can be consolidated by importing dates. An integrated plan requires someone to identify incompatible assumptions and challenge the owners. A risk register can be maintained by recording entries. Risk control requires someone to distinguish a genuine uncertainty from a delayed decision disguised as one.

These are not small refinements to the same job. They are different kinds of work.

In my experience, the weakest programme offices are not always staffed by weak people. More often, capable people have been recruited into roles that reward compliance, deny them access to context and then blame them for failing to add insight.

The mechanism is predictable:

- Job descriptions are copied from a generic model.
- Recruitment tests familiarity with processes and documents.
- New staff inherit reporting cycles before they understand the programme.
- Their performance is judged by punctuality and completeness.
- Senior leaders retain the interpretive work because they do not trust the office.
- The office never develops judgement because it is never allowed to exercise it.

A capability gap then appears to justify more training. Yet training cannot repair a work design that separates evidence from consequence.

3. Who actually belongs in a PMO

There is no single correct PMO profile. The team should reflect the decisions, risks and stage of the programme. But the strongest offices contain a deliberate mixture of four dispositions.

Disposition	Contribution	Failure when absent
Integrator	Sees sequence, dependency and cumulative consequence	Projects appear individually plausible while the programme is impossible
Analyst	Tests numbers, assumptions and competing explanations	Variance is reported without meaning
Operator	Creates reliable cadence, records and follow-through	Good decisions decay into forgotten conditions and open actions
Challenger	Questions optimism, weak evidence and comfortable consensus	The office becomes an echo of project reporting

These are dispositions before they are titles. One person may carry two; a large programme may require several specialists within each. What matters is that the combination exists and that each contribution is connected to real authority.

The integrator is not merely the person with the planning tool. The analyst is not merely the person who reconciles the monthly figures. The operator is not a junior presence whose work is invisible until it fails. The challenger is not an auditor arriving after the damage. Each is part of the programme's decision-making machinery.

The PMO leader's task is to combine them. That requires more than seniority. It requires the ability to translate between detail and consequence, to know when evidence is sufficient, and to tell a programme director that a tidy pack is concealing an untidy truth.

A surprising number of PMO leaders are appointed because they can impose order. Order matters, but programmes do not fail only from disorder. They also fail from orderly avoidance: assumptions left untested, decisions deferred through requests for more information, and dependencies presented as coloured lines without an owner willing to resolve them.

4. The work people are given determines the capability they develop

Consider a composite programme with eighteen projects, five principal suppliers and a fixed implementation window. Its PMO has twelve staff. A four-week review finds that roughly 72 per cent of the team's time is consumed by collecting reports, correcting formats, servicing meetings and maintaining separate action logs. Only 11 per cent is spent on cross-project analysis. The remainder goes to planning administration and urgent requests.

The programme director believes the team lacks commercial and analytical capability. That diagnosis is partly true, but it misses the cause. Two analysts with strong financial backgrounds spend three days each month re-keying forecast returns. The most experienced planner updates project dates but is not invited to the supplier integration meeting. A coordinator who understands the operating departments prepares minutes but never sees the readiness criteria.

The organisation has the beginnings of the capability it says it lacks. It has arranged the work so that the capability cannot appear.

The PMO manager changes three things.

First, project managers become accountable for the quality of their own returns. The office stops rewriting them and rejects incomplete submissions. Second, the planning officer attends the integration meeting and owns the cross-project dependency view, not the individual plans. Third, the two analysts replace a large variance appendix with three decision notes: supplier exposure, forecast uncertainty and the cost of protecting the implementation window.

Within two reporting cycles, the board pack falls from 118 pages to 39. More importantly, one supplier conflict is resolved six weeks before it would have reached the critical path. No new qualification produced that result. Authority, access and work design did.

Capability grows where people are asked to make distinctions, explain consequences and stand behind their analysis. It withers where they are used as a buffer between project teams and senior management.

A PMO cannot become more capable while its people are rewarded for making weak information look complete.

5. The case for administrative discipline is stronger than its critics admit

There is an opposing view worth taking seriously. Programmes need consistency. Senior leaders cannot make sound decisions if every project reports differently, records are incomplete or agreed actions disappear. Standard processes reduce avoidable friction. In a large programme, administrative discipline is not bureaucracy; it is part of control.

That view is correct.

The mistake is to treat discipline as the destination rather than the foundation. Standard templates can improve the comparability of information, but only a person can judge whether the comparison is meaningful. A governance calendar can ensure that a decision reaches the right meeting, but only a person can recognise that the paper presents no genuine choice. A common risk format can improve expression, but it cannot make an owner act.

We should therefore stop setting up a false choice between administration and insight. Good offices need both. The honest distinction is between administration that enables judgement and administration that substitutes for it.

The purpose of PMO discipline is to release attention for judgement, not to consume all available attention in proving that discipline exists.

This is also why very small offices can outperform large ones. If project managers own their data, decision owners accept their authority and the PMO has access to the real discussions, a small team can concentrate on integration and challenge. If accountability is blurred, a large team becomes necessary simply to chase, reconcile and restate.

6. Recruitment reveals what the organisation really values

Organisations often advertise for programme office staff using long inventories of methods, tools and document types. Candidates learn to speak the language. Interviews ask whether they have maintained a risk register, produced a board pack or administered change control.

Those questions establish exposure. They do not establish capability.

A better conversation begins with imperfect evidence. Give a planning candidate three schedules with conflicting milestones and ask what they would challenge. Give an analyst a forecast, a supplier claim and a change request, then ask what decision is required. Give a coordinator an agenda with twelve items and ask which belong in the room.

The useful candidate does not rush to make the information tidy. The useful candidate identifies what is missing, distinguishes fact from assumption and explains who must decide.

The same principle applies to internal appointments. Subject-matter knowledge from operations, finance, procurement or delivery can be more valuable than years spent inside a programme office, provided the person can work across boundaries. A team composed entirely of career coordinators may understand the machinery but lack the texture of the enterprise. A team composed entirely of specialists may possess judgement but resist common discipline. The leader must build the blend.

What should be sought is not one heroic PMO professional who can do everything. That merely creates another dependency. The office needs complementary capability and visible hand-offs:

- planners who can translate movement into consequence;
- analysts who can turn figures into bounded choices;
- coordinators who understand authority as well as calendars;

- assurance staff who can challenge without taking ownership away;
- leaders who can protect the office from becoming the programme's clerical overflow.

7. Capability is a contract with leadership

There is a comfortable fiction that the PMO owns its own maturity. It does not.

A sponsor who asks for insight but tolerates late or poor project returns has weakened the office. A programme director who wants challenge but excludes analysts from difficult conversations has weakened it. Project managers who delegate accountability for their plans to planners have weakened it. The PMO can propose standards and expose failure, but leadership determines whether those standards have force.

This is why attempts to "upgrade the PMO" so often disappoint. New staff arrive, new templates appear and training is completed, while the surrounding accountabilities remain unchanged. Within months, the new capability is absorbed into the old work.

The bargain must be explicit.

The PMO owes the programme reliable evidence, integrated analysis, disciplined governance and candid challenge. In return, programme leadership must give it access to context, authority over information standards, permission to reject weak inputs and space to develop people through real work.

Where that bargain is absent, talk of PMO capability is theatre.

8. Judge the office by decisions, not output

The simplest way to understand who should work in a PMO and what they should do is to look at the programme's recurring decisions.

Which decisions repeatedly arrive late? Which lack credible options? Which depend on figures nobody can reconcile? Which are discussed across three meetings because authority is unclear? Which accepted conditions are never checked?

Those questions reveal the work. The work reveals the capabilities. The capabilities reveal the team.

This reverses the normal sequence, in which an organisation selects a standard model, fills roles and then searches for useful duties. It is less comfortable because it exposes leadership weaknesses alongside PMO weaknesses. It may show that the office is overstaffed in reporting and understaffed in integration. It may show that an apparently junior coordinator is carrying the governance system while a senior manager performs little more than presentation. It may show that the missing capability belongs in project leadership, not in the PMO at all.

That is precisely why the reversal matters.

The honest account is that PMO capability has never been only about who works there. It is about what the organisation permits those people to see, challenge and own. Recruit for judgement, design work around decisions, and preserve enough discipline to make the evidence trustworthy. Anything less produces an office that can describe the programme perfectly while remaining unable to help change its course.