

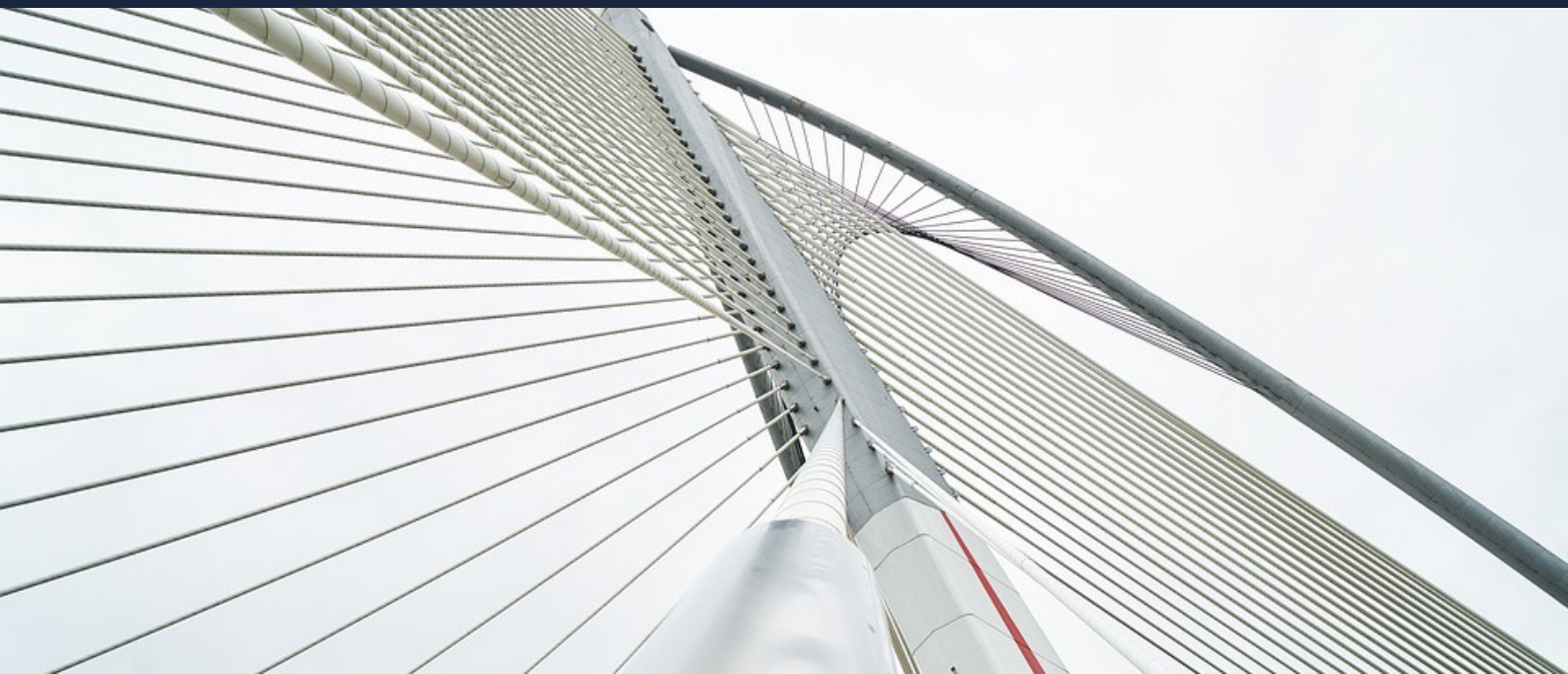
BEYOND THE HEADCOUNT SAVING

Where Will the Next Programme Directors Come From? — The Broken Ladder Problem

How the Automation of Junior Roles Is Breaking the Profession's Succession Pipeline

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1. The Rung That Nobody Noticed

There is a hire that every large organisation will try to make in 2031 or 2032, and most will fail. They will need a programme director — someone who can hold the shape of a £50m transformation, read the room of a steering committee, and know, from the texture of a status report, which workstream is about to break. They will look for someone with fifteen to twenty years of delivery experience. And they will find that the pipeline is empty.

Not because people left the profession. Because the profession stopped forming them.

The career ladder that produced today's programme directors was never designed — it accreted. A graduate joined a PMO, spent two years tracking actions and assembling status packs, learned which RAG ratings concealed trouble and which reflected reality. They moved into project management, ran a workstream, discovered that a plan is a hypothesis and a RAID log is a political document. They led a portfolio office, learned to read the patterns across programmes — where resource contention hides, how dependencies cascade, why a monthly board sees something different from a weekly checkpoint. By year fifteen, the pattern recognition was bone-deep. Nobody taught it explicitly. The work itself taught it.

That ladder is now losing its bottom rungs.

2. What AI Actually Removes

The conversation about AI in programme delivery tends to fixate on two poles: anxiety about replacement, or enthusiasm about productivity. Both miss the structural point. The roles most exposed to automation in the near term are not the senior ones — they are the junior administrative and analytical roles that happen also to be the profession's apprenticeship layer.

Status aggregation is already being automated in organisations that have invested in delivery tooling. Plan maintenance — the manual reconciliation of schedules, the chasing

of milestone owners, the re-baselining exercise — is following. Report drafting, the weekly synthesis of workstream updates into a coherent programme narrative, is precisely the kind of structured summarisation that current AI handles competently. These are not theoretical displacements. They are happening now, in 2025 and early 2026, in organisations that see themselves as simply becoming more efficient. A delivery function that ran with eight PMO analysts three years ago runs with four today and plans for two by next year. The business case writes itself.

And they are right that it is more efficient. The error is in what they are not counting.

Every one of those tasks was also a formation mechanism. The junior analyst who assembled the status pack learned, over months, to distinguish a workstream that was genuinely green from one where the lead had stopped updating the tracker. The project coordinator who maintained the plan learned that dependencies are not lines on a Gantt chart but political agreements between workstream leads. The PMO officer who drafted the programme report learned to read the gap between what was said in the checkpoint and what appeared in the numbers. These were not merely tasks to be completed. They were how the profession reproduced itself.

3. The Formation Gap

What we face is not a skills shortage in the conventional sense. Skills shortages respond to training: build a course, certify a cohort, fill the vacancies. The programme-director pipeline does not work that way, because the capability it produces is not a skill — it is a form of pattern recognition that develops only through prolonged, situated exposure to live programme dynamics.

This is the distinction that most workforce-planning exercises miss. They see the junior PMO analyst role disappearing and count it as a headcount saving. They do not see it as the removal of a formative experience that, compounded over a career, produces the judgement a programme director relies upon. The saving is real. The cost is deferred — by exactly the length of a career pipeline. If the bottom two rungs of a twenty-year ladder disappear in 2025, the gap in the director pipeline arrives around 2032.

We are, in other words, spending the profession's seed corn. And almost nobody is keeping the ledger.

The roles most exposed to near-term automation are not the senior ones — they are the junior roles that happen also to be the profession's apprenticeship layer. Removing them is efficient. It is also removing the mechanism by which programme directors are formed.

4. Why the Investment Is Not Happening

The objection I hear most often is that organisations will simply adapt — that new formation pathways will emerge organically, as they did before. This misunderstands how

the old pathway came into being. It was not designed; it was a side effect of operational necessity. Organisations needed junior PMO staff to do administrative work; the apprenticeship was incidental. When the administrative work disappears, the apprenticeship disappears with it, and there is no organic force that recreates it, because no one was maintaining it deliberately in the first place.

The second obstacle is temporal. The shortage arrives in 2032. Budget cycles are annual. Strategic workforce planning in most organisations extends three years at best. A capability investment whose payoff lies six to eight years out is structurally invisible to the planning mechanisms that would need to fund it. This is not a failure of foresight at the individual level — plenty of delivery leaders can see the problem coming. It is a failure of institutional time horizons.

The third is conceptual. Building a deliberate formation pathway for programme directors requires acknowledging that the capability is not transferable through training alone — that it requires something closer to a medical residency than a certification programme. Rotational exposure to live programme decisions. Simulation-based formation using real programme data. Apprenticeship-by-shadowing where the junior sits in the steering committee, reads the pre-read, forms their own view, and then watches the director navigate the room. These are expensive, resource-intensive investments. They require senior directors to give time to formation that they are currently spending on delivery. And they require an institutional commitment to a pipeline that will not produce returns for a decade.

5. The Shape of a Deliberate Pathway

I am not proposing a curriculum — the whole point is that curriculum alone cannot produce this capability. But the elements of a deliberate formation pathway are identifiable, and some organisations are beginning to experiment with fragments of them, even if none has yet assembled them into a coherent programme.

The first element is structured exposure to programme-level decisions early in a career. If the administrative rung is disappearing, the formation it provided must be replaced by direct participation in the decision-making it once gave oblique access to. This means placing analysts and coordinators in programme steering committees, governance reviews, and benefit-realisation assessments — not as note-takers, but as participants expected to form and defend a view.

The second is simulated programme environments that compress the feedback loops. A real programme takes three years to reveal its patterns; a well-designed simulation can expose the same dynamics — cascading dependency failures, benefit erosion, stakeholder misalignment — in weeks. The investment required is in designing simulations from real programme data, not from textbook scenarios.

The third is deliberate apprenticeship — pairing junior practitioners with experienced directors in a relationship that is explicitly formative, not merely supervisory. The apprentice shadows the director through a complete programme arc: initiation, mobilisation, delivery, transition. They see the whole shape, not just the workstream they happen to be assigned to.

None of this is revolutionary. Medicine, law, and architecture all maintain deliberate formation pathways because they recognise that professional judgement cannot be taught in a classroom. The delivery profession has never needed one, because the operational ladder did the work implicitly. Now that the ladder is breaking, the profession must build what it never had to build before.

6. The Window

The urgency is real but quiet. Today's programme directors — the generation formed on the old ladder — are still active. The pipeline has not yet visibly failed, because the cohort formed in the 2000s and 2010s is still delivering. The gap will become visible when this cohort begins to retire or move into executive roles, and the cohort behind them arrives with five fewer years of formative experience than their predecessors had at the same career stage. The director who joined a PMO in 2008 and is running a major programme in 2026 had the full ladder beneath her. Her equivalent who joins in 2026 will not.

By then, the options narrow. Organisations will compete for a shrinking pool of experienced directors. They will promote people before they are ready, because the alternative is leaving critical programmes without leadership. They will hire consultancies to fill the gap, which solves the immediate problem but does nothing for the internal pipeline. And they will wish they had started building a deliberate formation pathway in 2025 or 2026, when the bottom rungs first started disappearing and the investment would still have had time to mature.

The broken ladder is not a future problem. It is a present investment decision that almost nobody is making, because the consequences are deferred just far enough to fall outside the planning horizon. The profession's succession crisis is already under way. It is just happening too slowly, and too far down the career ladder, for anyone in a steering committee to see it yet.