Systems Approach to Project Management Office[1]

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Abstract

There is no common understanding of what a Project Management Office (PMO) should be, what purposes it ought to serve, or what roles it must play within an organisation's delivery ecosystem. Practitioners transitioning from project management roles often identify the PMO as a vehicle for maintaining performance within the iron triangle of cost, schedule, and quality. Conversely, those operating at the strategic level tend to construe the PMO as an engine for enhancing strategic throughput and assuring good returns on investment. This divergence creates ambiguity regarding the PMO's purpose, scope, and organisational positioning, thereby compromising project delivery.

It is widely acknowledged that project, programme, and portfolio management are concerned not only with delivering projects right, but equally with delivering the right projects to enable value creation. An effective PMO must therefore reconcile these two perspectives. What is required is an integrated organisational mechanism that enables strategy execution through improved operations, often achieved by selecting vital, "value-adding" project initiatives and delivering them effectively.

This paper proposes a systems-based model of the PMO, conceptualised as a socio-technical system that links business performance to investment realisation and project execution. Such a model is structured across three interdependent layers—strategic, tactical, and operational—each with distinct objectives and measurement domains, thus establishing the PMO as a business imperative. Furthermore, this article introduces the concept of a delivery platform (or realisation system), comprising organisational structures, integrated processes, competencies, and appropriate tools, as the foundational mechanism enabling effective project delivery. By establishing a clear causal chain from projects to operations to enterprise performance, the proposed model provides a holistic framework for aligning strategy, execution, and value realisation in complex project environments.

Challenges the Industry Faces

Large infrastructure projects (LIPs) are critical to (and have an impact on) the host country's macro-economy, as they result in job creation, increased export opportunities and/or reduced imports, and contribute to economic growth. Indeed, LIPs play a crucial role in socio-economic development. "Investments in modern infrastructure lay the foundations for economic development and growth. Building roads, bridges, power transmission lines, and making other improvements creates jobs. When completed [effectively], these projects help a society increase its wealth and its citizens' standard of living [otherwise, they will destroy both wealth and standard of living]" (US DoS, 2012).

However, the LIP industry often fails to meet expectations; in fact, only a few projects are successful. "The megaproject market is worth about $9-trillion each year [and still increasing], and globally big builds are in a [costly] mess. It is rare to have one completed on time and on budget" (Nevine, 2015).

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Moreover, according to the Independent Project Analysts (IPA), "Data from more than 300 global megaprojects show that 65 percent of industrial projects with a budget larger than $ 1 billion in 2010 U.S. dollars failed to meet business objectives. In some industrial sectors, the failure rate was as high as 75 percent" (Merrow, 2011). Surely, something quite structural ought to be addressed here.

"The construction industry process is one of the most complex and risky businesses undertaken; however, it has also been suggested that the construction industry has developed great difficulty in coping with the increasing complexity of major construction projects" (Wood and Ashton, 2010). The widespread, persistent unsatisfactory outcomes of large infrastructure projects (LIPs) in both private and public sectors indicate that traditional project management has not necessarily kept pace with the ever-increasing complexity of LIPs. Part of the problem could stem from the PMO model. The string of project fiascos persists because the traditional PMO model is structurally incomplete.

Embracing the systems approach to project delivery would entail two major implications as follows:

(1) The focus should shift away from "*building physical facilities*" to devising a "*successful system*" that effectively improves the operational environment. Indeed, "Building physical stuff [e.g., airport, railway, road network, bus station] is easy; producing improved services [e.g., smart, integrated transportation system] is much more difficult" (Andrews et al., 2012).

(2) The mechanism in place to manage project delivery (i.e., realisation system) should also reflect and accord with the systems approach. Therefore, the PMO model should depart from the traditional administrative or control model (merely a project repository) to "*an adequate engine that links business performance to investment realisation and to project execution*".

Therefore, irrespective of what the "P" in the PMO stands for (project, programme, or portfolio), such a management "apparatus" shall address both strategic and operational concerns concomitantly. This paper proposes a *holistic* PMO model structured across three viable, but interdependent layers.

The Necessity and Role of the PMO

The PMO should ensure that the right projects are delivered effectively and efficiently. However, a question remains: Why do projects, especially large and complex infrastructure projects, still fail? At the "micro" level (as perceived by team members), most studies, such as the chaos report, suggest that failure to manage "*project requirements*" leads to complications and failures (Mabelo, 2025). The chaos report published from 1994 to date (while Figure 1 stops at 2014) indicates "lack of users' input", "incomplete requirements", "changing requirements", "unclear objectives", and "unrealistic expectations" account for half of the causes of failure, in percentage and in number (Clancy, 2014).

Conversely, at the "macro" level (as perceived by corporate executives), it is ultimately the "*lack of strategy*", the absence of a "*company-wide project management framework*" and, mostly in 3rd-world nations, a degree of "*poor or lack of governance*" that would cause project failure (Buttrick, 2003). Through a cascade of organisational dynamics, these two or three root causes of project failure at the company-wide level will eventually manifest in three failure paths (Buttrick, 2003; Mabelo, 2011a).

Generally, as Figure 2 clearly depicts, assuming a competent project team, the reasons (at the macro level) projects are often not started, running late, terminated, and/or fail altogether appear as follows:

(1) The wrong projects (that may never create value) are started

(2) Resources (both personnel and financial) are overstretched

(3) Functional departments reverse previously made decisions

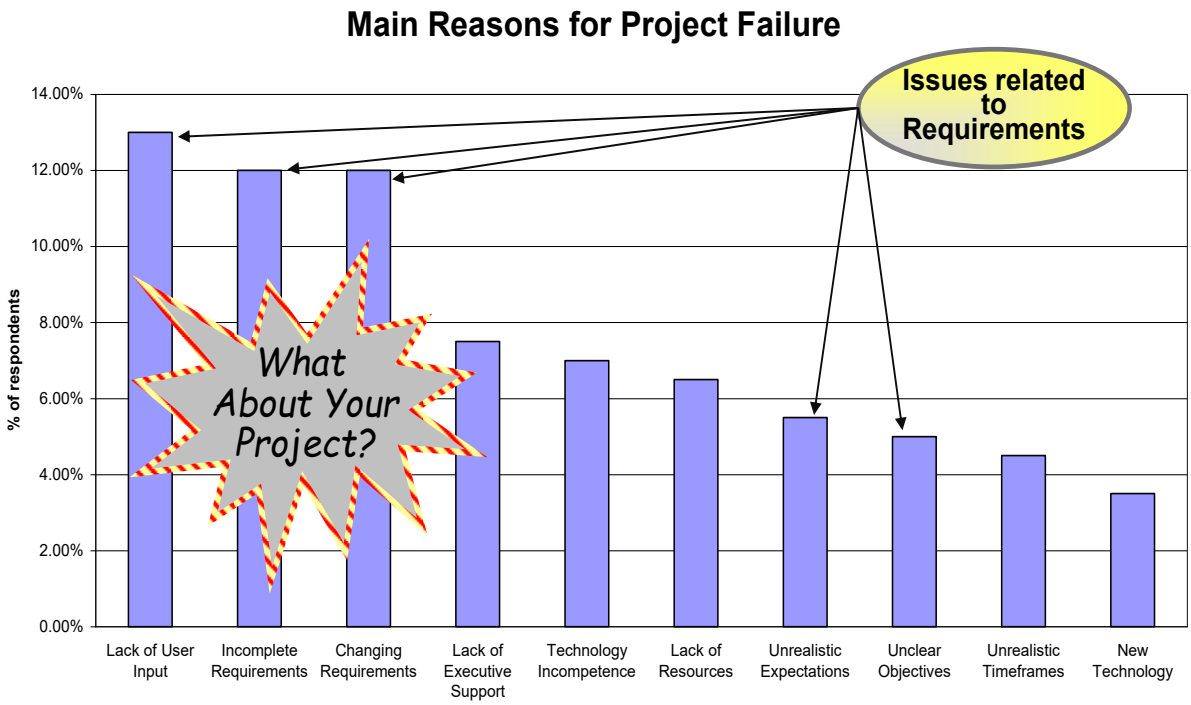


Figure 1 – Project Team's Reasons for Project Failure per Chaos Report (Clancy, 2014)

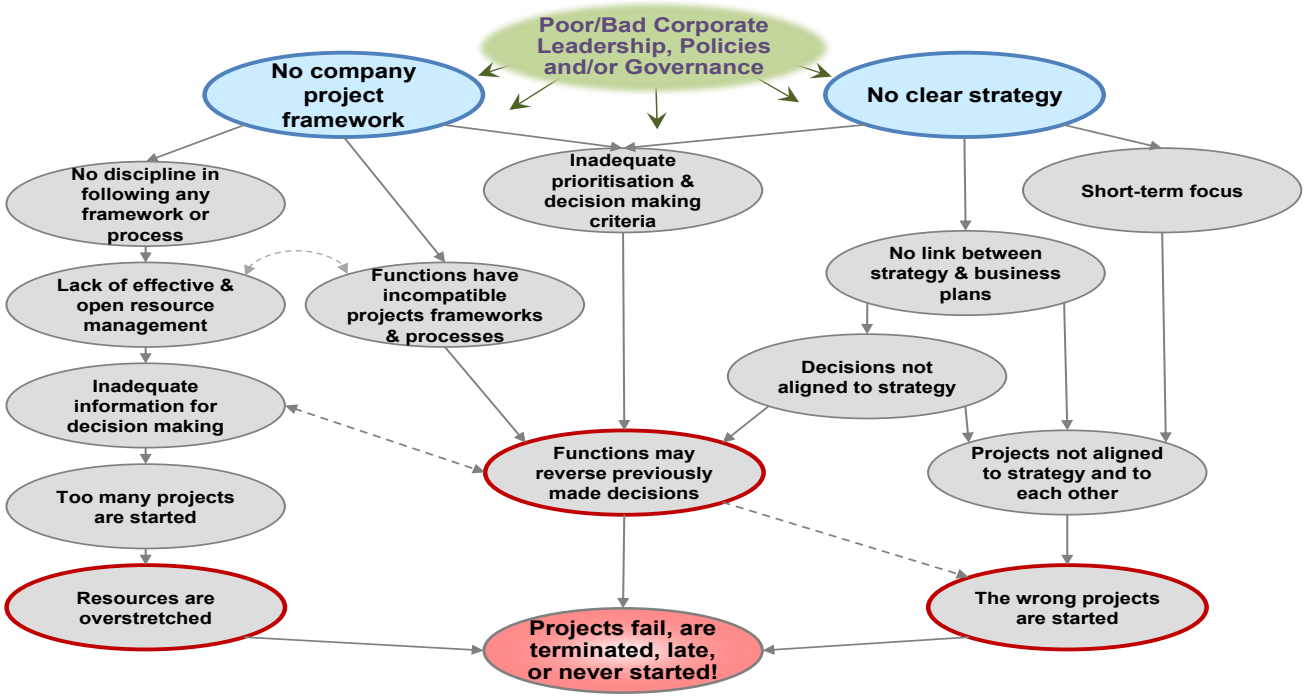


Figure 2 – Corporate's Reasons for Project Failure (Adapted: Buttrick, 2003)

Therefore, organisations interested or involved in delivering large infrastructure projects (LIPs) should first address the aforementioned concerns through their Project Management Office (PMO). Failure to address "*project requirements*" and/or "*strategy, policy, and governance*" considerations across the organisation would engender toxic, counterintuitive dynamics, leading to project failure.

Strategy becomes real when skills and resources are deployed; otherwise, it is merely words. Strategy implementation hinges on committing resources to initiatives (portfolios, programmes, projects). It is also noted that effectively and efficiently delivering large and complex projects such as LIPs requires five groups of delivery functions as follows: (1) planning, (2) design and development, (3) execution, (4) monitoring and control, and (5) capacity building, which takes teams to the next level.

These delivery functions are aggregated and clustered based on three crucial organisational aspects: (1) segregation of duties (prevents any one person from perpetrating and concealing errors or fraud), (2) organisational cohesion (binds individuals to one another and to the organisation's mission), and (3) anticipated portfolio workload (collective demand placed on the organisation's shared resources). It is common to see a configuration with a stand-alone planning unit, with design and development paired with execution, and, ultimately, monitoring and control assembled with capacity building. This functional aggregation results in various "project office" formats, including project controls (PC), project support office (PSO), project management office (PMO), project management centre of excellence (PM-CoE), and, of course, the *revered* enterprise project management office (EPMO).

The prevailing situation—ranging from no PMO to *incomplete* PMOs at different levels—is so toxic that, if not for its necessity and the adverse consequences of its absence, the industry would have ceased paying it attention. Even some so-called PMO experts are confused about its architecture, contributions, and altitude in organisations; thus, makeshift PMO arrangements abound. However, the problem is often not with the PMO, but with the "*what*" that organisations expect it to deliver.

Structure and Roles of a Holistic PMO

The functions of a PMO go far beyond mere administrative utilities, despite common misconceptions. Many still perceive it as something between a postman and a policeman, sharing information and ensuring compliance with processes and templates. The PMO should be construed as the mechanism that converts strategy into business performance through disciplined project delivery—nothing less. In this sense, the holistic PMO functions as the organisation's "*Centre of Metabolism*", continuously processing strategic intent into the vital energy of operational improvement and business growth.

This article introduces a conceptual model that presents the PMO as "*an engine that links business performance to investment realisation and to project execution*", not merely a "project repository". In this outlook, the PMO should encompass three distinct layers: strategic, tactical, and operational. Each such level has a "specific" objective and an established measurement domain as per Table 1:

Layer/Level	PMO Objectives	Measurement Domain	Requirements
Strategic	Enterprise performance (*Why*)	OKR metrics (financial, others)	*The Hierarchy of Requirements is duly managed in these three levels*
Tactical	Investment returns (*How*)	Operational KPIs	
Operational	Delivery performance (*What*)	Project metrics	

Table 1 – Holistic PMO Framework: Integrating Strategic Intent with Operational Precision

The logic of this PMO model is holistic because it clearly establishes that projects (infrastructure or otherwise) exist to improve operations, and in turn, improved operations drive business performance. The highlighted strategic and value-adding "causal chain" is one of the most significant insights in project governance; still, most PMO models fail to appreciate it, focusing on output-based reporting. In delivery performance, in reality, value emerges from *interactions* across levels. Even when every component of a holistic PMO is in place, but operates in silos, a lack of interaction will still destroy value. Worse yet, value is further eroded when portfolios (long-term), programmes (medium-term), and projects (short-term) are treated as equivalent, disregarding their distinct roles within the system.

This PMO model is conceived as a socio-technical system designed to convert (corporate) strategic intent into realised organisational performance through coordinated (operational) project delivery. These three layers are discussed in greater detail in the ensuing sections to provide further clarity and assist project practitioners in understanding the specific mechanisms of the model as follows:

1. ***Strategic Role***

   The strategic role consists of optimising "strategic throughput"—the rate at which strategic investments are converted into measurable business performance. Here is the ultimate layer of enterprise (and societal) "benefits" tracking. Indeed, this is the domain of organisational key results (OKRs); these ratios are derived from the income statement, balance sheet, and cash flow statement. Typical OKRs are market share, return on investment (ROI), return on capital employed (ROCE), profit margin, earnings per share (EPS), gearing ratio, solvency ratio, and economic value added (EVA)—which, unlike GDP growth, measures the *quality* of macro-economic outputs by determining if firms yield returns *above* their cost of capital.

   The two main aspects or dimensions of the *strategic* role of the PMO include the following:

   a. Strategic translation (of corporate goals to investment themes to projects/programmes)
   b. Portfolio management (the selection and prioritisation of envisioned project initiatives)

   This is the most significant level in the PMO's functioning: "Translating strategy into project initiatives." Delivering the *wrong* projects makes the organisation *wronger* (Ackoff, 1994). Hence, both catabolism (strategy → projects) and anabolism (outputs → value) are needed.

2. ***Tactical Role***

   The tactical role consists of maximising the "returns" (financial or otherwise) on investment through an integrated delivery architecture (IDA) by combining technical execution with change enablement. This is the domain of key performance indicators (KPIs), arising from the planned "*improvements in operations*" (e.g., faster processing, reduced downtime, lower production costs, dependable supply, faster delivery, superior safety, better quality/image).

   The three main aspects or dimensions of the *tactical* role of the PMO include the following:

   a. Planning and deploying project governance and "org structure" (per delivery platform)
   b. Establishing the project delivery's 6-Ms (Methods, Manpower, Materials, Machinery, Milieu, and Measurements). Manpower should also address maturity, competency, and culture. At this level, project delivery targets are defined, rather than arbitrarily imposed
   c. Change enablement strategy (change strategy per ADKAR, stakeholder mobilisation by activating sponsors, not just as funders but as change leaders), and impact assessments

3. Operational Role

The operational role consists of assessing the project's "progress and status", the domain of delivery metrics (tracking scope, cost, schedule, quality, and risk). Such metrics are reported on individual projects, programmes, or portfolios. Further, the PMO involves "adoption and proficiency" metrics to continuously track whether people are using the new processes or tools correctly, not merely whether "go-live" went well; the focus should not be on outputs.

The two main aspects or dimensions of the *operational* role of the PMO entail the following:

a. Delivery monitoring and control (earned value, milestones tracking, variance analysis) and delivery reporting (output metrics, period-to-period dashboard, and ad hoc reports)

b. Tracking user adoption rates (e.g., login frequency), speed of adoption, and utilising sentiment analysis or "pulse surveys" to measure user resistance or engagement levels during pilot and rollout on the part of project personnel and other relevant stakeholders

The preconised PMO model is premised not only on controls but on value creation. By adopting the above elements, the "causal chain" of this *holistic* PMO model becomes more robust and visible. Notably, at the operational and tactical levels, care is taken to reflect the *human* dimension as follows:

1. Operational—Project is delivered (technical) + **people adopt it (human)**
2. Tactical—**Adopted changes lead to sustained improvements** in operations
3. Strategic—Sustained operational improvements drive **long-term business performance**

Thus, Table 2 below highlights the human dimensions entailed in the tactical and operational roles. A sample of metrics may apply as tactical (training attendance, process upgrade log, and change workshops) or operational (login frequency, non-compliance rate, resistance cases, and glitches).

Level	Enhanced Objective	Measurement Focus
Tactical	**Change-ready** investment returns	Adoption readiness and **stakeholder buy-in**
Operational	**Integrated** delivery performance	Technical status and **adoption proficiency**

Table 2 – Human Dimensions and Enhanced Objectives of the PMO

Figure 3 (below) provides a synoptic and all-inclusive map of the proposed PMO Model as follows:

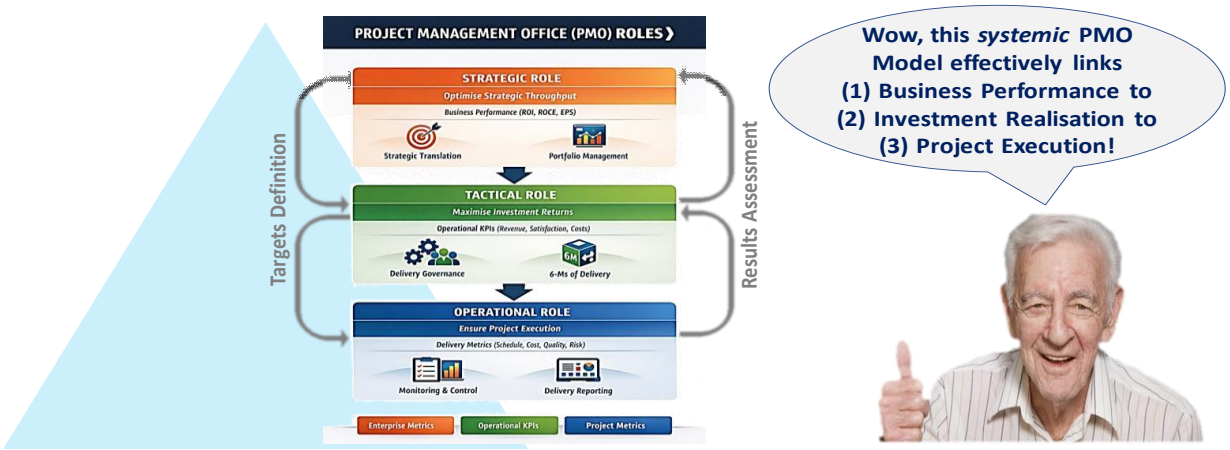


Figure 3 – Conceptual Framework of the Holistic PMO Model

This integrated, holistic PMO model naturally fits organisations managing complex projects (e.g., rail, port, energy, and major construction). The traditional approach of installing "segments" of the PMO model (e.g., strategy execution office, results management office, value management office, enterprise portfolio management office, project support office, transformation office) often causes misalignments, missing capabilities, and asymmetries in "value creation" across the organisation.

Moreover, the propriety of this PMO model lies in its ability to address the main causes of project failure, i.e., managing project requirements and attending to strategy, governance, and methodology. This PMO model evolved from years of research and project experience, and shall prove practical in:

- Infrastructure programmes
- Large capital investment environments
- Public sector portfolios (e.g., socio-economic services)

Components of the Delivery Platform

The operational level of the PMO should accommodate a "delivery platform" (realisation system). The animal world demonstrates that any form of delivery necessitates a well-functioning "womb". A functional delivery platform comprises the four crucial organisational components listed below: "reporting and responsibilities", "processes and procedures", "competencies and culture", and "techniques and tools"—together they constitute the "*womb that begets projects*" (Mabelo, 2023). In that previous paper, the author elaborates on the rationale and components of the delivery platform.

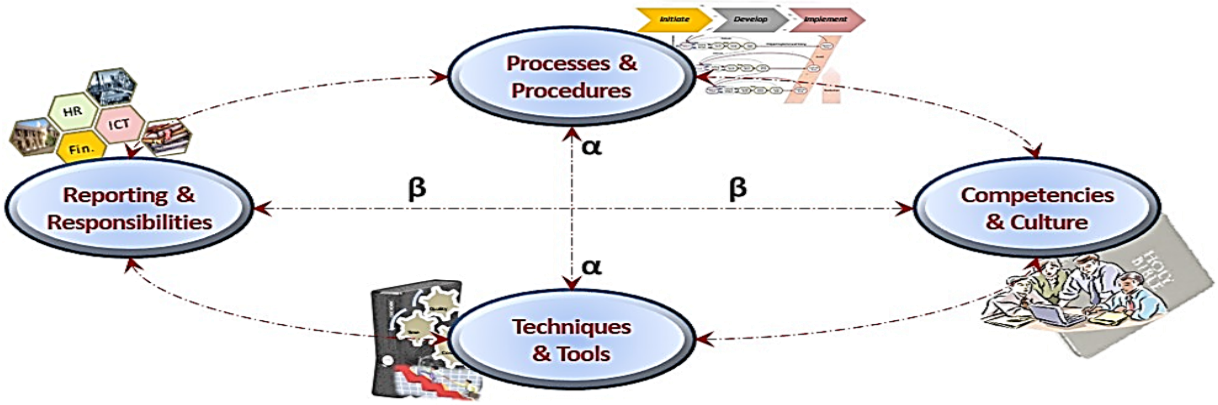


Figure 4 – Delivery Platform or Realisation System Model (Mabelo, 2011b; Mabelo, 2023)

These four "components" must be balanced, in harmony, and in sync with one another for overall delivery to remain adequate and effective. Further, "processes and procedures" and "techniques and tools" constitute the technical axis, while "reporting and responsibilities" and "competencies and culture" represent the human axis. Hence, the prevailing undue insistence on the technical [α] axis over the human [β] axis should be avoided. In reality, the [α] axis will only "magnify" what [β] produces. Worth noting that, "It's people [β] who get [project] things done!" (Cooke-Davies, 2002). Further, Ninck (2014) finds 80% of all unsuccessful projects fail due to human or interpersonal error. However, a 2011 industry survey (Mabelo, 2011b) reveals an undue focus on the technical [α] axis.

When confronted with the need to deliver infrastructure and capital projects, many organisations would hire a certified project manager or send their current personnel to a "methodology" training.

What they often forget is that each such component is "*more equal than others*" in specific aspects:

- Organisations with sound PM processes often prove *consistent* in delivering most projects
- PM techniques and tools are needed to *efficiently* gather, process, analyse, and/or circulate projects' inputs and outputs, supply burn rate, progress rate, performance ratios, and forecasts
- Specific PM competencies are needed to *satisfactorily* carry out project activities, although innovative solutions demand creative flair or expanded problem-solving skills (Ninck, 2014)
- Appropriate PM organisational structures and interfaces enable and improve governance, teamwork, and other capabilities, leading to an *effective* coordination of project activities

Akin to how a fragmented PMO threatens capital project delivery and ultimately strategy execution, there are also instances where project delivery entities, in seeking to establish the delivery platform, manage only to install one or two components (out of four preconised), at the peril of major projects. Consequently, the four components must together span the strategic, tactical, and operational levels.

The following sections discuss each of the four components of a functional platform; further details of their rationale, requirements, contributions, and implications are expounded in Mabelo (2023).

Reporting and Responsibilities

"Unless we look at things as systems that are somewhat interconnected, we wouldn't perceive anything beyond their faint and fleeting shadows"

There is a pervasive misconception in the industry that since large projects are ring-fenced, there is no need to connect them to their parent organisation; nothing could be further from the reality. Some form of *dedicated* organisational structure is always required to ensure disciplined delivery. Complex projects need clear governance, defined reporting relationships, contractor coordination mechanisms, and appropriate decision-making pathways. Without this structural clarity, complexity soon devolves into operational fragmentation, for a large project is an extension, albeit *virtual* and temporary, of the parent organisation. Since project governance derives from corporate governance, the project team structure should be woven into the corporate structure to function most effectively.

Project functions (cost, contract, risk management, etc.) must *interact* with corporate-level functions (finance, legal, governance, etc.) to nurture teamwork, collaboration, and organisational synergy. This systemic arrangement also fosters portfolio alignment by linking project initiatives to strategy, corporate governance, and even roles, responsibilities, and authorities of the principal stakeholders.

Notably, Figure 5 suggests that—contrary to popular belief—corporate leadership, rather than the project managers, defines the business targets used to measure operational improvements. These targets complement the traditional metrics of the iron triangle. The Success-Failure Grid (Figure 6) reflects this broader dimension of business goals. An effective PMO model needs to accommodate crucial operational metrics, such as reduced logistics costs or increased outputs, aggregated at the corporate level. Hence, a new asset (e.g., power plant, airport, hospital) must be tracked not only on its delivery, but also on its impact on the cashflow statement, income statement, and balance sheet.

Figure 5 – Organisational Ecology and Project Delivery (Mabelo, 2017)

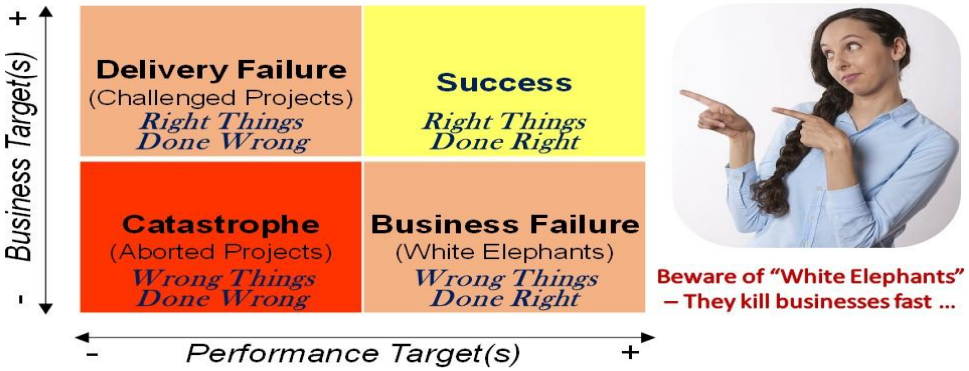


Figure 6 – Project Success—Failure Grid (Mabelo,2011a; Mabelo, 2025)

From this perspective, one should be wary of "*white elephant*" projects that are completed within the iron triangle (on budget, on time, to specifications) but fail to achieve strategic and operational targets. Such projects are *outwardly* successful but sheer failures on the business side, and often drain corporate resources without adding value. These types of projects are the most counterproductive.

Processes and Procedures

"A process is required that can transform ... a dream into reality; this is about a process that determines what should be done, who could get involved, how much it might cost, and how long it would take, and most importantly, whether the envisaged system will be successfully delivered"

Project delivery resembles an orchestral performance, where a project manager leads the ensemble according to a score, ensuring every note contributes to a great symphony. To succeed, the project team must "*sing from the same hymn sheet*"—following the same tempo and rhythm. Likewise,

effective project delivery requires a consistent, company-wide lifecycle methodology to govern all activities and tasks. There must also be corresponding processes for the tactical and strategic environments. Allowing project personnel to follow their own disparate methodologies and norms is tantamount to revelling in cacophony—a discordant and chaotic mixture of unpleasant sounds.

However, a harmonious performance is not the only measure of success. Project teams should not ignore what might occur beyond closeout; upstream work often produces *undesirable* downstream outcomes in the business realm. Figure 7 depicts a lifecycle reflecting the operational environment.

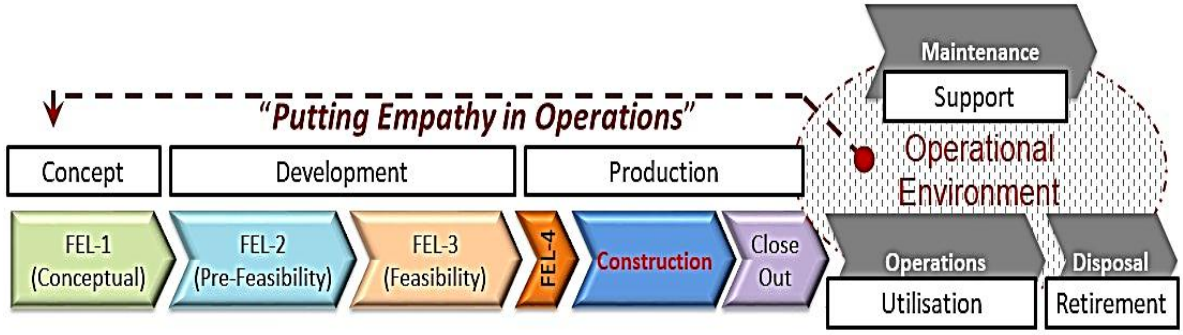


Figure 7 – Holistic Project Lifecycle, Showing Operational Environment

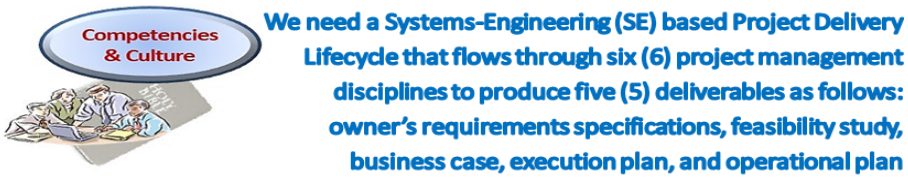
Consistent with the systems approach to project delivery, the holistic lifecycle methodology should accommodate two "feedback loops" that contribute *significantly* to improving delivery performance:

(1) The first feedback accords with the principle of beginning with the end in mind (Scott, 2012). The author refers to "*Putting empathy in operations*"; operational concerns (challenges, ills, problems, shortfalls) should be considered *first* during the concept and development phases.

(2) The second feedback consists of relying on the outcomes (including any lessons learned) as assessed at post-implementation reviews (PIRs) to readjust and improve delivery in the next cycle. While the project team's *contractual* involvement ends at closeout, project personnel or their proxy should remain involved in the operational environment (at PIRs) to gather "*requirements*", design, and construction lessons learned, and/or retrofit missing assemblies.

Thus, lifecycle guidelines, delivery roadmaps, checklists, and templates are part of this component. However, the level of elaboration and detail should reflect the project management maturity across the entire organisation, including at the corporate level, not only among team members and suppliers.

Competencies and Culture



"It is people who get the [project delivery] things done" (Cooke-Davies, 2002), an essential tenet to uphold. Project personnel must be competent in executing the project and related activities and, better still, also be aware of organisational arrangements at strategic, tactical, and operational levels. A leadership deficit and a personnel shortage force PMOs to stretch existing team members too thin.

Both capacity and competency are needed to design and produce project deliverables and artefacts. However, while project management is defined as "The application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet project requirements" (PMBoK, 2013), it is worth noting that attitude, culture, or mindset ought to feature in that definition. This internal orientation—how individuals think, feel, and relate to others and the environment—shapes how teams collaborate and persevere through problems, often proving a better *predictor of success* than technical skill alone. Thus, work breakdown structure, Gantt chart, and s-curve are necessary but not sufficient for success.

Merely or, at times, blindly following standardised PMBoK processes or methodology would prove counterproductive, should project personnel lack the necessary competencies (e.g., PM skills). The Project Management Professional (PMP) certification is a great foundation for PM knowledge, but, like passing a driver's license test, it does not make the "apprentice" a good driver yet. Indeed, true mastery requires advanced training and hands-on experience to sharpen such skills, notably in LIPs.

One important implication of the foregoing discussions is that the PMO also needs to establish a vehicle for continued and targeted capacity building. Gaps identified around project competencies and mindset must be addressed through relevant and timely training and capacitation interventions.

Figure 8 outlines a systems-based methodology with five generic deliverables and six main pillars to ensure critical failure factors, such as *poor requirements management*, do not jeopardise projects. Thus, a systems approach should integrate culture and competencies throughout these key elements.

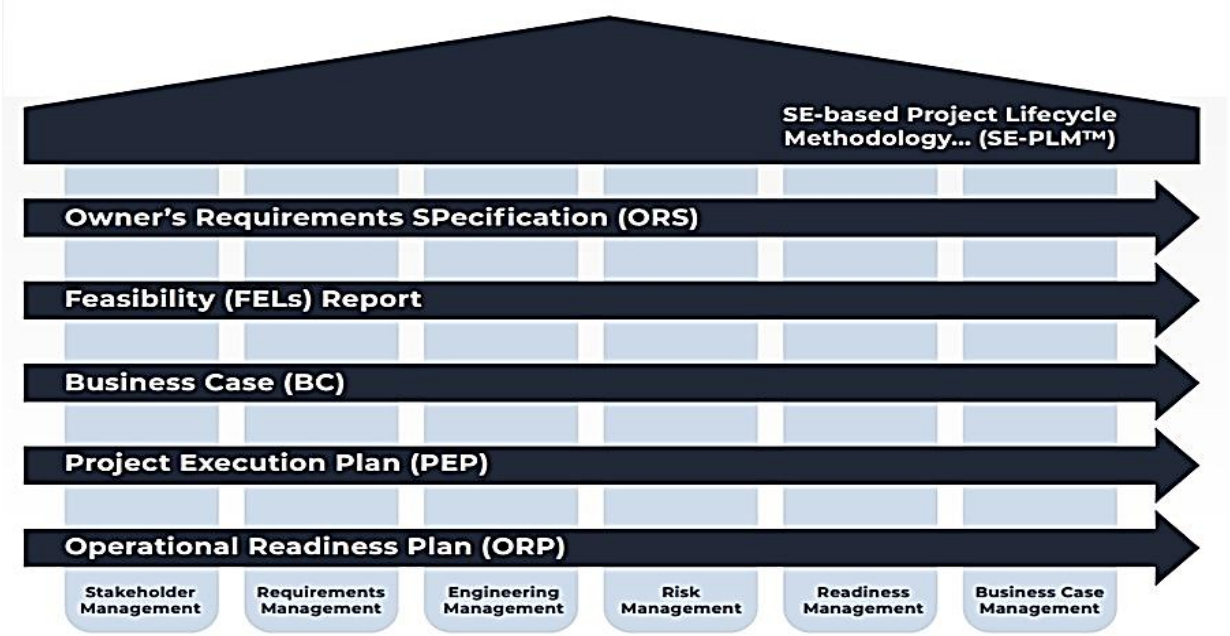
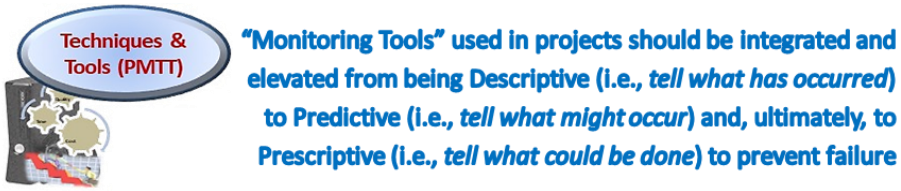


Figure 8 – Systems Engineering-Based Methodology: Key Pillars and Deliverables

Moreover, project personnel must equally be prepared, to the extent necessary, in pertinent areas of knowledge, expertise, and work culture applicable to the tactical and strategic delivery domains. Competencies in strategic and portfolio management, corporate finance, and contracts equip teams to interpret complex metrics and make *high-stakes* decisions, such as adopting a novel technology. Many PMOs, however, remain overly focused on technical proficiencies at the expense of critical strategic and human-centric capabilities. This pernicious imbalance was discussed in a prior section.

Techniques and Tools



"According to a Chinese proverb, 'to do good work, one must first have good tools.' It is also true for project managers, who, if they want to deliver good project results, must first have good project management tools […] What they actually need is a manageable set of tools that they can use effectively and efficiently [based on factors such as strategy, methodology, etc.]" (Miloševic, 2003).

This perspective is promoted in industry: "The appropriate use of [project management techniques and tools, PMTT] can lead to some potential benefits such as increased [delivery] efficiency, reduced training, improved project predictability, increased stakeholder confidence [as they trust inputs and reports], increased probability of project success, and improved communication" (Miloševic, 2003). Information silos or bottlenecks breed decision delays, increasing timelines, costs, and risk exposure.

The collage in Figure 9 illustrates a sample of techniques and tools commonly used on projects, especially large and complex infrastructure projects (such as LIPs). Accordingly, similar tools and techniques should be adopted and adapted for use at the tactical and strategic levels, respectively.

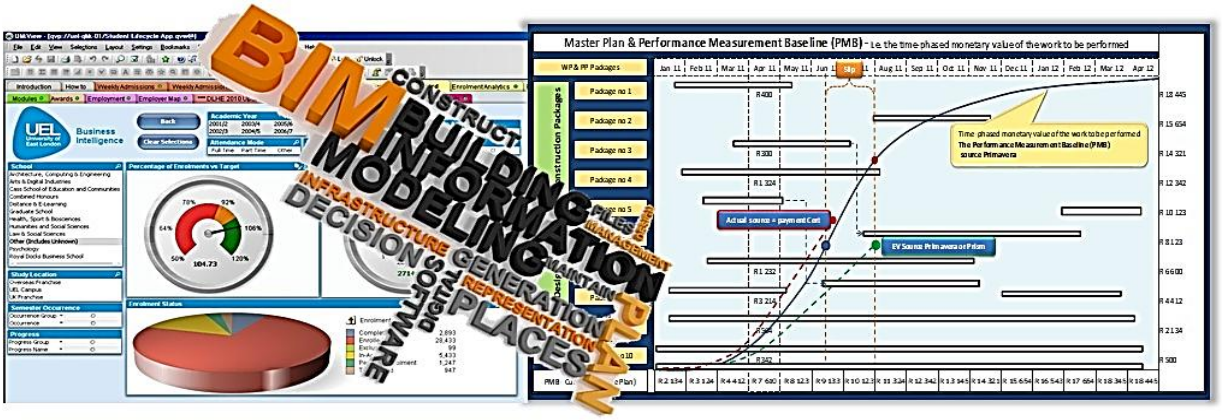


Figure 9 – Collage on Project Management Information Systems

Project management information systems (PMIS) and other project management software (PMS) provide capabilities of managing scope, resources, schedule, budget or costs, quality, configuration, documentation, collaboration, decision-making, key deliverables, and administrative arrangements.

In this era of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), even straddling onto the fifth industrial revolution (Industry 5.0), where humans are expected to work alongside advanced technology and artificial intelligence (AI), it would be amiss for the project delivery community not to adopt technology in managing projects, programmes, and portfolios in a way that *accelerates* both tasks and decisions. Prompt and *informed* decision-making in project management is crucial to maintaining momentum, reducing costly delays, mitigating risks, and ensuring the project stays on schedule and within budget.

Thus, at every level of the PMO, there must be tools and techniques that provide the required metrics (operational, tactical, and strategic measurements). A few other tools shall process and circulate such

information (and their initial inputs) across the organisation to facilitate and sustain decision-making. Information about the sequencing of activities and tasks (schedule) and the costs of construction elements is nowadays conveyed in the building information modelling (BIM) repository as part of the 4D-BIM workflows (utilised in construction planning), and 5D-BIM (providing cost estimates).

Furthermore, as Table 1 suggests, project metrics (scope, cost, time, and quality progress and status) indicate delivery performance and should be rolled up into the assessment of investment returns, as measured in operation-based KPIs (faster processing, lower production costs, higher availability, better quality/image, higher customer satisfaction). In turn, these tactical metrics (operation-based KPIs) should be rolled up into the appraisal of ultimate enterprise performance, as expressed in OKRs such as market share, return on investment (ROI), return on capital employed (ROCE), profit margin, earnings per share (EPS), gearing ratio, cash ratio, solvency ratio, and economic value added (EVA).

This information-sharing arrangement not only ensures a "*single version of the truth*" at any PMO level but also, and more importantly, provides a consolidated view of performance across all layers. Data without integration is merely noise; it is the 'yoking' of these metrics (the effective application of these PMO provisions) that prevents *intelligence asymmetry*—a situation in which the views, information, and interpretations available for decision-making will differ markedly among major participants (project team members, project directors/sponsors, legislators, and C-suite executives). Any concerned member of the project management community who is wondering where their PMO *cacophony* stems from now has an answer—it is akin to a squadron flying without a shared compass.

Industry Survey and Analysis

Table 3 in Annexure (A) summarises the survey questions capturing demographic context, current PMO configurations, systemic alignment, functional coverage, and the industry's receptiveness to a systems-based PMO model. The analysis provides several important insights into the present state and evolution of the PMO concept. Whereas 59% of respondents would agree to possessing a single PMO with a defined mandate and objectives, none 'strongly agree', and 23% could not confirm this. Such uncertainty suggests that many PMOs lack institutional visibility or clearly allocated authority.

Although 55% of participants indicate that their PMO ensures delivery within time, cost, and quality constraints, 18% remain uncertain whether this basic assurance exists—they cannot tell. This stance reinforces a familiar industry pattern: operational control mechanisms may be present, yet their effectiveness is unevenly perceived across organisational levels. A governance structure that key stakeholders do not fully understand cannot reliably perform an integrative organisational role. It may be assuring that most respondents believe their PMO contributes to strategic alignment (86%), links project outcomes to business performance (73%), and supports value creation (73%). However, the persistence of a significant dissenting minority indicates these capabilities are not yet fully and consistently institutionalised. The industry, therefore, exhibits dual realities: the PMO functioning as a strategic enabler in some *intelligent* organisations, and remaining largely administrative in others.

Responses reveal an almost even split about enterprise-wide delivery frameworks, strategic portfolio prioritisation, cross-functional coordination, organisational learning mechanisms, and the balance between technical and human aspects of delivery. This equilibrium means the profession stands at an inflexion point. PMOs are gradually transitioning from process-centric control entities toward socio-technical delivery systems, while many organisations remain anchored in legacy operating models.

A similar divide appears in performance measurement practices. Respondents report inconsistent existence of integrated strategic, tactical, and operational measurement platforms and varying clarity on PMO roles and responsibilities. The above findings point to the coexistence of two maturity tiers:

(a) **Control-oriented PMOs**, focused primarily on reporting progress/status and compliance; and

(b) **System-based PMOs**, linking delivery to operational improvement and enterprise performance.

Given the economic scale ($9 trillion per annum) and societal dependence on project-based delivery, this structural inconsistency poses a systemic risk to strategy execution. Research by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) demonstrates measurable performance advantages for organisations that successfully implement strategy through projects (Unit, E.I., 2017). Yet the survey reveals that a notable proportion of organisations still fail to recognise the causal linkage between projects and strategic outcomes. Delivering transformational change initiatives, therefore, remains a significant organisational challenge, even as it becomes a competitive necessity (Keenan et al., 2013). Properly positioned and enabled, the PMO can serve as a critical mechanism for addressing this challenge.

Remarkably, around 83% of participants express strong receptiveness to a holistic, systems-based PMO that can simultaneously measure delivery progress, operational improvement, and business performance. Respondents broadly support integrating governance, processes, competencies, PMIS, and other enabling tools into a unified delivery platform. Further, qualitative responses reinforce this sentiment, emphasising growing expectations that PMOs demonstrate tangible organisational value rather than administrative oversight. One of the participants reported establishing a strategic management office incorporating many characteristics of the proposed holistic model; this heralds a convergence between emerging practices and systems thinking, providing a tangible case in point.

Beyond descriptive observations, correlation analysis of survey responses reveals deeper systemic relationships (as per the correlation matrix). The findings strongly suggest that PMO effectiveness arises not from isolated functions but from the interaction of organisational elements operating as an integrated delivery system. These correlation analyses also highlight the following PMO insights:

- Organisations with enterprise-wide delivery frameworks are more likely to measure value creation in addition to the conventional iron triangle of time, cost, and quality performance. Further, strategic alignment of projects strongly correlates with demonstrated value creation.
- Where project selection and prioritisation are strategy-driven, project outcomes tend to prove consistently linked to business performance, and PMOs actively promote project management maturity through training and coaching/mentoring. Similarly, strategically aligned portfolios correlate to stronger coordination between project teams (cost control, contracts, risk, etc) and corporate functions (finance, legal, governance, etc.), reinforcing the PMO's integrative role.
- Systematic feedback of lessons learned correlates with a balanced integration of technical mechanisms (methodologies, tools) and human factors (competence, governance, and culture). Integrated measurement across strategic, tactical, and operational levels becomes achievable primarily in project contexts where these human-technical dimensions operate in harmony.
- Practitioners with more than fifteen years of experience overwhelmingly indicate that their organisations would benefit from adopting a holistic, systems-based PMO model rather than maintaining fragmented mandates. The longer their experience, the stronger this conviction.

Taken collectively, the correlations confirm that PMO success emerges from systemic coherence. Organisations exhibiting alignment across governance, delivery frameworks, learning mechanisms, and performance measurement display characteristics consistent with the Holistic PMO Model. The analysis therefore provides empirical support for a central proposition of this research: the PMO is effective only when it operates as an integrated organisational system linking strategy, execution, and value realisation. In short, by moving beyond traditional, siloed and fragmented administrative roles, this holistic model provides a modern blueprint for PMOs to drive sustained strategic value.

The survey findings reveal a profession in transition. The traditional PMO centred on monitoring projects remains prevalent. Nevertheless, industry sentiment favours evolution toward an integrated delivery system that connects strategy formulation, investment realisation, operational performance, and organisational learning. Observed fragmentation does not contradict the proposed model; rather, it explains the persistent ambiguity surrounding the PMO's identity, highlighting the systemic disconnect and stressing the need for reconceptualisation. This shift is necessary and long overdue.

While exploratory (22 responses) and not intended for statistical generalisation, the consistency of responses across demographic categories provides indicative support for the Holistic PMO Model. The results suggest that improving project success in isolation is insufficient. Sustainable enterprise performance requires an integrated model that links strategic intent, delivery capability, operational outcomes, and business value. Projects are not merely technical tasks, but strategic building blocks.

Consequently, the industry survey substantiates the paper's central proposition: the future of the PMO lies not in expanding functions but in achieving systemic integration. The Holistic PMO Model therefore emerges not merely as a theoretical construct but as a practical response to an already recognised organisational need. The STODI assessment tool presented in Annexure (B) operationalises this principle by explicitly evaluating the linkage between projects and measurable business performance. On the strength of the above, the systems approach to the PMO rests its case.

Conclusion

The familiar analogy of observers attempting to describe an elephant from different vantage points illustrates a fundamental systems principle: when *parts* are considered in isolation, the nature of the *whole* is inevitably misunderstood. Every single perspective may be valid, yet inherently partial. This condition closely mirrors the Project Management Office, which is respectively interpreted through operational, tactical, and strategic lenses. This results in a fragmented understanding and persistent ambiguity about its role and purpose; not even experienced practitioners are immune to this muddle.

The persistent ambiguity surrounding the role, purpose, and positioning of PMO reflects a deeper structural issue within many organisations—namely, the lack of an integrated mechanism to link strategy, execution, and value realisation. As long as the PMO is conceived as either an operational control function or a strategic oversight body in isolation, this ambiguity will remain unresolved. Many organisations suffer the malady of expecting the PMO to "*do a job it was never set up to do.*" So, PMOs designed to report cannot influence decisions; that is why they fail, not for a lack of tools.

This paper proposes a systems-based model of the Project Management Office, conceptualised as a socio-technical system clearly linking business performance to investment realisation and project execution, and vice versa. The article synthesises and extends a research trajectory developed by the author across several publications on systems engineering, project governance, and operational readiness—thereby, proposing a holistic, systems-based architectural interpretation of the PMO.

By structuring the PMO across three interdependent layers (strategic, tactical, and operational), the model reconciles the dual imperative of delivering projects right and delivering the right projects. Central to this approach is the concept of a delivery platform (or realisation system), which provides the organisational bedrock for effective project execution. By integrating governance, processes, competencies, and tools, this platform enables the consistent translation of strategic intent into operational outcomes. In doing so, it establishes a clear causal chain in which projects should enable operational improvements, and operations drive business performance, in fulfilment of the strategy.

The implications for practice are significant. Organisations seeking to improve project outcomes must move beyond piecemeal PMO implementations and instead adopt a holistic architecture that aligns strategic objectives, delivery mechanisms, and performance measurement systems. No longer dealing with a myriad of *fragmented* PMOs; only one integrated, *holistic* PMO is needed. Failure to do so risks perpetuating the well-documented disconnect between project success and business value.

Furthermore, this model provides a foundation for assessing PMO maturity, diagnosing systemic weaknesses, and guiding organisational transformation efforts. It also opens avenues for further research, particularly the empirical validation of the relationships among PMO structure, delivery platform capability, and enterprise performance, thus establishing the PMO as a business imperative. Annexure (B) introduces an assessment tool (the STODI) for diagnostic purposes, significantly increasing this paper's practical impact and positioning it as actionable rather than merely conceptual.

Exploratory survey insights further support the existence of systemic fragmentation in current PMO implementations. While many organisations demonstrate strong project control capabilities, fewer exhibit a clear linkage between project outcomes and business performance, indicating a persistent disconnect between execution and value realisation. These findings reinforce the need for a more integrated, systems-based approach to the PMO. Therefore, let the will of the PMO system be done.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the PMO should not be judged solely by its ability to control projects, but by its capacity to enable value creation through a coherent, even integrated system. In this regard, the PMO must be understood not as a set of functions but as a critical organisational system for strategy execution—embracing a holistic PMO model. This shift is both necessary and long overdue.

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Additional Readings

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Annexure (A)

This table captures the 22 questions that were put to project practitioners and experts during March 2026:

Section A: Demographic Questions [Non-Likert Questions]	
A.1	Role (Executive / PMO / Project Manager / Engineer / Consultant / Expert / Other)
A.2	Industry experience (1 to 5 years / 6 to 10 years / 11 to 15 years / 16 to 20 years / more than 20 years)
A.3	Industry (Infrastructure, Energy and Oil & Gas, Transportation, IT, Public Sector, Other)
A.4	Organisation size (10 to 250 staff / 251 to 5,500 staff / 5,501 to 15,000 staff / more than 15,000 staff)
A.5	PMO maturity level (from level 1 [Initial / Ad Hoc] to level 5 [Optimised], if known)
Section B: Current PMO Effectiveness (As-Is Diagnosis) [Likert Questions]	
B.1	In my organisation, there is a single PMO, with a **clearly defined mandate and purpose**.
B.2	The PMO effectively ensures that projects are delivered **on time, on budget, and to the required quality**.
B.3	The PMO plays a meaningful role in **aligning projects with organisational strategy**.
B.4	There is a **clear link between project outcomes and business performance** in my organisation.
B.5	The PMO contributes to **measurable value creation**, not just reporting and compliance.
Section C: Systemic Alignment and Gaps [Likert Questions]	
C.1	My organisation has a **consistent, enterprise-wide project delivery framework**.
C.2	Project selection and prioritisation are **systematically aligned with strategic objectives**.
C.3	There is **coordination between project teams and corporate functions** (finance, operations, strategy).
C.4	My organisation's PMO **actively promotes** project management maturity through training and coaching.
C.5	Lessons learned from past projects are **effectively fed back into future projects and decision-making**.
C.6	My organisation adequately balances **technical delivery (processes & procedures, tools & techniques) and human factors (culture, adoption, competencies, teamwork, governance, organisational reporting)**.
Section D: PMO Structure and Functional Coverage [Likert Questions]	
D.1	My organisation's PMO operates effectively across **strategic, tactical, and operational levels**; measures progress status, operational improvements (faster production), and business performance (ROI, ROCE)
D.2	Responsibilities for **strategy execution, benefits realisation, and project delivery** are clearly integrated.
Section E: Receptiveness to a Systems-Based PMO Model (To-Be) [Likert Questions]	
E.1	A PMO model that explicitly links **project delivery to operational improvements and business performance** would add value to my organisation.
E.2	Integrating **governance, processes, competencies, and tools** into a unified delivery platform would improve project outcomes, operational results, and business performance.
E.3	My organisation would definitely benefit from adopting a **holistic, systems-based PMO model** rather than maintaining the current fragmented and/or incomplete PMO mandate and functions.
Section F: Closing Remarks (Optional)	
F.1	Do you have **any additional remarks or any questions** you wish were asked in this industry survey?

Table 3 – PMO Industry Survey Questions

Annexure (B)

THE HOLISTIC PMO MODEL ASSESSMENT TOOL — THE STODI

An effective project management assessment tool must transcend simple checklists. It must function as a robust measurement mechanism that provides actionable insights to improve performance, align with strategic goals, and enhance delivery productivity. To prove truly effective, such a tool must exhibit **validity** (measuring what it intends to measure) and **reliability** (consistency of results), while remaining user-friendly and providing high-quality feedback. The Holistic PMO needs such a tool.

The **STODI** instrument provides a practical framework for the systematic evaluation of PMO maturity. It identifies critical systemic gaps across strategic, tactical, and operational layers, directly supporting targeted organisational improvement. By translating the conceptual architecture into assessable criteria, the STODI ensures that assessment outcomes are both diagnostically meaningful and directly actionable—firmly positioning the PMO as an integrated system for strategy execution. One ought to remember this Chinese proverb: "*To do good work, one must first have good tools*."

Structure of the Proposed Assessment Tool:

The assessment tool is divided into five domains, with each criterion scored on a scale from 1 to 5:

Domain (STODI)	Weight
1. [S] Strategic Alignment and Throughput	25%
2. [T] Tactical Delivery Architecture	25%
3. [O] Operational Delivery Performance	20%
4. [D] Delivery Platform Adequacy	20%
5. [I] System Integration and Value Flow	10%
TOTAL	**100%**

PMO Criterion Scoring Scale	
Score	**Meaning**
1	Non-existent
2	Weak / ad hoc
3	Defined but inconsistent
4	Strong and consistent
5	Optimised / systemic

Why This Tool Works — Alignment to This Paper:

When the PMO operates primarily at the operational and tactical levels, with limited integration into strategic planning and benefits realisation, a disconnect emerges between project delivery and business performance, undermining strategy execution. This practical tool is designed to diagnose and address this imbalance by ensuring comprehensive coverage across all three system layers. The STODI "weighted" domain (above) is faithful to the proposed Holistic PMO Model in that it:

- reflects the three distinct PMO layers
- enforces the value-adding causal chain logic
- embeds the delivery platform (four components)
- captures the technical versus human duality (α vs β)
- distinguishes outputs, outcomes, and business performance

The ensuing sections expound on the elements of the Holistic PMO Model's proposed "Assessment Tool", duly encompassing the three layers (strategic, tactical, operational) and the delivery platform.

The text in blue refers to an example of a STODI assessment conducted for a particular company ...

(1) STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND THROUGHPUT (25%)

Core Question: Does the installed PMO meaningfully connect projects to business performance?

#	Criterion		Weight
S1	Clear linkage between projects and business performance (ROI, ROCE)	1	5%
S2	Formal strategic translation (strategy → initiatives → projects)	2	5%
S3	Portfolio selection and prioritisation are systematic and value-driven	2	5%
S4	PMO influences capital allocation decisions	3	5%
S5	Tracking of realised benefits at the enterprise level	2	5%

Interpretation:

1.1 **< 10%** → PMO is not strategic
1.2 **10% –20%** → Emerging strategic role
1.3 **> 20%** → Strong strategic PMO

Score = 10%; therefore, the assessment is:
PMO plays an emerging strategic role ...

(2) TACTICAL DELIVERY ARCHITECTURE (25%)

Core Question: Does the organisation have a coherent delivery system to realise all investments?

#	Criterion		Weight
T1	Existence of integrated delivery architecture (governance + structure)	2	5%
T2	Clear project governance framework across the organisation	4	5%
T3	Benefits realisation (improvements in operations) is actively managed	3	5%
T4	Methods, manpower, machinery, materials, milieu, and measurement, or the (6-Ms) are defined and aligned across the organisation	3	5%
T5	Change enablement strategy (adoption, stakeholder mobilisation)	5	5%

Interpretation:

2.1 < 15%, weak: **good projects, poor outcomes**
2.2 > 15%, strong: **projects improve operations**

Score = 17%; therefore, the assessment is:
Projects actually improve operations ...

(3) OPERATIONAL DELIVERY PERFORMANCE (20%)

Core Question: Are projects (and any similar) initiatives delivered effectively and transparently?

#	Criterion		Weight
O1	Robust monitoring and control (EVM, milestones, variance)	4	5%
O2	Performance is measured across scope, cost, schedule, quality, and risk	5	5%
O3	Reliable reporting (dashboards, consistency, accuracy)	5	5%
O4	Adoption and usage tracking (not just delivery)	3	5%

Interpretation:

3.1 < 12%, weak: **execution chaos prevails**
3.2 > 12%, strong: **delivery is mostly predictable**

Score = 17%; therefore, the assessment is:
Strong PMO; leads to predictable delivery …

(4) DELIVERY PLATFORM ADEQUACY (20%)

Core Question: Is the "womb that begets delivery" (delivery/realisation system) fully functional?

D.1 Reporting and Responsibilities (5%)

#	Criterion		Weight
D.1.1	There are clear governance structures in place	3	1.5%
D.1.2	Roles are defined, and decision rights escalation paths are established	4	1.5%
D.1.3	Corporate functions are integrated with their project counterparts	2	2.0%

D.2 Processes and Procedures (5%)

#	Criterion		Weight
D.2.1	A standard lifecycle methodology is in place and applied in projects	4	1.5%
D.2.2	Feedback loops (lessons learned, operation input) are fully implemented	1	1.5%
D.2.3	Processes are integrated, smart, but simple, and applied across projects	3	2.0%

D.3 Competencies and Culture (5%)

#	Criterion		Weight
D.3.1	Most project personnel hold adequate, relevant skills and experience	3	1.5%
D.3.2	There is an effective vehicle for continuous capacity building in projects	2	1.5%
D.3.3	The prevailing culture/attitude supports delivery, not compliance only	4	2.0%

D.4 Techniques and Tools (5%)

#	Criterion		Weight
D.4.1	There are appropriate PM tools (PMIS, BIM, etc.) implemented	3	1.5%
D.4.2	Data integration is effectively applied across levels (corporate, project)	1	1.5%
D.4.3	The concept of "*single version of truth*" is appreciated and implemented	2	2.0%

Interpretation:

4.1 < 15%, weak: **risk of structural failure**
4.2 > 15%, strong: **repeatable delivery capability**

Score = 10.7%; therefore, the assessment is:
Weak PMO, with a structural failure risk …
(PMO is seen as "weak" due to failure risk)

(5) SYSTEM INTEGRATION AND VALUE FLOW (10%)

Core Question: Does the PMO operate as an organisational system, or as silos or a set of functions?

#	Criterion		Weight
I1	There is a clear causal chain: projects → operations → performance	1	3%
I2	Metrics cascade (project → KPI → OKR) in a consolidated manner	2	3%
I3	There is a strong interaction across strategic, tactical and operational levels	1	2%
I4	There is a balance between technical (α) and human (β) factors at PMO	2	2%

Interpretation:

5.1 < 6%, weak: **not integrated, and value leakage** Score = 03%; therefore, the assessment is:
5.2 > 6%, strong: **optimised, and value delivered** *Siloed PMO; successful projects, no value …*

Scoring Model:

Step 1: **Score each criterion (C_i) item** → C_i = *1 to 5*
Step 2: **Multiply (C_i) by weight (W_i)** → $S_i = (C_1 \times W_1 + C_2 \times W_2 + \cdots + C_n \times W_n)/5$
Step 3: **Sum the total score (T) out of 100%** → $T = \sum_1^5 S_i$ In this example, Score = 57.70%

Per the tables below, "Fragmented PMO; it has partial capability, but with value leakage", where "Good intentions, but poor execution; value leakage; human factors okay … eventual PM maturity".

Final PMO Suitability Rating:

Score	Rating	Meaning
80–100%	Holistic PMO (Optimised System)	PMO is fully aligned with the holistic model
60–79%	Integrated PMO (Maturing)	PMO is strong, but has gaps
40–59%	**Fragmented PMO**	PMO has partial capability, value leakage
<40%	**Administrative PMO**	PMO with reporting function only

This tool reinforces the most important idea: **No PMO is suitable if it performs well only at one level**.

Typical failure patterns:

Pattern	PMO Diagnosis
Strong operational, weak strategic	"Efficiently delivering the wrong projects"
Strong strategic, weak operational	"Good intentions, poor execution"
Strong technical, weak human	"Adoption failure, lack of maturity"
Strong silos, weak integration	"Value destruction despite capability"

This tool is a practical instrument; it significantly increases this paper's practical impact, positions it as actionable (not just conceptual), and makes it highly attractive to PMO leaders and executives.

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Pascal has over 25 years of professional experience in large and complex infrastructure projects, having served as a design engineer, project/programme manager, consultant, and executive. A seasoned practitioner and a recognised thought leader for his many contributions to the body of knowledge, he is also a former national chairman of Project Management South Africa (PMSA)—the largest professional project management association in Southern Africa.

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