

The Signal Gap: Why Initiative Drift Goes Undetected and What It Costs Organizations ¹

Findings from Primary Research Across Twenty Organizations in Eight Countries, Set Against Three Decades of Documented Project Management Office (PMO) and Strategy Execution Failure

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Abstract

This study examines why initiative drift goes undetected in complex organizations despite significant investment in project management and analytics tools. Twenty senior leaders were interviewed across three structured research cycles, representing organizations in eight countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, India, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Norway. Participants held roles including Project Management Office (PMO) Director, Chief of Staff, Portfolio Leader, Chief Strategy Officer, and Vice President of Operations across healthcare, financial services, technology, pharmaceutical, infrastructure, and energy sectors.

Using a qualitative research design informed by thematic analysis, the study identifies four consistent findings: a significant reporting burden consuming 20 to 60 hours per cycle; a structural signal gap between when initiative drift begins and when leadership can act; a cross-functional alignment deficit; and a normalization pattern in which leaders absorb the burden over time and cease to experience it as a solvable problem.

The central hypothesis of this study is that initiative drift goes undetected not because organizations lack data, but because initiative signals are fragmented across teams, systems, and functional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are not explicitly connected to the original assumptions and intended outcomes of the initiative. This condition, termed the Signal Gap, requires leaders to repeatedly validate and reinterpret information from multiple sources before determining whether an initiative remains on

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course. The result is delayed intervention, increased reporting burden, and a reduced organizational ability to act on early indicators of drift.

These findings are consistent across all eight countries represented. The study contributes a structural explanation for a problem that has been documented in the project management literature since 1994 and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: initiative drift, PMO, strategic leadership, reporting burden, cross-functional alignment, initiative operational intelligence, portfolio management, signal detection, normalization pattern

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Problem This Research Addresses

A Chief of Staff at a global content Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) organization described the condition directly during one of the interviews conducted for this study. She stated, "We always know something is wrong before the report says so. We just can't act on it yet." Senior leaders frequently know something is wrong before formal reporting catches up. Many cannot act, and many will not say so openly. The reasons vary by organization and by leader style. The pattern is structural.

That statement is the most precise description of the signal gap identified across twenty interviews and three research cycles. The data exists. The people closest to the work know what is happening. But the formal system has not confirmed it yet, so leadership cannot act. In the weeks between when drift begins and when the report finally catches up, the cost of correction compounds daily. By the time drift is captured in a formal report, the actions required to resolve it are substantially more urgent and more expensive than they would have been at the moment leadership first received the signal.

This paper is about that window. Not the report. Not the problem after it surfaces. The window before, when early detection is still possible and the cost of intervention is still manageable. That window typically spans two to six weeks. For most organizations running complex, cross-functional initiatives, it is completely invisible.

This study terms the condition the Signal Gap. It is the period between when initiative drift begins and when leadership receives a formal signal that something has changed. Drift can take many forms. A KPI starts moving away from its assumption. A dependency slips. A team begins absorbing a problem rather than escalating it. In each case, the signal gap is not a failure of the people involved. It is a structural consequence of the mismatch

between the speed at which drift occurs and the speed at which formal reporting systems catch up to it.

This research was conducted to understand that gap from the inside. The study examines how the gap manifests across different industries and geographies. It examines why the gap persists despite significant investment in project management and analytics tools. And it examines why leaders who live closest to the gap have, in many cases, stopped seeing it as a problem at all.

1.2 Research Hypothesis

This study proposes the following hypothesis:

Initiative drift goes undetected not because organizations lack data, but because initiative signals are fragmented across teams, systems, and functional KPIs that are not explicitly connected to the original assumptions and intended outcomes of the initiative. This structural condition, termed the Signal Gap, requires leaders to repeatedly validate and reinterpret information from multiple sources before determining whether an initiative remains aligned to its intended outcome. The result is delayed intervention, increased reporting burden, and a reduced organizational ability to act on early indicators of drift.

Three themes were anticipated based on preliminary practitioner interviews: reporting burden, signal detection latency, and cross-functional alignment deficit. A fourth theme, the normalization pattern, emerged inductively from the data and was not anticipated at the outset of the study. The emergence of this fourth finding is addressed in Section 4.4.

1.3 Why This Research Matters Now

The PMO function is no longer at risk. It is on life support. The men and women who control enterprise budgets are increasingly looking to pull the plug on PMO functions whose value cannot be demonstrated against the cost of running them. Practitioner publications including Prism PPM (2026), PMO365 (2026), CIO Magazine (2026), and Projects & Co. (2026) have converged on the same conclusion in 2026. The administrative PMO, built around reporting, governance, and compliance, is not transforming. It is being dismantled. What replaces it has not been precisely defined.

This research offers a specific answer. The most significant cost of the current model is not the hours spent on reporting. It is the lead time those hours steal from leadership. Every hour spent assembling last week's picture is an hour not spent catching this week's

drift. The reporting burden and the signal gap are the same problem expressed at different timescales. Solving for one requires solving for both.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

This study used qualitative research methodology supported by structured interview protocols, transcription tools, and thematic coding. The interview protocol is described in detail in Section 3.3. Findings are based on structured interviews and are intended to surface patterns and hypotheses rather than statistical generalizations. The sample of twenty participants is appropriate for qualitative research but is not a representative sample of the global PMO population. This research is practitioner-led, conducted as part of an Entrepreneurial MBA program at William Jewell College, and reflects the perspective of a researcher with direct professional experience inside the initiative management environments examined here. The following Literature Review situates this study within three decades of documented project management failure and the practitioner conversation that has been calling for structural change for at least the past fifteen years.

2.0 Literature Review

2.0.1 A Thirty-Two Year Crisis

The problem documented in this paper is not new. It has been continuously documented since 1994. The Standish Group's first CHAOS Report (1994) found that only 16.2 percent of software projects were delivered on time and on budget. A further 31.1 percent were cancelled before completion, and 52.7 percent ran 189 percent over their original cost estimates. For large organizations, the success rate was 9 percent. The 1994 report did not describe an emerging issue. It described a crisis that had been hidden for years by a lack of measurement.

Thirty years of subsequent research has done little to change those numbers. Standish Group data through 2020 continues to show approximately 31 percent project success, 50 percent challenged, and 19 percent failed. Deloitte (2010) found only 37 percent of projects delivered on time and on budget. Forrester (2011) reported a 70 percent failure rate of change management initiatives. McKinsey and the University of Oxford (2012), analyzing more than 5,400 information technology (IT) projects, established that large IT projects (those exceeding \$15 million) run on average 45 percent over budget, 7 percent over time, and deliver 56 percent less value than predicted. McKinsey further found that 17 percent of large IT projects perform so poorly that they threaten the very existence of

the company. McKinsey's 2020 update found that two out of three large technology programs regularly exceed initial budgets, miss schedule estimates, and underdeliver against business objectives.

The Project Management Institute's 2025 Pulse of the Profession found that only 36 percent of organizations fully realize the benefits intended from their projects, and only 34 percent deliver on time and within budget. Only 18 percent of project professionals demonstrate the business acumen required to align projects with strategic outcomes. Project Management Institute (PMI) further found that this gap contributes to a 27 percent higher failure rate in organizations where it exists.

These numbers have barely moved in thirty-two years. The conclusion that follows is structural, not behavioral. The interventions proposed for three decades, including more rigorous methodology, better tooling, and improved project management certification, have not closed the gap. What has been missing is an explanation for why a problem this well-documented has resisted thirty years of organized effort to solve it. The Project Management Office was created as the organizational answer to that crisis. Yet as the following section demonstrates, the PMO itself has struggled to survive, suggesting that the response the field chose has not resolved the underlying problem.

2.1 The Evolving PMO and the Fifteen-Year Call for Transformation

The PMO emerged as the organizational response to the project failure crisis documented by Standish and others. Early conceptions of the PMO as a governance and compliance function have given way to broader frameworks positioning the PMO as a strategic partner to executive leadership (Hobbs and Aubry, 2007; Müller et al., 2013). The distinction between administrative and strategic PMOs has become central to the field. This shift toward strategic positioning is not new. PMO leaders have been asking for it explicitly for at least the past ten to fifteen years. The current 2026 discussion is the long-overdue answer to a request the community has been making since the mid-2010s.

What the literature has not adequately resolved is whether the PMO will survive in any form. Hobbs and Aubry (2007) found that approximately half of all PMOs face legitimacy issues and are reconfigured every three to four years. Their research established that the average age of a PMO is only two years (Hobbs and Aubry, 2007). Aubry, Hobbs, Müller, and Blomquist (2010) extended this work and confirmed that PMOs are unstable structures, often reconfigured with significant frequency in response to internal organizational pressure. Forrester research has consistently found that 50 to 75 percent of PMOs close within their first three years of operation. A 2021 Australian survey found

that one in five organizations had discontinued their PMO in the past two years because it became ineffective or a drain on resources.

Practitioner literature has sharpened this conversation in 2026. Prism PPM (2026) argues that PMOs focused on delivery mechanics are at existential risk as artificial intelligence automates routine workflows. PMO365 (2026) is direct in its framing. Administrative PMOs are under threat. Strategic PMOs are not. That framing is correct but incomplete. Strategic PMOs survive the immediate threat, but survival is the floor, not the ceiling. They will still have to fight for credibility at the leadership table, and there is no guarantee of an equal voice in strategic decisions even after the transformation is complete. The work of the PMO function itself remains contested.

PMI's 2025 Pulse of the Profession finding that only 18 percent of project professionals demonstrate high business acumen has significant implications for individual practitioners. Project and program managers who intend to extend their careers must develop and demonstrate business acumen. They will not be rewarded for executing traditional PM methodology in the way the profession rewarded it for the previous twenty years. This shift is not theoretical. It is happening now in the budgeting decisions of enterprises around the world.

2.2 Strategy Execution and the Visibility Problem

Research on strategy execution consistently identifies the gap between strategy formulation and execution as a primary source of organizational underperformance. Research cited by Kaplan and Norton (2008) estimates that 67 percent of well-formulated strategies fail due to poor execution, a figure originating from Renaissance Solutions survey data (1996) and widely cited in the strategy execution literature. More recent research connects this directly to visibility deficits. Leadership cannot track initiative health in real time against the assumptions that justified the initiative at approval. The causes are multiple and reinforcing. They include insufficient leadership time, inadequate or misaligned tooling, unclear decision rights and accountability, and the absence of structured decision intelligence at the point where leaders are being asked to make calls.

Spider Strategies (2026) describes the pattern. Leaders invest months building roadmaps, then visibility disappears. Progress is reported in quarterly decks assembled from data already weeks old. Problems surface through informal conversations rather than structured signals. The structural answer is an early drift warning system or tripwire mechanism that operates continuously rather than at fixed reporting intervals. Without one, by the time the gap between strategy and reality becomes undeniable, the cost of correction has multiplied.

Broadcom (2026) confirms the same pattern with current 2026 enterprise data. Only 44 percent of companies believe their Strategic Portfolio Management processes are effective, despite 95 percent agreeing that Strategic Portfolio Management (SPM) is critical to the success of their organizations. The Tempo 2026 State of SPM report, surveying 667 planning and PMO leaders across 43 countries, found a 77 percentage point visibility gap between organizations with mature strategic portfolio practices and those without. Zero of the lowest-maturity organizations report complete visibility across their portfolios. More than four in ten have limited or no visibility at all.

What the literature does not adequately explain is why this persists in organizations that have already invested in project management software, business intelligence platforms, and analytics tools. This research addresses that question directly.

The term 'visibility' as used by practitioners in this context warrants precise qualification. Participants in this study did not describe an absence of data. All twenty organizations represented used at least one project management or reporting platform. What participants consistently described was not a visibility deficit but a shared understanding deficit: a condition in which data exists across systems but no common interpretive framework connects it to the original initiative intent, assumptions, or intended outcomes. Two leaders can look at the same dashboard and reach different conclusions about whether an initiative is on track, because their respective KPIs were never explicitly bound to the shared outcome the initiative was funded to achieve. This study proposes that it is this shared understanding deficit, not the absence of data, which sustains the Signal Gap. The emergence of artificial intelligence as an organizational tool has reopened this question: whether technology can now provide the interpretive infrastructure that human-assembled reporting has failed to deliver.

2.3 The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in PMO Transformation

AI has reopened questions about the division of labor between human judgment and automated systems. A CIO Magazine contributor (2026) described the shift that came when AI entered their PMO. Instead of reacting to slipped milestones, their discussions began focusing on what the data was signaling early. The move, they argue, is from reporting on the past to detecting signals in the present.

Analytics8 (2026) offers an important caution. AI accelerates confusion as well as insight when foundational data governance is weak. Without standardized KPIs and shared calculation logic, AI amplifies whatever logic already exists. For organizations that have not yet aligned cross-functional data into a shared view of initiative health, AI deployment amplifies fragmentation rather than resolving it. This is the structural reason why

operational AI without an initiative intelligence layer underneath it has produced disappointing results in enterprise deployments through 2025 and 2026.

The Project Management Institute's publication of its first Standard for Artificial Intelligence in Portfolio, Program, and Project Management (PMI, 2026) represents the most significant governance development in the field since the Pulse of the Profession series began. The standard explicitly identifies data quality, continuous risk monitoring, and the governance of AI-generated interpretations as foundational concerns for portfolio and program leaders. Critically, the standard introduces the category of Agentic AI, systems capable of executing multi-step tasks, making limited autonomous decisions, and surfacing signals continuously, and recommends that human accountability be maintained regardless of the level of AI autonomy. This governance framing is directly consistent with the signal gap documented in this study. The standard's emphasis on the gap between AI-generated outputs and human-validated understanding mirrors the structural condition participants described across all eight countries represented in this research: that data exists, signals are present, but the interpretive and governance infrastructure to act on them early is absent. The PMI (2026) standard does not resolve this gap. It names it as the central governance challenge of AI-enabled portfolio and program management.

2.4 Gap in the Literature

The literature addresses PMO transformation, strategy execution failure rates, and the potential of AI to augment portfolio intelligence. What it does not adequately address is the normalization phenomenon. This is the process by which leaders who have absorbed the reporting burden longest come to experience that burden as a normal feature of their role rather than a structural problem to be solved. A review of the PMO literature, including Hobbs and Aubry (2007), Müller et al. (2013), and PMI's Pulse of the Profession series (2025), found no study examining the normalization of reporting burden as a distinct phenomenon. This paper contributes primary research evidence on that phenomenon and its implications.

2.5 Global Market Context

The findings reported in this paper are confirmed by 2026 enterprise data and statements from senior leaders across three major regional markets. The pattern is consistent across the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, and Korea and Asia. The language varies. The structural diagnosis does not.

2.5.1 United States

Beyond the academic literature already cited, current 2026 US enterprise data confirms the operational picture. Broadcom's 2026 study established that only 44 percent of US companies consider their Strategic Portfolio Management processes effective. PMI's 2025 findings continue to indicate that only 18 percent of project professionals demonstrate the strategic business acumen the field now requires. Forrester research continues to show 50 to 75 percent PMO closure within three years. The nine US-based participants in this primary research confirmed the reporting burden, the signal gap, and the alignment deficit directly. The US market is in the most mature stage of practitioner-led recognition that the administrative PMO model is collapsing under the weight of its own reporting overhead.

2.5.2 United Kingdom and Europe

The European framing of this problem is more governance-focused and more financially explicit than the US framing. European practitioner literature in 2025 and 2026 increasingly describes a structural imbalance where greater portfolio scale is not accompanied by increased execution maturity. The Tempo 2026 State of SPM report, conducted across 43 countries, established a 77 percentage point visibility gap between mature and immature portfolio practices. A representative European manufacturing case illustrates the pattern. The executive team of a mid-turnaround European manufacturer reviewed a portfolio of forty initiatives, all marked green in the reporting, while Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortisation (EBITDA) was declining. The dashboard reported aligned execution. The financial reality reported otherwise. Portfolio credibility dies when finance has one number, the PMO has another, and delivery leaders explain the difference in side meetings.

Participant F in this research, a Portfolio Leader at a UK telecommunications infrastructure organization managing a 35-initiative portfolio across Tableau, PowerPoint, and Excel, confirmed the same structural pattern from inside one of the United Kingdom's most strategically important digital infrastructure programs.

2.5.3 Korea and Asia

The Korean and broader Asian framing of this problem in 2026 is the most explicit of any global market and is being articulated at the level of national policy. Korea's Minister of Science and ICT, Bae Kyung-hoon, stated publicly at a 2026 press conference, "Up to now, we focused on securing resources and rebuilding foundations. From next year, execution and results must follow." South Korea is investing approximately 525 million

US dollars (700 billion KRW) in 2026 to accelerate manufacturing AI transformation through a public-private alliance of 1,300 organizations including Samsung, LG, SK, and Hyundai. The Korean government has described the effort as a national survival issue. The Minister of SMEs and Startups instructed 15 public institutions directly that policy implementation delay diminishes effectiveness and that prompt execution must follow.

LG Chairman Koo Kwang-mo flew to Silicon Valley in early 2026 to meet with Palantir CEO Alex Karp and examine the Palantir Ontology platform. The publicly reported interest was specifically in strengthening LG's execution capabilities in AI-driven operations through a unified data structure that enables real-time simulation and operational insights. KoreaTechDesk (2026) reported that Korea combines strong execution capability with complex governance structures and structured delivery models that slow experimentation, with the tension becoming most visible as organizations move from pilot to full-scale deployment. Independent industry research has established that 72 percent of AI investments globally are destroying value rather than creating it, driven by tool sprawl, invisible spending, and unmanaged AI deployment outside formal governance.

The normalization pattern documented across this research found its most developed expression not in Korea's high-urgency execution environment but in the adjacent context of mature infrastructure delivery, confirming that the pattern is a function of professional tenure rather than national context.

Participant G, a Project Director running large-scale energy infrastructure programs in Australia, confirmed the operational reality in the Asia-Pacific region. The normalization pattern documented in this research reached its most developed expression in this interview.

2.5.4 Synthesis

The signal gap is not a US problem. It is not a European problem. It is not an Asian problem. It is a structural condition of running complex, cross-functional initiatives in any market where data is fragmented and reporting cycles cannot keep pace with execution. Three continents. Three different languages of complaint. One underlying problem. The methodology described in the following section was designed to surface that underlying problem from inside the lived experience of senior leaders carrying it.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design built around structured interviews. The guiding research question, a why and how inquiry into a contemporary organizational phenomenon, was framed in accordance with case study research principles (Yin, 2014): why does initiative drift go undetected in organizations that have invested in project management and analytics tools, and what does this cost leadership teams?

Qualitative methodology was selected because the research objective required depth of lived experience rather than statistical frequency (Creswell, 2013). The objective was to understand the lived experience of leaders inside this problem, not to measure its frequency across a large population. The depth of insight required to answer this question is more accessible through extended conversation than through survey instruments.

3.2 Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across organizational roles, industries, and geographies. The target profile was senior leaders with direct responsibility for initiative reporting, portfolio visibility, or cross-functional initiative coordination. Participants were recruited through LinkedIn outreach and professional referrals. Twenty participants completed full interviews across three research cycles.

Roles represented included PMO Director, Chief of Staff, Portfolio Leader, Director of Consumer Experience, Chief Strategy Officer, VP Strategy, Director of Project Management, Implementation Lead, Portfolio Manager, and Project Director. Organizations ranged from a 255-employee community bank to a 150,000-employee healthcare system. Industries represented included community banking, healthcare, technology, pharmaceutical, advertising, telecom infrastructure, energy, food and beverage, and content management. Geographies included the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Norway. A reference table identifying each participant cited in this paper by anonymous code is provided in Appendix A.

3.3 Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was built on customer discovery principles drawn from The Mom Test (Fitzpatrick, 2013). No leading questions. No hypothetical framing. No product

pitching. The primary opening question in every interview was, "Walk me through your week before an executive review. What does that actually look like?"

That question was deliberate. It invites people to describe what they actually do, not what they believe they should do, not whether they think a problem exists, not their response to a proposed solution. Follow-up questions explored the frequency and intensity of reporting-related activities, the tools and systems in use, and how participants discovered initiative problems. No product or solution was described until after the primary discovery questions had been fully explored. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed using Otter.ai and Fathom for thematic analysis.

3.4 Research Cycles and Value Proposition Testing

An iterative three-cycle design was selected to allow themes to be refined progressively across participant cohorts rather than confirmed in a single pass (Creswell, 2013). Value proposition testing was incorporated in Cycles 2 and 3 to assess whether participants' expressed pain translated to perceived need for an intervention, following practitioner research design principles (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Research ran in three cycles. Cycle 1 included ten participants and served primarily as a discovery and participant profile refinement phase. Cycle 2 included six participants and introduced structured value proposition testing alongside the discovery interview. Three concepts were tested comparatively. Proposal A was Strategic and Decision Intelligence. Proposal B was Financial Performance Discipline. Proposal C was Executive Reporting Automation. Participants scored each proposal's features independently. Cycle 3 included four participants plus one additional participant added to validate insights from prior cycles.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed the inductive six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually by the author across all three research cycles through repeated review of interview notes and transcripts. Themes were assessed for consistency across participant role, industry, and geography. The analytical distinction between participants who expressed buyer intent and those who did not was identified during the coding process and treated as a structurally significant finding, producing the normalization pattern described in Section 4.4.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the research purpose and consented to participation. No personally identifiable information is disclosed in this paper. Participants are referenced by anonymous code only. Verbatim quotes have been lightly paraphrased where necessary to protect participant privacy while preserving the substantive meaning of the statement. A reference table identifying participants by role, industry, organizational scale, and country is provided in Appendix A.

4.0 Research Findings

4.1 Overview

The four findings presented in this section represent the observable consequences of the central hypothesis: that initiative signals fragmented across systems and unbound from original assumptions require continuous human revalidation, creating compounding costs at every level of the organization. Each finding documents a distinct manifestation of that structural condition.

Four primary findings emerged from this research. Three reflect pain points confirmed consistently across participants regardless of role, industry, or geography. The fourth is the normalization pattern. It emerged from analysis of participants who confirmed the pain but had absorbed it so completely that it no longer registered as a problem worth solving. All four findings have implications for how organizations approach the initiative drift problem and how the PMO and strategy leadership functions are designed and supported.

4.2 Finding 1. The Reporting Tax

Pattern

Senior leaders spend 20 to 60 or more hours per reporting cycle on activities that are not formally part of their job description. They collect data from multiple sources. They chase team leads for status updates. They reconcile discrepancies between systems. They rebuild a narrative from scratch so that leadership above them can see a coherent picture of initiative health. Fifteen of twenty participants confirmed this before seeing any proposed solution.

Evidence

The numbers were striking across every interview. Participant B, a Portfolio PMO Director at a US technology company, was spending 50 percent of her working week on reporting. Not on the work. On reporting about the work. Participant C, a Director of Consumer Experience at a 132,000-employee US healthcare system, was spending 8 to 12 hours per week reworking low-quality status updates from his teams into something leadership could actually use. He required a four-day meeting cadence just to produce one coherent picture for Monday. Participant E, an Implementation Lead at a community bank, spent 5 or more hours per week manually reconciling information across 13 separate vendor systems. Each system reported to different stakeholders who wanted different formats, and none of those systems communicated with each other. Participant F, a Portfolio Leader at a UK telecom infrastructure company, spent 3 to 8 hours per week on reporting across a portfolio of 35 or more simultaneous initiatives.

Significance

Of particular analytical significance, participants described this burden without affect. Nobody described it as unusual. Nobody said this is too much. They just described it. The way you describe traffic or weather. The hours consumed represent a direct opportunity cost. Time spent assembling last week's picture is time not spent catching this week's drift. The normalization of that trade-off is itself a significant finding, discussed in detail below.

4.3 Finding 2. The Signal Gap

Pattern

The data that would allow leadership to act on initiative drift early already exists inside the organization. But by the time it is assembled, validated, and packaged into a report, the window to respond cheaply has already closed. Leaders described knowing something was wrong before the formal system confirmed it. But they were unable to act because the signal had not yet been translated into a reportable, defensible finding.

Evidence

Participant A, a Chief of Staff at a global content SaaS organization, described it directly. We always know something is wrong before the report says so. We just cannot act on it yet. She estimated that by the time the signal could be formalized into a report, six weeks had typically passed. Six weeks of compounding cost, during which the organization's options were narrowing and nobody with authority could officially act.

Participant D, a VP Strategy at a US Marketing company, put it differently. By the time it showed up in a status report, the money was already gone.

Significance

The signal gap is not a failure of the people involved. It is a structural consequence of the mismatch between the speed at which initiative drift occurs and the speed at which formal reporting systems catch up to it. Existing tools, including Jira, Smartsheet, Power BI, and Microsoft Copilot, track activity and describe what has happened. None of them are designed to surface the gap between what was planned and what is happening in the period before that gap becomes reportable. That is the structural void the signal gap describes.

4.4 Finding 3. The Alignment Deficit

Pattern

Every team involved in a cross-functional initiative sees a different picture of that initiative's health. Risk has one number. Finance has another. Operations has a third. Leadership receives multiple versions of reality in the same meeting and must spend the first part of every review reconciling which version is correct before any action can be taken.

Evidence

Participant E, the Implementation Lead at a community bank, was managing 13 separate vendor systems. Each reported to different stakeholders with different requirements and no integration between them. Participant F, the Portfolio Leader at a telecom infrastructure company, described initiative data scattered across Tableau, PowerPoint, and Excel, with no unified view across a 35-initiative portfolio. Participant C, the Director of Consumer Experience at the healthcare system, had structured his entire week, Tuesday through Friday, around a single purpose. Producing one coherent picture for Monday's leadership review.

Significance

The alignment deficit is a direct cause of both the reporting tax and the signal gap. Because data lives in silos, it must be manually assembled before it can be evaluated. Because assembly is manual, it consumes the time that could otherwise be spent on analysis and early detection. This is not a tooling problem. Organizations represented in this research had invested significantly in project management and analytics tools. It is

an integration problem. No tool in the typical organizational stack is designed to aggregate cross-functional initiative data into a single, current view for leadership.

4.5 Finding 4. The Normalization Pattern

Pattern

The most important finding in this research was not anticipated at the outset. Participants who had absorbed the reporting burden longest, and who had built sophisticated manual systems to manage it over years of iteration, were least likely to identify it as a problem requiring intervention. They had normalized the burden to the point where it had become part of their professional identity. The measure of competence was not whether the burden existed, but how effectively they managed it.

Evidence

Participant G, a Project Director running large-scale energy infrastructure programs in Australia, had built a mature Excel-based reporting system over years of practice. When asked to describe his reporting week, he did so with evident pride. When asked whether the current approach created any pain, he said the data came together quite well. He confirmed the existence of monthly and weekly reporting requirements, re-validation activities, and cross-schedule reconciliation. These are activities that would register as significant burden in any other context. But he experienced them as simply part of the job.

He was not a buyer for a solution to a problem he did not feel. That is precisely what made this interview analytically valuable.

Significance

The normalization pattern has important implications for how this problem is understood and addressed. It suggests that the initiative drift problem is not self-evidently visible to the people who live closest to it. Interventions aimed at reducing the reporting burden must address both the structural gap and the cultural assumption that the burden is simply the cost of operating at a senior level.

The contrast between participants who felt the pain acutely and those who had normalized it is not primarily explained by role, industry, or geography. It appears to be a function of how long the individual has been inside the system, and how much professional investment they have made in building workarounds that make it manageable. The workaround system becomes the operative definition of competence. As a result, the underlying gap becomes imperceptible to the practitioner most positioned to address it.

Viewed against the historical context established in Section 2, this finding takes on additional weight. The leaders who have most fully normalized the reporting burden are not less capable than those who have not. They are typically more experienced. They have spent ten, fifteen, or twenty years inside an environment where the structural problem documented in this paper has been continuously known and continuously unresolved. Every signal in their professional environment has reinforced the conclusion that the system is not going to change. The only rational response to that signal is to internalize the workaround as competence and to make peace with the burden as a feature of the role. The normalization pattern is not a personal failing. It is the predictable psychological adaptation of skilled professionals to a structural problem that has resisted three decades of organized effort to solve it.

4.6 Value Proposition Testing Results

Each feature was evaluated by participants using a five-point resonance scale ranging from -2 (strong rejection) to +2 (strong resonance), with 0 indicating neutrality. Composite scores represent the aggregate of all participant scores for each feature across the relevant research cycles.

Three value proposition concepts were tested across Cycle 2 and 3 participants. Participants scored specific features independently before any product framing was introduced. The results were clear.

Table 1. Value proposition composite scores across Cycle 2 and 3 participants (five-point resonance scale, -2 to +2; n = 10 participants)

Proposal C, Executive Reporting Automation: 178 composite points. Clear winner across every research cycle.

Proposal A, Strategic and Decision Intelligence: 89 composite points.

Proposal B, Financial Performance Discipline: 19 composite points.

The margin between Proposal C and Proposals A and B is not marginal. It directly reflects the four findings: participants experience initiative management as a reporting and timing problem first, not a strategy or financial intelligence problem. Visibility and timing, not ownership or financial governance, are the acute pain points.

Within Proposal C, the highest-scoring features were reduced reporting preparation time at 21 points, executive-ready automated summaries at 19 points, more time spent

improving rather than defending at 18 points, and faster stakeholder alignment at 17 points.

The lowest-scoring feature was clear ownership and follow-through, at 3 points. This result was inconsistent with the initial hypothesis, which held that accountability and ownership clarity would be a primary pain point. The data indicated otherwise. Participants do not primarily experience the initiative management challenge as an ownership problem. They experience it as a visibility and timing problem. The question is not who owns the outcome. It is whether leadership has the information to act on it before the cost of acting has already compounded.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Why the Signal Gap Persists

The signal gap persists for structural reasons, not behavioral ones. Leaders and their teams are not managing initiatives poorly. They are working within a system that was designed for a different information environment. That earlier environment had a slower pace of project execution, a smaller number of simultaneous initiatives, and fewer data sources contributing to the organizational picture.

Three structural conditions sustain the signal gap today. First is data fragmentation. Initiative health data lives across multiple systems that do not communicate with each other, requiring manual assembly before analysis is possible. Second is reporting cycle latency. Formal reporting cycles are typically weekly or bi-weekly, which means that drift beginning mid-week may not be formally visible for ten days or more. Third is normalization. Leaders who have built effective manual systems to manage the assembly process experience that process as competence rather than burden, and have reduced urgency for structural change as a result.

5.2 The Cross-Geographic Consistency of the Pattern

One of the most significant aspects of this research is the geographic consistency of what was found. Participants in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Norway described functionally identical experiences. The reporting burden, the signal gap, and the alignment deficit appeared across all eight countries. The normalization pattern appeared consistently as well, though its severity varied with the maturity of the manual systems participants had built.

This consistency matters. The initiative drift problem is not a product of any particular organizational culture, regulatory environment, or technology infrastructure. It is a structural consequence of running complex, cross-functional initiatives in an information environment where data is fragmented and reporting cycles are slow relative to the pace of execution.

5.3 Implications for the PMO Transformation Conversation

The literature on PMO transformation consistently identifies the shift from administrative to strategic function as the imperative for the profession. This research supports that framing but adds a specific mechanism. The shift requires not just a change in mindset or role definition, but a change in the information infrastructure that supports the PMO function. Strategic PMOs need the signal before the report. They need the ability to act in the window between when drift begins and when it becomes formally reportable.

That is not achievable through better reporting templates or more frequent status meetings. It requires an infrastructure layer that aggregates cross-functional data continuously, compares it against the assumptions and KPIs defined at initiative approval, and surfaces anomalies before they become crises. Based on participant accounts across this study, no organization represented had deployed such infrastructure, suggesting its absence warrants further investigation at scale. Its absence is the structural cause of the signal gap.

5.4 The Non-Buyer as Research Asset

Conventional customer discovery treats participants who do not express interest in a proposed solution as disqualified. They are treated as evidence that they are not the target market. The data indicated the opposite. Participants who had normalized the burden and did not feel it acutely were among the most valuable sources of insight. Their experiences illustrated the normalization pattern in ways that buyer interviews could not.

Participant G, the Project Director in Australia, was not a prospect. But his interview produced the clearest illustration of what the normalization pattern looks like at its most developed. A skilled, experienced professional who had invested years in building a system that made an unreasonable burden manageable. In the process, he had lost the ability to see the burden as unreasonable. That insight would not have been available if the research had been limited to participants who expressed felt pain.

6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This research set out to answer one question. Why does initiative drift go undetected in organizations that have invested in project management and analytics tools? The answer is structural. The tools organizations have invested in track activity and describe what has happened. None of them are designed to surface the gap between what was planned and what is happening in the period before that gap becomes formally reportable. That gap, typically two to six weeks, is where financial loss lives. It is where decisions get made too late. It is where the cost of correction compounds.

The reporting burden is not a symptom of poor process or insufficient tools. It is a consequence of data fragmentation combined with reporting cycle latency. And the normalization pattern, perhaps the most important finding here, suggests that the leaders best positioned to advocate for structural change are often the ones least likely to see the need for it. They have built their professional competence around absorbing the burden that structural change would eliminate. The burden has been absorbed so completely that it no longer registers as a condition requiring intervention. It has become the role itself.

This problem has been documented for thirty-two years. The PMO transformation conversation has been active for fifteen. What is finally available in 2026 is the technological capability to close the gap at the speed at which it opens. The maturity of operational artificial intelligence makes continuous initiative monitoring, KPI variance detection, and early drift surfacing technically achievable for the first time in the history of this field. The conditions for resolving a three-decade structural problem are now present.

And this reframes how the field should understand the practitioners who have been holding this burden. When a structural problem persists across an entire career, the people inside it are not failing the system. The system is failing them. The PMO Directors, Chiefs of Staff, Portfolio Leaders, and initiative leaders who have absorbed the reporting tax for decades have done so because the alternative was to let critical work fall apart. They built the workarounds because no one else would. They moved the hours into administrative codes because the system did not count them. They produced the Monday picture by Friday night because leadership needed it to make decisions. That work was always real. The cost to the people doing it was always real. What the field can now do, for the first time in thirty-two years, is build the infrastructure that makes the workaround unnecessary and the burden visible. That is what closing the signal gap actually means in human terms.

6.2 Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations follow directly from the four findings described above and are intended to address the structural causes of initiative drift identified in the research hypothesis. Each recommendation is conceptual in nature and will require validation in future empirical studies.

- Organizations should audit the actual hours consumed by initiative reporting at the portfolio and individual initiative level. These hours are systematically underestimated because they have been normalized. A realistic accounting of reporting overhead is a prerequisite for understanding the true cost of the signal gap.
- PMO leaders should distinguish between the intelligence infrastructure problem and the reporting process problem. Better processes for assembling reports do not close the signal gap. Only an infrastructure layer that aggregates cross-functional data continuously against defined KPIs and assumptions can surface the signal before the reporting cycle does.
- Organizations pursuing AI-enabled PMO transformation should address the data fragmentation problem before deploying AI analytics. As Analytics8 (2026) notes, AI amplifies the logic that already exists. Organizations with fragmented initiative data will amplify fragmentation through AI, not clarity.
- Leaders responsible for PMO transformation should take the normalization pattern seriously. Change management in this context requires not only presenting a better solution but helping experienced practitioners recognize that the burden they have normalized is not a feature of competence. It is a consequence of a structural gap. The workaround is not the job.
- Project and program managers planning to extend their careers must develop and demonstrate business acumen. The PMI 2025 finding that only 18 percent of project professionals do so today represents both a career risk for those who do not adapt and an opportunity for those who do.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

This research is exploratory and qualitative. It identifies patterns and generates hypotheses. Future research should test these findings at scale through quantitative studies measuring the relationship between reporting overhead, signal detection speed, and initiative outcomes. Longitudinal research examining what happens to initiative drift rates and reporting burden when early detection infrastructure is deployed would be particularly valuable. Cross-cultural research examining whether the normalization pattern varies systematically across national contexts could also meaningfully extend this work. The structural problem documented here has waited thirty-two years for a workable

solution. The research community now has both the data and the technological context to test, refine, and ultimately close it.

The Project Management Institute's 2026 Standard for Artificial Intelligence in Portfolio, Program, and Project Management specifically acknowledges the emergence of Agentic AI systems capable of continuous monitoring and early signal detection, a category of capability that directly addresses the signal gap documented here. Future research should examine whether deployment of such systems measurably reduces the reporting burden and signal detection latency documented across this study's twenty participants, and whether the normalization pattern attenuates in organizations where infrastructure of this kind has been operationally embedded.

Declarations

Declaration of Interest

The author is the founder of DaytaTech.ai, a company whose commercial work is directly relevant to the research presented in this paper. This relationship is disclosed in the interest of transparency so that readers may evaluate the findings accordingly. The research itself was conducted independently as part of the author's Entrepreneurial MBA program at William Jewell College. No commercial relationship with any research participant existed at the time of the interviews, and no participant was compensated for participation. A description of the author's commercial work is provided in the About the Author section.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author used AI-assisted tools during the structural organization and editing process of this manuscript, including transcription tools (Otter.ai, Fathom) for interview data capture. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the original work of the author. AI was used solely to assist with document structure, transcription, and language editing. The author takes full responsibility for the content and findings presented.

Informed Consent

All participants were informed of the research purpose and consented to participation. No personally identifiable information is disclosed in this paper. Participants are referenced by anonymous code, role, industry, and organizational context only. Verbatim quotes have been lightly paraphrased where necessary to protect participant privacy while preserving the substantive meaning of the statement.

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Appendix A. Participant Reference Table

The following anonymous reference table identifies each participant cited in this paper. Participants are referenced by code throughout the body of the paper. No personally identifiable information is disclosed. Each participant's role, industry, organizational scale, and country are provided to give context to the substantive content of their interview while preserving privacy.

Pattern Observed key: 1 = Reporting Tax (Finding 1) primarily confirmed; 2 = Signal Gap or Alignment Deficit (Findings 2 or 3) primarily confirmed; 3 = Normalization Pattern (Finding 4) primarily observed. Participants may have confirmed more than one pattern; the code represents the most analytically significant pattern for each participant's contribution to the study.

Code	Role	Industry	Org Size	Country	Pattern Observed
A	Chief of Staff	Technology Content SaaS	Growth-stage	United States	1
B	Portfolio PMO Director	Healthcare Technology	~650 employees	United States	1
C	Director, Consumer Experience	Healthcare System	132,000 employees	United States	2
D	VP of Strategy	Marketing	Large enterprise	United States	2
E	Implementation Lead	Community Banking	~255 employees	United States	2
F	Portfolio Leader	Telecom Infrastructure	National scale	United Kingdom	2
G	Project Director	Energy Infrastructure	Large-scale programs	Australia	3
H	Chief Strategy Officer	Financial Services Banking	Mid-market	United States	1
I	Portfolio PMO Director	Healthcare Technology	Enterprise	United States	1
J	Director of Project Management	Technology SaaS	Growth-stage	United States	1

K	Senior Director, PMO	Technology Hospitality SaaS	~650 employees	United States	1
L	IT Director	Technology	Mid-market	UAE	1
M	Portfolio Manager	Technology SaaS	Growth-stage	United States	1
N	Director of Project Management	Food and Beverage	Mid-market	Egypt	1
O	Senior Program Manager	Technology	Large enterprise	India	1
P	VP of Strategy	Pharmaceutical	Enterprise	United States	2
Q	Director of Project Management	Advertising	Large agency	United States	3
R	Implementation Lead	Financial Services Banking	~255 employees	United States	3
S	Chief of Staff	Technology Content SaaS	Global / Growth-stage	Norway	3
T	Project Director	Energy Infrastructure	State-owned enterprise	Australia	3

Additional participants beyond those cited in this paper contributed to the broader thematic analysis. Total participant count: twenty senior leaders across three research cycles, eight countries, and eight industries.

About the Author



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Caran Bradshaw is an Entrepreneurial MBA candidate at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, and the Founder and CEO of DaytaTech.ai. Her professional background spans project management, business analysis, and enterprise operations, including direct experience inside the initiative management environments examined in this research. This paper represents the applied research component of her MBA program and is built on three rounds of structured customer discovery interviews with senior leaders across eight countries. Her current commercial work, DaytaBrain, is an Initiative Operational Intelligence platform designed to address the structural signal gap described in this paper.

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