Towards Intelligent Project Management Offices: A Systematic Literature Review of AI-Driven Analytics and Digital Governance Frameworks in Multi-Site Infrastructure Delivery [1]

Zeeshan Ahmed

Abstract

Infrastructure project delivery continues to suffer from persistent cost overruns, schedule slippage, and governance failures globally, despite decades of research into their root causes. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), real-time data analytics, and digital programme controls presents a potentially transformative opportunity for Project Management Offices (PMOs) responsible for governing complex multi-site infrastructure programmes. This paper presents a systematic literature review of 62 studies published between 2015 and 2025, supplemented by emerging 2026 professional literature, examining the intersection of AI-driven analytics, digital PMO governance, and infrastructure project performance. Three primary themes are identified: the persistent and multi-causal nature of infrastructure underperformance; the promise and limitations of AI tools in project management contexts, including the important distinction between AI-enabled task automation and AI-augmented human judgment; and the critical absence of an integrated digital PMO governance framework applicable to multi-site environments. The paper proposes a conceptual Digital PMO Governance Framework (DPGF) as a vehicle for future empirical inquiry and makes an original contribution by systematically mapping the research gap at the convergence of these themes.

Keywords: *Project Management Office; PMO governance; artificial intelligence; automation; augmentation; infrastructure delivery; digital analytics; schedule performance; cost overrun; multi-site projects*

1. Introduction

Infrastructure project delivery remains one of the most challenging and consequential domains in professional project management. Across sectors including transportation, utilities, data centres, energy, and public works, large-scale infrastructure programmes are characterised by extended timescales, high capital investment, multiple concurrent

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workstreams, and complex stakeholder environments. Despite significant advances in project management methodology over the past three decades, performance data consistently reveals that infrastructure projects routinely fail to meet their original cost and schedule targets.

Research conducted by Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) established that infrastructure megaprojects suffer cost overruns at a rate that has remained largely unchanged over a 70-year period, a finding replicated in multiple global contexts. McKinsey Global Institute (2020) reported that large infrastructure projects typically exceed their budgets by an average of 80 percent, while PMI (2021) found that organisations waste an average of USD 97 million for every USD 1 billion invested due to poor project performance. In the context of the post-pandemic infrastructure investment surge, the consequences of these persistent failures are more significant than ever.

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and real-time digital analytics presents a potentially transformative opportunity for the project management profession. AI-assisted scheduling, predictive risk analytics, intelligent resource optimisation, and digital twin technologies are entering mainstream project delivery environments, offering the prospect of earlier variance detection, more accurate forecasting, and more responsive governance. The pace of this shift has accelerated markedly through 2026, with a growing professional literature arguing that AI is reshaping the operating model of the PMO itself rather than simply speeding up existing tasks (Alieva and Pirozzi, 2026; Nieto-Rodriguez, 2026). Yet the academic literature on how these tools integrate into PMO governance structures, particularly across complex multi-site environments, remains underdeveloped relative to the pace of technological adoption in practice.

This paper responds to that gap. It presents a systematic literature review of research published between 2015 and 2025, extended with key 2026 professional publications, examining the intersection of AI-driven analytics, digital PMO governance, and infrastructure project performance. The review pursues three objectives: (1) to map the existing evidence base on infrastructure project performance and its drivers; (2) to synthesise current knowledge on AI applications in project management and their governance implications; and (3) to identify underexplored research areas and propose a conceptual agenda for future empirical inquiry.

2. Background and Theoretical Context

2.1 The Persistent Infrastructure Performance Gap

The literature on infrastructure project performance is extensive and consistently alarming. Flyvbjerg (2014) analysed data from 2,062 infrastructure projects across 104 countries and found that cost overruns affected the majority of projects, with average overruns of approximately 28 percent for rail, 20 percent for roads, and 45 percent for large dams. These figures have remained broadly stable over decades, suggesting that the problem is systemic rather than the product of isolated managerial failure.

Love et al. (2015) identified rework, scope creep, and inadequate planning as primary drivers of cost growth in infrastructure programmes. Merrow (2011) analysed industrial megaprojects and found that fewer than 25 percent were completed within budget and schedule targets, and that governance failures at the programme level were the most significant discriminating factor between high and low performers. Within multi-site infrastructure environments specifically, challenges are compounded by the need to coordinate multiple concurrent workstreams, manage geographically dispersed teams, maintain consistent reporting standards, and ensure governance compliance across diverse contractual contexts.

2.2 The Evolving Role of the Project Management Office

The PMO has evolved considerably from its early conceptualisation as an administrative support function. Hobbs and Aubry (2007) conducted a landmark study of PMOs across 500 organisations and identified wide variation in mandates and functions, from basic project support to active portfolio governance, establishing that PMO maturity was strongly associated with organisational project performance outcomes. Wellingtone (2025) reported that 53 percent of PMOs now have a defined strategic remit, up from one-third in 2017, with growing expectations for real-time programme visibility, data-driven decision support, and cross-functional governance leadership. More recent professional analysis has gone further, arguing that in the AI era the PMO risks becoming “a lagging narrative of decisions already made elsewhere” unless it repositions itself from a reporting and control function toward an intelligence and advisory one (Alieva and Pirozzi, 2026).

Yet the tools and frameworks available to PMOs have not kept pace with these expectations. The majority of PMO reporting processes remain dependent on manually compiled data, periodic status updates, and retrospective variance analysis, all of which limit capacity for early intervention in deteriorating programme situations. This reporting lag systematically allows variances to compound before they are acted upon.

2.3 AI and Digital Technologies in Project Management

Research on AI applications in project management has grown substantially since 2018. Pan and Zhang (2021) reviewed AI applications in construction engineering and management, identifying four primary domains: cost estimation, schedule optimisation, risk assessment, and quality monitoring. Their review found machine learning models consistently outperformed traditional statistical approaches in predictive accuracy, but noted significant real-world implementation limitations including data quality requirements, model interpretability, and integration with existing project controls systems.

A fifth domain, less prominent in the earlier technical literature but central to more recent work, is stakeholder management. Alieva and Pirozzi (2026) argue that natural language processing applied to meeting transcripts, communications, and document trails allows PMOs to identify stakeholder interest clusters, detect shifts in sentiment, and tailor communication to different stakeholder groups at a scale not previously feasible. This is a material addition to the four technical domains identified by Pan and Zhang (2021), because stakeholder misalignment is itself a recurring cause of infrastructure underperformance, and it is examined further in Theme 2.

Liang et al. (2024) extended the analysis to digital twin technologies, finding that real-time integration of physical and digital project data enabled more accurate progress monitoring and earlier detection of schedule deviations. Armanios and Tucci (2025) explored organisational readiness for AI adoption, identifying a dialectical tension between technical AI capabilities and the governance structures required to deploy them effectively, highlighting that benefits are conditional on data quality, organisational maturity, and appropriate governance frameworks.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). A structured search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by targeted searches of the International Journal of Project Management, Journal of Construction Engineering and Management, Project Management Journal, and Automation in Construction. The search was conducted between January and June 2025, combining terms relating to three conceptual clusters: PMO governance and project performance; artificial intelligence and digital analytics; and infrastructure delivery and multi-site projects.

The core review applied a peer-reviewed inclusion criterion in order to ensure a consistent standard of methodological rigour and to make quality appraisal tractable across a large initial pool of records. This constraint is a recognised limitation, since it excludes professional and practitioner literature in which much current thinking on AI in the PMO is being developed, particularly outlets such as the PM World Journal. To address this, the review was subsequently extended to incorporate key 2026 professional publications on AI-augmented PMOs (Alieva and Pirozzi, 2026; Nieto-Rodriguez, 2026), which are treated as informing the discussion and framework development rather than as part of the systematically appraised evidence base. This two-tier approach preserves the rigour of the systematic core while ensuring the paper engages with the most current professional discourse.

Studies were included in the systematic core if published between 2015 and 2025, peer-reviewed, written in English, and addressing PMO governance, AI in project management, or infrastructure project performance. The initial search returned 1,847 records. After duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 184 full-text articles were assessed, yielding 62 studies meeting all criteria. Quality appraisal was conducted using a modified Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). Thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008) was employed to identify patterns across the evidence base.

4. Findings and Thematic Analysis

4.1 Theme 1: The Persistent and Multi-Causal Nature of Infrastructure Underperformance

Across the 62 included studies, a consistent pattern of infrastructure underperformance was documented. Baerenbold (2023) demonstrated that cost overruns and schedule delays generate significant economic losses and investor reluctance to fund future programmes. The most frequently cited causes included scope changes and design evolution (Love and Ahiaga-Dagbui, 2018; Shoar et al., 2023), inadequate risk identification (Nabawy and Gouda Mohamed, 2024), stakeholder misalignment and governance failures (Merrow, 2011), and insufficient real-time programme visibility at the PMO level (PMI, 2021).

A further cause that recurs strongly in the literature is optimism bias at the business-case stage. Flyvbjerg (2014) and Love and Ahiaga-Dagbui (2018) argue that cost and schedule estimates are systematically too optimistic when business cases are developed, whether through genuine cognitive optimism or through strategic misrepresentation intended to secure project approval. Because these distortions are embedded at the point of appraisal, they set baselines against which later performance is measured, and they help explain why overruns appear so persistent across decades and contexts. Any governance framework that relies on comparing delivery against an original baseline must therefore account for the possibility that the baseline itself was biased from the outset — a point that has direct implications for how AI-driven variance analytics should be interpreted.

Several studies identified fragmentation of project data across multiple systems and sites as a primary driver of governance failure in multi-site environments. When programme performance information must be manually compiled from disparate sources on a periodic basis, the latency between performance events and managerial response is typically measured in weeks rather than hours. This reporting lag systematically reduces capacity for early corrective intervention, allowing variances to compound before they are acted upon — a finding consistent across construction, utilities, and transportation infrastructure contexts.

4.2 Theme 2: AI and Digital Analytics — Promise and Limitations

The reviewed literature documented significant evidence of AI effectiveness in discrete project management tasks. Research cited by Bushuyev et al. (2024) and Khang et al. (2023) suggested that AI-assisted scheduling tools can reduce project schedule duration by up to 40 percent, and that predictive risk models have been associated with reductions of approximately 25 percent in cost-overrun exposure. Liang et al. (2024) documented significant advances in digital twin applications, enabling continuous synchronisation between physical site progress and digital programme models, supporting real-time earned value analysis and automated anomaly detection.

A distinction that has become central in the 2026 professional literature, and that clarifies much of the earlier evidence, is the difference between two fundamentally different uses of AI in the PMO. The first is task automation, in which AI performs well-defined, repetitive, rule-governed work — generating status reports, aggregating updates, tracking budget variance — faster and at lower cost than manual effort. The second is the augmentation of human decision-making, in which AI enhances the judgment of PMO professionals in situations that are ambiguous, complex, and context-sensitive, by surfacing patterns across large volumes of data, testing hypotheses, challenging confirmation bias, and deepening interpretive analysis (Alieva and Pirozzi, 2026). Nieto-Rodriguez (2026) frames the same shift from the perspective of leadership, arguing that as AI makes information abundant, the scarce and decisive capability becomes human judgment — sense-making, decision courage, and trust creation — rather than the generation of further analysis.

This distinction matters for infrastructure PMOs because the two uses carry different governance requirements and different risks. Automation risks are largely operational: data quality, integration, and error propagation. Augmentation risks are interpretive and organisational: over-reliance on outputs that appear objective, the erosion of accountability when the boundary between analysis and decision blurs, and the tendency of AI systems to surface what is most measurable rather than what is most significant (Alieva and Pirozzi, 2026). Much of the earlier evidence on AI effectiveness concerns automation, whereas the governance gap identified in this review lies predominantly in the augmentation domain, where human judgment and clear accountability must be actively preserved.

The literature also consistently identified significant barriers to effective AI adoption. Papagiannidis et al. (2023) documented that employees frequently misinterpreted AI capabilities and required extended training periods before effective use was practical. Data quality emerged as the most frequently cited technical barrier, with multiple studies noting that AI models require high-volume, consistent, well-structured historical data — a condition many infrastructure PMOs cannot currently satisfy. Armanios and Tucci (2025) identified a readiness paradox in which organisations most needing AI capabilities to address governance failures often lack the organisational maturity required to deploy AI effectively.

4.3 Theme 3: The Gap Between Digital Tools and PMO Governance Frameworks

The third and most significant theme was the absence of an integrated governance framework capable of embedding AI-driven analytics within the formal structures and accountability mechanisms of infrastructure PMOs. While numerous studies documented performance benefits of individual digital tools, very few addressed how these tools should be governed, integrated, and institutionalised within PMO environments managing multiple concurrent projects.

Foundational PMO governance frameworks developed by Hobbs and Aubry (2007) and Crawford (2010) predate the widespread availability of AI analytics. Wellingtone (2025) noted the growing strategic role of PMOs but did not provide operationally specific guidance on how digital analytics should be structured within programme reporting hierarchies. The most developed recent treatment of the strategic, AI-era PMO comes from the professional literature: Alieva and Pirozzi (2026) set out eight dimensions of PMO evolution and argue explicitly for governance layers that define whether AI outputs are authoritative, advisory, or merely informative, while Nieto-Rodriguez (2026) argues that AI elevates rather than diminishes the leadership role of the PMO by shifting its value toward judgment and prioritisation. These contributions strengthen the case that the PMO is becoming a strategic, decision-centred function, but they remain conceptual and are not specific to multi-site infrastructure delivery. Armanios and Tucci (2025) came closest to addressing the governance gap empirically at the project level, but did not extend their analysis to PMO-level governance frameworks for multi-site infrastructure environments. The gap this paper identifies therefore persists: no integrated framework yet specifies how AI analytics should be governed within a multi-site infrastructure PMO.

5. Discussion

5.1 Towards a Digital PMO Governance Framework (DPGF)

The findings suggest that existing literature, while rich in evidence about individual components of digital PMO practice, lacks an integrated framework bringing these components into a coherent governance architecture. Drawing on the thematic synthesis, this paper proposes a conceptual Digital PMO Governance Framework (DPGF) as a vehicle for future empirical inquiry. The framework is deliberately structured around the automation–augmentation distinction developed in Theme 2, because the central governance challenge is not automating existing PMO tasks but governing the augmentation of human judgment. The DPGF comprises three interdependent layers, each with a defined purpose, defined components, and defined interfaces to the layers around it.

Layer one, the data and analytics layer, is the foundation. Its purpose is to generate reliable programme-performance intelligence across multiple sites. Its components include the digital infrastructure and integration pipelines that consolidate fragmented multi-site data into a single reliable record; the AI analytics that operate on that data (variance detection, predictive risk models, digital twins, and natural-language stakeholder analysis); and explicit data-quality controls. This layer directly addresses the reporting-lag and data-fragmentation problems identified in Theme 1. Its defining governance rule is that analytics outputs must carry an indication of data quality and confidence, so that downstream users can weight them appropriately rather than treating all outputs as equally reliable.

Layer two, the governance and reporting layer, is the decision core of the framework and the point at which the automation–augmentation distinction is operationalised. Its purpose is to specify, for each class of PMO decision, whether an AI output is authoritative, advisory, or merely informative, following the classification proposed by Alieva and Pirozzi (2026). It defines the escalation thresholds at which an analytic signal triggers human review; the accountability rule that a named human decision-maker remains responsible for every consequential decision regardless of the analytics used; and the reporting protocols through which augmented intelligence reaches programme boards. Crucially, this layer requires that AI outputs be presented to decision-makers as hypotheses to be tested rather than as conclusions to be accepted — a design principle intended to counter the over-reliance and accountability-erosion risks identified in Theme 2, and to preserve the human judgment that Nieto-Rodriguez (2026) identifies as the scarce, decisive capability.

Layer three, the institutional and compliance layer, sustains the framework over time. Its purpose is to embed digital PMO capability durably within the organisation rather than as a one-off deployment. Its components include data-governance and information-security standards; protocols for handling commercially sensitive multi-site and multi-contractor records; regulatory-compliance requirements specific to the infrastructure sector; and the capability-development and change-management processes needed to build the analytical literacy that augmentation demands of PMO staff. This layer responds directly to the readiness paradox identified by Armanios and Tucci (2025): without it, organisations that adopt analytics tools without the institutional groundwork will not realise sustained benefit.

The three layers are interdependent rather than sequential. The data and analytics layer is meaningless without the governance layer to determine how its outputs are used; the governance layer cannot function without the institutional layer to supply the data standards, accountability structures, and staff capability it depends on. This interdependence is the central claim of the framework, and it distinguishes the DPGF from tool-centred approaches that concentrate on the first layer alone. The framework is presented here as a conceptual structure requiring empirical validation, and Section 5.3 sets out how that validation might proceed.

5.2 Implications for Practice

The evidence suggests that investment in AI analytics tools alone is unlikely to produce sustained performance improvements without parallel investment in the governance structures, data quality processes, and institutional capabilities required to deploy these tools effectively. The readiness paradox identified by Armanios and Tucci (2025) suggests organisations should assess data maturity and governance readiness before committing to AI-intensive PMO solutions. A phased approach — beginning with foundational data quality improvement and governance process standardisation — may be more effective than attempting wholesale digital transformation in environments where organisational prerequisites for AI adoption are absent. Consistent with Alieva and Pirozzi (2026) and Nieto-Rodriguez (2026), organisations should also invest explicitly in the analytical literacy of PMO staff, since the value of augmentation depends on the capacity of human professionals to interrogate, contextualise, and where necessary override AI outputs.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This paper is a literature review, and its conclusions are therefore bounded by the studies it synthesises rather than by new empirical data. The systematic core was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed work published between 2015 and 2025; while this was extended with key 2026 professional publications, some relevant grey literature and very recent tools will inevitably be underrepresented in a field moving as rapidly as this one. Thematic synthesis also involves interpretive judgement, so a different reviewer might weight the themes differently. Finally, the DPGF is a conceptual proposal, not a validated instrument.

These limitations define the research agenda. The priority is empirical validation of the DPGF through mixed-methods research — practitioner interviews, multi-site case studies, and quantitative analysis of programme performance data — to test whether embedding analytics within the three-layer governance structure measurably reduces reporting lag, cost variance, and schedule slippage. Further questions follow: how the automation–augmentation boundary is drawn in practice; what data-maturity threshold an infrastructure PMO must cross before augmentation pays off; and how optimism bias at the business-case stage should be handled by AI variance analytics that take the original baseline as given.

6. Conclusions

This systematic literature review has examined 62 peer-reviewed studies, supplemented by emerging 2026 professional literature, at the intersection of AI-driven analytics, digital PMO governance, and infrastructure project performance. Three primary findings emerge. First, infrastructure project underperformance is persistent, multi-causal, and deeply connected to governance failures at the PMO level — including optimism bias at the business-case stage and the inability to detect and respond to variances in real time across multi-site environments. Second, AI and digital analytics tools demonstrate significant capability for improving project performance outcomes, but their value depends on distinguishing AI-enabled task automation from the augmentation of human judgment, and on the data quality, organisational maturity, and governance structures that augmentation in particular requires. Third, a critical research gap exists at the convergence of these findings: there is currently no integrated, empirically validated framework for governing AI-driven analytics within the PMOs that manage complex multi-site infrastructure programmes.

This paper proposes the Digital PMO Governance Framework (DPGF), structured around the automation–augmentation distinction and comprising data-and-analytics, governance-and-reporting, and institutional-and-compliance layers, as a conceptual vehicle for addressing this gap. Empirical validation through mixed-methods research represents the primary agenda for future work, and the author intends to develop and test the framework more fully in a subsequent paper. As infrastructure investment accelerates globally in response to net zero commitments, post-pandemic economic recovery, and digital infrastructure expansion, the need for effective, evidence-based digital PMO governance has never been more urgent.

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About the Author

Zeeshan Ahmed

Dublin, Ireland

Zeeshan Ahmed is a project and programme coordination professional based in Dublin, Ireland. He holds an MSc in Project Planning and Management with Distinction from the University of Bradford, specialising in project scheduling, programme management, stakeholder coordination, and PMO functions. He is currently working as an Assistant Project Manager at Handy Lads Solution Ltd, coordinating work programmes across multiple concurrent infrastructure projects on different sites and liaising with major principal contractors on data centre demolition and EU infrastructure programmes.

Prior to this role, Zeeshan served as an R&D Trials Officer at STRI Group in Bradford, delivering multiple concurrent research projects end to end with full responsibility for PMO reporting, governance, and SharePoint-based data management. He is an active Member of the Association for Project Management (APM) and a Student Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), currently working toward APM Chartered Project Professional (ChPP) status. His research interests lie at the intersection of digital PMO governance, AI-driven project analytics, and infrastructure project performance. He can be contacted at Zeeshan.Technical@outlook.com.