

Three Funerals: Building a PMO That Outlives Its Founder in the Age of AI ¹

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Abstract

Over a 45-year career in financial-services technology, I built three project management offices. Each delivered measurably, earned executive praise in writing, and was dismantled within twelve months of my departure. Once is bad luck. Twice is coincidence. Three times is data. This paper performs the autopsy. The cause of death was never performance: all three PMOs measured well and were praised on their way out. The cause was dependency — credibility, relationships, and political capital concentrated in one person, and when that person left, the office lost its load-bearing wall. Drawing on that pattern, and on independent research showing PMOs are reconfigured or dismantled roughly every two to four years regardless of performance, this paper introduces a five-level maturity model distinguishing an effective PMO from an institutionalized one, and identifies three structural failure modes — hero economics, orphan processes, and borrowed authority — that keep most PMOs from making that jump. It then argues that artificial intelligence has turned this old survival problem into an urgent one: AI is rapidly absorbing the clerical core of PMO work (status reporting, dashboard assembly, schedule mechanics), which means a PMO still operating at the lower maturity levels will soon compete with software it cannot outprice. The paper closes with concrete practices for using AI deliberately — not just to cut cost, but to build the explainable, self-generating value evidence that earns stakeholder trust and makes a PMO's continued existence a foregone conclusion rather than a founder's personal accomplishment.

Introduction

Over a forty-five-year career in financial-services technology, I built three project management offices. All three delivered. All three earned executive praise in writing. And all three were dismantled within twelve months of my leaving. That is not false modesty, and it is not a humblebrag disguised as a confession. It is data, and until recently I did not know what to do with it.

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The temptation, when a PMO you built gets dismantled, is to treat it as a local failure: a bad reorganization, an unsympathetic new executive, bad timing. I told myself some version of that story after the first funeral. After the second, the story got harder to believe. After the third, I stopped grieving and started measuring, because a pattern that repeats three times, under different leadership, in different business units, across a fifteen-year span, is not bad luck. It is a structure, and a structure can be modeled.

This paper is that model, written for PMO leaders who suspect their office is more admired than required. It makes three arguments. First, that PMO effectiveness and PMO durability are different engineering problems, and much of our profession's guidance on the former quietly assumes it implies the latter. Second, that the reason effective PMOs die is structural and predictable: dependency on a single person for credibility, relationships, and political capital. Third, and most urgent for this journal's readers, that artificial intelligence has compressed the timeline on this problem. A PMO that has spent years running on heroic individuals rather than durable systems is no longer just vulnerable to the next reorganization; it is now competing with software that can produce its core deliverables for a fraction of the cost. Institutionalizing a PMO used to be a nice-to-have for offices with the luxury of time. It is now closer to a survival requirement — and AI, used deliberately, is one of the more effective tools available for building it.

The Industry's Open Secret: PMOs Are Built to Be Temporary

My three funerals felt, at the time, like personal failures. They are not unusual. Hobbs and Aubry's landmark multi-phase research program surveyed several hundred PMOs and found roughly half were less than two years old at the time of study, with later phases of their work showing that organizations reconfigure their project management offices on a two-to-four-year cycle (Hobbs and Aubry, 2007; Aubry, Hobbs and Thuillier, 2008). A separate analysis of the forces behind these changes found that organizational politics and shifting perceptions of value — not delivery performance — are the primary drivers of PMO reconfiguration (Aubry, Hobbs, Müller and Blomquist, 2010). Performance is rarely the stated reason a PMO is cut, because performance is rarely the real reason. Successful PMOs die too. Mine did, three times.

That research matters because it reframes the question. If PMOs died mainly because they did poor work, the fix would be operational: better methodology, better metrics, better governance gates. I tried that fix. It was Funeral II.

Three Funerals

Funeral I: The One They Praised on My Way Out

I built the first PMO from close to nothing: a project management office within my employer, providing project management and delivery for a public telephone company in Texas. It delivered — time, cost, scope, and quality were outstanding — and executives praised it in writing. Then I

was promoted into a larger role elsewhere in the organization, and within twelve months the PMO I had built was gone, folded back into the business lines it had been coordinating, its charter quietly retired. Nobody involved in that decision believed they were doing anything wrong. That is the detail that took me years to sit with: dismantling a working PMO rarely feels, from the inside, like an act of sabotage. It feels like housekeeping.

Funeral II: The One I Built Smarter

I learned the wrong lesson from Funeral I. I concluded the problem had been under-documentation, so the second PMO got better processes, better metrics, and better artifacts than the first: charters, methodologies, templates, and governance gates that I was proud of then, and still am, on their own terms. This PMO delivered project management and project delivery for my employer's client, a telecommunications company that was, for a time, the second-largest long-distance carrier in the United States. We built processes and tools specifically for that client, and I remain convinced they were transportable well beyond it — we delivered tens of millions of dollars in successful projects. I told myself this one would outlast me because I had engineered it to. It did not. Same funeral, different flowers. All the documentation I had produced survived exactly one reorganization before people quietly stopped following it.

Funeral III: The One That Made It a Pattern

The third PMO had what the first two lacked: a mature host organization, real executive sponsorship, and formal authority written into the org chart — this one was chartered specifically to remediate a regulatory consent order. It was highly structured, with formal documentation, controls, and a sophisticated Software Development Life Cycle built on the Waterfall model. By any conventional measure, this was the PMO built to last. It lasted about as long as the others. My sponsor moved on roughly eight months after I did, and the authority the PMO had been operating under moved with him.

Once is bad luck. Twice is coincidence. Three times is data — and, per a line long, if apocryphally, attributed to W. Edwards Deming, in God we trust; all others must bring data (Quote Investigator, 2017). So I did the autopsy.

The Autopsy: What Actually Killed Them

Three funerals, three different organizations, three different eras of my career, and one cause of death.

Not the metrics. All three PMOs measured well. Delivery improved under each of them, and executives said so in writing, which is more than most PMOs can produce on their way out the door.

Not the process. Charters, methodologies, templates, and governance gates were documented in all three cases. All were, eventually, ignored.

The dependency. In each PMO, credibility, relationships, and political capital ran through one person: me. The organization chart never showed this. The day I left, the organization found out it had been true all along.

I want to be precise about what this diagnosis is not. It is not a boast about being indispensable. Indispensability, I have come to believe, is closer to the failure mode than the achievement. If a PMO needs a specific person to survive, the organization has not built an office. It has built a personality-dependent function with a charter attached, and personality-dependent functions have exactly the life expectancy of the personality in question.

Effective vs. Durable: The Institutionalization Gap

Twenty years into this pattern, I understood I had been conflating two different words. An effective PMO delivers projects well, runs on the talent and trust of the people staffing it, reports value when someone asks for it, and is admired. A durable PMO does something different: it embeds delivery in the organization's operating model, runs on systems that outlive any one person's tenure, generates value data continuously rather than on demand, and — the distinction that matters most at budget time — is required rather than merely admired. Table 1 lays out the comparison.

An Effective PMO	A Durable (Institutionalized) PMO
Delivers projects well	Embeds delivery in the operating model
Runs on talent and trust	Runs on systems that outlive talent
Reports value when asked	Generates value data continuously
Is admired	Is required

Table 1. The institutionalization gap between an effective PMO and a durable one.

All three of my PMOs sat comfortably in the left column. None of them made it to the right. I did not understand the difference until the third funeral, and understanding it is what led to the model in the next section.

The Miller Maturity Model: Five Levels from Improvisation to Institution

The only question that matters for a PMO leader is not “how do you build a good PMO” — most experienced practitioners already know how to do that — but “how do you build one that survives its creator.” That turns out to be a different discipline with identifiable levels, summarized in Table 2.

Level	Name	Description
1	Ad Hoc	Project management happens through individual initiative; no consistent structure.
2	Structured	Formal processes, templates, and governance exist, run by capable individuals.
3	Integrated	Capability is embedded in budgeting, strategy, and operations; it survives a change of personnel.
4	Optimized	The PMO measures and improves itself; value reporting is automatic, continuous, and system-owned.
5	Intelligent	The PMO senses, predicts, and adapts using AI-augmented portfolio intelligence; it becomes the organization's decision engine.

Table 2. The Miller Maturity Model™: five levels from improvisation to institution.

The line that matters most on this staircase falls between Levels 2 and 3. Below it, the PMO depends on people. Above it, people depend on the PMO. All three of my PMOs were strong Level 2 organizations. None of them made the jump to Level 3, and the reason each failed maps cleanly onto one of three structural failure modes.

Hero economics killed Funeral I: a Level 2 PMO runs on exceptional individuals, and exceptional individuals get promoted, or they leave.

Orphan processes killed Funeral II: process without integration into the surrounding organization is shelf-ware, and shelf-ware survives exactly one reorganization.

Borrowed authority killed Funeral III: power on loan from an executive sponsor vanishes the day the sponsor does.

Levels 4 and 5 are where the discipline shifts from documenting work to building systems that do not need a hero to operate. That shift is also where artificial intelligence stops being a side conversation and becomes the main one.

Why “Intelligent” — and Why Now: AI as the PMO's Survival Imperative

AI Has Already Arrived in the PMO

This is not a speculative future. PMI's most recent research on AI adoption among project professionals found that one in five now uses generative AI in more than half of their recent projects, and that professionals who use it extensively are sixteen times more likely than casual users to report advanced productivity gains — 48 percent of heavy adopters report such gains, compared with 3 percent of light users (PMI, 2025). A separate industry survey found AI tool usage among project professionals climbing from 41 percent in 2023 to 66 percent by 2025 (PMI Global Chapter Report, 2025). The technology is not arriving at some point on the PMO's future planning horizon. It is already inside the office, usually informally, usually through individual

staff members experimenting on their own initiative rather than through any deliberate PMO strategy.

What AI Actually Threatens — and What It Cannot Replace

The threat is specific, and it is worth naming precisely rather than vaguely. AI is very good at the PMO's clerical core: assembling status reports from source systems, generating dashboards, tracking schedule mechanics, and summarizing meeting notes into action items. These are exactly the deliverables that make up most of a Level 2 PMO's visible output. A recent review of AI applications in project portfolio management catalogs machine learning and natural language processing tools that predict project performance, identify risk patterns, and automate prioritization — capabilities that, a decade ago, existed only in the judgment of an experienced PMO director (Taheripour and Sadjadi, 2026).

What AI does not yet replace, and by most current expert assessment will not replace soon, is judgment under ambiguity: negotiating trade-offs between competing executive priorities, reading the politics of a stalled decision, and exercising the kind of accountability that comes from a named person standing behind a recommendation. A multi-expert analysis of AI's trajectory in project management through 2030 concluded that while AI substantially enhances predictive precision and operational effectiveness, human judgment remains essential to the profession, particularly in its ethical and relational dimensions (Hughes, Kiani Mavi, Aghajani, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2025). This is, in effect, the argument for Level 5. A Level 2 PMO competes directly with the machine on the ground where the machine wins: routine reporting. A Level 5 PMO uses the machine to do that work and redirects its people toward the ground where humans still win: judgment, prediction, and portfolio-level intelligence.

AI and the Trust Problem

Institutionalization was always partly about trust — a durable PMO is one the organization trusts enough to fund without being asked. AI complicates and, if used well, can strengthen that trust. It complicates it because the evidence on AI trust is genuinely mixed: a 2025 global study by KPMG and the University of Melbourne found that while most people now use AI regularly, only 46 percent are willing to trust AI systems, and trust drops further for consequential decisions (KPMG, 2025). Project-management-specific research shows a similar gap between enthusiasm and confidence in organizational readiness to implement AI responsibly (McKinsey, 2026). Explainability appears to be the variable that moves this number most. Stakeholders who can see the basis for an AI-generated risk score or forecast — the data it drew on, the confidence interval, the assumptions — extend more trust to it than stakeholders handed a black-box conclusion, and organizations that skip the explainability layer tend to face significant resistance during rollout (McKinsey, 2026).

This is directly relevant to institutionalization. A PMO's value data has always needed to be credible to survive a change in leadership; that was true long before AI existed. What AI changes

is the volume and immediacy of the data a PMO can now generate — continuous risk scoring instead of a monthly status deck, predictive schedule variance instead of a retrospective one. Used with a visible explainability layer, that volume becomes exactly the kind of self-generating, continuously produced value evidence that Table 1 identifies as the signature of a durable PMO. Used as a black box, it becomes a new, faster way to lose the room.

From Reporting to Intelligence: What This Looks Like in Practice

In practice, moving a PMO from Level 2 toward Levels 4 and 5 with AI means a specific set of choices, not a technology purchase. Predictive risk scoring applied across a portfolio — flagging schedule and budget variance before it shows up in a status report — turns the PMO from a rear-view mirror into an early-warning system, which is the kind of capability executives fund rather than merely admire. Automated, continuously updated dashboards replace the retrospective monthly deck, and because they are system-generated rather than assembled by a single analyst, they keep functioning the week that analyst is out sick or has moved to another role — precisely the institutionalization test in Table 1. Natural-language summarization of project documentation and meeting records reduces the informal, undocumented knowledge that concentrates in a PMO director's head, which is the exact mechanism behind hero economics. And portfolio-level optimization models, of the kind reviewed by Taheripour and Sadjadi (2026), can recommend investment mixes and flag capacity constraints across a whole portfolio in a way no single person, however experienced, can hold in their head simultaneously.

None of this is about eliminating headcount for its own sake. It is about relocating scarce human judgment away from producing reports and toward the decisions the reports are supposed to inform — and about making sure the evidence for those decisions no longer depends on any one person assembling it by hand.

A Caution: Don't Trade a Human Hero for an Algorithmic One

There is an obvious trap here, and I would be doing this argument a disservice if I did not name it. A PMO that becomes critically dependent on a single AI vendor, a single unaudited model, or a single technically-minded staff member who is the only one who understands how the predictive dashboard actually works has not solved hero economics. It has re-created it in software. Institutionalizing AI use means applying the same disciplines that institutionalize anything else: documented methodology behind the models, more than one person capable of maintaining and explaining the system, and governance that treats the AI layer as organizational infrastructure rather than one person's pet project. Level 5, properly built, distributes intelligence across a system the organization owns. Built carelessly, it just gives the next hero a more impressive tool — and a PMO that dies with that hero's departure will die faster, because by then the organization will have forgotten how to produce a status report by hand.

The Monday-Morning Diagnostic

Three questions, honestly answered, will tell a PMO leader roughly where their office sits on this staircase and how exposed it is — with a fourth question, added since I first developed this diagnostic, addressing the AI dimension directly.

1. If your PMO director left tomorrow, what breaks first, and how long before someone notices?
2. Could a new CIO or business sponsor cut your PMO in their first ninety days without anything visibly failing?
3. Does your value data exist because someone builds it, or because the system produces it?
4. If your organization adopted AI-driven reporting and risk analytics tomorrow, would your PMO be the team designing that system, or the team whose job it replaces?

An honest “yes” to question two, in my experience, means the organization is one executive transition away from a funeral. I have catered three of them.

What I'd Do Differently

None of this is only retrospective. Here is what institutionalization looks like as a working practice, informed both by the failures and by where AI now fits into each one.

Build for succession from day one. Your eventual replacement's success — not your own tenure — is the design requirement. In practice this means documenting decisions as they are made, not reconstructing them afterward, and it means an AI-generated project history a successor can query rather than a set of undocumented judgment calls that leave with you.

Integrate before you optimize. Wire the PMO into budgeting, strategy, and operations so that removing it costs the organization more than funding it does. An AI capability that only the PMO uses is a departmental tool; one that finance, portfolio governance, and executive reporting all depend on is infrastructure, and infrastructure is harder to cut.

Make the data self-serving. Value evidence that a system generates continuously survives; evidence a person assembles by hand retires with that person. This is the single clearest place AI earns its keep in an institutionalization strategy, provided the explainability layer is built in from the start rather than bolted on after a trust problem appears.

Institutionalize the story. Write it down. Teach it. A PMO with no recorded organizational memory can be erased in a single meeting, and a well-documented AI model with no one else trained to interpret it is just a faster version of the same vulnerability.

Conclusion

I spent three PMOs being indispensable and mistook that feeling for success. It was the failure mode. An effective PMO and a durable one are different achievements, and the difference is not effort or talent — all three of my PMOs had both — it is architecture. For most of my career, the deadline for making that architectural correction was measured in years; a PMO could coast at Level 2 for a long time before politics or reorganization eventually caught up with it. AI has shortened that deadline considerably, because it now offers organizations a cheaper way to get the Level 2 deliverables a struggling PMO produces, which removes the “at least it's cheap to keep them” argument that has quietly protected mediocre-but-functional PMOs for decades. The PMOs that fail over the next five years will not, in most cases, be killed by AI directly. They will be killed by staying at Level 2 while AI made Level 2 free. The organizations that get ahead of that shift will use AI not to shrink their PMO, but to finish the institutionalization job three of mine never completed: building an office that does not need its founder, is trusted because its evidence is transparent and continuous, and — the only outcome that actually matters — is still standing the year after its builder walks out the door.

Author's Note on the Use of AI

In keeping with PMWJ's policy on the use of Artificial Intelligence, I am disclosing the following: this manuscript was developed in collaboration with Claude, an AI assistant built by Anthropic. I provided the assistant with my own source material — a keynote presentation and speaker's supplement I had already written, describing my career, my three PMOs, and the Miller Maturity Model™ — together with direction to expand that material into a journal article addressing AI's role in PMO institutionalization. The assistant drafted the manuscript's prose from that material, researched and identified the sources cited in the References section, and organized the content into PMWJ's required structure. I reviewed, fact-checked, and edited the resulting draft, and I take full responsibility for its accuracy and content. The claims about my own career — the three PMOs, their outcomes, and the lessons I draw from them — reflect my own direct experience and judgment, not the assistant's invention; the organizational and biographical specifics were supplied or verified by me.

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James Miller, Jr. is a retired Vice President of IT Global Information Security PMO with more than 45 years of experience in telecommunications and financial-services technology. He holds a Master of Science in Management Science (STEM designated), with a specialization in project management, from the University of Texas at Dallas, which he completed with high distinction. He has held the PMP credential (6144) since July 1996, has taught PMP exam preparation at the University of Texas at Dallas, Collin College, and the University of California, Irvine, and has delivered two track presentations for UT Dallas Project Management Symposiums. He built and led three PMOs over the course of his career and is the creator of the Miller Maturity Model™ and author of the seven-volume MMM™ series. He is based in Allen, Texas, and can be reached at jim.miller50@gmail.com.