

Redefining the PMO: Strategy, AI and the Rise of the Chief Project Officer

An exclusive interview with co-authors of *The Evolution of the PMO: The Rise of the Chief Project Officer – Part 5*¹

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General Introduction

A year ago, we set out to redefine project management leadership through a collaborative writing challenge. Earlier this year, we were thrilled to announce the release of "*The Evolution of the PMO: The Rise of the Chief Project Officer*," now an Amazon bestseller. This groundbreaking book brings together insights from 40 global authors, each offering unique perspectives on modern project management complexities.

This article follows part four published in the July PMWJ. It captures more of the essence of our year-long collaboration and invites you to engage with the dynamic conversations driving innovation in project management

Interviews

Introduction

The traditional PMO was once synonymous with governance and reporting. But in 2025, that definition is outdated. Organizations increasingly look to PMOs to safeguard value, align portfolios with strategy, and integrate disruptive technologies. The emergence of the Chief Project Officer (CPO) signals a recognition that project execution is no longer a back-office concern — it is the driver of transformation.

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This round of interviews showcases voices from North America, the Middle East, and Central Asia, each offering practical insights on how PMOs can meet the demands of a fast-changing world. Their stories highlight not only models and tools but also the mindsets needed to thrive in the future economy.

Here, we bring together insights from **Farahana Jobanputra, Abdelhalim Hafed, Anara Asylbekova, Saad A. AlShayiah, and Mohammad Ali Shalan**. Collectively, they reveal how PMOs are redefining leadership, adopting artificial intelligence, and elevating their role to the executive table. Note that backgrounds of the interviewees can be found at the end of this set of interviews.

Updated and Expanded Interviews

Aina: Farahana, in your writing and talks, you highlight the debate between centralized and federated PMOs. How should leaders decide which model fits best?

Farahana: It comes down to context. Centralized PMOs work well for organizations with early or mature practices where authority, training, and governance can roll up under one banner. They bring consistency, cost efficiency, and streamlined execution.

On the other hand, federated models shine in large, complex enterprises where specialized skill sets, and rapid adaptability are needed. In fact, I often see hybrid models — an Enterprise PMO holding minimum standards, with federated PMOs empowered to tailor approaches to their business lines.

The real question is not “which model is right” but rather “which model aligns with our maturity, complexity, and strategic goals.” What I remind executives is that the choice isn’t binary. The strongest organizations know when to tighten governance and when to allow flexibility. A centralized model might deliver reliability in compliance, while federated PMOs inject speed and responsiveness into fast-moving business lines.

Ultimately, leaders should not ask, “*Which model will control the organization better?*” but instead, “*Which model will enable the organization to deliver value consistently and strategically?*” That shift in perspective makes all the difference.

Aina: Many still see PMOs as administrative overhead. What strategies can leaders use to shift perceptions?

Farahana: We must stop measuring value only by how many projects we delivered or how much we spent. Instead, we must ask: Did we protect the organization? Did we align with strategy? Did we enable growth?

For example, when I led a transformation at a Canadian bank, we moved from being the least compliant business unit to the most compliant. It wasn’t about adding bureaucracy

— it was about embedding consistent frameworks, training, and metrics. Over time, executives and teams reported higher trust, greater clarity, and faster execution.

Competent PMs and strong stakeholder engagement turn a PMO from a “cost center” into a strategic asset. The real breakthrough happens when executives stop seeing reports as paperwork and start seeing them as roadmaps for decisions. A PMO that can speak the language of both compliance and opportunity — showing how a portfolio protects against risk while opening doors to growth — will never be dismissed as overhead.

We must lead that narrative ourselves. If we don’t, we risk being measured only in outputs, not outcomes.

Aina: Abdelhalim, your chapter focuses on the Chief Project Officer (CPO). How does the CPO role reshape strategy execution?

Abdelhalim: The CPO is essentially the executive-level owner of project execution. This role ensures accountability for selecting the right projects and delivering them effectively.

The CPO must be more than a project overseer — they’re a strategic integrator. They decide when projects should pivot, pause, or even be terminated if benefits will not materialize.

Success hinges on multidiscipline exposure, robust interpersonal skills, and the ability to manage executive expectations. Ultimately, the CPO bridges strategy and execution, making sure organizations don’t just start projects — they realize measurable benefits.

Without the CPO lens, portfolios often become overcrowded with initiatives that look good on paper but fail to advance strategic goals. The CPO changes that dynamic by linking investment decisions directly to business value. In many ways, the CPO is the missing piece — giving the boardroom confidence that strategy is not just well-designed but also well-delivered.

Aina: Both of you stress executive alignment. What practical advice would you give PMO leaders struggling to gain buy-in from the C-suite?

Farahana: Start with self-awareness. Know your own strengths, stress points, and communication style. Then map your stakeholders — both executives and influencers at all levels. Build trust incrementally: sometimes through compliance wins, sometimes through visible quick gains like status reporting consistency.

If you face resistance, don’t avoid it. Work with change management techniques, communities of practice, and informal networks to win hearts and minds. And yes — sometimes it requires escalating strategically.

The key is persistence with purpose. A PMO leader must demonstrate reliability in small things to earn trust in larger matters. Every update, every dashboard, every conversation is an opportunity to show executives that the PMO is not about slowing them down — it's about giving them the clarity to move faster with less risk.

Abdelhalim: I would add manage executives as much as you manage projects. They have limited time and need assurance more than detail. Give them crisp insights — what's on track, what's at risk, and what decisions they must make.

Too much detail loses them; too little detail erodes trust. The CPO and PMO leaders must balance both, offering executives exactly the information they need to steer without overwhelming them.

What I've learned is that alignment is not about endless reporting — it's about targeted relevance. If a CEO can walk out of a five-minute update with a clear decision and confidence in its execution, you've done your job.

Aina: Anara, your chapter emphasizes the rise of AI in portfolio management. Why did you feel it was important to contribute to this conversation?

Anara: Because I see a gap between hype and real application. Everyone talks about AI, but most advice is generic — use AI for notetaking, for example. The real challenge is: are organizations ready? Do they have the data quality, the stakeholder awareness, and the infrastructure needed to leverage AI responsibly?

My work in Kazakhstan and the UAE showed me that the real value of AI in portfolio management is not just automation but enabling smarter, faster, data-driven decisions. Sharing this insight felt critical for preparing leaders to move beyond surface-level adoption.

What excites me most is AI's potential to democratize decision-making. When used responsibly, AI can highlight options that a small group of executives may overlook, giving mid-level managers better visibility and ensuring no critical insight is missed. But this requires preparation. Organizations must treat AI readiness as seriously as financial or regulatory readiness.

Aina: What are the biggest misconceptions you encounter about AI in project and portfolio management?

Anara: That AI is a magic bullet. Many assume it will automatically make projects faster and cheaper. But without clean, complete, and contextually relevant data, AI becomes useless — even dangerous.

AI doesn't replace human judgment; it enhances it. Leaders must prepare their stakeholders, ensure data transparency, and understand the ethical considerations. Otherwise, they risk paying for technology that delivers no real value.

The truth is, AI is not about replacing people but about augmenting their capacity. When PMOs understand this, they stop fearing disruption and start asking the right question: *How can AI help us make better decisions, not just faster ones?*

Aina: Saad, your chapter focuses on navigating technological disruptions. How have PMOs in Riyadh adapted to AI and automation?

Saad: We've seen a profound transformation. At one leading tech firm, we integrated Project Management Information Systems (PMIS) with live dashboards. This gave us real-time insights into scope, cost, and risk, enabling us to anticipate issues instead of reacting to them.

AI has been a game-changer. Predictive analytics allowed us to identify anomalies before they escalated into crises. Automation took over repetitive tasks, freeing project managers to focus on strategy. The result was not only efficiency gains but also greater competitiveness on a global scale.

This transformation wasn't only technological — it was cultural. Project managers had to shift from being task trackers to strategic advisors, learning to interpret insights rather than merely deliver reports. That cultural change has been as important as the tools themselves.

Aina: Many PMO leaders struggle with executive buy-in. How did you overcome resistance when introducing AI-driven tools?

Saad: Executive resistance is natural, especially when the technology seems complex or expensive. The key was to connect every AI-enabled improvement directly to a business priority.

For example, when predictive analytics flagged potential cost overruns months in advance, we didn't present it as "an AI feature." We showed the executives the savings in real dollars and the avoided reputational risk. Once executives saw tangible results — faster decision-making, better resource allocation, reduced risks — adoption followed quickly.

We also used small pilots to build confidence. Executives didn't have to approve a massive rollout at once; they saw incremental wins that created momentum.

Aina: You mention global competitiveness. How are Riyadh's PMOs preparing for cross-border collaboration and international standards?

Saad: We're focusing on three things: alignment with global frameworks, investment in digital collaboration platforms, and cultural readiness.

International projects often involve multiple time zones, regulations, and business cultures. AI-enabled PMIS platforms allow us to maintain transparency across borders.

Executives and teams in different countries can view the same live dashboards, reducing misunderstandings and delays.

Equally important is cultural training. A PMO that understands global standards but ignores cultural nuances risks failure. By integrating AI for translation, compliance monitoring, and stakeholder sentiment analysis, we're bridging these gaps. The goal is to make Riyadh's PMOs not only globally connected but globally competitive.

Aina: Looking forward, what will define a successful PMO in Riyadh in the next five years?

Saad: Success will be defined by adaptability. Technology is moving too quickly for static processes. A successful PMO will continuously integrate new AI tools, balance automation with human judgment, and ensure talent is future-ready.

We'll also see the PMO play a more active role in talent retention. In a world where AI handles routine tasks, human creativity and leadership become premium assets. The PMO must create environments where people are motivated, engaged, and continuously developing.

In five years, I believe the most successful PMOs in Riyadh — and globally — will be those that can act both as guardians of strategy and as pioneers of innovation.

Aina: Both of you highlight risk management. How does AI shift the way organizations approach risk?

Anara: AI tools can cross-check lessons learned and historical project data to predict recurring risks. They don't mitigate risk themselves — that remains a human responsibility — but they highlight patterns and options leaders might otherwise miss.

This changes the game because we no longer wait for risks to manifest before acting. AI enables a proactive stance, where risk planning is dynamic and continuously informed by data.

Saad: In my experience, AI-driven dashboards give executives the foresight to make timely adjustments. For example, predictive cost KPIs helped us flag potential overruns months in advance. This proactive approach shifts risk management from a defensive stance to a strategic advantage.

When executives see risk dashboards that not only show what's happening but what's *likely* to happen, their confidence in the PMO grows exponentially. That confidence is often the bridge between cautious investment and bold strategic action.

Aina: Mohammad, your chapter focuses on the role of PMIS in successful PMO implementation. Why is PMIS so pivotal in today's project-driven economy?

Mohammad: Because we've entered an era where data has become the new raw material. Just as steel powered the industrial age, data now powers our project and portfolio decisions. A Project Management Information System (PMIS) orchestrates this data, turning raw information into actionable insights.

PMOs that rely solely on manual reporting or fragmented systems often struggle to adapt. But with a well-implemented PMIS, organizations gain real-time visibility into performance, costs, resources, and risks — all aligned with strategic objectives.

A PMIS is not just a repository of information; it's the nervous system of the modern PMO. It ensures transparency, enables predictive analytics, and makes sure leaders can see beyond the next milestone to the long-term trajectory. Without it, decisions are slower, risks are greater, and opportunities are often missed.

Aina: What common mistakes do organizations make when adopting PMIS?

Mohammad: The biggest mistake is treating PMIS as just a reporting tool. It's far more — it's a strategic framework. Many also underestimate the cultural shift required. You need training, governance, and executive buy-in to fully leverage PMIS.

Another pitfall is neglecting integration. A PMIS must connect with ERP, CRM, HR, and finance systems. Without integration, you end up with silos — and the true value of predictive analytics and real-time monitoring is lost.

Too often, leaders assume technology alone will solve problems. But PMIS success is 50% technology and 50% people. If the culture doesn't embrace transparency and continuous learning, the system becomes a database rather than a decision engine.

Aina: How can AI enhance PMIS and reduce errors in project management?

Mohammad: AI changes the game. It automates data collection, identifies anomalies before humans notice them, and even drafts lessons learned through natural language processing.

For example, predictive analytics can flag risks months in advance. Sentiment analysis can uncover stakeholder concerns hidden in feedback or emails. Automated dashboards can transform raw data into decision-ready insights in real time.

The result is not just fewer errors but a proactive PMO — one that anticipates problems rather than reacting to them. With AI, the PMO becomes not only faster but smarter.

Aina: How can PMIS support lessons learned and continuous improvement?

Mohammad: This is where PMIS shows its real long-term value. It creates a centralized knowledge base that captures not only numbers but the context behind successes and failures.

When teams can access prior lessons, they don't repeat mistakes. With AI, the PMIS can even surface patterns that humans might overlook — for example, showing that projects with certain vendor contracts consistently run late, or that certain stakeholder groups always resist particular types of change.

PMIS transforms lessons learned from a closing ritual into a living resource. It turns hindsight into foresight, making every project a stepping stone for the next.

Aina: You also discuss PMO contracts in the era of digital transformation. What must leaders consider when drafting them?

Mohammad: Flexibility. The business environment is evolving too fast for rigid contracts. Leaders should build frameworks that allow for scaling, integration with emerging technologies, and continuous improvement.

Contracts must also embed governance and ethics — particularly around data privacy, security, and transparency. A PMO that ignores these dimensions risks losing both stakeholder trust and competitive advantage.

Good contracts are not just about scope and deliverables; they set the tone for adaptability. They define how the PMO will evolve as markets, technologies, and priorities change.

Aina: Looking ahead, what's your vision for the PMO of the future?

Mohammad: The PMO of the future is a strategic nerve center — a place where data and projects intersect to drive innovation, growth, and sustainability.

With PMIS enhanced by AI and machine learning, PMOs will not just monitor but forecast, not just report but recommend. Those who embrace this shift will define the competitive landscape in the digital economy. Those who resist risk obsolescence.

In short, the PMO's relevance will be defined not by how well it controls, but by how effectively it empowers organizations to thrive in uncertainty.

Final Reflections

The PMO is no longer a static support function; it has become the nerve center of strategic execution. Across continents and sectors, our interviewees emphasized adaptability, stakeholder trust, and data-driven foresight as the defining traits of tomorrow's PMOs.

Whether through Farahana's hybrid governance models, Abdelhalim's executive-level CPO vision, Anara's AI readiness, Saad's digitally resilient PMOs in Riyadh, or Mohammad's blueprint for PMIS-driven transformation, one theme remains constant:

The PMO must evolve from a reporting entity to a value-creating partner in shaping organizational destiny.

Interviewee Information



Farahana Jobanputra

Canada



Farahana Jobanputra is a senior transformation leader with expertise in Capital Markets, Asset Management, Wealth Management, and Insurance. She has led major business transformations, established PMOs and Centers of Excellence, and built governance frameworks that enable strategy. A first-generation immigrant to Canada, she brings lived experience across Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. She serves on the Boards of St. Joseph's Hospital and Quantius Education Foundation, mentors aspiring leaders, and co-authored several international bestsellers.





Abdelhalim Hafed

Algeria



Abdelhalim Hafed is CTO at Algérie Poste and a recognized expert in project management and organizational transformation. With credentials including CM™, PMP®, P3O®, and SMC™, he has extensive experience leading digital initiatives and strengthening governance. He is known for integrating strategic oversight with execution, ensuring organizations realize measurable benefits from their investments.

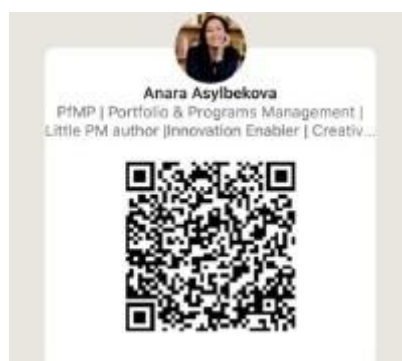


Anara Asylbekova

UAE, Kazakhstan



Anara Asylbekova is a portfolio management professional with experience across Kazakhstan and the UAE. Certified in PMP, PMI-ACP, and PfMP, she specializes in AI integration, agile mentoring, and advanced facilitation methods. Anara has led healthcare and fintech initiatives and is known for preparing organizations to move beyond surface-level adoption of AI in portfolio management.





Saad AlShayiah

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



Saad A. AlShayiah is an ICT PMO Executive based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where he has pioneered digital transformation in the technology sector. He focuses on integrating AI, automation, and real-time dashboards to strengthen decision-making and competitiveness. Saad is also a strong advocate for cultural readiness and global collaboration in project environments.



Mohammad Shalan

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



Mohammad Ali Shalan is CXO–Thrive and Vice President of Professional Development at PMI KSA. With certifications including PMP, PMI-RMP, and CISA, he is a leading voice on PMIS implementation, digital transformation, and governance. His work emphasizes turning data into actionable insights and building PMOs as strategic nerve centers in the digital economy.

About the Interviewer



Aina Aliieva

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Aina Aliieva (Alive) is an experienced Agile Coach and a Business Consultant with 20 years of experience in different industries, from hospitality and tourism to banking and engineering, a Founder & CEO at Bee Agile and a CEO & VP of Marketing at The PMO Strategy and Execution Hub.

She is a keynote speaker on Agile, Project Management, Negotiation, People Management, and Soft Skills topics. She was a guest instructor at NASA in 2022 & 2023 with topics on Conflict Resolution & Negotiation and Facilitation Techniques.

Her book, "It Starts with YOU. 40 Letters to My Younger Self on How to Get Going in Your Career," hit the #1 position in the #jobhunting category on Amazon and is featured in a Forbes Councils Executive Library.

She also contributed to the books "Mastering Solution Delivery: Practical Insights and Lessons from Thought Leaders in a Post-Pandemic Era", "Green PMO: Sustainability through Project Management Lens" and "Agile Coaching and Transformation: The Journey to Enterprise Agility".

Aina was also a Finalist in the Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year category in 2021 by the Canadian SME National Business Award

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