

From Systems to Synergy: Exploring the Human-Centered Transformation of PMOs

**An exclusive interview with co-authors of
*The Evolution of the PMO: The Rise
of the Chief Project Officer – Part 6*¹
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DY5VY4KV>)**

by Aina Aliieva (Alive)

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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 five published in the August 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

For years, the Project Management Office (PMO) was seen mainly as a control function — the place that set standards, tracked progress, and enforced compliance. That role hasn't disappeared, but it is no longer the whole story. In many organizations, the PMO has become something larger: a driver of alignment, a connector between strategy and operations, and in some cases, a voice at the leadership table. The question today is not whether PMOs deliver projects, but whether they help the business adapt, transform, and create lasting value.

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This round of conversations features **Blake Mallett, Dmitry Shlyonsky, Luis Guardado, Mercy Mosunmola Momah, and Joseph Fernandes**. Together, they explore how PMOs can thrive in a world that demands both rigor and resilience. From systems thinking and structured career pathways to stoic leadership, practical solutions, and the spirit of high-performance teams, each of these voices points toward a future where PMOs become catalysts for transformation.

Note that backgrounds of the interviewees can be found at the end of this set of interviews.

Updated and Expanded Interviews

Aina: Blake, you've worked across the Navy, aerospace and IT. How has this diversity of experience shaped your view of project management?

Blake: The biggest influence has been learning that every field brings its own way of solving problems—and once you see that, you stop believing there's only one "right" approach to project management. In the Navy, the work was about discipline and adaptability: you had to act decisively in environments where the stakes could literally be life and death, and yet also remain flexible because plans rarely survived first contact with reality. Aerospace, on the other hand, drilled into me the value of precision and compliance. Every action was documented, every tolerance measured. It made me realize that rigor is not bureaucracy—it's safety, it's reliability. Then when I moved into IT, the pace changed entirely. Technology projects are all about speed, iteration, and being ready for requirements that shift overnight.

What happens when you put those together is you begin to see projects as living systems rather than static deliverables. You realize a change in one area always creates a ripple somewhere else. That's why I often say systems thinking is the core of my practice. A PMO that doesn't think in systems is doomed to chase symptoms rather than fix causes. My background taught me to respect that interplay. It's not about choosing discipline over agility or speed over rigor—it's about integrating them in a way that keeps the whole system balanced

Aina: You argue that diversity in professional backgrounds is more powerful than surface-level diversity. What does that look like in practice inside a PMO?

Blake: I've seen the power of this kind of diversity too many times to doubt it. When you build a team made up of people who have only ever worked in the same industry, they share the same blind spots. Their solutions may be good, but they tend to echo each other. Now compare that to a team where an aerospace engineer sits next to someone from quality control, who works alongside a cybersecurity specialist and a production manager. At first, the conversations can be awkward. Each one has their own language, their own set of assumptions, even their own pace of decision-making. You will absolutely face friction in the beginning—people defend their domain, they get frustrated at not being understood. But if you persist, what emerges is a kind of "fusion lens" that sees problems in three dimensions instead of one.

In aerospace and automotive, compliance and innovation are always in tension—you can't let one win at the expense of the other. By bringing different backgrounds together, I've seen teams create solutions that are both bold and safe, both innovative and compliant. That is rare when everyone comes from the same mold. And the added bonus is that communication itself becomes a strength. Learning to speak across disciplines forces clarity. It pushes people to listen before they respond. It's messy in the short term, but the long-term payoff is resilience and creativity. That's why I tell PMOs: don't just look at gender or ethnicity when you think diversity—look at professional journeys. That's where the real strategic advantage lies.

Aina: You've said the hardest barrier isn't culture but willingness to participate. How can leaders encourage voices that might otherwise stay quiet?

Blake: In my experience, the real danger isn't conflict—it's silence. When people hold back, either because they feel their input isn't valued or they fear repercussions, the team loses perspective. And in project work, losing perspective is dangerous because it means risks go unspoken and opportunities are missed. I've seen this in both the military and in corporate environments. On a submarine, silence could mean a hazard goes unreported until it becomes a crisis. In an IT project, silence can mean a developer sees a flaw in the architecture but doesn't bring it up because they don't want to sound negative. In both cases, the outcome is the same: avoidable problems escalate.

So the first step is safety: you have to create an environment where speaking up does not carry a penalty. That doesn't mean there are no standards—it means people know they won't be embarrassed, ignored, or punished for raising a concern. But safety alone isn't enough. Contribution also has to feel valuable. When someone speaks, leaders have to acknowledge it, take it seriously, and, if appropriate, act on it. Nothing shuts down a team faster than ideas going into a void.

One thing I've carried from the Navy is the idea of participation as expectation, not option. Everyone has a duty to the mission, so everyone's voice is needed. I try to bring that mindset into PMOs. In meetings, I make it clear that silence is not neutrality—it's withholding. When people understand that their role includes contributing, not just executing, they rise to it. It changes the culture from passive compliance to active ownership. And once you establish that expectation, diversity of thought doesn't just exist—it thrives

Aina: Dimitry, you developed the P3O Personas framework. How does categorizing project managers into personas improve outcomes in practice?

Dimitry: The challenge I saw repeatedly was that organizations often treated project managers as interchangeable resources. Someone with two years of Work Package experience could be dropped into a complex transformation program, and the results were almost always painful. By creating P3O Personas, I wanted to give leaders a way to make assignments that reflect reality—what the individual is actually ready for, both technically and emotionally.

When you classify someone as a Work Package Manager, for example, you know they can handle defined deliverables and dependencies but may not yet have the foresight to manage strategic relationships. A Relationship Manager, by contrast, thrives in navigating stakeholders but may need guidance in financial rigor. The Personas don't limit people—they provide clarity. It's like a career map that acknowledges progression isn't linear. This helps PMOs avoid costly mismatches, but it also helps individuals. It gives them a language to say, "Here's where I am, here's where I want to grow." And when PMOs use it well, it creates both better delivery and healthier careers.

Aina: You emphasize financial discipline as central to project leadership. How does embedding strong financial tracking early change the trajectory of a project?

Dimitry: I'll share an example from a large ERP implementation where financial missteps nearly sank the project. The sponsor treated a time-and-materials contract like a fixed bid, which meant scope ballooned without budget adjustments. By the time we hit the second cycle of integration testing, 80% of the budget had been spent. At that point, every decision downstream was constrained—not by strategy, but by financial damage control.

What financial discipline does, when embedded early, is prevent that situation. Weekly tracking, clear forecasting, and honest Estimate-to-Complete numbers create transparency. They don't just protect the bottom line—they protect trust. Executives know where the money is going, teams know the true boundaries, and delivery decisions are made in light of reality rather than wishful thinking. Without this, projects become what I call "vampire projects," draining profit and energy from other work. With it, even difficult projects can be course-corrected before they spiral. Financial clarity is not about spreadsheets—it's about giving the organization options instead of being cornered.

Aina: With sustainability now a global priority, how can PMOs adapt frameworks like P3O Personas to integrate environmental and social impact into portfolio decisions?

Dimitry: I see sustainability as the next evolution of project success criteria. We used to define success as on time, on budget, in scope. Then we began talking about business value and strategic alignment. Now, if a project delivers financially but damages the organization's reputation or ignores environmental obligations, can we really call it successful? I don't think so.

From a Personas perspective, this means adding sustainability awareness into every level. A Work Package Manager may need to understand how their deliverables reduce waste or energy use. A Program Manager must be able to evaluate trade-offs between speed and environmental impact. At the PMO Executive or CPO level, sustainability becomes part of portfolio selection—choosing not just the most profitable projects, but the ones that keep the organization credible in society. This isn't about turning project managers into climate scientists—it's about making them fluent in the language of long-term responsibility. If PMOs embed that expectation into each Persona, then sustainability becomes part of how we define excellence, not an afterthought.

Aina: Luis, you bring stoic philosophy into your leadership. How does this philosophy help PMOs lead with clarity during times of uncertainty?

Luis: At its core, stoicism is about distinguishing what is within our control from what is not. In projects, uncertainty is constant: requirements shift, markets fluctuate, risks materialize in ways we could not fully predict. Many leaders respond with anxiety, micromanagement, or blame. Stoicism teaches us that those reactions are wasted energy. The uncertainty itself is not ours to control; how we respond is.

In practice, this means maintaining serenity even when turbulence hits. For example, in a regional transformation program, external conditions changed halfway through—regulations shifted, budgets tightened, and resources were reassigned. Instead of chasing after what could not be fixed, we focused on clarity: what remained possible within the new constraints, what decisions truly required executive input, and what could be simplified to keep momentum. The calmness of leadership radiates through the team. People work better when they see a leader who is composed, thoughtful, and consistent rather than reactive. That doesn't mean ignoring problems; it means facing them with courage, temperance, and wisdom, the very virtues the Stoics held as essential.

Aina: You write about balancing resilience with emotional intelligence. Can you share an example where this combination turned a difficult project situation around?

Luis: One of the biggest misconceptions is that stoicism equals cold detachment. In reality, stoicism without empathy becomes rigidity. Emotional intelligence bridges that gap. I remember leading a large digital transformation effort where morale had collapsed. Teams were overworked, resistance to change was strong, and leaders felt under attack. A purely stoic posture—"endure, persist, ignore the noise"—would not have worked. People needed to feel heard, not dismissed.

So I combined both approaches. From the stoic side, I provided stability: we clarified objectives, removed noise, and focused on what we could influence. From the emotional intelligence side, I actively listened. We created open forums where frustrations could be voiced, and rather than defend decisions, I validated concerns. The turning point came when people realized we were not asking them to suppress their emotions, but to process them constructively. Within a few months, resilience was no longer something I had to "teach"—it had become part of the culture. The lesson for me was simple: resilience is strengthened, not weakened, when you integrate empathy.

Aina: Looking ahead, how do you envision stoic leadership shaping the Chief Project Officer role globally?

Luis: The Chief Project Officer is still an emerging role, but it is increasingly vital as organizations realize that strategy without execution is empty. What differentiates a CPO from a traditional PMO director is that they are not just enforcing process—they are influencing culture and shaping decision-making at the highest levels. This requires more than technical expertise; it requires philosophy.

Stoic leadership provides a model. A CPO guided by courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom will be someone executives trust in crises. They will not panic at uncertainty, nor chase trends impulsively. They will embody calm judgment, fairness in resource allocation, restraint in promises, and wisdom in aligning portfolios with long-term strategy. And because they lead by example, they will cultivate resilience across the organization. I believe in the near future, when boards and CEOs ask, “Who do we trust to bridge strategy and delivery?”, the answer will increasingly be: the CPO. And the ones who succeed will not be those who chase visibility, but those who practice discipline, introspection, and authentic care for their teams.

Aina: Mercy, you highlight skills gaps as a recurring issue. What is one scalable solution organizations often overlook when addressing this challenge?

Mercy: Many organizations treat skills gaps as an individual problem—send one project manager to a course, certify another, and hope that solves it. But gaps are systemic. When you don’t have a structured learning and development plan, the PMO becomes dependent on a few stars while the rest of the team struggles to keep pace. I’ve seen projects where one or two experts carried the weight of an entire portfolio, and when they left, everything slowed down.

A scalable solution is to institutionalize learning. That means combining classroom training, on-the-job mentoring, and e-learning into a continuous cycle. It’s not enough to train once; skills must be reinforced through real work. I’ve led initiatives where we created communities of practice inside the PMO—small groups that meet monthly to share lessons learned, new tools, and even failures. Over time, this builds collective competence rather than isolated expertise. It’s slower at first, but it pays off because the PMO no longer collapses when one person exits. The capability becomes embedded in the system.

Aina: Many PMOs lean too heavily on compliance. How can leaders ensure value-driven results without losing necessary structure?

Mercy: Compliance has its place—standards, processes, templates, all of these create consistency. The danger is when compliance becomes the end goal rather than the means. I’ve worked in organizations where project managers were spending more time filling out forms than engaging stakeholders. The projects were technically “compliant” but failing to deliver meaningful value.

To shift this, leaders need to balance governance with flexibility. One method I use is the “value lens” in reporting. Instead of asking only, “Was the process followed?”, we also ask, “What outcome did this enable?” For example, if a risk register is completed, I want to see evidence that it influenced decision-making—not just that it exists. In Agile environments, this is even more critical. We should measure whether the product increments are meeting customer needs, not just whether ceremonies happened on time. The PMO should be both guardian and enabler: enforce enough structure to keep quality, but always tie back to whether value is being created for the business.

Aina: Resistance to change is common in large programs. What's the most effective way you've managed it, and what should PMO leaders learn from that experience?

Mercy: Resistance to change is not just stubbornness; it's often fear—fear of losing control, relevance, or stability. I've been in programs where new processes were met with hostility not because they were wrong, but because stakeholders didn't see how it would help them personally. The key is communication—not one-way broadcasting, but two-way dialogue.

In one transformation program, initial rollout failed badly. Teams ignored the new framework, executives bypassed governance, and morale dipped. We stepped back and created a change management plan that included targeted communication sessions, tailored to each group. Instead of generic memos, we showed IT how the change reduced rework, finance how it improved forecasting, and executives how it tied to strategic goals. We also built feedback loops so people could voice frustrations without fear. Adoption improved dramatically—not overnight, but steadily. The lesson for PMO leaders is this: don't assume resistance means rejection. Often it means "help me understand." If you engage at that level, you don't just push change—you build buy-in.

Aina: Joe, you emphasize "spirit and synergy" in high-performing teams. What concrete actions can PMOs take to cultivate this across different maturity levels?

Joe: Spirit and synergy may sound abstract, but they are lived realities in every team. Spirit is the shared belief that the work matters, and synergy is the feeling that together we can achieve more than as individuals. I've seen mature teams where this comes naturally, but in younger or fractured teams, it requires deliberate cultivation.

One practical way is to create rituals that remind the team of their shared mission. In corporate teams, this could be as simple as starting meetings with a reflection on how today's deliverable connects to organizational goals. In volunteer teams, where people often juggle many priorities, it means celebrating even small wins to show that every effort counts. I've also found that structured collaboration exercises—where people must depend on each other to solve a problem—accelerate synergy. These aren't just "team building games"; they're rehearsals for real project interdependence. Over time, these practices shift people from working *next to* each other to working *with* each other. That's the difference between compliance and commitment.

Aina: Psychological safety often clashes with organizational pressure. How do you balance accountability with creating a safe environment for risk-taking?

Joe: It's one of the hardest balances. Accountability is non-negotiable—projects have deliverables, deadlines, and budgets. But accountability without safety produces fear, and fear suppresses performance. I've seen it firsthand: people hesitate to raise issues, mistakes are hidden, and teams stagnate.

My approach has been to set clear expectations upfront. Everyone knows what they are accountable for, and that doesn't go away. But I also establish forums where questions

and failures are not just allowed, but expected. In one project, we created weekly “red flag sessions” where team members could raise problems without immediate judgment. Instead of asking “who is at fault?”, we asked “what did we learn and how do we adapt?” Over time, this shifted the culture. People realized accountability was about delivering outcomes, not about punishment for setbacks. The paradox is that when people feel safe enough to admit mistakes, accountability actually improves. Because the sooner issues surface, the faster they can be resolved.

Aina: You’ve worked with both volunteer and corporate teams. What lessons from volunteer-led initiatives can strengthen corporate PMOs?

Joe: Volunteer teams teach humility. In corporate settings, leaders often assume authority guarantees compliance—people do what they’re told because it’s their job. In volunteer settings, you have no such leverage. People walk away if they feel disrespected or overburdened. That forces you to lead with influence rather than control.

One lesson that translates beautifully into corporate PMOs is the power of intrinsic motivation. Volunteers show up not for pay but for purpose. Corporate teams also crave that sense of purpose, even if they’re salaried. Leaders who learn to articulate the “why” of a project—why it matters to the organization, to the customer, even to society—unlock higher engagement. Another lesson is flexibility. With volunteers, you adjust goals to what is realistic given their availability. In corporations, while deadlines are firmer, the principle remains: respect people’s bandwidth, and you’ll earn their commitment. In short, corporate PMOs that learn from volunteer leadership create cultures where people don’t just comply—they care.

Aina: Blake & Mercy, both of you emphasize diversity—not only in professional backgrounds (Blake) but also in skills and capabilities (Mercy). How can PMOs practically measure whether they are truly diverse in capability, not just in appearance?

Blake: Too often, diversity is measured by surface indicators—how many different demographics are represented, how many boxes are ticked. But capability diversity is harder to quantify, and yet far more powerful. One approach is to map the problem-solving styles and professional journeys represented in the PMO. Do you have people who’ve lived through manufacturing constraints, regulatory audits, or digital transformations? Each experience is a lens, and when you create a skills inventory that captures those lenses, you can measure gaps. If every PM has the same background, your diversity score is low, no matter what the demographics say. The PMO should be able to show that for every major project dimension—compliance, speed, innovation, resilience—it has at least one voice with proven experience in that space.

Mercy: I fully agree with Blake. For me, the key is to treat capability diversity as a portfolio problem. You wouldn’t build a financial portfolio with all the same asset class, so why build a PMO with all the same skillset? Practically, this means running periodic skills assessments and aligning them with the organization’s strategic priorities. If the business is investing in digital transformation but no one in the PMO has deep Agile experience, that’s a capability gap. If sustainability is a priority and no one understands

ESG reporting, that's another. Measuring capability diversity isn't just about headcount—it's about alignment. A PMO that can demonstrate breadth of expertise mapped to future demand is one that is truly diverse in a meaningful way.

Aina: Luis, Dmitry & Joe, each of you highlights leadership evolution—stoic discipline (Luis), structured progression (Dimitry), and high-performance culture (Joe). How should PMOs redefine leadership development programs to prepare the next generation of Chief Project Officers?

Luis: Leadership development has to move beyond technical mastery. We've produced generations of project managers who are strong in tools and methodologies but weak in judgment when facing uncertainty. The CPO role will demand resilience, wisdom, and the ability to maintain composure under pressure. Training must therefore include philosophy and reflection. Leaders should be taught not only how to plan and deliver, but how to think: what is within their control, how to lead with fairness, how to temper their instincts. A CPO without stoic grounding may achieve quick wins but will falter when the storm comes. Preparing the next generation means building leaders who are not just skilled, but wise.

Dimitry: From my perspective, leadership development must also become more structured. The P3O Personas framework shows that career growth is not linear, and we should not pretend it is. A future CPO may begin as a Relationship Manager, or as a Financial Manager, but the path forward must be guided intentionally. Leadership programs should expose people to different Personas—not just train them deeper in one role. That means rotations, mentorship, and assessments that push people out of their comfort zones. A CPO is not someone who mastered one aspect of project management—they are someone who has walked across the spectrum, understands finance, stakeholders, strategy, and delivery. Leadership development should make that progression visible and achievable.

Joe: I'd add that the cultural dimension is critical. You can have all the frameworks and philosophy, but if you cannot build trust and psychological safety, you cannot lead. Leadership development should therefore include experiential learning—putting people in environments where they have to lead without authority, motivate without pay, and navigate conflict without hierarchy. That's why I often look to volunteer organizations as training grounds. If you can inspire a team that doesn't have to follow you, you are ready for the CPO role. The PMO should encourage these experiences, because they build the kind of authentic leadership that no classroom can teach.

Final Reflections

The PMO is no longer just an office. It's a crucible where systems, people, and strategy converge. What unites these five voices is their insistence that the PMO must grow beyond oversight into something far more vital: a space where diversity fuels solutions, frameworks create clarity, stoicism anchors leadership, and human spirit turns teams into forces of performance.

Blake shows us that diversity of background is not cosmetic but strategic. Dimitry gives us the structure to place people where they can succeed. Luis reminds us that resilience and wisdom are as critical as plans and budgets. Mercy grounds the vision in the daily battles of skills, compliance, and change. Joe closes by bringing us back to what matters most — the trust, safety, and synergy that make performance possible.

The Chief Project Officer is not an abstraction. It is the next natural step when PMOs stop asking, “*Are we in control?*” and start asking, “*Are we creating value, resilience, and transformation?*”

Interviewee Information



Blake Mallett

South Carolina, USA



Blake Mallett is a Strategic Technical Program and Project Manager with over 20 years of experience spanning engineering, customer operations, and military service. Currently a Senior IT Project Manager, he leads global initiatives, drives Agile adoption, and establishes Scrumban practices to improve efficiency. Holding both an MBA in Technical Project Management and an MSPM from The Citadel Military College, along with PMP and CSM certifications, Blake is known for his holistic approach to problem-solving, risk navigation, and operational improvement. Beyond his professional work, he actively supports the Veteran and Project Management community through podcasts, PMI involvement, and mentoring.





Dimitry Shlyonsky

Toronto, Canada



Dimitry Shlyonsky is a Strategic Technology and Digital Transformation Leader with 20+ years of experience delivering enterprise-wide change through PMO leadership, cloud migration (Amazon AWS & Private Cloud), and portfolio management. Proven success leading ERP Steering Committees and practice leadership to align project delivery with business goals and governance. Expert in modernizing legacy systems, managing multi-million dollar digital programs, and collaborating with C-level executives to accelerate growth and operational excellence.



Luis Guardado

El Salvador



Luis Guardado is Vice-President of PMO LATAM and Global Governance at Concentrix™, where he drives corporate strategy, portfolio execution, and digital transformation. With 14 years of international PMO leadership across HSBC, TELUS, the United Nations, and Webhelp, he has earned multiple global awards, including “Best PMO of the Americas” and recognition as one of the “Top 5 Revolutionary Business Leaders.” A frequent author and board member with the PMO Global Alliance and The PMO Leader, Luis is also an international speaker and lecturer in strategy,

portfolio management, and leadership, currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Philosophy. He is founder of PMOex, an NGO dedicated to advancing professional excellence and community impact

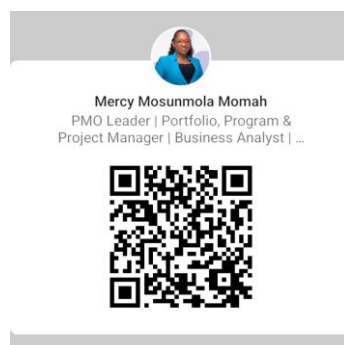


Mercy Mosunmola Momah

Nigeria



Mercy Mosunmola Momah is a Project Coach, Mentor, PMO Consultant, and Motivational Speaker with over 20 years of experience across consulting, IT, strategy, and program management. She has led multi-million-dollar projects in sectors ranging from software and telecoms to healthcare, banking, and education. A certified PMP and Business Analyst with an MBA and postgraduate management training in the UK, Mercy is recognized for translating concepts into results, driving innovation, and challenging the status quo. Beyond her corporate work, she is active in public speaking, leadership coaching, and career development, helping others achieve professional growth.





Joseph Fernandes

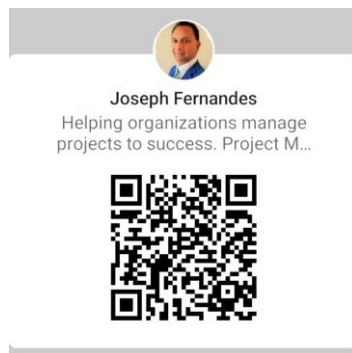
Toronto, Canada



Joseph Fernandes held various roles in project management and business improvement in public and private sectors for over 2 decades. He is a strategic thinker and recognized for his ability to set vision, align others to goals and deliver results. He has collaborated with teams to plan and execute complex enterprise IT, business and educational projects in both private and public sectors.

Accomplishments and extensive volunteer experience include:

- PMI Toronto Chapter Board Member, Mentor, Vice Chair on GovCoP for PMI Global
- Project Manager, Founder and President for Project Management Toastmasters Club (PMTMC)
- IPM Day, Day in the Life of a PM project - Writer & Evaluator Lead; Contributor to PM book



About the Interviewer



Aina Aliieva

Toronto, Ontario, Canada



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.

Aina can be contacted at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/aina-aliieva/>