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The role of different project management office types in organizational development

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the different types and levels of project management offices (PMOs) and their functions in creating organizational development, together with the best way to structure project work in the organization. Based on semi-structured interviews from managers of seven organizations located in Hungary and Switzerland, the outcome is that PMOs function as brokers between corporate strategy and project delivery whose performance is determined by aspects like positioning, access to senior executives, and project culture maturity rather than by formal design. Successful PMOs balance decentralized execution with centralized standards and governance by utilizing common hybrid models that combine support, compliance, and project management freedom. The paper also found that PMOs significantly improved transparency, prioritization, and organizational resilience. The study that the most-used model is the hybrid type of PMO and stresses the combined effect of positioning, maturity, and integrated skills as the most important factors that have an influence on effectiveness. The research is limited by the small sample size and the limited sectoral coverage, suggesting the need for larger-scale mixed-method studies as well as cross-national studies.

KEYWORDS: project management office (PMO), organizational development, project culture maturity, project governance
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1. Introduction

The project management office (PMO) is currently defined by the Project Management Institute (PMI) as "a management structure that standardizes project-related governance processes and facilities, the sharing of resources, tools, methodologies and techniques" (PMI 2021: 245). Yet, the emphasis on the word "currently" is important, as the contemporary concept of the PMO dates back to the 1950s and it has gone through several changes over the past decades (Darling – Whitty 2016).

Nevertheless, the importance of PMOs is increasing in today's organizations due to several factors. Wald et al. (2025) argue that projectification is on the rise, meaning that organizations tend to shift towards project-based operations to keep their competitive positions. Several changes on the levels of society, technology, or even geopolitics also put organizations into an uncertain position, necessitating more flexible operations, which projects can provide (Aranyossy et al. 2017; Gellén 2012; Novakova 2020; Kovách – Kučerová 2006; Stocker 2019; Stocker – Erdélyi 2024; Troilo et al. 2024). Several studies have shown that PMOs and PMO managers have a beneficial effect on organizational projects (Hobbs – Aubry 2006; Hubbard – Bolles 2015; Ichsan et al. 2023), which de facto supports the previous statement on the strengthening role of PMOs today.

The scientific and practical knowledge on PMOs has gone through a substantial transformation in the previous decades (Darling – Whitty 2016), yet it is still evolving and is still in the focus of the project manager community, both from a scholarly and a practitioner perspective. Recent studies examine the role of PMOs for example in the case of digital transformation (Simard – Aubry 2025), in different industries (Ershadi et al. 2023; Braun – Sydow 2024), in their role in stimulating innovation (Sergeeva – Ali 2020) and knowledge management (Arbabi et al. 2020), and organizational design (Braun – Sydow 2024). Several studies published in high-quality journals still argue on the taxonomy of PMOs (Monteiro et al. 2024; Müller – Wang 2024), and review articles still focus on the evolution of the topic from different perspectives (Wald et al. 2025). Despite the ongoing vibrant discussion on the topic, there is a scarcity of and a need for studies examining the relationship between the different PMO types and organizational success factors, and on how different PMO types allocate their tasks in terms of centralization. Our paper aims to provide contributions on these matters by answering the following main research questions:

1. How can different levels of the PMO support organizational development?
2. How can an effective project task configuration be described at an organizational level?

In further sections of our paper, we introduce the underlying literature of our research, present our research design and findings, draw our conclusions, set out the theoretical and practical implications, and assess the limitations along with the further research directions of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Functions and roles of PMOs

Modern organizations operate under circumstances where complexity and dynamism are amplified, making factors like competition, changes in technologies (Pelsőci et al. 2021), and global uncertainty call for simultaneous management of multiple interdependent projects. The ability to properly coordinate, prioritize, and deliver multiple initiatives has become the key driver of both survival and growth for the organization. Due to such factors, companies have continued to set up PMOs – dedicated bodies tasked with establishing and instilling project management methodologies (Hofman 2014). PMOs must not be viewed only as administrative addenda but, instead, are specifically set up to ensure that projects are deployed systematically, aligned with organizational intent, and lead towards ultimate success. As borne out by Görög (2001), organizational competitiveness over the long term is increasingly dependent on the execution of strategically relevant projects, thereby giving the PMO the role of key driver toward improving organizational performance.

The value of PMOs has been increasingly highlighted over the past few years with the onset of economic turbulence and recessionary pressures, motivating business entities to look for improvement in efficiency and value differentiation. Under the circumstances, PMOs have expanded their roles from narrow administrative ones to wider strategic roles including portfolio management, skill development, and continuous performance enhancement (Meredith et al. 2003; Singh et al. 2009). The evolution is one of perspective: the PMOs are no longer viewed as mere administrative obstructions but are instead viewed as strategic enablers whose justification is their ability to demonstrate tangible value addition to organizational performance and resilience.

In terms of practice, PMOs are given an overarching set of duties. These include setting standardized project management methods for maintaining uniformity, consolidation of project information into a reliable organizational repository of knowledge, and intensification of communication between project teams and the upper echelons of management (PMI 2017; Silvius 2021; Schipper – Silvius 2018). Acting as information coordinators and facilitators, PMOs are

responsible for aligning the micro-level processes engaged in the execution of projects with the macro-level strategy comprising overarching decisions. They provide the necessary data and information required by the managers for the effective allocation of resources, risk management, as well as the prioritization of activities.

In addition to their operational roles, PMOs are increasingly prominent in their roles in stakeholder management as well as alignment with strategic intentions. As identified by Cleland and Ireland (2010), the measures by which success is determined have shifted from the classic "project triangle" comprised by time, cost, and scope; success is increasingly required to balance multiple stakeholder expectations while retaining awareness of the organization's strategic direction. In this regard, PMOs are organizational entities responsible for guaranteeing not only the success of the end result of projects but their alignment within the overall organizational framework.

Altogether, these developments illustrate the evolution from the traditional support role for the PMO to an increasingly sophisticated organizational entity. It plays multiple roles as an upholder of methodological integrity, an information dissemination and communication center, and a strategic partner that strengthens resilience, alignment, as well as the creation of lasting value.

2.2. Types of PMOs and defining factors for their influence

In spite of the general recognition of the importance of PMOs, their organizational structures, functional roles, and levels of authority exhibit considerable discrepancy among institutions. Initial studies have indicated that PMOs were also commonly established to solve gaps in project management practices by applying standards, imposing timelines, and providing centralized coordination (Block – Frame 1998). However, the scope and effectiveness of PMOs are not fixed universally; rather, they are determined by senior management's decisions regarding processes, duties, and control mechanisms (Harris 2000). This suggests that the setting up of a PMO is as much an indication of organizational decisions on governance as much as it is a response to requirements from project management.

Many researchers have provided taxonomies of PMO classification by maturity level or level of integration. As an example, Garfein (2005) outlines four different levels:

1. Project office – serves as a fundamental entity that gathers and disseminates project-related information for consolidation at elevated tiers.
2. Basic PMO – responsible for defining selection criteria, collecting performance data, and ensuring projects meet organizational requirements.

3. Mature PMO – integrates projects into strategy, coordinates resources among initiatives, and installs prioritization mechanisms.
4. Enterprise PMO – located at the strategic apex of the organization, spanning portfolio management with corporate-level decisions made in real time.

This model showcases the continuous inclusion of PMOs into the strategic organization core, such that as the PMOs mature, they make the transition from the delivery of operational support to leadership functions that are strategic.

Other classification models categorize PMOs by the degree of powers over projects. PMI (2017) and Unger et al. (2012) make the classification between supporting, controlling, and directive PMOs. Supporting PMOs are primarily auxiliaries, providing templates, tools, and training documents. Controlling PMOs impose standardized processes to maintain compliance with rules and conformity among projects. Directive PMOs possess the maximum degree of powers, where active management is present, including the distribution of resources. This is one classification where the range of powers and influence are exercised by the PMOs, from an advisory function to management.

Alternative frameworks categorize PMOs based on their strategic or operational focus. For example, enterprise PMOs are strategically oriented, emphasizing the alignment of portfolios with the overarching corporate strategy, overseeing the selection of projects, and reporting directly to senior leadership (Carrillo et al. 2010; Hubbard – Bolles 2012). Conversely, project control offices function at a level closer to operations, particularly within large or intricate initiatives. Their duties encompass the monitoring of key performance indicators (KPIs), budget management, and interdepartmental coordination to facilitate project delivery (Crawford 2010; Hubbard – Bolles 2015).

Taken together, the models show that PMOs are able to function on all levels simultaneously – operational, tactical, and strategic – and that their activities are by no means monotonous nor one-dimensional. The PMOs instead grow according to the organization, culture, and maturity requirements as well as the degree of delegated power from the senior management. The diversity heightens the versatility as much as the indeterminacy of the PMOs, rendering them very versatile but difficult to map automatically to rigid typological categories.

2.3. Competencies and capabilities of PMOs

Beyond structural classification, PMOs are also potential centers for knowledge and skills that define the general project management culture of the organization. A good example is the project management centre of excellence (COE),

whose function is not the direct management of projects but rather to provide standardized processes, develop best practices, permit the sharing of knowledge, and align project management skills throughout the organization (BCG 2013; Scheiblich et al. 2017; Farid 2021). As expertise stores as well as promoters of continuous improvement, COEs illustrate that the function of the work of the PMO can reach beyond monitoring and coordination to capability development as well as organizational learning.

These models form the basis of the adaptive role of PMOs, that must stimulate coherence by standardizing but still remain responsive to evolving organizational needs. Hobbs and Aubry (2007) describe five principal functions reflecting this adaptability:

1. Monitoring project performance
2. Developing competences
3. Managing multiple projects
4. Promoting organizational learning
5. Supporting strategic decisions

In comparison with monitoring projects and multi-project coordination, where so much work has concentrated, the function of developing competences is relatively understudied. The omission is all the more unexpected given that organizational resilience and competitiveness come to depend increasingly on the development of not only methodological but broader skills throughout project teams and their managers. The difficulties encountered by the development of competencies are the result from the absence of a univocal interpretation of the concept of competence itself from the area of project management, as Papp-Horváth et al. (2024) underlined.

The PMI's Project Management Competency Development Framework offers preliminary direction by delineating the technical and methodological competencies anticipated of project managers. However, researchers persist in emphasizing that these frameworks remain inadequate unless they also encompass behavioral and interpersonal competencies, such as leadership, negotiation, coaching, and communication (Costa et al. 2013). The amalgamation of these technical and behavioral facets within PMO practice constitutes an essential advancement in comprehending how PMOs can function not merely as process enforcers, but as facilitators of professional development and organizational flexibility. Further examination of cognitive capabilities is also important in project management and in facilitated strategic change contexts, as pointed out by Aleksandrova et al. (2025).

2.4. Synthesis and research gap

The literature clearly establishes PMOs as prime organizational functions whose functions vary from operational support to strategy alignment and the development of project management capability. They are increasingly considered not only as administrative functions but also as strategic enablers that support organizational learning, portfolio optimization, and resilience. There is still much, however, that remains unknown from the research perspective as well as practically.

In the first case, even though numerous typologies are identified to divide PMOs by level or type – from supporting units to enterprise-level configurations – very little empirical evidence is uncovered on the concrete increment such levels contribute to organizational development in practice. The leap from conceptual models to organizational influence is under-researched.

Second, although the relationship between project managers and PMOs is widely concurred upon to be the basis of the efficiency of PMOs, research so far has been relatively neglectful of the daily practices, structures, and relations underlying the working of this relationship. How the balance between oversight and support is achieved by the PMOs, or how they build communities of practice among the project managers, remains too undertheorized and empirically under-specified.

Third, all the research increasingly underlines the value placed by effective PMOs on competencies influencing the effectiveness of the PMO. The majority of the accounts, however, tend to prioritize technical issues – methodologies, tools, procedures – over the behavioral and interpersonal skills, such as negotiation, coaching, and facilitating. The incorporation of the set of skills into the working of the PMO is one underdeveloped but vital area.

To address these gaps, the paper investigates the role and functioning of PMOs through two guiding research questions:

1. How can different levels of the PMO support organizational development?
2. How can an effective project task configuration be described at the organizational level?

3. Methods and sampling

The paper is based on a qualitative research design built on semi-structured expert interviews, following the method suggested by Montenero and Cazorzi (2021). Given the explorative nature of the topic, the qualitative method was found suitable to uncover the implicit mechanisms underlying the performance of the PMOs.

An interview guide was created, organized into three parts. The first addressed the overall background of PMOs within the engaged organizations to glean experts' perceptions of the concept, still poorly defined within the writings. The second dealt with centralized and decentralized aspects of the PMO (i.e., tasks, processes, accountabilities, tools), guided by the review of the literature. The third dealt with the interaction between the PMO and the project managers, noted within previous work as an extremely important condition for the success of the PMO. The guide consisted of sixteen questions overall.

Experts from seven institutions – five from Hungary and two from Switzerland – were interviewed. Convenience sampling was chosen together with snowball sampling, given the challenge of accessing suitable informants. The criteria for selection were the existence of an active PMO and the firm's organization, with larger firms anticipated to embrace the latest practices. Accessibility as well as the researchers' forehand acquaintance with the institutions also guided the selection. Two external experts – one from PMSZ (Hungarian Project Management Association) and one from PMI – also examined the interview guide and endorsed the selection of the potential institutions. Seven agreed to take part out of the twenty institutions approached (ten from Hungary, ten from Switzerland).

Participants included senior-level as well as middle-level managers. All interviews were conducted online during Microsoft Teams from October to December 2024. Interview duration was from 35 to 65 minutes, averaging 50 minutes. The interviews were manually transcribed and coded in Microsoft Word. The data was analyzed by the implementation of thematic coding (Williams – Moser 2019). The transcripts were independently coded by each author, with the subsequent consolidation of the coding conducted to increase reliability through triangulation (Bryman 2006). Four thematic codes came from the above process, on which the results outlined in the subsequent sections are built.

The final sample is varied, as sampling by industry was not possible. Although diversity means that generalizability is restricted (Fletcher et al. 2018), the study gained varied experiences of PMO practices. The recent recession had an influence over the organizational environment common to all the firms that took place, making the strategic function of projects intense in terms of resilience building. Interviewees also commonly mentioned busy schedules throughout the end months of the calendar year, making schedules hard to secure. Table 1 provides characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Types of PMOs in the sample

Number	Industry	PMO type
1	Luxury cosmetics	Enterprise PMO
2	Consulting	Enterprise PMO
3	Consulting	Enterprise PMO; Center of Excellence
4	Energy	Division PMO
5	Energy	Division PMO
6	Tourism	Division PMO
7	Higher education	Division PMO;Center of Excellence

Source: authors.

4. Research results and discussion

The thematic data from the interviews produced four thematic codes, each giving an insight into the means by which experts conceptualize, as well as have experience of, the work of PMOs. While respondents indicated organization-specific practices, they offered common "truths" concerning PMOs, according to their professional experience. The results are presented below under the four themes, with links to the research questions.

4.1. The general role and positioning of PMOs

In all the organizations studied, the interviewees all characterized the PMOs as intermediate mechanisms between operational realities of delivery by project and the strategic agendas of the senior management. Their key advantage was found to be their capability to provide visibility throughout projects, their information summarization, and their capability to bring better decisions by the executives. This way, the PMOs were not considered as unrelated administrative functions but rather connections between tactical project-level activities and corporate strategy.

> *"Obviously, the priority and importance of a project vary greatly [...] That's why I think that if a company does it right, its PMO is a strategic organizational unit that helps implement the strategy. This is because the company does not need to think in terms of individual projects, but rather in terms of a project portfolio, so it needs to be able to weigh up the less important, the important, and the most important. A project manager also needs to be*

> *familiar with the strategy, because then they will be able to position their project among the other projects."* (Interviewee 3.)

The organizational location of PMOs also differed across cases. In many firms, PMOs resided within the IT function, reflecting the high-project intensity of IT departments as well as the cross-cutting nature of digital infrastructure to organizational processes. The location is notable for how PMOs tend to emanate from technologically focused areas before scaling up to enterprise-wide functions. By contrast, large multinationals commonly reported possessing multiple-specialized PMOs structured under an overarching global PMO. These "federated" models enabled local/functions-based PMOs to take advantage of particular business needs while achieving coherence from corporate-level oversight. These models demonstrate the networked and layered forms of PMOs reported by Aubry et al. (2007), where governance structures are shaped dynamically by organizational size and intricacy rather than according to some common blueprint.

Respondents identified one of the most important roles that the PMO plays as helping to prepare decisions and project prioritizations. The PMOs were characterized as winnowing, organizing, and interpreting project information for the senior management level, whose decisions to invest, hold up, or end projects depend on this information. In some instances, respondents identified that the absence of the PMO's analytical and coordination function would mean that top management would have too fragmented an overview to provide effective steering.

> *"For me, the PMO is all about portfolio management [...] ensuring that we are focusing on the right projects and programs and sequencing them to the global supply chain strategy. End-to-end thinking is what it is all about: getting the priorities straight, working out the strategic initiatives required, and then ensuring that we have the right resources on the right projects at the right time so that we have the ability to deliver successfully."* (Interviewee 1.)

This viewpoint positions the PMO as an organization that makes sense by transforming scattered project information into strategic intelligence.

At the same time, respondents agreed that the level of maturity existing within the project organizational culture significantly affected the ability with which PMOs were able to perform their roles. In the case where project management methods were not well integrated nor esteemed, the PMOs were unable to influence much but instead spent most of their time on narrow reporting activities. On the other hand, where the project culture was better developed, the

PMOs were able to function as trustworthy advisors by instigating the flow of discussion on the topic of priority as well as improving coordination among multiple projects. These observations support the contention made by Hobbs and Aubry (2006) that the PMOs are not static nor permanent frameworks but rather movable constructs whose success depends on cultural as well as organizational readiness.

> *"[...] when project maturity is close to zero, the debate between different fields and units focuses on what each party understands by the term 'cost'."* (Interviewee 5.)

Another aspect highlighted by the respondents was the symbolic placement of the PMO. Some respondents characterized PMOs as strategic entities instead of extensions of particular departments. The symbolic awareness seemed to be vital for the conferment of legitimacy and authority on the PMOs to make portfolio-level decisions. Wherein the PMOs became too embedded into operational silos, they had the risk of being seen as technical assistance groups instead of strategic management partners.

> *"Resources are always limited, and companies can't do everything they'd like or chase every opportunity that comes up. That's why prioritization is essential: deciding what really matters most at a given time. I see the project office's key role as gathering this information, shaping it for decision-making, and connecting it to the bigger picture. At its best, the project office has a clear view of the company's strategy, listens closely to senior leadership, and actively contributes to shaping that strategy. Ideally, all of this happens through a structured and transparent process."* (Interviewee 2.)

Broadly speaking, this theme corresponds directly with RQ1, showing that the level where the PMO is positioned within the hierarchy of the organization and the degree of inclusion within the strategic process determines the degree of development input from the PMO. Where PMOs have access to the senior levels of the decision process and are considered strategy development partners, they are capable of adding great value by better prioritization, better allocation of resources, and better synchronization between projects and organizational goals. Where this is not the case, their role is reduced to operational reporting only, with their developmental impact under-utilized.

In general, the evidence suggests that the influence of PMOs is less driven by their formal structural definition than by their placement, access, and credibility within the broader organizational system. As linkers, translators, and brokers between strategy and implementation, PMOs have the potential to be prime

levers for organizational development – if they operate within a facilitating culture that values their integrative role.

4.2. Centralized and decentralized aspects of PMO activities

The second theme pertains to the equilibrium between centralization and decentralization, a tension that participants in the interviews consistently highlighted as crucial to the functioning of PMOs. Participants concurred that PMOs establish a cohesive framework for project management, thereby ensuring uniformity across various processes and projects. Nevertheless, they noted considerable discrepancies regarding the extent of authority granted to the PMO. In certain organizations, PMOs possessed a comprehensive mandate, undertaking responsibilities related to project portfolio management (PPM), strategic alignment, and the prioritization of initiatives. Conversely, in other organizations, PMOs were constrained to more operational duties, including reporting, monitoring KPIs, and integrating project data.

The respondents pinpointed the set of functions that they found indispensable to the success of PMOs, regardless of their type or level. These include consulting with both executives and project managers, sharing knowledge among projects, setting up standards, and sharing information. The functions such as these were described as bolstering efficiency as well as strategic decision-making by helping the organization to avoid duplication, apply uniform practices, and retain control over complex project portfolios. These findings come close to the work by PMI (2017) and Unger et al. (2012), where the former classifies the resultant PMOs into supporting, controlling, and directive depending on the level of authority. Similarly, the stories given by the interviewees repeated aspects of Garfein's (2005) framework, where some organizations operated at the level of "mature" PMO, focusing on the alignment with business strategy, whereas the rest operated at an "enterprise" level, where they provided portfolio-level decision support, together with real-time information on projects.

> *"On the one hand, the PMO has a bit of a governance role, and on the other hand, it has an educational role."* (Interviewee 4.)

A recurring interview comment was the importance of PMOs focusing on strategic alignment instead of an exclusive emphasis on the classic "project triangle" of time, budget, and scope. A number of interviewees emphasized that on-time and within-budget delivery is no longer enough to prove value. Instead, the PMO needs to enable the organization to choose the correct projects, ensure they are aligned with the strategy, and supply the expertise and framework to

ensure their success. In this way, the PMO was framed as a strategic partner instead of an exclusively technical role.

Respondents also cited the role of competence and innovation as the prime enablers of effective PMO performance. In addition to functional expertise, PMOs also had to demonstrate an openness to new practices and tools, including planning, controlling, and decisioning tools by means of AI. However, the survey respondents made one thing certain, namely that the tool success depends on the level of maturity the organizational project culture possesses.

> *"[...] AI will induce even more projects [...] of course, there are project offices that are at a lower level of maturity, they produce templates at most [...] and there are the highly developed ones, who are really implementing such strategies."* (Interviewee 3.)

It is also analogous to the argument by Hobbs and Aubry (2007) that the PMOs are not the repository of any standardized method but must be adjusted according to the organizational context and incorporated within an environment where the culture values and uses the generated knowledge.

In short, this theme illustrates that the balance between centralized and decentralized elements is not fixed but is agreed upon depending on the organization's needs, developmental level, and strategy. Examples of all-centralized or all-decentralized structures were not found. Instead, organizations seemed to combine elements from both methods: the centralization of methods, procedures, and performance indicators was balanced by decentralization of implementation, reporting, and daily project activities.

This theme therefore directly connects to RQ1 and RQ2, showing how PMOs establish centralized environments with decentralized behavior to support organizational growth. It also points out that success is even less tied to design structures but is rather dependent on cultural maturity, abilities, and the capability to align project management architectures to strategic choices.

4.3. The relationship between PMOs and project managers

The third theme describes the dual mandate of the PMOs: they are both tasked with helping the project managers with their everyday work and monitoring the project work on the organization's behalf. The tension between the two was also an underlying current throughout the interviews. Interviewees noted an array of supporting services provided by the PMOs, ranging from standardized tools to the provision of document templates, onboarding procedures, and the ability to provide training, both internally generated and externally accredited (e.g.,

PMI-PMP, Prince2). These were viewed as helping to ensure the level of consistency across projects but also develop the professional competences of the project managers. These results correspond very much with the literature where supportive PMOs are conceptualized as centers of knowledge and training suppliers whose role is one where methodologies are propagated and professional development fostered (PMI 2017; Unger et al. 2012).

> *"[...] it is important that the fundamental document templates (e.g., status PPT or Excel) are available and uniform [...] and that there is training so that everyone fills in the individual cells and items in the portfolio management software in the same way."* (Interviewee 4.)

> *"[...] a good project office makes sure that everyone wants to develop. There are many different ways for a PM to develop [...] they can learn something in an institutional setting, so they can go on a PMP or Prince2 course, or the project office itself can organize such programs. Where is this profession headed? [...] A good project office sends its people to training courses. Not because it thinks they will come back knowing everything, but on the one hand as an incentive, and on the other hand so they can pick up a little knowledge and make friends with people from other companies."* (Interviewee 3.)

Aside from formal training, many respondents also identified the importance of the PMO as a community of practice. They described the PMO as the "home" for project managers – a professional as well as personal anchor point where practitioners are able to share experiences, reflect on issues, and learn from each other. This perspective is very much aligned with the current literature on PMOs as centers of excellence (BCG 2013; Scheiblich et al. 2017), where the former are tasked with infusing competencies across the organization, creating channels for knowledge transfer, as well as fostering organizational learning. The conceptualization of the PMO as a professional community underlines the point that its worth extends beyond that of governance alone, embracing cultural as well as developmental roles.

> *"[...] this is the home of project managers [...] first and foremost, it must provide security. It is a safe environment where you can be honest, where you can talk openly about what is going well and what is going wrong, and what the environment of the project office is like. It is very important that they receive support, because they will inevitably get stuck here and there."* (Interviewee 3.)

Meanwhile, respondents also emphasized the overriding need for effective PMOs to allow project managers to work autonomously within agreed methodological frameworks. The justification for the independence was assessed as key in avoiding excessive bureaucratic interference and in ensuring that project managers retain their motivation and versatility within their mandates. The independence was not, however, envisaged as mutually exclusive with monitoring. Monitoring was emphasized by respondents as still retaining the need for PMOs to retain the capability to monitor, to direct, and intervene where deemed necessary, especially where projects are getting off-track from strategy or where risk is high. The sensitive balance is compatible with the view put forward by Giraudo and Monaldi (2015), by reference to which the degree of PMO intervention would be conditional on the maturity level of the organizational project culture.

In practice, most organizations reported the adoption of hybrid structures, where PMOs combined elements of both supportive and controlling types. That is, while the PMOs may provide standardized forms and training offerings (supportive roles), they also monitor compliance with methodologies and ensure the implementation of the appropriate tools (controlling roles). Total directive models, where PMOs have direct authority over project management, were not encountered; instead, the organizations appeared to balance supportive and monitoring functions in ways that matched their maturity levels and strategy.

> *"[...] an intermediate solution. Of course, manual control is not good. A project manager is a manager by definition; and if they are managers, then they have autonomy. If I trust them and think I have put the right person on the right project, then they will do their job, and if they get stuck or want support, they will come to me. However, a project office and its manager or management must monitor the progress of the projects."* (Interviewee 2.)

This is one illustration of the delicate balance between empowerment and control that defines good relations between PMO-PM.

This theme tackles RQ2 straight on, illustrating how PMOs set up work and responsibilities such that the balance between autonomy and monitoring is struck in project management. It also illustrates the significance of organizational culture and maturity in where the boundary is set between assistance and management, underlining the conclusion that the nature of the PMO cannot be grasped by structural typologies alone but needs to be examined relatively given their contextual function for facilitating project success.

4.4. The value added by PMOs to the organizational development

Ultimately, the interviewees identified the broad value that PMOs add to their work beyond their routine operational functions. The PMOs were invariably characterized as "driving forces" for the execution of corporate strategy, playing principal brokers between implementation and strategic control. In the regional context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where the institutions are overwhelmed by heightened uncertainty and economies are susceptible to volatility, the interviewees identified that PMOs contribute stability and resilience by ensuring that projects are aligned with the long-term business direction. This is reinforced by current studies that identify PMOs as organizational resilience promoters, above all during turbulent times, by controlling responses and operational continuity (Bokal et al. 2014; Boda et al. 2020; Egyed – Zsibók 2023; Jałocha 2013).

> *"Setting up control towers is a bit beyond the traditional PMO role, but it's becoming increasingly important. With resource constraints and the need for flexibility, control towers help us focus on specific areas, drive improvements, and ultimately deliver both cost savings and better service."* (Interviewee 1.)

They also tied the value of PMOs to concrete advantages. Initially, PMOs foster openness by implementing standardized reportage procedures, thereby allowing the predictable flow of information from executive personnel to project teams. Secondly, they provide traceability by maintaining systematic records and tracking portfolio level, thereby allowing management to make sense of how individual projects map onto broader organizational priorities. Thirdly, they provide portfolio management that allows management to prioritize initiatives, their detection of interdependencies allowing them to allocate resources better. Lastly, they build buy-in by the stakeholders, both internally – by aligning work by the project management offices as well as departments – and externally – by ensuring the desired level of client as well as partner satisfaction from the end results of projects. These remarks are consistent with previous studies where linkages have been found between PMOs and better communication, accountabilities, and organizational alignment (Carrillo et al. 2010; Schipper – Silvius 2018).

> *"You have to centralize if you want to see what's happening and make good decisions. In my opinion, project management cannot be completely decentralized. You need to have a think tank that can see what we are doing,*

> *where it is taking the organization, whether we are doing well, whether we are developing well, and whether our project managers and other experts working there are good.[...] the highly successful ones [author: PMOs] have a lot of authority, a lot of prestige, good people, and the necessary resources, and in return, the project office is mature, providing managers with high-quality information and doing high-quality work in project implementation."* (Interviewee 3.)

This sentiment reflects the shift from viewing PMOs as administrative entities toward recognizing them as sense-making structures, capable of translating project data into strategic insights.

This theme answers RQ1 directly by highlighting the way that PMOs bring value to organizational development by adding to technical delivery of projects but also to organizational capability for decisions, resilience, and stakeholder satisfaction. Note the way the outcomes also indicate that value from PMOs is not necessarily from the way that they have potential to provide control or standardization. Their value is instead multiplied where they combine those functions with the consultative and interpretive functions, where the organization reaps the benefits by capitalizing on the complexities and uncertainties.

The combined four thematic codes therefore illustrate how PMOs are both strategic and operational entities. They reconcile centralized and decentralized functions, offer structures but permit dynamism, serve the project managers but are answerable to the senior leadership. The study validates much of the prevailing body of work on the roles and typologies of the PMO, but also illuminates the hybrid qualities of the PMOs that resisted simplistic categorizations. The very hybridity points up organizational project culture maturity, together with the skills of the member of the PMO – both the technical and behavioural – as prime determinants of their successes.

The results therefore provide evidence that future research must break free from structural typologies of PMOs and take closer account of the contextual factors – culture, competencies, external pressures – by virtue of which PMOs are able to provide organizational value. The relationship between the factors will provide the key to an account of why PMOs are effective in some but not other organizations, and how best they may provide resilience and strategic alignment under conditions of uncertainty.

Table 2. Thematic codes and key findings from interviews

Thematic Code	Key Findings from Interviews	Connection to Literature	Research Question
1. General role and positioning of PMOs	• PMOs bridge operational project execution and senior management. • Often positioned in IT, or multiple specialized PMOs under a global PMO. • Influence through decision preparation and project prioritization. • Effectiveness is shaped by organizational project culture maturity.	PMOs adapt to organizational culture and act as mediators between strategy and operations (Aubry et al. 2007; Hobbs – Aubry 2006).	RQ1
2. Centralized vs. decentralized elements	• PMOs provide a coherent framework but vary in authority. • Some oversee PPM and strategic alignment; others focus on reporting and integration. • Functions include consultation, knowledge transfer, and setting standards. – Tools widely used (Microsoft Project, SharePoint, AI) but must fit organizational maturity.	Matches supportive / controlling / directive PMO typology (PMI 2017; Unger et al. 2012). Reflects Garfein's (2005) maturity model. Supports Hobbs and Aubry (2007) on context-driven PMO design.	RQ1 & RQ2
3. Relationship between PMOs and project managers	• PMOs provide templates, training, onboarding, supervision. • Seen as a "home" or community of practice for PMs. • Balance between empowering autonomy and retaining oversight. • Hybrid models: supportive + controlling types common.	PMOs as centers of excellence (BCG 2013; Scheiblich et al. 2017). Intervention levels vary with maturity (Giraudo – Monaldi 2015).	RQ2

Thematic Code	Key Findings from Interviews	Connection to Literature	Research Question
4. Value contribution of PMOs	• PMOs are viewed as drivers of strategy implementation. • Provide transparency, traceability, portfolio-level oversight. • Enhance resilience and stakeholder satisfaction, especially in CEE context.	PMOs support resilience and strategy alignment (Boda et al. 2020; Jałocha 2013; Schipper – Silvius 2018).	RQ1

Source: authors.

5. Conclusions

This research aimed to map and explore the decentralized roles of PMOs in centralized settings in the CEE countries. The findings indicate that PMOs never comply with strict typologies but develop as hybrids combining supporting and controlling characteristics according to the organizational requirements. Their success also depends not only on structural location but also on the maturity of organizational project culture, the intensity of senior management support, as well as the capability to connect project-level actions with the strategic agenda. In all the examined cases, the role of the PMOs was presented as connection mechanisms between operational delivery versus strategic oversight, fulfilling two roles: on the one hand, monitoring and holding accountable, and on the other, facilitating knowledge sharing, training, and professional development for the project managers.

The study's outcomes greatly enrich the current stock of knowledge pertaining to PMOs in the following principal ways. First, they extend existing categorizations (Garfein 2005; Hobbs – Aubry 2007; PMI 2017) by showing that hybrid PMOs, merging elements of supporting, controlling, and enterprise models, are not exceptions but the rule in practice. Second, they enrich debates around the relationship between PMOs and the project management profession by showing that PMOs have the potential to serve as communities of practice, generating learning, resilience, and professional credibility, alongside their current roles as mechanisms for control. Third, they highlight the role of competences, notably the much-needed conjunction of technical and behavioral competences, as being indispensable for the delivery by PMOs of value above the level of structural alignment. Lastly, by focusing on the CEE region, this study enriches the globally diversified knowledge on PMOs by showing how the region's economic difficulties and the need for resilience shape their roles and functions amidst the economies in transition.

For practitioners, the study recommends that the most effective PMOs are imbedded within strategic decision-making processes and continually endorsed by senior management. A clear methodological framework must be put in place to provide transparency and accountability, but this must be balanced by enough flexibility to enable teams and project managers to innovate practices for context-specific issues. Creating an open project culture is also important, with investment needed in training, coaching, and negotiation skills. The PMO must be viewed not only as an administrative body but also as an enhancer of resilience, capable of steadying the ship during emergencies but also enable the organization to adapt. Notably, the PMO must be alert to their role in the protection of the well-being and mental health of the project managers, so that professional development and reflective supervision are an integrated requirement of their remit.

Some limitations must be noted. The study's sample was small, consisting only of seven organizations, thus constraining the generalizability of the findings, even though the sectors studied varied greatly. There were access restrictions that made systematic comparisons between industry sectors impossible, and the opinions obtained were predominantly from the middle and top management, without the inclusion of the views of other stakeholders, including the project team members, as well as chief-level executives. Lastly, the study only utilized interviews, without the completion by other data sources, including project records, quantitative performance data, as well as longitudinal studies, whose inclusion would have enhanced triangulation and resulted in stronger conclusions.

Further research needs to consider if the identified hybrid PMOs are uniquely CEE phenomena or found elsewhere, using cross-country comparisons, particularly by contrasting transitional economies with mature market economies. Further comparisons also need to be made at the sectoral level, given the probability that the maturity of project culture also varies among sectors like construction, IT, healthcare, or the public sector, thereby defining the scope and mandates of PMOs.

The sole emphasis on qualitative interviews here offered depth but narrow breadth. Subsequent studies would benefit from including quantitative designs based on larger samples to test the relations posited here – say, between PMO competencies, maturity of project culture, and organizational outcomes like success rates for projects, portfolio efficiency, or attainment of strategy. Longitudinal case studies would trace the evolution over time of PMOs under circumstances like organizational transformation or economic downturn. Qualitative as well as quantitative data, combined through mixed-methods studies including interviews, surveys, and document review, would allow for firmer triangulation and more complete comprehension of the dynamics of PMOs.

Some respondents also highlighted the rising importance of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital platforms for project portfolio management and decision support. Further research is desirable to study how digitalization restructures the work of the PMO, changes the degree of decentralization versus centralization, and reconfigures the skills needed by the members of the PMO. Tied to this is the accelerating uptake of the agile and the hybrid delivery methods of projects. Research on the response of PMOs to agile practices, or their embedding with them, may illuminate whether the PMOs are harbingers of digital transformation or obstacles to innovation.

Lastly, the human and cultural dynamics of PMO operation need to be studied more. This work demonstrated how PMOs are capable of playing the role of communities of practice, fostering professional development and resilience among project managers. Subsequent studies need to study this role more formally, particularly with reference to their role in mental health, job contentment, and organizational learning. Inter-cultural work could consider the ways national and organizational culture influence the legitimacy, distribution of authority, and maturity of project culture of the PMO. These studies would provide better answers to the question of why particular PMO designs work well in one cultural environment but are ineffective in the next.

Overall, this work reveals that the most effective way to conceptualize PMOs is to view them as adaptive and hybrid organizations that combine oversight with support, strategy alignment with delivery, and standardizing with tailoring. By situating PMOs organizationally and regionally, the work contributes to theoretical arguments around the hybridity and capability of PMOs as well as operational direction to organizations striving to bring better project governance into being. Finally, PMOs need to be conceptualized not as formal administrative offices but as very much alive entities that are able to bring resilience, support the sharing of knowledge, and are key actors aligning projects with strategy under conditions of uncertainty and variability.

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