2026 TRENDS

Program and Project Management

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TREND 1

Governance and Risk Management for Agentic AI

TREND 2

Scaling Native AI Delivery Across Functional Operations

TREND 3

Value Realization as the Main KPI for PMOs

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PMOs Shift to Persistent Product Teams

TREND 5

From Project-Based Change Management to Sustained Enterprise Change Capability

As we kick off 2026, PMO and transformation leaders are operating in a very different climate than even a few years ago – timelines are tighter, expectations for clear, measurable results are higher, and technology keeps moving faster than most organizations are comfortable with. The conversation has moved beyond isolated pilots and point solutions. AI is increasingly embedded in day-to-day work, and new agent-driven capabilities are beginning to execute multi-step processes across systems, raising the bar for governance, accountability, and risk management.

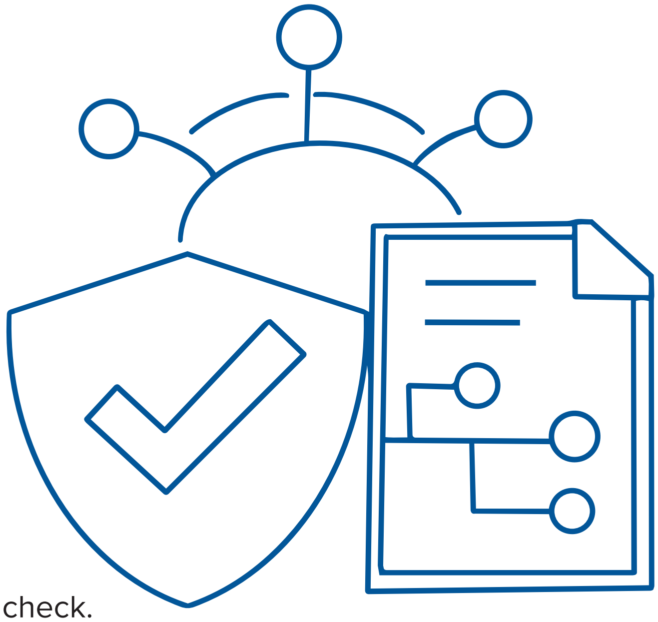
At the same time, delivery models are shifting as persistent teams and platforms release more frequently, which means change is hitting the business more quickly, even as stability, compliance, and customer experience expectations remain non-negotiable.

In this environment, the PMO becomes a differentiator. Success in 2026 will depend on transforming the PMO from a reporting function into an enablement engine that strengthens decision-making, embeds controls and readiness into delivery, and proves outcomes through disciplined value realization. Organizations will need to move from project-based change to repeatable change capability, manage adoption at the speed of release, and create governance patterns that can scale new technologies safely without slowing execution.

The trends that follow outline where leading organizations are investing to shorten reaction time, protect trust, and convert transformation effort into measurable, durable business results.

TREND 1

Governance and Risk Management for Agentic AI



Agentic AI is the first wave of automation that behaves less like a tool and more like a junior operator planning steps, calling systems, and completing multi-stage work. This shift – moving from people- and technology-integrated workflows to agentic AI – is happening fast, and it comes with a hard reality check.

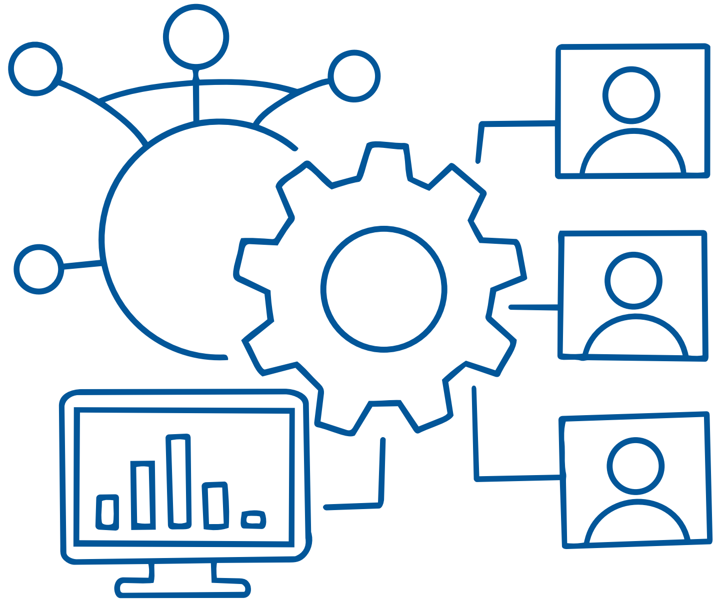
Gartner expects more than 40% of agentic AI projects to be canceled by the end of 2027 when teams fail to demonstrate clear value or build the right risk controls. At the same time, however, adoption will keep accelerating. Reuters reporting on Gartner notes that agentic AI is expected to autonomously handle 15% of daily business decisions by 2028 and be embedded in 33% of enterprise software by 2028. In other words, many organizations will continue moving forward even while a large share struggle to scale responsibly.

For PMO and change leaders, the implication is clear: agent rollout isn't just an IT release but rather an operating model change. Before agents touch regulated or revenue-impacting processes, such as pricing claims and returns, trade settlement, or quality events, programs must establish human-in-the-loop decision rights, defined ownership (RACI) for exceptions, audit trails, and production monitoring. If you wait until after deployment to add guardrails, you'll either throttle the agent into irrelevance or accept unmanaged risk. The risk isn't just model accuracy. It extends to process accountability: who approved an action, which data was used, what exceptions occurred, and how the organization detected and corrected failure.

Business reality reinforces why governance has to lead. Benchmarks cited in Business Insider show agent performance can be under 25% success on the first attempt and only around 40% even after eight tries. That gap between a cool demo and a trusted operator is the governance workstream. The winners will treat agents like a new workforce class with training through prompt and workflow design, supervision through controls and monitoring, and performance management through value and quality KPIs. Those that treat agents as simple plug-ins will quickly discover that the real complexity of the business lives in the exceptions.

TREND 2

Scaling Native AI Delivery Across Functional Operations



The AI conversation is shifting from which use cases to pursue to a deeper question: *what changes when AI becomes embedded in the way work actually gets done?*

That shift is why AI-native delivery (*AI being embedded in the entire project lifecycle*) is a program and change management issue, not a technology one. Gartner's forecast that at least 30% of GenAI initiatives would be abandoned after proof of concept by the end of 2025 is the clearest warning that scaling fails when organizations don't address the basics data readiness risk controls and measurable value.

Gartner also reports that 61% of organizations are evolving or rethinking their data and analytics operating model because of AI. This signals that the constraint has moved from model availability to enterprise readiness. AI programs will succeed or stall based on whether teams can standardize processes, clarify decision rights, and build practical adoption routines that reflect how people actually work. That includes role-based training, adjustments to job design, and policy updates that remove ambiguity.

Workforce behavior shows how quickly the ground is shifting. Financial Times reporting indicates that 48% of workers in a large survey now use AI every day, up from 31% the prior year. Adoption is moving faster than most formal enablement and governance efforts. When that gap widens, shadow AI becomes inevitable and outcomes grow inconsistent, which is exactly the risk transformation leaders are expected to manage.

TREND 3

Value Realization as the Main KPI for PMOs

The next evolution of PMOs is not better status reporting – it's about becoming the enterprise mechanism for converting investment into measurable outcomes.

PMI's research points to the core issue: 83% of organizations still lack maturity in benefits realization. In practice, that means teams can deliver outputs without ever capturing the value those initiatives were meant to create. As investment increases in new technology, process redesign, and operating model shifts, that gap becomes more costly. Value depends on sustained adoption and performance over time, not simply reaching go live.

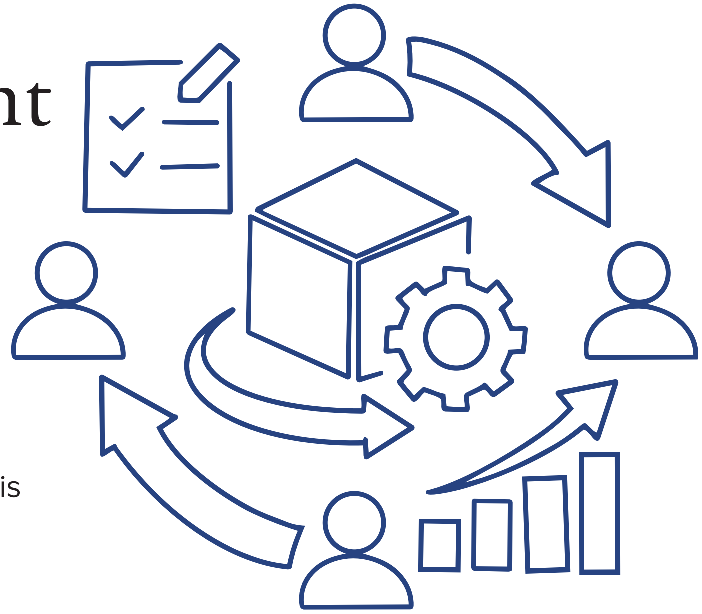
PMOs that operate like value offices will do three things differently. First, they will define benefits before work begins, with explicit owners in the business (not just IT). Second, they will track leading indicators that prove the value mechanism is working, such as usage cycle time, forecast accuracy, and first pass quality. Third, they will operationalize, stop, or change decisions when benefits are not materializing – treating value like a managed product and not a promised outcome.

The financial case for this discipline is straightforward. PMI found that organizations with high benefits realization maturity waste $54 million dollars for every $1 billion invested, compared to $166 million dollars per $1 billion in low-maturity organizations. That represents an $112-million-dollar opportunity per $1 billion invested and 67% less waste. High-maturity organizations also report 45% more projects meeting their original goals.

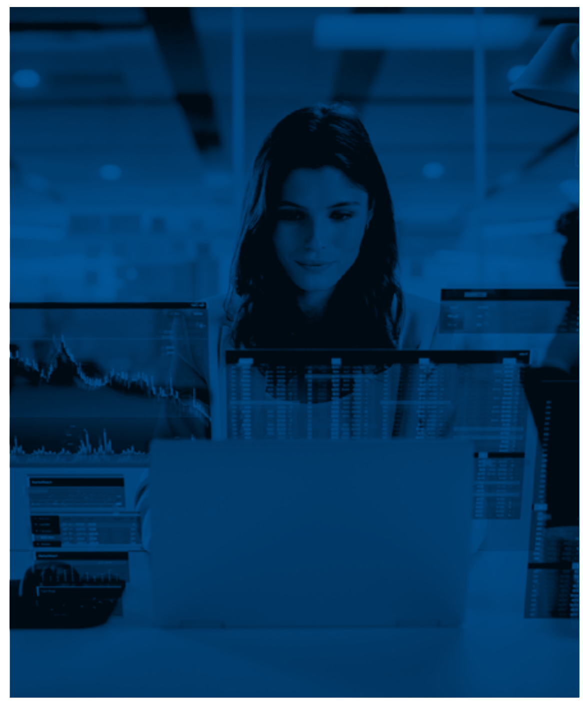
Bottom line: A PMO that can't prove value becomes overhead. A PMO that creates value becomes strategic infrastructure.

TREND 4

PMOs Shift to Persistent Product Teams



Organizations are steadily moving from project completion to product performance. The reason is simple: digital capabilities, data platforms, and integrated business processes don't end at go live. They require ongoing prioritization, funding, and performance management. That is why product and platform operating models are expanding beyond software teams into enterprise transformation delivery.



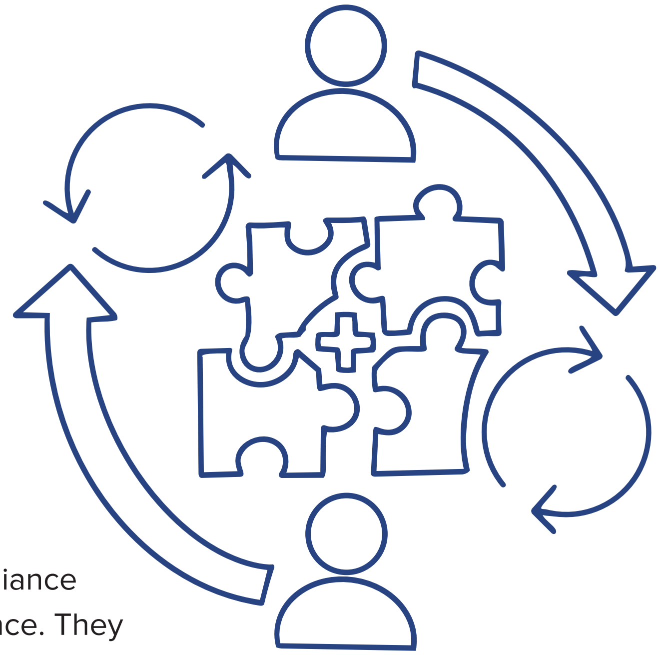
Gartner's data reinforces the scale of this shift, with 85% of organizations reporting they've adopted or plan to adopt a product-centric delivery model. For transformation leaders, this approach is quickly becoming the default model for how work gets done.

In practice, this transition demands a different governance posture. Persistent teams need stable backlogs, clearly defined product metrics, and funding aligned to value streams rather than one-time initiatives. At the same time, organizations must still honor time-bound program commitments and enterprise priorities. The shift also elevates the role of change management. Smaller, more frequent releases can reduce the risk associated with large launches, yet they increase the volume of change reaching the business.

Without structured enablement, role-based training, and deliberate communication, organizations either slow delivery in the name of stability or push out releases that fail to gain traction. The most effective PMOs and transformation offices will close that gap by establishing a reliable cadence that links product delivery to adoption readiness and measurable business results.

TREND 5

From Project-Based Change Management to Sustained Enterprise Change Capability



Organizations are now operating in what feels like an “always on” change environment. AI adoption, platform releases, compliance updates, and operational redesign no longer happen in sequence. They overlap. That reality exposes the limits of traditional change management, which was built around defined start dates and clear end points. The emerging priority is enterprise change capability, meaning the ability to absorb and sustain continuous change as part of the normal operating rhythm.

Two signals stand out. First, leaders recognize a readiness gap with only 35% of CEOs believing their teams are AI-ready, which implies technology rollouts will outpace workforce capability unless training and role redesign are built into the transformation plan. Second, workforce adoption is accelerating faster than formal enablement, with 48% of workers in one survey reporting they use AI every day, up from 31% the prior year. Rapid adoption combined with uneven readiness creates strain, heightening the risk of change fatigue and opening the door to inconsistent practices, policy gaps, and uneven performance.

For PTO and OCM leaders, building enterprise change capability is not a soft undertaking. It’s a matter of managing organizational capacity. Organizations need a portfolio-level view of change to understand who is impacted, how often, and where the organization may already be saturated. From there, deployment patterns can be designed to protect critical business periods and concentrate enablement efforts on the roles that directly influence outcomes.

The organizations that win in 2026 will not be those attempting the greatest volume of change, but rather the ones that apply the greatest discipline in how change is sequenced, supported, and sustained.

Looking Ahead

In 2026, organizations across retail, consumer products, and life sciences will continue to deliver transformation amid economic uncertainty, rising expectations for measurable outcomes, and rapid technology acceleration. AI is moving from pilots to embedded execution, agentic workflows are emerging as a new digital workforce, and product and platform operating models are increasing delivery velocity and the volume of change reaching the business. Success will depend on staying agile while maintaining control, protecting trust through disciplined governance, and sustaining adoption without overwhelming teams.

This is where PMO enablement becomes the differentiator. In 2026, leading PMOs will move beyond reporting to serve as enterprise enablement engines. They will connect strategy to execution, build readiness into delivery from the start, and ensure governance keeps pace with AI and agent deployments. Just as important, they will treat benefits realization as a core discipline, with clear ownership, defined baselines, and early indicators that show whether value is actually being created.

Clarkston Consulting brings deep expertise across the retail, consumer products, and life sciences industries with a pragmatic approach to PMO enablement, program delivery, and change management, helping clients build scalable governance, improve execution discipline, and translate transformation ambition into measurable results that stick.

ABOUT CLARKSTON CONSULTING

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For more information about how we can help your company, please contact us.

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