Orchestrating mega sports events: governance, complexity and scale

Governing complexity in Saudi Arabia's mega sports events

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Inside the report

1
Introduction
03

2
Complexity at an unprecedented scale in Saudi Arabia
05

3
The case for an event management PMO as a control tower
07

4
Governing at scale
09

5
From delivery to legacy
11-12

Introduction

To the audience, a mega sports event appears seamless. The match starts on time; the broadcast is flawless and the fan experience feels effortless. But behind that spectacle lies one of the most complex orchestration challenges in modern program delivery.

In Saudi Arabia, this complexity is amplified. The country is not just hosting events; it is building a global reputation as a destination for world-class sports and entertainment in line with its Vision 2030. From the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Formula 1 races and large-scale sports events, the ambition is to deliver at a level that competes with, and often surpasses, global benchmarks.

Such ambition requires a complex governance model, where most organizations underestimate the level of governance required to deliver these events successfully.

Mega sports events should not be treated as projects, they are, in fact, multi-layered programs operating under pressure, public scrutiny and zero tolerance for failure. Treating these events as anything less is the fastest route to fragmentation, delays and reputational risk.

A mega sports event is best understood not as a single initiative, but as an ecosystem of initiatives. Each event brings together:

- Government authorities and regulators
- Venue operators and infrastructure teams
- Fan engagement and experience teams
- Sports federations and rights holders
- Security, mobility and crowd control entities
- Sponsors and commercial partners
- Media, broadcasting and digital platforms

Each of these operates as a program. However, they must converge perfectly at a single moment in time. Without this convergence, organizations risk misaligned priorities across stakeholders, conflicting timelines and dependencies, delayed decision-making, limited visibility into critical risks and reactive rather than proactive management.

Mega events require a fundamentally different model — one that balances control with agility and standardization with flexibility. Governance is either seen as administrative overhead or imposed too late in the lifecycle to have real impact. By the time issues surface, the cost of correction is exponentially higher.

In our experience, the biggest challenge in mega sports events is not execution capability, it is governance design. Organizations often fall into one of two traps:

1 | Overcentralization: a heavy, traditional structure that slows down decisions and frustrates delivery teams

2 | Undergovernance: a loosely coordinated model where each stakeholder operates independently, resulting in fragmentation

Complexity at an unprecedented scale in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, sports have grown to become far more than merely competition on the field, serving as a platform for economic development, social cohesion, national identity and international visibility. As countries invest in hosting mega sports events, grassroots participation and modern sports infrastructure, the sector is evolving into a long-term growth engine rather than a series of isolated activities.

Sports act as a cross-sector economic platform that activates tourism, hospitality, retail, media and employment. As the sector matures, its value is created not only through mega and marquee events, but through the broader ecosystem that sits around them, including venues, sponsors, service providers, digital platforms and community participation pathways. For governments, this creates an opportunity for viewing sports through a wider development lens. Well-structured investment within the sports industry can support diversification objectives, while also generating lasting social value through healthier and better-engaged communities.

The focus is increasingly shifting from simply buying visibility through major events toward building owned assets, local infrastructure and long-term ecosystem capability. That matters because hosting events alone is expensive, unpredictable and difficult to monetize directly, whereas infrastructure-led investment creates greater control, more recurring value and a stronger foundation for sustained growth.

The public sector has a critical role to play in shaping the enabling environment for a high-performing sports ecosystem. This extends beyond funding and oversight to include policy design, regulatory clarity, infrastructure prioritization, delivery governance and frameworks that encourage private investment and innovation.

In practice, this means ministries and sector authorities are often required to orchestrate a wide network of stakeholders with differing mandates, timelines and incentives. The ability to align these actors behind a common ambition, while maintaining execution discipline and transparency, is increasingly essential for success.

Unlike traditional event-hosting markets, Saudi Arabia is scaling rapidly across multiple event types while building event-delivery capabilities and engaging a diverse mix of local and international stakeholders. In that sense, the strategic question is no longer only which events to host. It is also about what lasting capability and economic value those events help create while keeping in mind that Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a global events hub where the margin for error is extremely small.

This creates layered complexity of new operating models being tested in real time, and expectations are exceptionally high. In such an environment, governance is a strategic capability and not just a support function of the event.

Organizations that invest early in structured event management project management offices (PMOs) gain significant advantages including faster mobilization, better coordination and higher delivery confidence.

The cost of poor governance in mega sports events might be significant considering the impact and consequences such as operational disruptions, visibility to global audiences, safety and security risks, financial and budget overruns, in addition to reputational risk at different levels.

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The case for an event management PMO as a control tower

The event management PMO acts as the governance translation layer between the organizing committee, the executive committee, the event CEO and specialized delivery teams.

Leading organizations are increasingly adopting an event management PMO as a central control tower, where a high-performing event management PMO operates as:

- A governance backbone, providing clarity, rules, structure and a robust governance, and assurance framework to guide decision-making, oversee performance and assess risk systematically
- An integrator, connecting all stakeholders into a unified operating model
- A unified delivery engine, aligning all workstreams into one coordinated delivery model through disciplined planning and execution methodologies, supported by an integrated event masterplan with clear milestones, timelines and cross-stream dependencies
- A decision enabler, accelerating – not delaying – critical decisions
- A transparency engine, providing real-time visibility across all workstreams
- A risk orchestrator, identifying and mitigating issues before they escalate

To function effectively as a control tower, the event management PMO must maintain an integrated view across planning, readiness, risks, actions and dependencies. Its role is not to duplicate the work of individual streams but to consolidate and interpret information in a way that gives leadership a single source of truth. This visibility is essential in a live event setting, where fragmented updates can quickly create blind spots, delay interventions and reduce confidence in the overall state of readiness. Therefore, the role of the event management PMO is not simply to coordinate tasks, but to provide the structure required to manage scale with confidence. When multiple workstreams, stakeholders and timelines intersect, a clear governance model becomes the mechanism that aligns decisions, resolves dependencies and prevents minor issues from becoming event-level risks.

In the context of Saudi Arabia's mega events, this role becomes even more critical due to the scale and diversity of stakeholders involved. It extends beyond coordination and reporting to bring together multiple entities with different priorities and timelines. The event management PMO acts as the governance translation layer between the organizing committee, the executive committee, the event CEO and specialized delivery teams. It translates delegated authorities, committee procedures, reporting obligations and compliance requirements into disciplined execution.

In this context, the event management PMO not only integrates workstreams and enables decisions, but also safeguards governance integrity, manages approval pathways, supports committee operations, enforces financial and procurement controls and creates the institutional knowledge required to build repeatable event-delivery capability across the country.

The event management PMO needs to sit at the intersection of strategy and execution — close enough to leadership to influence decisions yet embedded enough in delivery to understand ground realities.

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Governing at scale

Effective event governance is rarely achieved through a single committee or reporting line. Instead, it is achieved through a layered model. In this model, strategic bodies provide direction, executive forums resolve cross-functional trade-offs, supervision drives daily control and delivery teams execute with clarity on their mandates.

Based on our practical experience, effective governance for mega sports events is built on five core principles:

1. Clarity of ownership

Every workstream, deliverable, and decision point must have a clearly defined owner, documented scope and agreed success criteria. Clarity of ownership is critical and key in multi-stakeholder environments to avoid diffuse accountabilities, where issues can fall through the cracks without being resolved or mitigated.

2. Integrated planning

One of the most common pitfalls is allowing stakeholders to plan independently on their own, which leads to misaligned timelines and unrealistic dependencies.

An effective event management PMO enforces a single integrated master schedule in alignment and coordination with the different owners and stakeholders, taking into consideration cross-functional dependency mapping and regular alignment cycles. This approach transforms the planning stage from a fragmented activity into an integrated coordinated effort.

3. Decision speed as a KPI

In mega events, speed of decision-making is a necessity, and governance must be designed to define decision rights upfront and establish escalation pathways, while enabling rapid issue resolution.

Organizations that treat decision-making as a structured process outperform those that rely on ad-hoc coordination and firefighting.

4. Real-time visibility

From experience, static reports are ineffective in a live event environment, where leadership usually looks for real-time dashboards, clear status indicators including early warning signals. Digital PMO tools and capabilities play a critical role in turning data into actionable insights.

It is essential in a live event environment because issues often emerge quickly and can escalate just as fast. Static reporting is rarely sufficient when leadership needs to understand current status, emerging risks and the likely impact on downstream workstreams. A strong PMO therefore needs digital tools, clear dashboards and disciplined status routines that turn fragmented updates into actionable insights.

5. Proactive risk management

As risks in mega events are inevitable, the key challenge lies in how early issues can be identified and addressed.

Proactive risk management allows issues to be addressed at the lowest effective level while preserving escalation routes for matters that carry wider operational, financial or reputational impact.

Therefore, designing a mature governance model helps embed risk management into daily operations, encouraging early escalation of risks while tracking mitigation actions rigorously. This approach shifts the organization from firefighting to foresight.

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From delivery to legacy

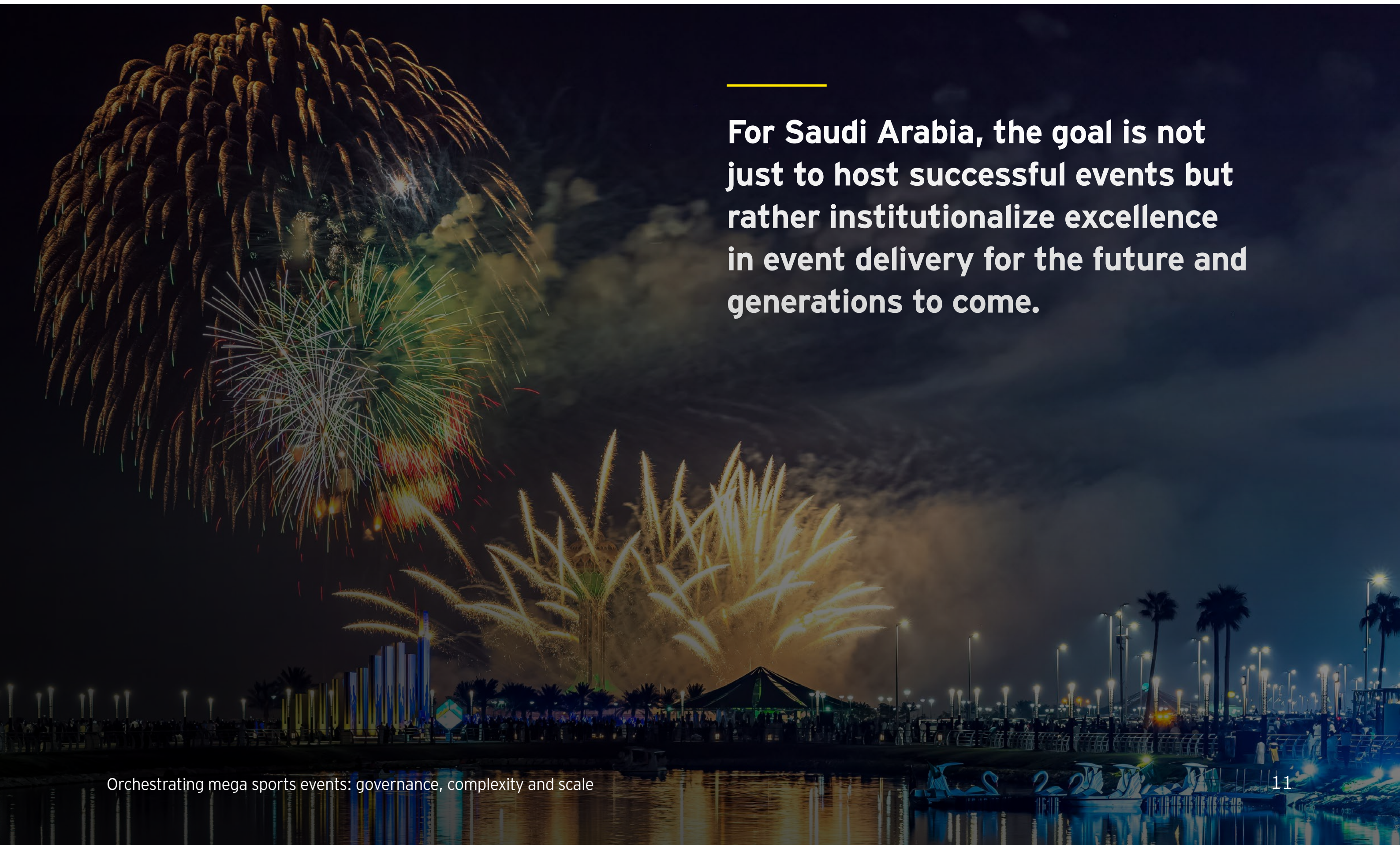
The conversation has shifted beyond the successful delivery of individual events toward the longer-term legacy they leave behind. One of the most overlooked aspects of governance is its contribution to long-term value creation.

To prevent an event management PMO from disappearing after the event, organizations should embed the practice of capturing lessons learned from the event, building reusable assets and framework repositories and more importantly developing institutional capabilities and knowledge. This includes the post-event utilization of venues after major competitions, the development of local operating capabilities, the strengthening of institutional coordination and the ability to convert short-term visibility into durable economic and social returns.

This move is particularly important in a public-sector context, where the value of sports investment is increasingly assessed through outcomes rather than activity alone.

A more mature model links event hosting with broader policy goals such as participation, youth engagement, tourism growth, talent development and city-scale regeneration.

These practices convert the event delivery from a one-off effort into a repeatable, scalable capability which can be transferred to other organizations and teams.



For Saudi Arabia, the goal is not just to host successful events but rather institutionalize excellence in event delivery for the future and generations to come.

In summary, governance is the differentiator

The next phase of growth in sports will be defined not only by the scale of ambition, but by the quality of execution. Organizations that can connect strategy, governance, partnerships and delivery will be better positioned to create a sports ecosystem that is commercially stronger, operationally more resilient and more closely aligned to Vision 2030 and national development priorities.

The complexity of events will increase as Saudi Arabia continues to expand its presence in global sports. Over time, infrastructure will improve, talent will grow and technology will evolve. However, the true differentiator will remain how effectively these elements are governed.

The organizations that succeed will be those that recognize that delivering a mega sports event is not about managing activities, it is about governing complexity. In this context, the event management PMO is not a support function – it is the backbone of delivery.

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