Pulse of the Profession® 2026

Driving Success in Complex Projects

From Navigating Tasks to Navigating Systems

Project Management Institute.

Foreword

Each year, PMI's *Pulse of the Profession®* research captures what project professionals around the world are experiencing. This year, our key finding was consistent across industries, geographies and organization sizes: complexity is increasing and changing the nature of project work.

In 2025, our *Maximizing Project Success* research reframed what it means for a project to succeed. From meeting the time, budget and scope constraints toward value and impact creation. Shortly after, we introduced M.O.R.E. — a call for action for project professionals to raise their accountability, expand their influence and deliver results that matter to their organizations. Both efforts pointed to the same underlying challenge: in conditions defined by rapid change, interdependence and uncertainty, projects demand intentionality and rigor to deliver value.

This report is about just that. It explores where complexity comes from and how it impacts projects when it goes unaddressed. The report provides insights into what the most effective project professionals do differently, and that one core distinction matters: complexity is not simply difficulty stemming from complications. A difficult, complicated project can be solved with effort, expertise and the right resources. A complex project requires the ability to sense, adapt and respond as conditions shift in ways that weren't anticipated at the outset.

What separates high performers isn't that they face less complexity. It's that they respond to it differently by sensing and adapting rather than planning and controlling. That orientation is what M.O.R.E. is designed to support, and it is what this report is designed to help you build.

Pierre Le Manh, PMP

President & CEO
Project Management Institute

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Key Takeaways and Research Insights

1 Project Complexity

Project complexity does not come from a single source; it emerges from the interaction of organizational, environmental and human dynamics.

Nearly half of project professionals (48%) cite faster technology and tool cycles as a driver of complexity, highlighting one way these forces are reshaping modern project work.

2 Effects of Complexity

The effects of complexity manifest in projects in ways that reduce value and drain resources.

In complex projects, 61% of project professionals report experiencing some form of value loss as a result of complexity.

3 Proven Practices

Proven practices can drive greater success in complex projects.

From sponsor alignment, to stakeholder engagement, to building team momentum — a select set of core project skills have the ability to move the needle on even the most complex projects.

Introduction

Organizations face constant pressure to reinvent. The latest CEO research[1] from PMI found that 93% of CEOs say their organizations must rethink their operating models at least every five years, and 65% say they must do so every two years or more. The top drivers for that change are AI and automation (cited by 72% of CEOs), market and economic pressures (48%) and growing competition (41%).

Projects are the vehicles through which this transformation and reinvention happen — and complexity is the friction that accumulates when the pace of change and interdependence strains the organization's ability to adapt. The same forces that prompt reinvention — rapid technology change, market volatility and geopolitical instability — also make individual projects harder to plan, execute and sustain, independent of any organization-wide change initiative.

Maximizing Project Success[2] research from PMI defines successful projects as those that deliver value worth the effort and expense. If not handled well, complexity pressures on both sides of that equation increase the potential for value erosion and poor strategic alignment, as well as cost and effort.

> *The traditional management system is no longer fit for purpose to help organizations really navigate the speed and complexity of the environment within which we're now operating.*
>
> **Michael Lurie**
> chief catalyst officer, Bayer, U.S.A.

Complex Projects Today: 2026 *Pulse of the Profession®*

About a third (31%) of complex projects fail to achieve the full scope of their originally intended benefits, according to the latest PMI *Pulse of the Profession®* research — more than twice the 12%[3] rate reported in our 2024 *Maximizing Project Success* research.

Our *Pulse of the Profession®* research reveals the ubiquity of complexity: 97% of project professionals say they managed at least one complex project in the past year, with over half classifying those projects as significantly complex. Additionally, project professionals report that complexity is increasing: 81% say projects have become more complex in recent years, with 37% describing a significant increase. The forces driving this increase include the rapid evolution of technology, navigation of multiple stakeholder groups across functions and geographies, and instability in the political and regulatory environments — forces similar to those driving CEOs to reconsider their operating models.

Why is this important? Because four in five complex projects experience some fallout driven by complexity in ways that aren't always immediately apparent: strategic drift, diminished value and teams slowly burning out.

While complexity pervades modern project work, its impact can be mitigated. Our analysis shows that high performers (those who see their complex project perform higher than average) don't face fewer complexity challenges; they respond to them more effectively by applying familiar project management practices with intention and foresight. High performers align stakeholders early, engage them strategically over time, keep teams moving through uncertainty and use structured approaches to anticipate and interpret emerging challenges. In doing so, they look beyond execution to protect the value the project is meant to create and this pays off. Projects that manage complexity effectively are five times more likely to succeed. Eighty-eight percent of projects were rated extremely or very successful when teams were highly effective at managing complexity, compared with just 14% when teams were only slightly effective or ineffective.

This report explores the landscape of project complexity today: where it comes from, what it does to projects and how proactive project professionals can navigate it.

+31%

Percentage of complex projects that fail to achieve originally intended goals

DEEP DIVE

What Do We Mean by Project Complexity?

Not all challenges are a sign of complexity, which differs from “complicated” or difficult.

A complicated problem has many elements but their relationships are knowable. Complicated systems can be understood and resolved with expertise.

Complex problems are different — they also have many elements, but the relationships among those elements are unpredictable. Complex systems evolve through interactions, and navigating them requires sensing, experimentation and adjustment — not a fixed plan.

Our definition of complexity reflects these distinctions:

By complex, we mean the inherent quality that arises when many interdependent elements — such as tasks, stakeholders, technologies and external influences — interact in dynamic and often unpredictable ways. The challenge comes less from effort or expertise and more from adaptation, emergence and interdependence — it requires sensing and responding.

Where Complexity Comes From: Three Dimensions

Based on PMI research into how project professionals are experiencing complexity today, this report offers a simplified lens to identify the dimensions of complexity in their projects: organizational, human and environmental. This framing helps project professionals quickly identify where the friction is coming from: inside the project or organization, outside the organization or among people.

In shaping this model, we also drew on a broad range of academic research, practice guidance and related professional perspectives on complexity. To provide more granularity and depth on complexity, including project characteristics that cause complexity and types of project complexity, PMI is developing the upcoming *Navigating Complexity: A Practice Guide — Second Edition*. For project professionals who want to explore further, there is a substantial, decades-long body of academic literature on complexity that offers valuable insight into the dynamics of complex systems and changes across multiple disciplines.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF COMPLEXITY

1 Organizational Dimension

2 Environmental Dimension

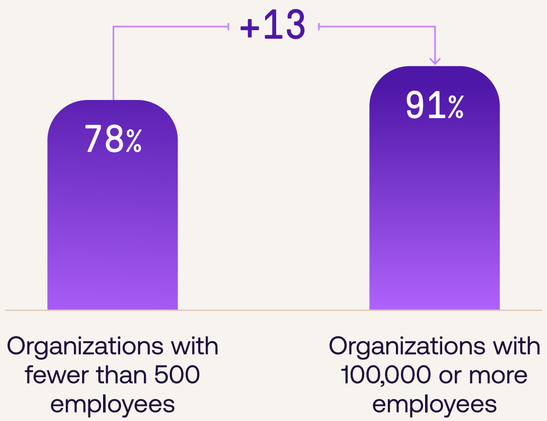
3 Human Dimension

The Organizational Dimension

Organizational complexity, which aligns with many definitions of structural complexity in the literature, is the internal friction: unclear decision-making authority, siloed teams, competing priorities and misaligned objectives. Organizational complexity creates coordination challenges across teams, vendors and governance structures. These challenges scale with size — among project professionals in the largest organizations (100,000 or more employees), 91% report increasing complexity, compared with 78% in organizations with fewer than 500 employees (see Figure 1).

What does this look like? Escalations take longer, approvals stall in hidden layers and “who owns this?” becomes a recurring question. When you map the issue, the bottlenecks occur in structure, governance and alignment.

Figure 1: Coordination Challenges Across Teams



13-point gap: Challenges scale with size

The Environmental Dimension

Environmental complexity is the external forces — AI, digital transformation, regulatory flux, geopolitical shifts, supply chain and third-party collaborators — that impact the project from outside and often reshape the context faster than teams can plan for. Environmental complexity brings external disruptions — from regulatory changes to market volatility — that ripple through project plans.

Senior leaders cite environmental factors more often than project professionals (see Figure 2), indicating that senior leaders are often focused on external forces, whereas project teams are more focused on the daily project realities. This gap, and the differing perspectives that lead to it, can create friction when trying to execute on strategic priorities.

What does this look like? The broader context the project sits in is unstable and project professionals must continuously adjust as a result. Requirements or scope change not because stakeholders can't decide, but because the world around the project is changing faster than the original plan. Emerging technologies, such as AI solutions, reset expectations on speed, cost or scope. Market shifts or geopolitical events force a rethink of what "value" looks like.

The Human Dimension

Human complexity is the social and cognitive dimension: how the dynamics among the people involved impact decision-making and team confidence. Human complexity introduces competing incentives, politics and relationship dynamics.

What does this look like? Decision-makers avoid commitment. Teams second-guess direction. Psychological safety becomes a stretch rather than an expectation. Scope changes arrive not because requirements are unclear, but because political dynamics among stakeholders keep shifting them. Navigating this dimension requires emotional intelligence, influence and the ability to build coalitions — capabilities that no methodology installs automatically.

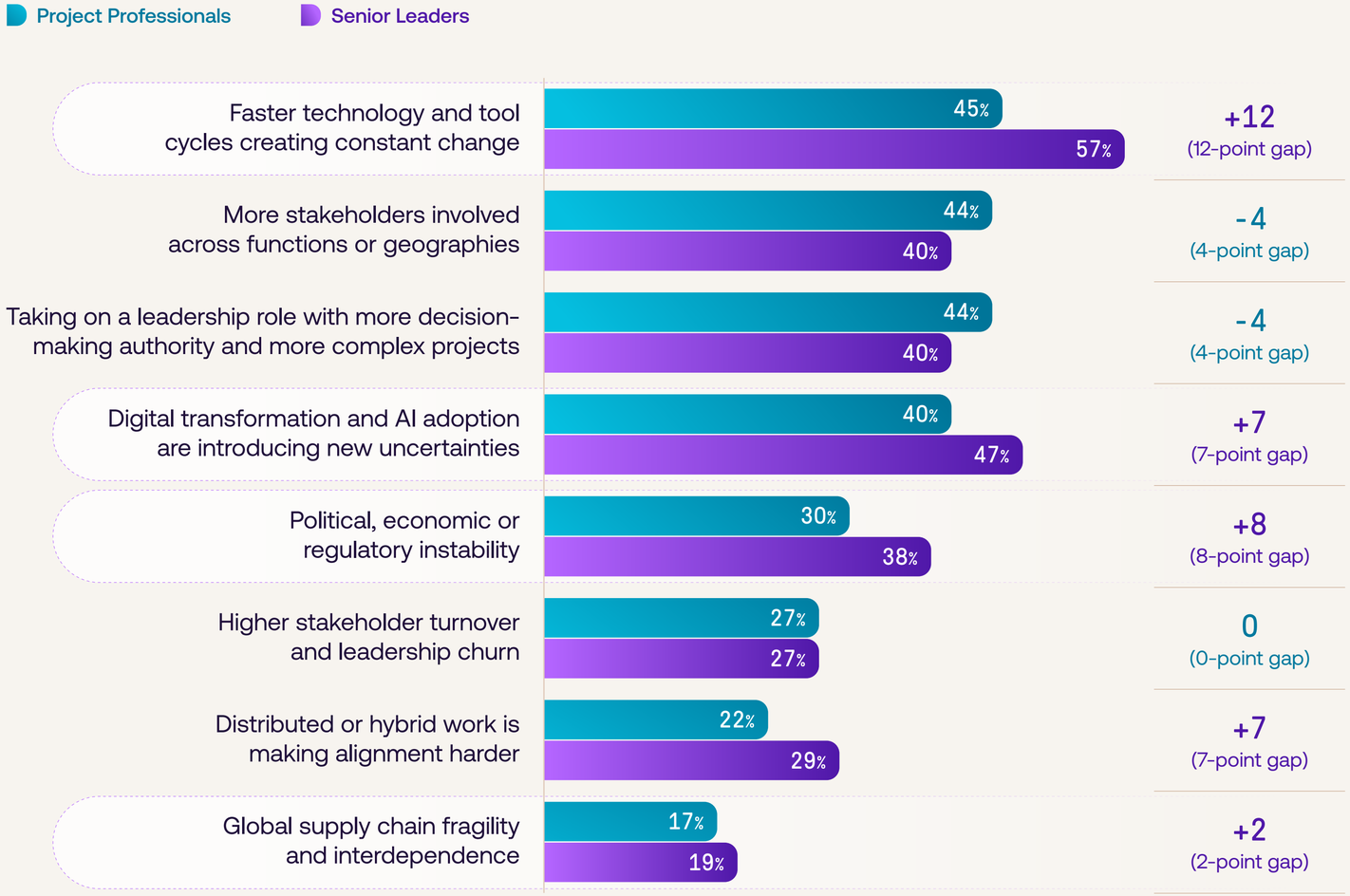
In reality, organizational, environmental and human complexity often interact: A regulatory shift (environmental) triggers new internal approvals (organizational), which increase anxiety and micromanagement (human). Economic uncertainty (environmental) creates pressure to reduce costs while still delivering the original objectives (organizational), resulting in strain on team morale (human).

What Is Driving Increasing Complexity?

Complexity is rising across the board but its drivers are not uniform — and where you sit shapes what you see (see Figure 2).

Senior leaders and project professionals are navigating the same environment but diagnosing it differently. Leaders point outward — to technology cycles, AI disruption and regulatory volatility. Project professionals see these forces when they impact the project, manifesting as shifting scope, conflicting priorities and coordination breakdowns. This isn't a disagreement about what complexity is — it's a difference in perspective. But when the diagnosis doesn't align, the response often doesn't either, resulting in the strategy-execution gap that CEOs name as their top challenge.[4] Bridging that divide requires a shared vocabulary and recognition that both perspectives are partial views of a larger system.

Figure 2: Why Complexity is Increasing: What Project Professionals and Senior Leaders Say



Across industries, over half of projects are viewed as complex, but the forces that drive increasing complexity differ (see Figure 3, 4).

- For IT, telecommunications, automotive, aerospace and healthcare, the primary driver is technological: relentless change cycles that outpace governance.
- For financial services, consulting and transportation, the primary driver is the uncertainty introduced by digital transformation and AI adoption.
- Government stands apart: Political, economic or regulatory instability is its defining pressure, reflecting how thoroughly political volatility shapes project conditions from the outside in.
- For manufacturing, construction and energy, the dominant force is internal: Project professionals in these sectors point to evolving leadership demands and expanding decision-making responsibility as the primary drivers, signaling an organizational and workforce evolution running alongside the technical one.

Understanding where complexity originates — and what is fueling its rapid growth — empowers project professionals to diagnose disruptions and respond strategically.

Figure 3: Project Complexity Frequency by Industry

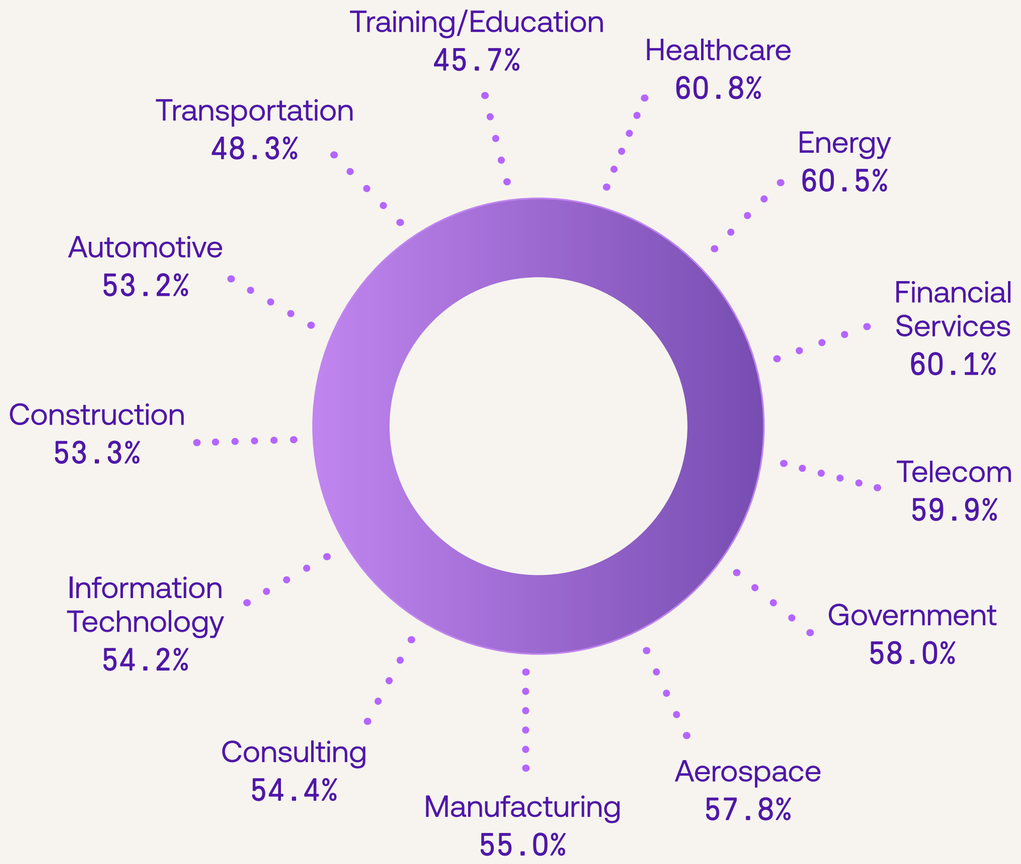


Figure 4: Drivers of Complexity by Industry

Complexity Increases Driven by Environmental Factors

Industries shaped by rapid change or regulation face rising complexity from external and technological forces

Faster technology and tool cycles creating constant change

Information Technology • Telecom • Automotive • Aerospace • Healthcare

Digital transformation and AI adoption introducing new uncertainties

Financial Services • Consulting • Transportation/ Logistics/Distribution

Political, economic or regulatory instability

Government

Complexity Increases Driven by Organizational Factors

People and coordination-heavy sectors grow more complex as stakeholder networks expand

More stakeholders involved across functions or geographies

Training/Education

Complexity Increases Driven by Human Factors

Decision-intensive industries face greater complexity as leadership and project demands increase

Taken on a leadership role with more decision-making authority and more complex projects

Manufacturing • Construction • Energy

DEEP DIVE

Systems Thinking:
Seeing the Bigger Picture

Systems thinking is a lens. Project professionals who use it treat their project as a web of interdependencies rather than a list of tasks. This precisely targets the nature of complexity — the dynamic and often-unpredictable interaction of multiple organizational, environmental and human elements.

Academic research reinforces why this matters. In a PMI Thesis Research white paper on international development projects,[5] researchers Nhlabatsi and Ika found that complexity factors are interdependent and connected, and that effective navigation requires an integrated view of the project. Research by Maylor and colleagues[6] also found that the most consequential complexity in projects lies not in technical structure but in the interactions among stakeholders, priorities and shifting expectations.

Despite the value of this capability, however, only 23% of project professionals in our survey identify systems thinking as critical for navigating complexity.

Applying systems thinking doesn't require mastering theory. It starts with thinking more broadly about your project. Instead of focusing only on tasks, deadlines and deliverables, look at the relationships, assumptions, dependencies and feedback loops that influence how successfully the project is progressing.

Ask these questions: What is really going on here? Who and what are influencing the project? How is the situation changing? Asking good questions can help you begin the process. In fact, you may already be applying systems thinking without realizing it — when you spot a hidden dependency or consider downstream implications.

The PMI vision for the profession, M.O.R.E.[7] — managing perceptions, owning success, relentlessly reassessing and expanding perspective — aligns closely with the principles of systems thinking. Keeping these four elements in mind can help you apply systems thinking.

What Complexity Does to Your Projects

The three dimensions of complexity describe the underlying forces shaping modern projects, but complexity rarely presents itself to project professionals in those terms. Instead, complexity appears through the everyday challenges of project execution: requirements that shift midstream, stakeholders who disagree on priorities, vendors that struggle to integrate systems or sponsors whose attention moves elsewhere.

These issues can look like isolated management problems. But stepping back to see how they fit within the bigger picture can help project professionals navigate these challenges more effectively to mitigate the impact they can have on project outcomes: strategic drift, delivery disruptions and strained team morale.

The Impact on Project Outcomes

Four out of five projects experience some fallout as a result of poorly managed complexity. On average, complex projects experienced at least two different types of negative outcomes out of 12 evaluated in the survey, highlighting the widespread difficulties of handling complexity. These effects cluster into three dimensions.

Importantly, these impact dimensions are not a 1:1 map to the three sources of complexity described in the previous section, and the relationship should not be read as direct causation. Any mix of organizational, environmental and human complexity can contribute to any of the impacts below, often in combination (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Negative Outcomes of Poorly Managed Complexity on Projects

As a result of complexity ...

61%
experience
Value/Alignment Gaps

Value/Alignment Gaps are the most pervasive consequences. These projects deliver outputs while losing sight of outcomes. When alignment breaks down, a project can cross the finish line and still fall short of its purpose.

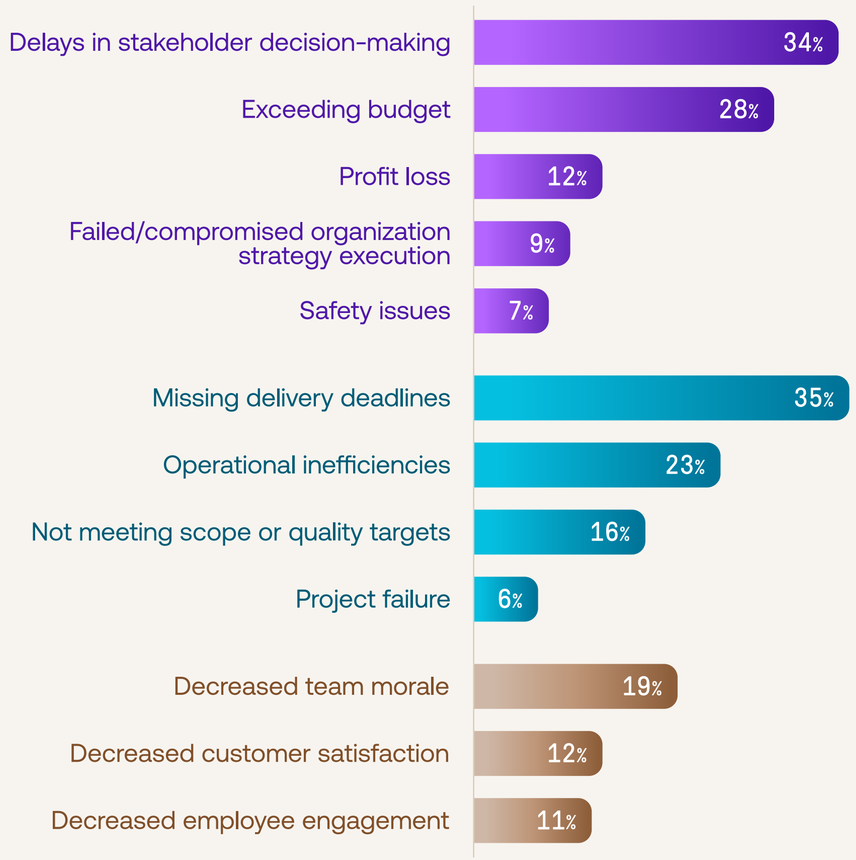
55%
experience
Delivery Disruptions

Delivery Disruptions are where complexity becomes visible through impacts on execution. Missed deadlines and operational inefficiencies may appear as isolated problems, but in a complex project they are signs that the system is performing below its intended level.

31%
experience
Human Impact

Human Impact is frequently invisible and perhaps the most consequential for long-term capability. These aren't "soft" issues separate from delivery — they compound from one project to another. A team fatigued by one complex project carries that strain into the next, creating drag that outlasts any single initiative.

The average project experiences 2.1 complexity-related issues



	Project Professionals	Senior Leaders	Gap
Delays in stakeholder decision-making	33%	38%	+5 (5-point gap)
Exceeding budget	27%	33%	+6 (6-point gap)
Profit loss	11%	14%	+3 (3-point gap)
Failed/compromised organization strategy execution	9%	8%	-1 (1-point gap)
Safety issues	8%	4%	-4 (4-point gap)
Missing delivery deadlines	35%	36%	+1 (1-point gap)
Operational inefficiencies	23%	22%	-1 (1-point gap)
Not meeting scope or quality targets	16%	16%	0 (0-point gap)
Project failure	5%	7%	+2 (2-point gap)
Decreased team morale	19%	18%	-1 (1-point gap)
Decreased customer satisfaction	11%	15%	+4 (4-point gap)
Decreased employee engagement	11%	1%	-10 (10-point gap)

Complexity Solutions: What You Can Do

Our research on project success shows that project professionals who move beyond execution to focus on value — by managing perceptions, owning success, relentlessly reassessing and expanding perspective — are three times more likely to deliver successful projects.[8] Embracing these behaviors, which we call M.O.R.E., to drive value is the PMI vision for the profession. The practices are the key to navigating complexity.

When managing a complex project, what does this look like in practice? Our research surfaced five specific practices — aligned to M.O.R.E. — that drive better outcomes in complex projects. We also identified several examples of exemplary complexity navigation among the project leaders we interviewed.

PRACTICES THAT DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES

1. Sponsor Alignment at Initiation
2. Phased Stakeholder Engagement
3. Building and Maintaining Team Momentum
4. Scenario Planning
5. Frameworks

Practices That Move the Needle

The data is clear on which practices and tools actually drive outcomes. What makes them credible isn't just the numbers — it's that the project professionals who navigate complexity most effectively are already using them deliberately and by design.

Sponsor alignment at initiation establishes shared understanding of what the project is, what success looks like and who is accountable before execution begins. Without it, every ambiguous decision downstream becomes a site of misalignment. Forty percent of high performers use this lever versus 30% of low performers.

Project professionals describe this as deliberate relational work. "It's sponsorship — that's critical," said Vugar Rustamli, project management consultant at PMWill, Czechia. "I reached out to the sponsor first to convince them, which took weeks, before engaging stakeholder groups. Fortunately, they listened to me." The full breakdown of data on effective practices is available in Figure 10 in the Appendix.

Others embed this through governance structure: Arief Prasetyo, HQ integration PMO manager, SLB, UK, described how his organization brings senior leadership directly into stage-gate preparation — "The VP would be there, and the project manager would have that communication directly to the VP" — so alignment is built into the rhythm of the project, not retrofitted when problems arise.

Several practices that support managing perceptions in projects, as outlined in the M.O.R.E. Playbook, can enable this alignment:

- Clearly map how each stakeholder's needs and wants will be addressed in a successful project outcome.
- Align stakeholders on which metrics will be used to evaluate progress toward value creation.
- Align stakeholder expectations on a timeline for successful value creation.
- Build trust with stakeholders through early and ongoing engagement, which can enable this alignment.

Phased stakeholder engagement — engaging the right people at the right time — also maps to M.O.R.E.: continuously evaluating which stakeholders need to be involved throughout the life of the project, not just those who were activated at kickoff. High performers do this 50% of the time, versus 42% of low performers.

“In the discovery phase, define who the stakeholders will be,” said Vugar Rustamli, project management and agile transformation consultant, PMWILL, Czechia. “But at initiation, when we’re putting the baseline for the project, inviting senior stakeholders is beneficial.”

Hassene Siddat, regional IT manager at WHO Western Pacific Region, Philippines described how sustained engagement changed team dynamics: “By having key players together early in the project board, we put in place regular updates where different aspects are discussed between the teams.” The right people, brought in at the right moment, turn stakeholder engagement from a risk activity into an alignment engine.

These practices, outlined in the M.O.R.E. Playbook, can help project professionals engage effectively:

- Identify and prioritize which stakeholders’ opinions are most likely to influence perception of success.
- Tailor communication and engagement strategies to match the specific needs and expectations of each stakeholder.
- Regularly collect feedback to identify emergent opportunities, risks and potential stakeholders.

Building and maintaining team momentum is used by 42% of high performers versus 33% of low performers. In complex environments, progress is rarely linear and making it tangible keeps teams anchored to purpose. Deliberate momentum-building makes progress visible and builds critical psychological resilience.

At the center of this approach is emphasizing the value the team is creating, aligned with these practices from the M.O.R.E. Playbook:

- Regularly socialize a clear point of view on the project's progress toward value creation.
- Keep project participants focused on maximizing the total value created and the range of people who benefit from it.
- Empower project team members to understand their role in creating value, not just completing tasks.

Together, these three practices embody M.O.R.E, shaping conditions above, around and within the project rather than managing tasks inside it. The most effective project professionals aren't just executing — they are building the alignment, momentum and adaptive capacity that let their teams absorb complexity rather than be undone by it.

Scenario planning occupies a different position in the practitioner toolkit. While the three levers above show a consistent relationship with above-average performance, scenario planning appears to have greater impact when it is employed in the early stages of a project. In this sense, it also strengthens risk management by helping project professionals identify emerging threats, map interdependencies and prepare responses before disruption compounds. However, only about one in five practitioners use it, revealing an opportunity to add a valuable tool to the complexity toolkit.

Frameworks offer a structured and consistent way to think about and identify complexity, giving project professionals both a tool and a common language to use in complexity navigation. They also support more disciplined risk management by helping teams surface interconnected risks earlier and respond more systematically. When project professionals apply frameworks — whether proprietary to the organization or drawn from academic research — 72% of projects are considered successful compared with 61% when no structured approach is used. Yet 35% of project professionals used no frameworks at all on their most recent complex project.

DEEP DIVE

Complexity Is Not the Same as Risk

Project complexity and risk are closely connected but they are not interchangeable. Risk management focuses on identifying and mitigating specific, identifiable factors or events that could impact a project. Complexity, by contrast, describes the conditions that make projects difficult to predict, control and stabilize in the first place. Complexity is a source of risk; risks are consequences of complexity.

In complex environments, risks are more interconnected and more likely to emerge over time. Organizational structures, human dynamics and external forces interact in ways that can amplify small issues into larger disruptions.

Risk management is essential to managing these disruptions in complex projects, but project professionals must also look beyond individual risks and understand the broader system shaping project outcomes. Relentlessly reassessing and expanding perspective — the “R” and “E” in M.O.R.E. — can help project professionals see the forces impacting the project and continuously evaluate them to identify and manage risk throughout the project as conditions evolve.

Navigating Complexity in Action

The stories we gathered from our research demonstrate how project professionals are navigating complexity in practice.

Mazen H. Akhdar

General Manager on Enterprise Project Management Office, Government Organization, Saudi Arabia

When Akhdar began his career in 2001 as a project engineer, he stepped into one of the region's most demanding environments — Saudi Aramco's downstream refineries. There, he quickly learned how to deliver projects in live, high-risk operations, balancing greenfield ambition with brownfield realities.

Over the next 25 years, his project management career path would span nine sectors — from laboratory fit-outs at leading research centers across the Kingdom to major healthcare expansions at specialist hospitals, from sports event management to industrial localization programs. Yet it was in large-scale airport expansions — serving over 10 million passengers annually — where complexity revealed its full weight.

Multiple stakeholders — IT, legal, strategy, operations, security, maintenance, risk, HR, and corporate communications — were all critical, yet often misaligned. Progress risked being slowed not by engineering challenges, but by organizational friction.

Akhdar's response was not to reduce complexity, but to structure it. He established governance before execution, aligned stakeholders through a single unified kickoff, and decomposed delivery into clear, accountable work packages. The complexity didn't disappear — it became navigable.

This approach extended into national transformation programs, including pharmaceutical and medical device initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030, as well as large-scale customs and tax projects across ports of entry. With the rise of digital transformation — driven by mandates such as those of the Digital Government Authority — every service required a digital counterpart. Projects were no longer singular; they operated in parallel: physical delivery and its digital twin. Managing both simultaneously significantly increased coordination demands.

Today, as General Manager of the Enterprise Project Management Office, Akhdar continues to do what has defined his career — turn complexity into clarity, and strategy into execution.

Joseph Uwazie

Regional Programme Officer, Department of International Development, UK Aid, Nigeria

NENTAD (North East Nigeria Transition to Development) was designed as a transition program: humanitarian relief giving way to development across conflict-affected northeast Nigeria, spanning health, education, infrastructure and food security. When prolonged conflict stalled that transition, the program faced a choice to either wait or adapt.

Uwazie's team chose to redesign midflight. In areas where recovery had taken hold, they created a humanitarian-development nexus — running stabilization and development work simultaneously rather than sequentially. Gate reviews became sensing systems, not just checkpoints. A learn-and-adapt component was incorporated into the redesigned structure, giving teams autonomy to respond to conditions on the ground while staying aligned to strategic objectives. The complexity didn't derail the program — it reshaped it.

The PMO:
Steering Organizations Through Complexity

The advantage of a PMO is in equipping teams to navigate complexity. Project professionals in organizations with a PMO were more likely to recognize complexity in their projects (58%) compared with those without (53%). They are also more likely to use the practices that drive better performance in complex projects:

Practice	Organizations With a PMO	Organizations Without a PMO	Implementation Gap
Use of frameworks	71%	55%	16 percentage points
Sponsor alignment at initiation	38%	30%	8 percentage points
Celebrating wins and milestones	41%	34%	7 percentage points
Phased stakeholder engagement	49%	44%	5 percentage points
Scenario planning exercises	23%	21%	2 percentage points

At the end of a project, these practices paid off. Professionals in organizations with a PMO were more likely to say they were very or extremely successful at managing the complexity of their projects than those in organizations without a PMO (63% vs. 57%). The outcomes confirm this:

Outcome	Organizations With a PMO	Organizations Without a PMO	Implementation Gap
Supporting larger business goals/ mission	42%	37%	5 percentage points
Risk mitigation	40%	35%	5 percentage points
Stakeholder alignment	39%	34%	5 percentage points
Producing intended project outcomes	44%	39%	5 percentage points
Stronger stakeholder relationships	39%	35%	4 percentage points

Taken together, this points to what a PMO actually does in a complexity-heavy environment: It embeds the practices that make an impact. A well-functioning PMO is the organizational mechanism through which the M.O.R.E. mindset gets institutionalized.

This matters especially as complexity scales. The factors behind organizational complexity — unclear decision authority, competing priorities and misaligned objectives — are precisely the conditions that a well-functioning PMO is designed to address by ensuring the organization has the governance, visibility and relational infrastructure to navigate it. In these environments, where misalignment can compound quickly and compromise the investments organizations make in their project portfolios, PMOs can ensure not only that value gets delivered but that strategy gets successfully executed.

Conclusion

The shift this research points to isn't from simple to complex — it's from controlling tasks to navigating systems. Systems can't be controlled into submission — they must be understood, navigated and continuously recalibrated as conditions evolve.

Making this shift is not just about capabilities and practices — it's about mindset. Leadership research affirms that navigating in a "polycrisis" environment — where multiple, interconnected challenges converge — requires systems thinking, adaptive problem-solving, collaboration and a future-oriented approach.

The project professionals who do this well are not outliers — they are professionals who have made a deliberate shift in how they see their role. They focus not just on delivering the project but on protecting the value it is meant to create. The behaviors that distinguish them align closely with the principles captured in M.O.R.E.: Managing perceptions helps build alignment and trust, owning success reinforces accountability for outcomes and value, relentlessly reassessing supports adaptation in real time, and expanding perspective strengthens the ability to understand interdependencies and anticipate change.

For organizations, the implication is to institutionalize the ability to identify and respond to the forces that create the gap between strategy and execution — a function PMOs are well-positioned to fulfill. Complexity is shaped by the interaction of organizational systems, human dynamics and external forces. The organizations best positioned to navigate it are those that support project professionals in building the skills, judgment and perspective needed to identify complexity and respond to it. These capabilities sit comfortably within the broader idea of M.O.R.E., but the central imperative is developing them in practice.

The path forward is clear: Recognize where complexity is coming from and respond with the behaviors that enable project professionals to navigate it effectively. Start by diagnosing the forces at play in projects, then apply approaches that strengthen alignment, accountability, adaptability and perspective. These are the kinds of behaviors reflected in M.O.R.E. — not as a separate prescription but as a useful way of framing what effective project professionals are already doing to turn complexity from a constraint into an advantage.

Acknowledgments

To provide context and real-world examples, PMI conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with project professionals and senior leaders around the world during 2025. These leaders represented diverse industries and organizational types/sizes (government, healthcare, IT, financial services, energy, etc.), offering practical insights into how complexity navigation impacts project outcomes:

- **Adam Teakle**, senior director, Project and Program Management COE, Cognizant, UK
- **Ana Paula Mundim**, senior director, Operations Practice, BCG Vantage, UK
- **Andrew Davies**, RM Phillips Freeman Chair and professor of innovation management, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex Business School, UK
- **Arief Prasetyo**, HQ Integration PMO manager, SLB, UK
- **Chris Taormina**, director, Project and Program Management COE, Cognizant, UK
- **Christina Kucek**, senior product manager, AI and Data Analytics, GSK, USA
- **Daniel Saunders**, AVP, Project and Program Management COE, Cognizant, UK
- **Giorgio Locatelli**, full professor of complex projects business, Politecnico di Milano, School of Management, Italy
- **Harrison Smith**, VP of business development, NCMA AI Community of Practice Co-Lead, Easy Dynamics/NCMA, USA
- **Hassene Siddat**, regional IT manager, WHO Western Pacific Region, Philippines
- **Ignacio Peña Kindelán**, senior analyst, Capital Projects Excellence, BCG Vantage, Spain
- **Johan Sporre**, engineering manager, IKEA Retail (Ingka Group), Sweden
- **John Davidson**, program manager, multinational organization in energy, UK
- **Joseph Uwazie**, programme officer, Department of International Development, UK Aid, Nigeria
- **Julien Pollack**, associate professor, University of Sydney, Australia
- **Kate Davis**, associate professor, Cranfield School of Management, UK
- **Mazen H. Akhdar**, general manager on enterprise project management office, government organization, Saudi Arabia
- **Michael Lurie**, chief catalyst officer, Bayer, USA
- **Dr. Mustafa Hafizoglu**, managing partner, Advisors Turkey, Turkey
- **Neil Turner**, professor, Cranfield University, UK
- **Pratik Mishra**, senior strategic project manager, Zalando, Germany
- **Rob Hardwick**, program manager, multinational organization in energy, UK
- **Saniya Ayambekova**, chief executive officer, ACPM, Kazakhstan
- **Timothy Smith**, VP, Project and Program Management COE, Cognizant, UK
- **Tyson Browning**, professor, Texas Christian University, USA
- **Dr. Vijayetta Malla**, cost/trend engineer, Bechtel Infrastructure Corporation, USA
- **Vugar Rustamli**, project management and agile transformation consultant, PMWILL, Czechia
- **Wang Wei**, vice chief engineer, director of the project management department, SNERDI, China

Appendix

Figure 6: Participant Breakdown by Role

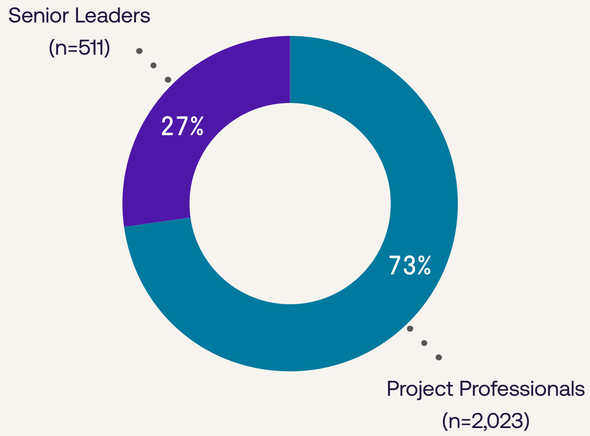
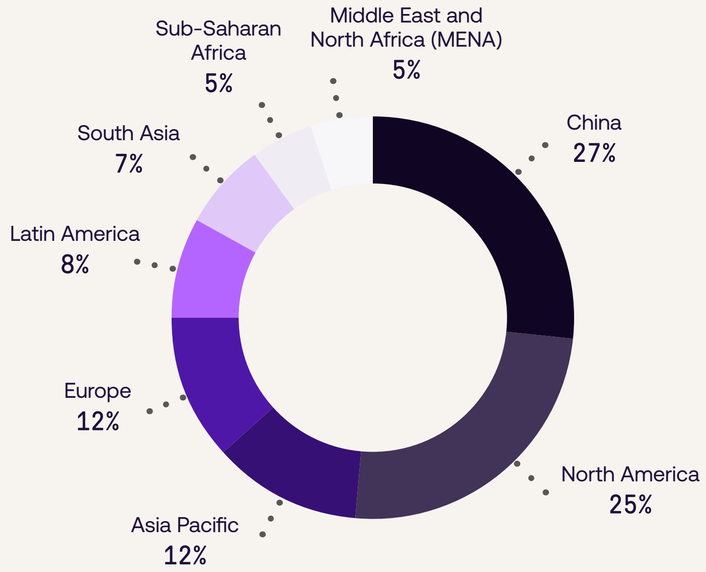


Figure 7: Participant Breakdown by Region



Note: The sample was weighted to reflect the global database distribution of PMI. The survey covered 35 countries and was translated into seven languages.

Figure 8: Participant Breakdown by Industry

Figure 9: Participant Breakdown by Organization Size

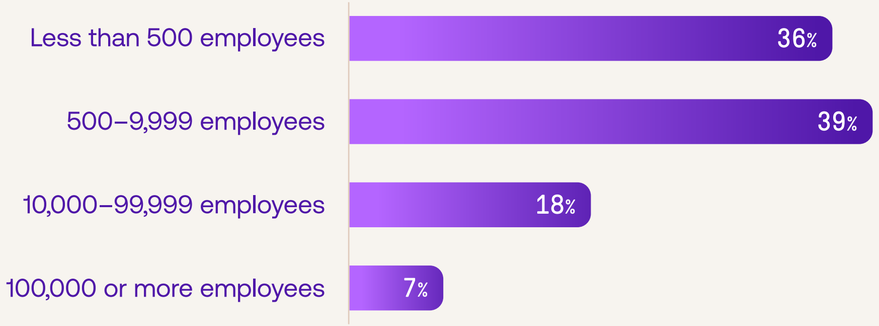
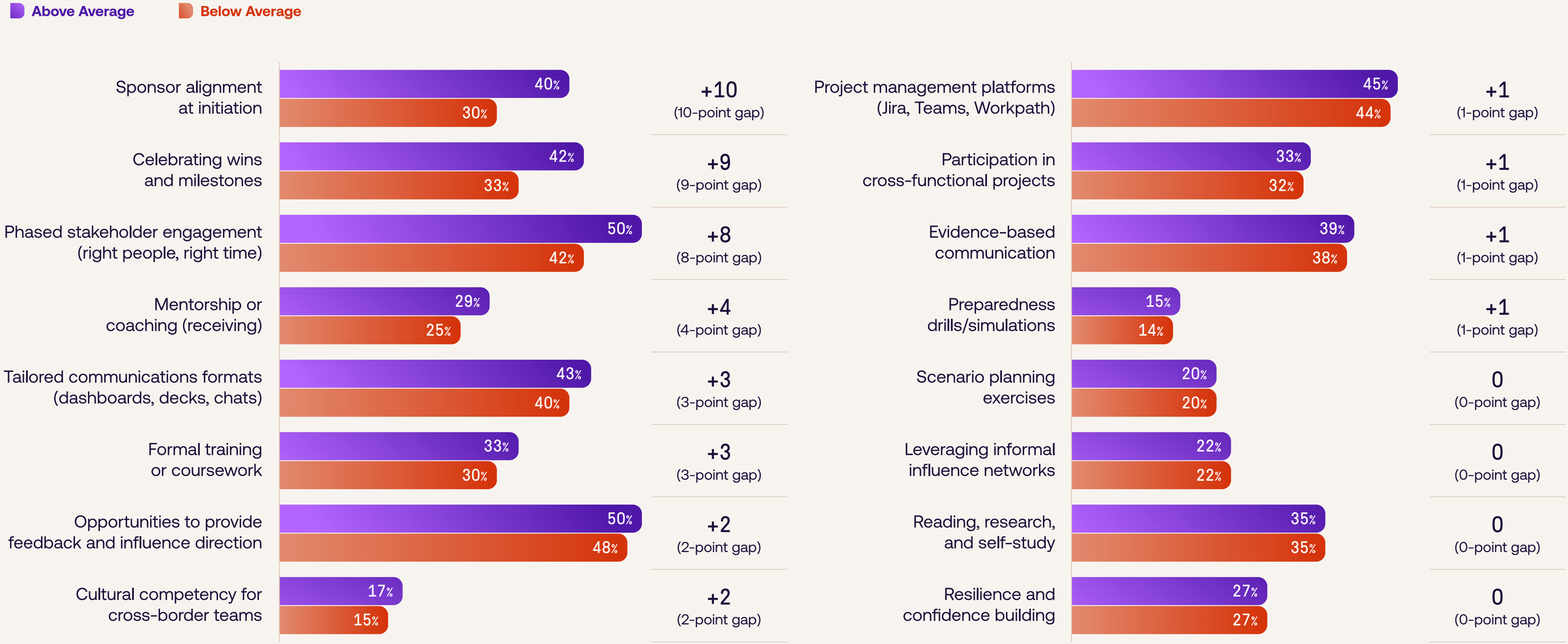


Figure 10: Levers Most Closely Correlated to Project Performance



Endnotes

1. The 2025 PMI CEO Quant Survey includes responses from 300 senior executives across regions and industries. The study examines how frequently organizations must reinvent their business models and operating approaches, what is driving this reinvention and the primary barriers to executing strategy at speed.
2. Project Management Institute (PMI) (November 2024). *Maximizing Project Success.* PMI. https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/project-success
3. Project Management Institute (PMI) (November 2024). *Maximizing Project Success.* PMI. https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/project-success
4. The 2025 PMI CEO Quant Survey includes responses from 300 senior executives across regions and industries. The study examines how frequently organizations must reinvent their business models and operating approaches, what is driving this reinvention and the primary barriers to executing strategy at speed.
5. Nhlabatsi, S. & Ika, L. (September 2024). *Navigating Project Complexity to Build Resilience in International Development Projects.* Project Management Institute (PMI). https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/academic-research/published/navigating_project_complexity_white_paper.pdf
6. Maylor, H., Vidgen, R., & Carver, S. (2008). *Managerial Complexity in Project-based Operations: A Grounded Model and its Implications for Practice.* Project Management Journal, 39(1), suppl (2008)
7. Project Management Institute (PMI) (2025). *PMI in 2025: Delivering M.O.R.E. to Deliver on Our PMI Purpose.* PMI. https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/about/purpose/pmi-more-2025.pdf?rev=68e3a1dcf7f64002b8cb60e87eb7a1ba
8. Project Management Institute (PMI) (December 2025). *Step up: Redefining the Path to Project Success With M.O.R.E.* PMI. https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/path-to-project-success

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- **State of the profession:** Inform project professionals of the latest trends, academic insights and practices to improve project management effectiveness and success as well as to advance the profession.
- **Enterprise and innovation:** Inspire and provide strategic direction to senior executive leaders through applied insights combined with academic perspectives, to help transform their organizations for long-term growth.

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