

Project Management: How Recognised is it by the C-Suite?

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits

Introduction

Three decades ago, 80% of the resources in an organisation were dedicated to operations, and 20% to projects; today, that ratio has flipped, according to the *Harvard Business Review*. Despite this massive disruption, there is still a lack of understanding and lack of recognition for the project profession at C-Suite/senior executive level.

This is important because of the significant role that projects and project professionals play in driving growth and transformation. A C-Suite that doesn't understand its company's projects doesn't understand where it is or where it's going. Project management is, in effect, future state planning.

This paper explores the evolving perceptions of project management at leadership level, discussing the factors driving its recognition, challenges faced, and strategies for fostering alignment with leadership priorities.

This paper is based on conversations that took place at the Association for Project Management (APM) Project Summit at St George's House, Windsor Castle in autumn 2024. Senior project experts, leaders and C-Suite-level executives attended to share ideas and examine challenging topics in new and creative ways.



Contributors



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Eddie Obeng is a Professor at the School of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the Henley Business School, founder and Learning Director of Pentacle, The Virtual Business School, and a leading business theorist, innovator and educator.



Andrew Schuster, Managing Partner, The Promoveo Group

Andrew Schuster is a consultant, practitioner, researcher and educator, devoted to helping progressive executives deliver their most complex programmes and projects successfully. He is a visiting professor at Skema Business School and Cranfield School of Management. He holds a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) from Cranfield University, a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from Sauder School of Business and a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in Computer Engineering from the University of Alberta. He is a Chartered Project Professional and a Fellow of the Institute of Directors, the Institute of Consulting, and the Association for Project Management.



Daniel Boreham, Head of Global Life Sciences, Turner & Townsend

Daniel Boreham is the Global Head of Life Sciences for Turner & Townsend. He has worked in the Life Sciences sector for over 14 years, working with major global pharmaceutical clients around the world. Daniel has a background in construction management and surveying, with significant experience providing construction consulting services on a range of programmes and projects in the science and technology sectors, leading on major projects and programmes with a wide range of experience at delivering major CAPEX projects and programmes.

How recognised is project management by the C-Suite?

The answer to this question is not straightforward, as it is likely to vary across different organisations. In project-centric organisations (e.g. in sectors such as construction, technology, aerospace and defence) there is likely to be a high level of recognition. A sector like pharmaceuticals may not see its work as 'delivering projects' but may instead see it in terms of curing disease. Similarly, the public sector sees its main business as delivering public policy that meets the needs of citizens. The means by which these sectors do what they do is often through projects, but 'projects' as an entity are not seen as the 'core' business.

These perceptions shape decision-making and relationships at the highest levels of leadership.



Factors driving the relationship between the project profession and the C-Suite:

Accountability

One of the main differences between project practitioners and people in leadership roles, according to Andrew Schuster, is accountability. This is to say that project practitioners, in the main, are seen to provide a service to leaders, but it will be a person in an executive role who will be held accountable and, often, those people are not project professionals. This has an impact on the relationships between people in these different roles.

Relative importance of the project profession

Every sector has a 'main' or 'commanding' profession. Taking the healthcare sector as an example, within the NHS, physicians are seen as the 'main' profession (i.e. the one with the most visible impact). Project management is not the main profession; instead it is a skill that some individuals foster. This is one of the things that defines the relationship between project professionals and senior leaders in this sector.

When there is an initiative that depends on having project professionals, such as a major transformation project, the relevance of the project profession does increase. However, it will not supplant the commanding profession.

Andrew Schuster said: "We have to think about positioning the executive mindset within each particular profession. What matters and how does it matter?"

Daniel Boreham added: "We need to understand, as project delivery experts, where we sit in terms of priorities? And how do our projects or programmes fit into those priorities?"

How recognised is project management by the C-Suite?



Factors driving the relationship between the project profession and the C-Suite (continued):

Leadership styles

Different executives lead in different ways. Andrew Schuster identified three types of leadership style he felt are most closely associated with C-Suite members who interact with project teams, all of which can affect perceptions. Understanding these styles can play an important role in calibrating relationships between project teams and C-Suite members.

1. Delegatory – this ‘hands-off’ approach involves assigning people or teams to a task, empowering them to make their own decisions and find their own solutions. This style creates opportunities for skills development and innovation, but can also lead to accountability issues if roles and responsibilities aren’t clearly communicated.
2. Functional – this style is more ‘hands-on’ and is based around treating a project team as a business function. It results in a more direct and organisational leadership approach that involves the entire team in identifying project goals and procedures to achieve them.

3. Transformational – a more ‘holistic’ leadership style in the sense that it sees the transformation being delivered by a particular project within the context of wider organisational transformation. This style is focused on the journey from current state to desired future state. It requires a deep understanding of an organisation’s goals and what is being done organisation-wide to achieve them.

Andrew said: “These styles all have pros and cons. There is no right or wrong. There’s appropriateness. Some are more appropriate to the context. But they are different. That means the relationship [of leaders] with the profession is different, depending on their leadership style.”

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Challenges facing the perception of the project profession within the C-Suite

C-Suite's perception of the project profession is dependent on the value provided to them. There are a number of factors to consider:

Bringing best practice – 'best practice' is an evolving concept. Bodies of knowledge go through different editions as individuals and the collective profession learns and evolves. Day to day practice changes as understanding of an idea develops over time. This can result in discrepancies between what people perceive as best practice and what they expect on a project.

Bringing lessons learned – leaders want project professionals to bring lessons learned from 'others' so that their organisation is not making mistakes that could be avoided. While lessons are routinely identified, they are rarely shared between organisations and truly learned. How are the learnings playing out in practice? What processes are being built into delivery as a result? This is particularly important when it comes to digital transformation projects, due a relative lack of historic reference data compared with capital projects.

Bringing pace to decision making and delivery – leaders want smooth, effective and well-informed decision-making. At the highest-performing companies, speed is not only an objective; it defines the operating model and culture. As projects progress, systems and processes often become more cumbersome, which can slow the pace of decision-making and delivery (often while driving up costs).

Pace is a particular challenge because many individual elements of the project/ programme operating environment have to operate well, and be connected to other projects and the business-as-usual functions. This is a highly dynamic environment that changes as projects progress and the context changes. The governance structure and the management controls that support it must all be designed, implemented and operated with pace in mind.

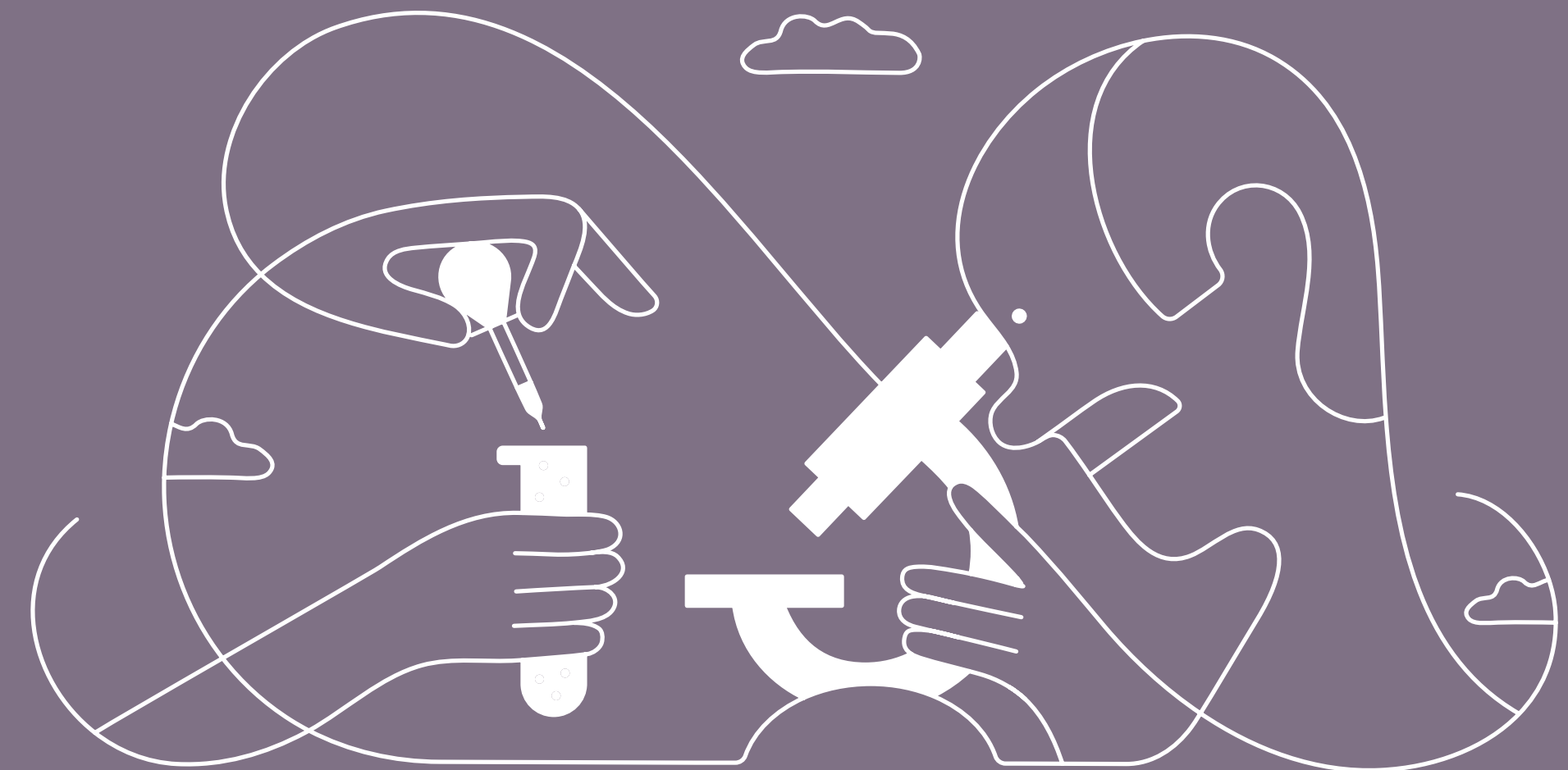
Chunking

Historically, projects were conceived as a long period of effort leading to an output. In the new world, big projects are broken into modules or 'chunks'.

Uncertainty prevents clients and stakeholders from making timely decisions. To speed this up (and reduce the chance of failure), break up the challenge into labelled chunks and set up as many interim structures, guidance groups and temporary governance bodies as you can. A chunk of change delivers an outcome and can be celebrated.

As Eddie Obeng explained: "Don't design your processes to be so complicated or intricate that the governance gets in the way. Everything from figuring out who the really crucial stakeholders are in the decision process, to focusing on the future, through to the design of your project – these are all crucial.

"I know of so many projects where, if they'd have 'chunked' it up, they would have been much happier...That de-risks and delivers results at pace so that you [the project professional] gets credibility."



How can the project profession connect with the C-Suite?

- **Understand the C-Suite's priorities and objectives** – if an organisation's priority is sustainability, for example, its project teams need to recognise and report against that. If not, credibility is lost with the C-Suite.

"You need to understand what the business needs from your project," said Daniel. "What are the outcomes and what are the objectives? That purpose – the reason why we do things – is really important because it's not just why a project is being delivered. It can actually inspire the team delivering that project...Understanding those drivers is important because you can work to that and report on that."

- **Help the C-Suite understand the project profession and the value it brings** – APM research has found that more than half (51%) of business leaders describe the function of project management as operational. Only 16% say it's strategic. Encourage executives to incorporate projects into their strategy and treat projects strategically. The true value of a project is not just in the delivery of an output, but in benefit realisation, which is something not often captured as part of strategy delivery by many organisations. UK businesses that report they are "very good" at delivering project objectives, delivering projects on time and within budget are more likely to describe their project management function as strategic.
- **Help the C-Suite understand how to effectively use project controls to govern** – it is not uncommon for sponsors to work in non-project roles. Sometimes, they may not even have been a sponsor before. This can pose challenges to the project teams reporting into them. Educational support, such as mentoring, can be an effective way to bridge knowledge gaps.

Andrew said: "When mentoring, it's important to build trust. Sponsors and executives don't want to look like they don't know what they're talking about. How do you approach that? Acknowledge that there's always that discomfort. Find a 'safe' way of bringing things to them. That could be verbal or written. Also, get your mentee to ask good questions that let you go away and help them fill in the gaps."



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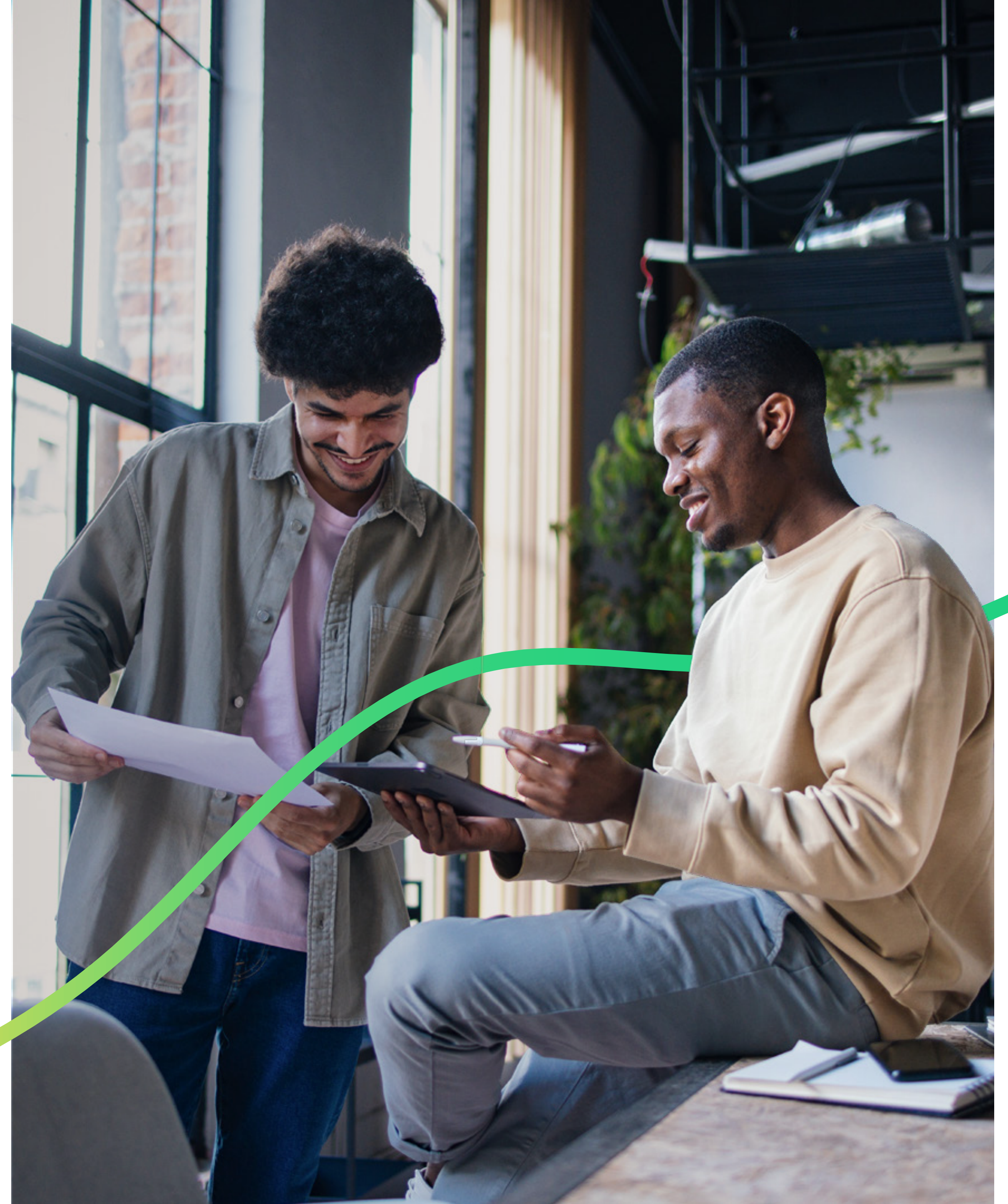
- **Bring accessible, understandable and decision-informing insight to the C-Suite** – it's important for project professionals to understand what matters to the C-Suite so that it can be reported on, but knowledge-sharing works best when there is a common language. Not only that, but there is also a risk of 'death by data' where too much information is provided to enable swift decisions. People in the C-Suite often only want very select data to inform their decisions. Knowing what that is and adapting to that context supports relevance and credibility.

While simplification is encouraged to a degree, project professionals must also understand which risks are business-critical, such as regulation, and provide information to a level that provides assurance that risks are known and under control.

- **Bring pace to decision-making** – Andrew said: "Without exception, governance structures are not designed for pace. They're designed for stakeholder engagement and control, not for the purpose of rapid decision-making. There's often a very small number of decision-makers, even on the largest programmes, operating at each level of the governance structure (delivery, integration and sponsorship). Help enable these executives and avoid over bureaucratizing with too many well-meaning project control processes.

"For example, when it comes to information management, significant effort and time is spent on finding data and we don't think about what the data means, We don't have time to validate it because our next monthly report is due, so that analysis is clipped.

"How do we streamline processes and be adaptable or agile? Think about these things and design them for pace."



About APM

The Association for Project Management (APM) is a professional membership organisation that sets the standards for the project profession and raises its profile. APM is the only chartered organisation representing the project profession in the world. As a registered charity, APM delivers learning and networking opportunities, qualifications, research, resources, events, and best practice guidance for the project community, helping the profession deliver better.

APM currently has over 45,000 members and more than 470 corporate partners based in 140 countries.

Further resources

- [*A guide to project sponsorship*](#)
- [*APM Podcast – How to bring strategy and projects closer together*](#)
- [*Directing Change: A Guide to Governance of Project Management, 3rd edition*](#)



Join Us at the Next Windsor Project Summit

Following the success of the inaugural Windsor Project Summit, we invite senior executives to express their interest in attending our next event set to take place at St George's House, Windsor Castle on Thursday 23 October 2025.

Designed exclusively for C-suite leaders, this summit offers a unique platform to explore cutting-edge insights, share strategic perspectives, and shape the future of the project profession. To maintain the calibre of discussions and networking opportunities, participation is limited to executives holding C-suite positions. If you meet this criterion and wish to be considered for an invitation, **[please fill out this form.](#)**





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for the project profession**

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