

The Human Advantage in Construction Projects

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits



Introduction

Construction projects are inherently complex. Each one is uniquely shaped by its context, whether that be site conditions, stakeholders, political pressures, procurement methods or regulatory constraints. As Alex Rabey-Bennett, Associate Director at Enborne Project Consultancy notes, each project is 'like a fingerprint': recognisably similar, yet never identical.

Achieving successful project outcomes in this environment requires more than processes, tools and technical expertise; it depends on the human element. Projects succeed or fail based on alignment, trust, leadership behaviours and the ability to create conditions where people consistently make informed decisions. Contracts, processes and data matter, but they only work when the human system is healthy.

This white paper explores the human advantage in construction projects and argues that developing future-ready project leadership must be a strategic priority for the industry. The insights in this paper are based on a roundtable discussion that took place at Gleeds in Central London with senior professionals from the construction sector. It is intended for business leaders, decision-makers and senior project and programme professionals, offering practical leadership, capability and organisational insights about delivering construction projects.



Human relationships and project breakdown

Uniqueness and unpredictability are the norm for construction projects, with multiple organisations – each with different incentives – working together under constant regulatory and political pressure. In this environment, small errors or delays can easily escalate to major issues. Adding human judgement, relationships and behaviours into the mix only amplifies the unpredictability.

When projects break down, it's rarely due to a single event. Delegates at APM's construction roundtable concurred that failure emerges from a combination of factors rather than one trigger, giving reasons such as "misaligned expectations", "unclear rules of engagement" and "gradual trust erosion". Alex Rabey-Bennett noted that these factors were not "technological, but all within the human element." He went on to say that "these are invisible issues that eventually become unmanageable if not addressed." For construction projects, success is built on relationships that are communicative and collaborative. If relationships deteriorate, projects can become contract-driven, adversarial and transactional. Decision making slows, risk aversion increases and innovation disappears.



'Stand or withdraw'

Contracts illustrate this dynamic clearly. In theory, contracts protect stakeholders, define responsibilities and support successful delivery, mainly independent of human influence. In practice, they can easily become victims of weak relations. Research in the construction industry supports this. In a recent study that surveyed 1,000 construction professionals across the UK, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Peru, 61% of built environment professionals said that supply chain relationships are still adversarial, despite widespread agreement that trust improves outcomes¹.

Participants at the roundtable noted that many contracts can become weaponised in the procurement process, being offered on a "stand or withdraw" basis, leaving no room for negotiation. Competitive pressure forces organisations to accept risks they cannot realistically absorb, knowing that refusal simply hands the work to a competitor. As one delegate said: "collaboration goes both ways; clients can't expect one way and not the other."

Ultimately, successful partnerships come down to people aligning on shared commitments (goals and values) and having trust in their relationships. Even in transactional environments, where everyone needs to get paid and must retain competitive advantage, alignment is crucial to ensuring a successful project outcome, which benefits every stakeholder. Delegates agreed that misalignment is the underlying issue of most construction project failures.

¹ Trust, contracts, outcomes: how collaboration really delivers | NEC Contracts

AI's impact

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already embedded in construction projects. Research by Censuswide, commissioned by APM, shows that 84% of project professionals in the sector are using AI more than they did five years ago. However, leaders at the roundtable discussion expressed mixed views of AI. One delegate explained they see it as a “powerful leveller that can enhance planning and decision making”, while another expressed concern that “it can’t take responsibility and accountability like humans.” Another succinctly said:

“AI could save money but at what cost?”

Whether the technology brings long-term benefits to the profession remains to be seen. What’s certain is that, for now, it’s adding new layers of uncertainty. As a tool, AI will not be a panacea for every challenge faced; rather, it will amplify the human environment in which it is deployed, as APM research has found.

For example:

- In organisations with strong alignment and clear leadership, AI will accelerate clarity and improve decision making.
- In organisations where trust is fragile or expectations are misaligned, AI risks accelerating confusion and deepening existing tensions.

Technology doesn’t replace judgement; it magnifies it. And in environments where the initial contract brings underlying tensions to the surface, the effects can be disastrous.

These challenges point to a simple truth:

Construction projects do not fail because of a lack of process, technology or contractual structure. They fail when leadership doesn’t create alignment.

In an environment defined by uncertainty, competing incentives and increasing technological complexity, alignment cannot be left to chance. It needs to be built intentionally and maintained continuously throughout a project’s lifecycle. This is where future ready leadership becomes essential.

So how can this be created?



Creating alignment through future-ready leadership

Future ready leaders are forward-thinking professionals who can foresee and navigate disruption, rather than react to it. As construction projects become more complex and technology continues to evolve, only leaders who can build alignment, trust and clarity will be able to deliver successful outcomes.

The roundtable delegation identified several strategic priorities for organisations who are seeking to develop future-ready leadership:

- **Create structured leadership development pathways** – These develop leaders to navigate fragmented supply chains, political pressures and complex stakeholder environments. There are several practical, structured ways organisations can do this:
 - **Competency-based development pathways** – Use the *APM Competence Framework* as a baseline to map required leadership skills and assess individuals against them.
 - **Scenario based learning** – Theory alone is not effective; organisations should hold crisis simulations, stakeholder negotiation and risk management workshops to emulate the complex environment.
 - **Shadowing leaders** – Our *APM Research Fund Study: Project Leadership (2017)* emphasised the importance of developing skills through experience, reflection and exposure to real leadership challenges, helping understanding around project complexity and uncertainty.



Creating alignment through future-ready leadership (continued)

- **Invest in data governance and decision-making support tools** – Construction projects generate vast amounts of data, but without strong governance, that data can become unreliable or unusable. High quality data can be a strategic asset, allowing leaders to challenge unrealistic expectations, manage risk proactively, maintain alignment and apply a values-based framework for project success. To get the most out of your data, you should:
 - **Start with a clear problem** – Data is only valuable when leaders use it to inform decisions and challenge expectations.
 - **Standardise data inputs early** – Before introducing any analytics or AI tools, project data needs to be structured and consistent.
 - **Build data literacy across the whole team** – Teams need to be able to interpret and understand data effectively to get the most out of it and avoid any errors.
- **Define success in terms of outcomes** – Reframing success around user experience, community value, sustainability and long term value helps align stakeholders with different incentives and reduces the risk of short term decisions undermining long term value.

When these elements are present, leaders will be able to make better decisions, resolve issues earlier and maintain momentum, even under pressure. The roundtable offered that future-ready construction project leaders will be well-placed to achieve the following:

- **Build alignment early and revisit it often** – Future ready leaders treat alignment as a system to be monitored, sidestepping the risk posed by shifting political pressures, regulatory changes, design evolution and commercial tensions in construction, which can erode alignment and ultimately distract from the intended outcomes.
- **Use contracts as tools for clarity, not control** – Leaders who are future ready recognise that contracts cannot compensate for poor relationships or unclear expectations. They can challenge 'stand or withdraw' behaviour and advocate for commercially realistic terms.
- **Prioritise communication that builds trust** – Future-ready leaders understand that communication is not just about providing updates, it's about creating shared meaning and understanding across organisations with different incentives and definitions of success.
- **Challenge unrealistic expectations early** – Construction projects are especially vulnerable to optimism bias, political timelines and value for money pressures. Future-ready leaders can challenge expectations before they become embedded in a project.
- **Shape the project narrative** – Cost and schedule often dominate public and internal conversations, but future-ready leaders can articulate a broader narrative about purpose, public value and long term outcomes, creating a shared meaning.



Conclusion: Reimagining project delivery through strategic leadership

The future of complex project delivery in construction will be defined by organisations that treat leadership as a strategic asset. Tools and processes are the bones, but people, judgement and alignment are the beating heart of the project. The organisations that thrive will be those that invest in human capability, sector maturity and future-ready leadership.



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 40,000 individual members and more than 480 Corporate Partners based across 140 countries.

Further resources

- Resource - [*APM Salary and Market Trends Survey 2025*](#)
- Blog - [*How to build AI into your projects*](#)
- Research - [*The Golden Thread*](#)
- Blog - [*Transforming construction management: The integration of BIM and AI*](#)
- Resource - [*APM Business Leader Index Survey 2025/2026*](#)
- Research - [*AI's Dual Impact on Project Managers' Well-Being*](#)
- Resource - [*APM Corporate partnership*](#)





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Charter RC000890 and a registered charity No. 1171112. Principal
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