

Growth and Success: The importance of business strategy and leadership – Part 2

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits



Introduction

While growth isn't always easy, it's almost always necessary, at least to a degree. Even stable enterprises and lifestyle businesses that aren't prioritising growth must expand their offering and/or customer base at some point as factors like inflation, technological change and evolving customer demands chip away at their 'steady state' status. More broadly, most businesses don't simply want to exist; they want to stand out.

Where growth is the aim, this is inevitably accompanied by risk. For example:

- productivity slumps as changes are implemented
- dilution of culture due to changes in process, policy and personnel
- emergence of skills/capability gaps as new needs emerge across the organisation.

It's possible to manage 'growing pains' like these and deliver growth while still retaining competitive advantage, however. This paper looks at some of the ways this can be achieved.

The points covered in this paper are based on a discussion of senior business leaders that took place at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford.



Improving productivity with technology

APM's previous white paper, *Growth and Success: The importance of business strategy and leadership – Part 1*, explained how the UK has experienced slower productivity growth than France, Germany and the United States since the 2008 global financial crisis¹.

While that paper looked at the importance of people and processes in driving productivity, there's no doubt that technology has a role to play too. A survey of UK business leaders by APM found 47% of those whose organisations use AI say it's improving productivity in their organisation. The challenge is often around deciding what technology to invest in and how to implement it.

Contributors to the discussion at Saïd Business School shared their experiences of introducing AI tools to improve productivity:

- One contributor explained their company, a major professional services provider, has three different AI tools. Adoption rates were initially very low and, while these have increased, the quality of output remains mixed.
- Another contributor shared that their company, a specialist software services developer, uses Microsoft Copilot. This has been embraced by younger workers, but older employees are less willing to use it.
- An example was given of another company that uses Microsoft Copilot to complete admin work for tenders and procurement. This enables them to complete tasks more quickly, but requires an initial investment of time to create the required workflows and to train users.

The consensus was that simplicity – combined with training – is the approach that achieves the best outcomes. This mirrored other findings from APM's survey, which found the most common barriers to successful AI adoption include:

- The scope of the chosen solution being too broad – trying to do too many things, rather than doing a few things well.
- Staff not understanding goals and expectations for the use of AI.

Those introducing AI into their business (or considering doing so) should manage the transition in the following ways, to minimise disruptions to productivity and accelerate positive outcomes:

1. **Navigate changes with flexibility** – teams must be able to make last-minute changes to a project without uprooting their entire timelines and disrupting other people's progress.
2. **Keep stakeholders aligned** – project managers must keep stakeholders aligned with progress every step of the way. Invest in a task management platform to enable real-time updates and data-sharing, in addition to scheduled meetings and reports.
3. **Anticipate and mitigate risks ahead of time** – potential risks must be flagged and mitigation strategies identified to prepare you for the unknown.

“The problem isn't so much what the technology can do. It's how you manage it to micro and macro level. It's how you change ways of working to deal with AI, rather than how AI itself works.”

Bob Bradley, leadership coach and author

¹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/britain-is-falling-behind-the-us-and-productivity-is-largely-to-blame/>

Maintaining a culture that supports growth

Ultimately, being a changemaker and realising a vision is about people and relationships, not technical detail. A culture that accepts and embraces change, and which views transformation as more strategic than tactical, is a culture that will support growth.

Understanding people's needs (direction, reassurance, explanation of benefits, etc) and reflecting these in your communication will spark motivation, interest and engagement. This is about more than saying the right things. Being visible, accessible and demonstrating curiosity during change is also important. Research on the role of leadership in managing change, published in the *International Review of Management and Marketing*, stated "the most significant communication aspect from leadership during the time of change is how visible they are..."²

It's also important to tailor incentivisation models to support the desired culture. Financial rewards for individual performance can be a powerful driver, but will these support long-term success that has collaboration at its core?

"If you want a truly collaborative structure, incentivisation has to reward that...If you let people know it's a team mission and they're all in it together, you're then much less reliant on your financial lever."

Edmund Goodin, Principal Associate, Mills & Reeve



² Misheck Musaigwa, *The Role of Leadership in Changing Organizational Culture*, *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 2023, volume 13, issue 6.

Professionalise the changemakers

Projects contribute £186.8bn to the UK economy annually when measured by Gross Value Added. Despite this, only 34% of businesses have dedicated project specialists. This gap is partly due to the relative scarcity of project and programme specialists, with an estimated 30 million more project managers needed worldwide by 2035³.

While this poses a challenge for recruitment, it presents an opportunity for developing existing employees; especially those who are managing projects but are not dedicated project professionals (sometimes called 'accidental project managers').

While it's true that many people have skills that lend themselves to project management (organisation, attention to detail, etc), it must be remembered that project management is a recognised profession with its own specialist skills and competences. Investing to upskill the people delivering change can help unlock a business's growth capability.



³ <https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/global-project-management-talent-gap>

Professionalise the changemakers (continued)

Skills that project professionals rate as most important for successful delivery, by industry:

Automotive	Construction	Education	Engineering	Financial services	Healthcare and pharmaceuticals	HR
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership Communication and interpersonal skills Stakeholder engagement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptability/Flexibility General computer skills Communication and interpersonal skills 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Procurement/ Supply chain management Solutions development AI-related skills 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Solution development Risk management Conflict resolution 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Solution development General computer skills Adaptability/Flexibility 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits management Conflict resolution Solutions development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder engagement Communication and interpersonal skills Emotional intelligence
Legal	Manufacturing	Retail, catering and leisure	Sales, media and marketing	Technology	Telecoms	Transport and logistics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Team management AI-related skills Communication and interpersonal skills 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Team management Communication and interpersonal skills Risk management 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> General computer skills Procurement/Supply chain management Stakeholder engagement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional intelligence Team management Solutions development 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptability/flexibility Transition management Budgeting 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Procurement/ Supply chain management Stakeholder engagement General computer skills 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder engagement Procurement/Supply chain management Personal time management

Investing in people’s professional development not only boosts an organisation’s intellectual capital and capabilities; it also unlocks career paths for employees. This improves employee engagement and reduces turnover.

* Source: Survey of 1,000 UK-based project professionals by APM and Censuswide, April 2025

³ <https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/global-project-management-talent-gap>

“If you’ve got the right people, you can achieve anything. But it’s not just getting the right people. It’s knowing what their motivators are. Is it about career? Is it about their next promotion?”

Laura Riley, Associate Director at Michael Page

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 42,000 members and more than 470 corporate partners based across 140 countries.

Further resources

- [*Growth and Success: The importance of business strategy and leadership – Part 1*](#)
- [*Project-led strategies to future-proof your business*](#)
- [*Blog – Building a collaborative culture: best practices for project managers*](#)
- [*The Golden Thread \(2024\)*](#)
- [*APM Competence Framework*](#)





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membership organisation
for the project profession**

Association for Project Management
Ibis House, Regent Park
Summerleys Road
Princes Risborough
Bucks HP27 9LE
0845 458 1944
apm.org.uk

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