Project-led strategies to future-proof your business

Because when projects succeed, society benefits

Introduction

In an ever-changing business landscape, staying ahead requires forward-thinking strategies. Making a business fit for the future means exploring innovative approaches to ensure adaptability and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Projects, programmes and portfolios are about delivering the transformations needed for strategic success. C-Suite and executive-level leaders must understand their business's projects in order to understand where it is and where it's going. Project management is, in effect, future state planning. Future-proofing an organisation is therefore dependent on a project-led approach.

This paper explores how organisations, C-Suite-level leaders and project professionals can build resilience into their plans to handle unexpected disruption, and the role played by culture and leadership. It 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.

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.

Dr Paul Chapman

Paul Chapman is Senior Fellow in Operations Management at Saïd Business School. He is a leading expert on the learning and development of executives, especially those responsible for leading the delivery of major projects and programmes typically valued at more than $1bn. Paul is Academy Director for the UK Government's Major Project Leadership Academy (MPLA), a one-year, part-time programme for the Major Project Leaders responsible for delivering the UK Government's portfolio of strategic projects, valued at over £440bn. In this role he also designed and directs the 'Sponsoring Major Projects' programme for UK Government Ministers. Paul is Chair of APM's Research Advisory Group.

Professor Martina Huemann

Martina Huemann is the Professor for Major Infrastructure Delivery at the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London and Professor at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. She has published widely on topics such as project careers, stakeholder engagement, sustainability and project management. Martina is Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Project Management* and Founding Editor-in-Chief of *Project Leadership and Society*. She has over 20 years of experience in research, teaching and consulting.

Professor Stephen Carver

Stephen Carver is Senior Lecturer at Cranfield School of Management and is rated as one of the top three lecturers at one of Europe's top MBA business schools. In addition to his academic career, Stephen has worked with many organisations in the banking, insurance and legal sectors. He has taught worldwide and appears regularly on national TV, radio and YouTube.

How future-proof is a project or programme?

Understanding how resilient, adaptable and fit-for-the-future a project is can be assessed through the following questions:

- **Is it worth doing?** – Project and programme professionals are, generally speaking, driven people who take satisfaction in delivering to a high standard. But at a leadership level, it's important to help project teams keep sight of the strategic goal. Why is a project taking place? Why is this the main priority? If the goal and intended value of a project are not clear – or if changing circumstances will affect its chances of success – is this project the right one?

- **Is it investible?** – Ask yourself, if you were a potential investor, would you put money behind this project, or would you choose to do something else? A consideration here is weighing up who the project will benefit and who it will leave behind. If there are people who will not be able to benefit from the resulting change (or who may be harmed by it), that must be taken into consideration and weighted against the intended benefit.

- **Can you get it done?** – The late Dr Martin Barnes, former APM President, remarked 'at its most fundamental, project management is about people getting things done'. But this does not simply come down to having the right know-how. Is there sufficient budget and human resource to support delivery (and is there sufficient contingency in these factors for them to be considered future-proof)? Be honest when assessing the resource available to you, to avoid optimism bias affecting plans.

> If you're going to deliver the future, is doing what you plan to do likely to deliver results that you expect? So often, the answer to that is 'we don't know'.

Paul Chapman

Don't fear failure

Continuous learning and innovation are as much to do with what goes wrong as with what goes right. Project professionals will help mitigate risks, and provide an element of control and certainty. However, there are opportunities in failure, risk and even in chaos.

Stephen Carver explained: "There is perhaps a need for chaos in society. Without chaos we're all just going to do the same thing, badly, over and over. Chaos breeds innovation and life whereas order breeds habits."

A survey of APM Corporate Members found over 60% of respondents associate risk with a negative outcome[1]. Commenting on the findings, Stephen said: "It's incredible we see risk as bad. It can be an opportunity. That's what chaos theory is saying; we have to get more opportunity from risk."

Risk exists as a consequence of uncertainty. Any project will therefore have various types of risks and uncertainties. These can – and should – be managed. Even on projects that are unique or where there is limited statistical data for analysis, experienced project leaders will be able to apply systematic processes, such as Project Risk Analysis and Management (PRAM). However, it is important to:

- capitalise on the opportunities that emerge from projects (or aspects of projects) that fail
- avoid falling into the trap of setting perfection as the intent, or trying to plan to perfection

"We have to have a culture that allows people to experiment," said Stephen.
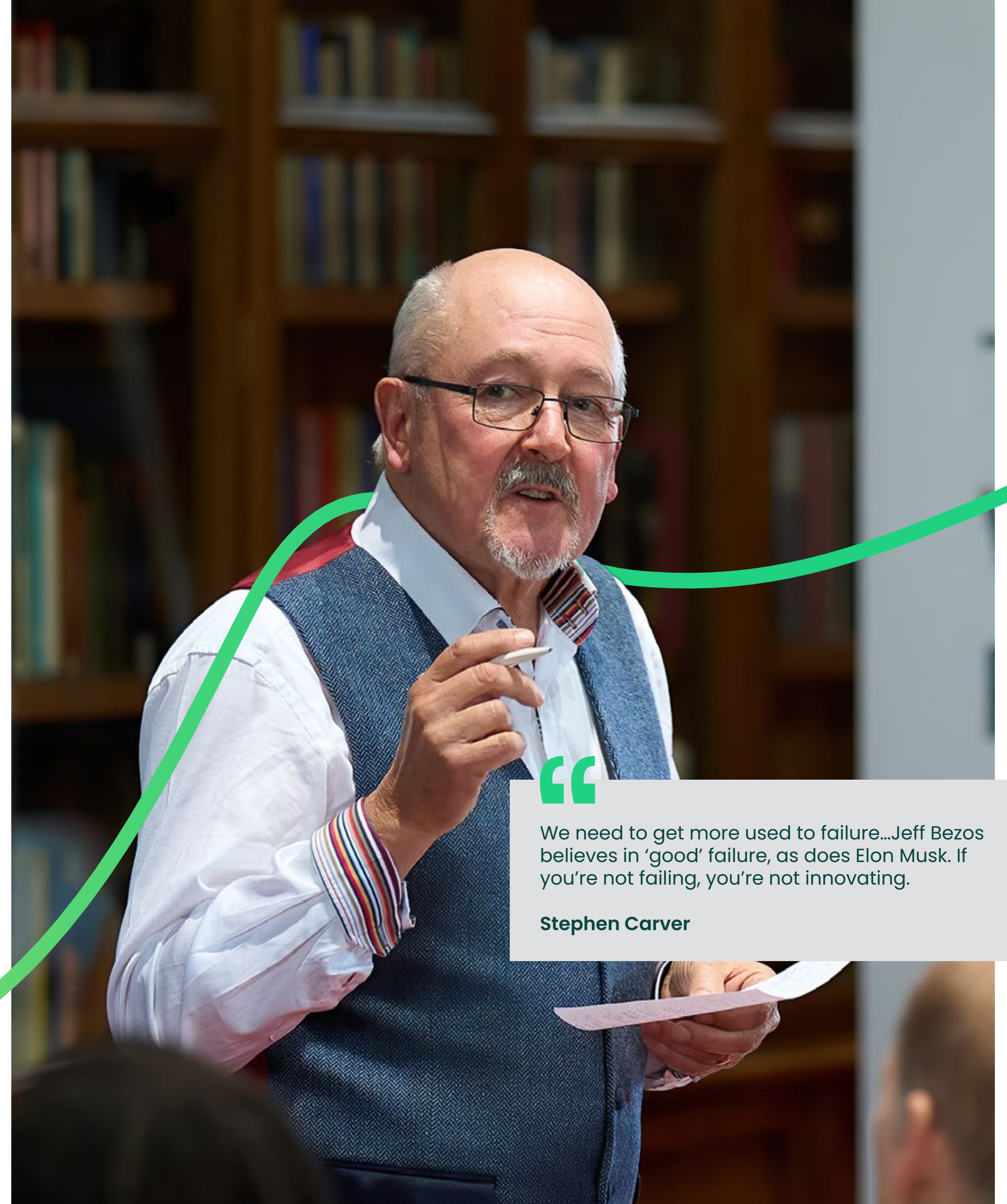
> " We need to get more used to failure...Jeff Bezos believes in 'good' failure, as does Elon Musk. If you're not failing, you're not innovating.
>
> **Stephen Carver**

[1] *The Asymmetry between Threats and Opportunities in Risk Management: Results from a survey among APM Corporate Members*

Create a culture that supports 'future-making'

Psychological safety is an important enabler of proper scrutiny. A culture that encourages openness is more likely to ask (and answer) the questions that will determine a project's future validity.

For business leaders, this means creating work environments that emphasise the purpose of projects and programmes, as these are important motivators for project professionals. It also means ensuring that colleagues have opportunities for professional development, so that they have the skills and competences needed to fulfil that purpose.

Another key motivator for project professionals is relatability (defined as "the desire to feel connected to others[2]").

Providing this focus and affording colleagues physical and psychological space in their work will help them find ways in which they and their project can best fulfil that purpose.

Martina Huemann described this type of environment as 'future-making', commenting: "From an HR perspective, who are project managers and what motivates them? There's a need for relatedness. There's a need for purpose. And there's also a need for competence... For leaders, that means you need to create spaces on the project: social space when it comes to relatedness, incorporation space when it comes to purpose, and also learning space when it comes to competence."

[2]Deci E. L., Ryan R. M. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, Volume 11, issue 4, 2000.

Make projects sustainable

Martina Huemann argued that the need for sustainability is likely to be a significant disruptor to the delivery of projects – even more so than digital transformation.

APM's research into dynamic conditions for project success found sustainability to be one such condition, and that it has four strands:

- Environmental, such as climate change
- Social, such as community
- Financial/economic, such as affordability
- Administration, such as health and safety

All of these factors contribute to wider business success too, of course. It can be a challenge however for organisations to apply these principles when it comes to moving from one state to another, as in the case of a project or programme delivering strategic change.

Ensuring these strands of sustainability are factored into projects or programmes delivering transformation requires leaders to think holistically, without losing site of why that project is taking place and what state it must reach in order to fulfil that goal. An example would be building a hospital. Constructing the buildings and placing the equipment may be the intended deliverable, but the goal is to have a sustainable facility where people can receive treatment.

"Very often, our understanding is not holistic enough, said Martina. "We're very much focusing on the infrastructure or the technology and not so much on the use."
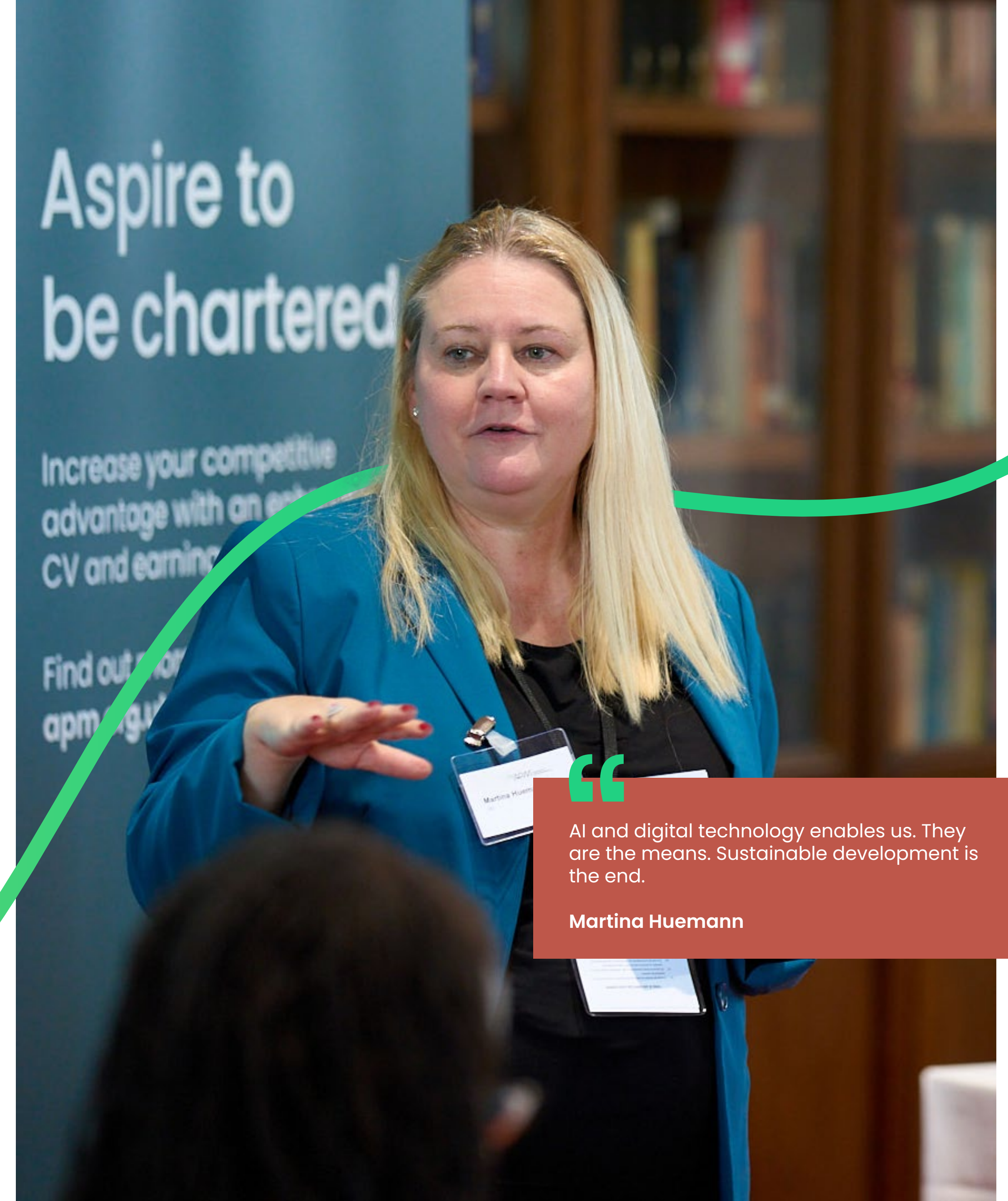
> " AI and digital technology enables us. They are the means. Sustainable development is the end.
>
> **Martina Huemann**

Attract and retain the right people

Tackling complex issues requires project professionals with the right skills and competencies to drive change. According to the Project Management Institute, the world needs 25 million additional project managers by 2030. The growth of the project profession is at risk however, due to potential talent shortages.

The gap between the demand for project management skills and the availability of talent globally continues to increase. **APM's _Golden Thread_ research** found more than half (51%) of businesses see difficulty in attracting new talent as a key barrier to growth. Organisations must acknowledge – and enhance – the appeal of project management to enrich and diversify the talent pipeline. Highlighting the following may aid recruitment:

- The business value of projects - not just delivering outputs, but realising benefits.
- The leadership role of project professionals – leading diverse teams, coordinating across departments, anticipating challenges and working to tight deadlines.
- The purpose-rich nature of project work – making a difference to colleagues, clients, end-users and society.

Martina Huemann said: "We want to attract the right people and the right talent, and we want to retain them. The project world offers people quite exciting work with a strong sense of purpose. This is something that is very attractive to people."

Stephen Carver cited the diverse project workforce at **Thames Tideway**, the 25km 'super sewer' under the River Thames, as an example of how purposeful projects and programmes attract and inspire emerging talent. "I was struck by the diversity of the workforce, how young they were and how enthusiastic they were…they knew what they were doing had purpose," he said.

Organisations should put measures in place to safeguard the wellbeing of project professionals and ensure a supportive work environment. Research by APM has found that project professionals are more likely to report poorer health and wellbeing compared to the general working population. This is a key concern for businesses, with 50% of respondents in the _Golden Thread_ survey citing it as a barrier to further growth.

Retention should also become a greater strategic priority, to reduce the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon. Retaining knowledge and experience will provide a richer pool of expertise to draw from on active project work. It also supports the development of new employees.
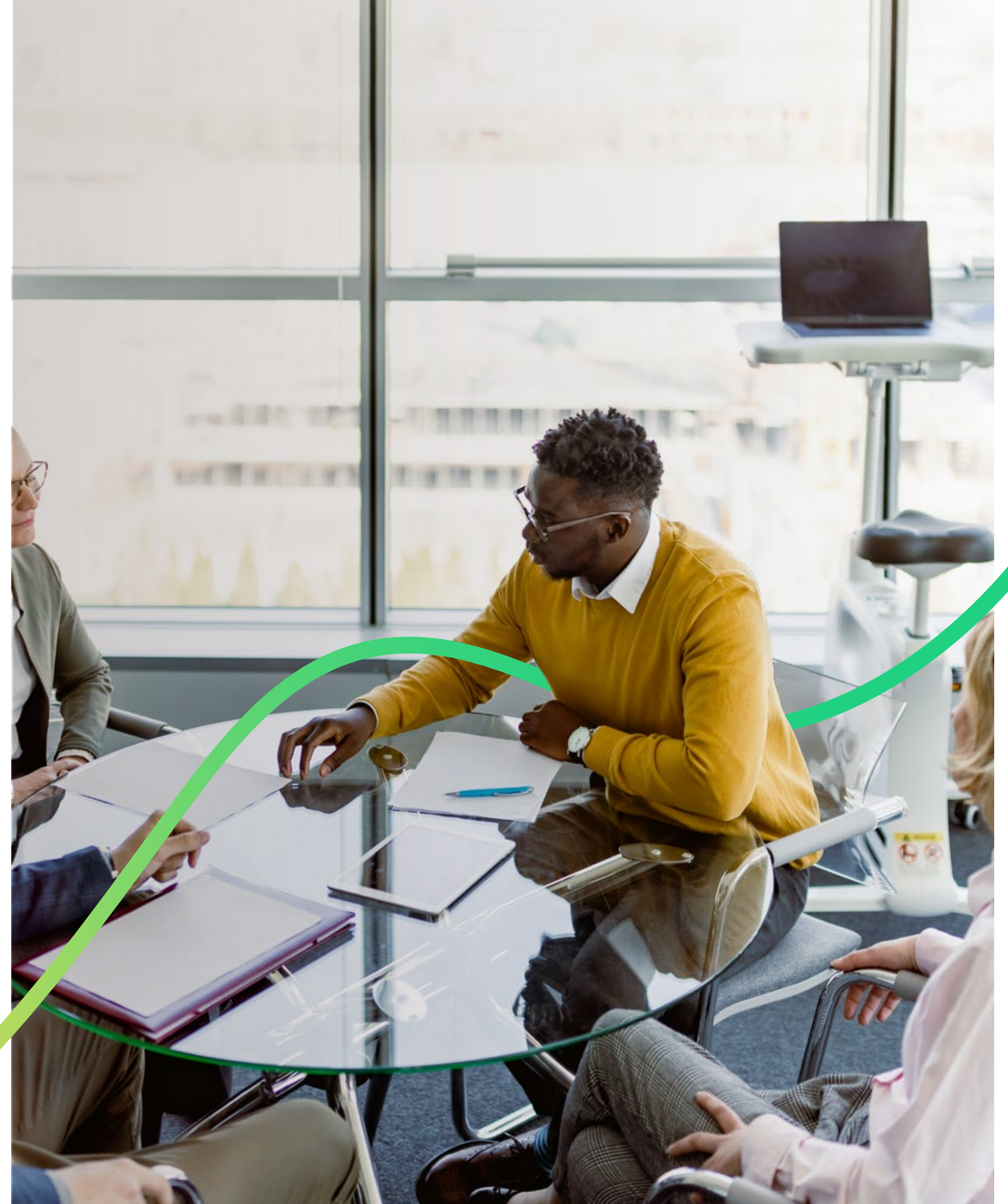
Don't be afraid to 'kill' a bad project

The idea of 'killing off' a project that is no longer fit for purpose (for whatever reason) can be difficult because cancelling a project may be seen as a failure.

Sometimes a senior business leader or sponsor may be emotionally invested in a project, which can make it difficult to convince them if the initiative needs to be stopped. These leaders must be open to persuasion and have trust in their project experts. There may also be a need for senior leaders to convince other C-Suite or board members that this is the right decision. It is advisable to appoint an Exit Champion: someone with the temperament and credibility to question a prevailing belief, produce robust data on the viability of the project, and, if necessary, forcefully make the case that it should be 'killed'[3].

[3]Isabelle Royer, Why Bad Projects Are So Hard to Kill, *Harvard Business Review*, 2003

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

Receive exclusive thought leadership from APM

If you would like to receive regular updates containing the latest thought leadership on the project profession and its impact on business, join our exclusive business leader mailing list by emailing **leaders@apm.org.uk**

APM takes privacy seriously and processes all personal data in accordance with Data Protection legislation and our privacy statement.

Further resources

- *Dynamic Conditions for Project Success*

- APM webinar – Inspire inclusion within the project profession to attract and retain a diverse workforce

- *The Golden Thread (2024)*

- APM mini guide, *Project Risk Analysis and Management*

- *The Asymmetry between Threats and Opportunities in Risk Management: Results from a Survey among APM Corporate Members*

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**.

We are the only chartered
membership organisation
for the project profession