

# Boosting the Project Profession

The Importance of Reskilling and Upskilling to Meet Project Workforce Demand

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Because when projects  
succeed, society benefits

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## Introduction

The project profession is facing its most significant evolution in a generation. For decades, the profession has operated within a framework of relative stability, with traditional sectors growing at a steady pace, and new sectors remaining accessible for project professionals with little need to upgrade their knowledge or expertise.

At the same time, global and economic developments have made the project environment more complicated and unstable, with high-priority sectors such as energy, defence and artificial intelligence evolving at such speeds that the skills capacity of the profession is struggling to keep pace. Project professionals now operate in a climate defined by unprecedented complexity, economic instability and the rise of autonomous technology.

The UK Government's key policy focus is now on these evolving sectors of high priority, including new infrastructure projects across the UK; funding new defence projects in line with the 2025 defence industrial strategy; strengthening energy security through new renewable energy, nuclear, and traditional oil and gas projects; and ensuring that the UK is at the forefront of new technology. These projects have highlighted the pressing need for more project management related skills and knowledge.

There are a series of challenges facing the project profession to ensure the right skills are available in the sectors of high priority; national and local skills funding, talent shortages, an ageing workforce, the need to develop early career talent, and retention of project skills in the UK. The profession faces a widening gap between supply and demand and attracting, developing, and retaining project management skills, particularly in sectors of high priority, is arguably the profession's biggest challenge.

As the labour market evolves to become heavily project-based, project management competences are most likely to be at the very core of the future labour market.<sup>1</sup> This shift has reinforced the focus within the project profession on hybrid capability roles through reskilling and upskilling.

When the project profession talks about reskilling, it can be defined as the process of a project professional learning a new set of sector specific competences to transition into a different project role or new project sector. When the profession talks about upskilling, it can be defined as learning new or advanced skills to expand competence within a project.

A focus on reskilling and upskilling the project profession in new sectors of high priority, such as energy, defence and infrastructure, can help build a more agile, capable and future-ready project workforce that is better equipped to deliver successful outcomes in a rapidly changing environment.

This report will explain the skills challenges facing the project profession and explore the need for reskilling and upskilling at a national and regional level. This will be vital

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<sup>1</sup> NFER. 2023. *Skills Imperative 2035*. <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/key-topics-expertise/education-to-employment/the-skills-imperative-2035/>

to the success of the UK's growth agenda and the long-term development of the UK's sectors of high priority.

## Skills Challenges in the Project Profession

The challenges facing skills in the project profession are varied but are not individual to the profession. They are shared across many different industries, highlighting the growing skills crisis facing the UK. The project profession can lead in fixing the challenges that cause skills shortages and set a blueprint for other industries to follow.

### **Access to training and funding**

The most common skills challenge facing the project profession is accessing training. APM research shows that 54% of project professionals say they are concerned about having the right skills to deliver projects successfully and 57% of project professionals say their organisation is concerned about a lack of skills to deliver current projects.<sup>2</sup> This presents the increasing challenge of project professionals not being able to access the correct skills required to deliver projects. To ensure that project professionals can access the correct skills, easier access to government-funding for training is necessary.

With project professionals struggling to access the right training, employers are struggling to find candidates with the necessary skills. More than half of businesses reported challenges in finding the right project management skills in 2024, compared to a third in 2019.<sup>3</sup> This statistic further highlights the challenge that businesses do not have the confidence in recruiting project professionals with the correct skills. When businesses do not have confidence in recruiting project professionals, future planning is reduced and long-term skills capacity, in the project profession, is put at risk.

Whilst project professionals and businesses are struggling to access the necessary training, APM research identified varied funding for project management training. At a local level, in Mayoral Combined Authorities, project professionals unanimously agree that they had sufficient skills development opportunities. However, when local authorities were asked the same question, only a quarter of project professionals agreed that they had sufficient skills development opportunities.<sup>4</sup> This trend shows a lack of consistent funding for routine project skills across the public sector and because of the funding gap, standards of training, when they are provided, appear to vary greatly.

To create easier access to government-funding for project management training, the UK Government's growth and skills levy should be reformed to support funding for professional qualifications that are supported by industry. This would help employers develop the capability needed to deliver complex projects while providing individuals with recognised pathways into project leadership roles

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<sup>2</sup> APM. 2026. *APM Project Management Skills Survey 2026*. <https://shorturl.at/mRFvm>

<sup>3</sup> APM. 2024. *The Golden Thread: A Study of the Contribution of the Project Profession to the UK's Economy*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/research/the-golden-thread/>

<sup>4</sup> APM. 2026. *But What about the Locals? Understanding Project Management in Local Government*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/media/rpio3f5a/apm-briefing-local-authority-report-2026.pdf>

## **Ageing Workforce**

An ageing workforce presents major challenges and shifts for every sector. Organisations are starting to adapt to this by rethinking career development and knowledge across generations.

In the construction sector, over half of mature professionals (over 55 years of age) plan to stop or semi-retire within three years.<sup>5</sup> With an ageing workforce, there is a real risk that the skills and knowledge will disappear and will not be passed on to early career talent. This stems from a wider challenge of the talent pipeline and ensuring that skills are in place to replace an ageing workforce. Solutions should be explored to help businesses create a workforce that can put long-term plans in place and take on more long-term projects.

## **Developing early career talent**

Developing early career talent in project management involves tackling challenges such as acute industry skills gaps, low professional visibility and structural training hurdles. 61% of business leaders say that they don't believe there are enough project professionals in the talent pipeline to sustain emerging sectors.<sup>6</sup> This shows the impact that not addressing this challenge will have on emerging sectors, stifling their growth and limiting the project expertise needed to complete projects.

Making sure that early-career talent has the skills needed to deliver projects has been an increasing challenge for the project profession, yet more needs to be done to ensure training is providing the necessary skills. 59% of project managers say that they learned day-to-day project skills on the job.<sup>7</sup> Whilst on the job experience is valuable to developing the skills for a dynamic project industry, there is a growing challenge that aspiring project professionals are lacking the training needed to develop early-career talent.

New and emerging skills are now needed to develop early career talent, specifically artificial intelligence (AI). The rapid shift towards AI and digital skills means that there is an evolving demand for project skills to utilise and expand the knowledge of digital technologies with 88% of project managers identifying AI capability as the most important skill for the next five years.<sup>8</sup> There is a growing recognition that artificial intelligence will become a fundamental capability within the project profession and businesses are investing significantly in artificial intelligence, more so than on workforce capacity. The gap between those who see artificial intelligence as an important future skill and those who view this as essential to project success today,

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<sup>5</sup> Trustmark. 2025. *Skilled to Build: Empowering the UK's Repair, Maintenance and Improvement Sector for a Better Future*. <https://cms.trustmark.org.uk/media/aaknq230/skilled-to-build-full-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> APM. 2026. *Business Leader Index Survey 2025/2026*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/business-leader-index-survey/>

<sup>7</sup> APM. 2026. *APM Project Management Skills Survey 2026*. <https://shorturl.at/mRFvm>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

suggests that the progression is still transitioning towards widespread AI adoption. The challenge is developing these capabilities among early career talent.

### **Retention of project skills**

The retention of project skills is a growing challenge in the UK, with 83% of professionals noting a persistent skills gap and 43% stating it is not improving.<sup>9</sup> This highlights a significant and persistent challenge in the UK, suggesting that project-critical knowledge and expertise are not being developed and retained quickly enough to meet demand. There is a clear risk that Government and the wider project industry could face reduced project delivery capability and difficulties sustaining long-term growth and innovation.

Whilst the profession notes that the skills gap is not improving, industry also notes that over 40% of project managers report that industry skills shortages remain stagnant or are worsening.<sup>10</sup> The retention of project skills remains a persistent challenge in the UK, as a significant proportion of project managers report that critical capability gaps are either unchanged or worsening. In sectors such as construction and engineering, they are seeing a reduction in skills due to retirement, attrition, and geographic pressures such as regional hotspots like London pulling a disproportionate share of the workforce, leaving shortages elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> More needs to be done to retain skills, particularly in regions where projects are struggling to develop due to a shortage of skills. This can be done by introducing a 10-year local pipeline strategy through the Mayoral Combined Authorities to provide greater certainty and continuity in the delivery of projects whilst helping to retain skilled project professionals within the regions.

### **Perception of Project Management**

One of the potential reasons for the persistent challenge around skills is the perception of project management itself, with the need for project professionals not being recognised consistently within current skills policy. The picture across the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) demonstrates this clearly as LSIPs describe major investment, infrastructure, clean energy, defence, construction, digital and regional growth ambitions, yet project management is not always identified as a career pathway. In many places it is treated as a generic leadership, coordination or employability skill; in others, often shaped by separate occupational categories and SOC-code mapping, demand is split into narrower roles such as digital project managers, engineering project managers, construction project managers. This fragmentation matters because it encourages employers and local skills systems to recruit from narrow sector pools, even where the underlying project competence is transferable. A clearer understanding that experienced project professionals can move

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<sup>9</sup> APM. 2024. *Apprenticeship Week 2024 - Skills gap is 'getting worse' say 1 in 8 project managers*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/apprenticeship-week-2024-skills-gap-is-getting-worse-say-1-in-8-project-managers/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Boden Group. 2025. *The 2025 Skills Shortage in Property & Construction: What It Means for Hiring Surveyors & Project Managers*. <https://boden-group.co.uk/property-blog/skills-shortage-property-construction/>

across sectors, with sector-specific knowledge taught through structured induction, technical training and supervised practice, would allow organisations to recruit from a wider pool while still maintaining competence and assurance.

Replacing the existing fragmented SOC-codes would reduce the confusion created by too many overlapping labels and help learners, employers and policy makers see project management as both a distinct profession and a portable capability. Additionally, this would enable a clearer picture of the actual shortage of project professionals needed to successfully deliver the ambitions for growth.

## The Need for Re-Skilling

The answer to these challenges is not simply more training provision, nor is it a request for each sector to grow its own separate and self-contained labour market. The answer is to implement a strategy of re-skilling project professionals to ensure the profession is treated as a transferable national asset and enables people with relevant experience, judgement and behaviours to learn the context of a new industry area and apply this alongside their existing project management competence.

This requires a shift in mindset by moving away from asking only for skills from a single sector, and towards asking what skills are needed to deliver for high-priority sectors such as nuclear, transport infrastructure, and defence. That distinction matters. It recognises that while some technical, regulatory and contextual knowledge is sector-specific, many of the capabilities needed to deliver complex projects can be developed and applied across sector boundaries.

This distinction was made by APM members who described the need to move from a narrow search for “nuclear skills” to a broader focus on “skills for nuclear”. APM members argued that the nuclear context can be taught in a relatively short period, but that it is much harder to teach someone to be a good technical project manager.<sup>12</sup> The same principle applies across other sectors such as transport and defence as they all require sector familiarisation, but they also depend on a core of transferable project competence, provided by, for example the APM Competence Framework. If employers and policy makers continue to define shortages too narrowly by sector, they risk overlooking people whose skills could be adapted quickly and effectively through targeted conversion routes.

The practical possibilities for cross-sector re-skilling are significant, but they need to be approached as a structured route for mobility rather than a general assumption that project professionals can move anywhere without support. This is highlighted in the APM's Golden Thread research, where four in ten said that limited opportunities for project professionals to move between sectors will likely act as a barrier to growth of the profession. If this isn't addressed, it could dampen any further contributions made by the profession to the UK economy'.<sup>13</sup> With structured sector familiarisation, the capability of the project profession can be reskilled into sectors of high priority to build these sectors and create economic growth.

The risk of not prioritising re-skilling is that sectors of high priority will continue to compete with one another for the same limited pool of skilled project professionals. This can distort the picture of demand and increase pressure on salary, mobilisation and delivery timelines. Where projects are delayed, contractors may not be able to hold skilled people in anticipation of future decisions; when contracts are finally awarded, there can be an immediate scramble to recruit. This creates a cycle in which projects start late, organisations buy in scarce capability at higher cost, and the wider system fails to grow the overall supply of competent project professionals.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> APM. 2026. *In-Person Skills Roundtable - 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2026*.

<sup>13</sup> APM. 2024. *The Golden Thread: A Study of the Contribution of the Project Profession to the UK's Economy*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/research/the-golden-thread/>

<sup>14</sup> APM. 2026. *Virtual Skills Roundtable - 29<sup>th</sup> June 2026*.

Apprenticeships, professional qualifications, and employer-led workforce planning, can all support businesses to re-skill their talent pool, but only if they are aligned around real demand and clear competence outcomes. APM members suggested that government and clients could use contracts to create stronger incentives for re-skilling, rather than relying on broad social value commitments that are easy to satisfy numerically but do not necessarily build long-term capability. Connected networks between employers, providers, clients and local areas would also help reduce duplicated training, aggregate demand and make it easier for people to move between opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Professional standards should sit at the centre of this approach. Re-skilling should not be understood as lowering the bar or assuming that any capable person can immediately deliver complex projects in any sector. Rather, it should provide a structured route for recognising transferable competence, identifying the additional sector-specific knowledge required, and supporting people to develop safely into new industries. This is particularly important in safety-critical and highly regulated environments, where people moving from other industries may not immediately understand the influence of regulators or the consequences of delivery failure. The policy objective should be to widen access to project roles while maintaining confidence that people are competent for the level of complexity and risk they are expected to manage.

Re-skilling needs to be treated as a strategic workforce intervention rather than a remedial activity. It can help retain people whose existing roles are changing, bring experienced workers into project careers, create progression routes and make better use of transferable capability across the economy. Without it, the UK risks a fragmented skills response in which each sector tries to solve the same problem separately; organisations continue to compete for talent rather than grow it; and projects central to national growth, face higher costs, slower mobilisation and greater delivery risk.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

## The Need for Upskilling

There is a need for upskilling young people into the project profession. Major programmes and projects are long-term undertakings, requiring sustained delivery capability across multiple sectors and places and they will need a new generation of project-capable entrants who understand how to work in complex, multi-disciplinary delivery environments.

This aligns with the wider challenge identified in the government's *Young People and Work: Interim Report*<sup>16</sup>, which describes nearly one million young people aged 16 to 24 as not in education, employment or training (NEETs), with the deeper issue increasingly being detachment from the labour market rather than temporary unemployment. Upskilling young people within the project profession can help build a long-term talent pipeline in the project profession that can play a major role in reducing the number of NEETs in the UK.

However, making the project profession attractive to young people is crucial. APM's research on generational differences found that younger project professionals were particularly interested in awareness campaigns that highlight regional employment opportunities, while older professionals placed greater emphasis on CPD.<sup>17</sup> This distinction matters; younger people may not reject project work; they may simply not see it, understand it or recognise the range of routes into it. The profession is often presented as something people enter after they have already acquired sector experience, rather than as an accessible career pathway. Young people need to see project management as a career that connects them to visible outcomes, such as clean energy, transport, defence capability, and local regeneration.

Young people can be helped to see project careers as more attractive by linking technical learning with real delivery experience. APM's World Youth Skills Day advice from emerging project professionals emphasises practical skills such as communication, listening, self-organisation, people management, confidence, curiosity and learning through experience.<sup>18</sup> For young entrants to the project profession, this should be built into the skills system through T-Levels, apprenticeships, applied technical qualifications, degree apprenticeships, industry placements, graduate routes and structured early-career project roles.

The risks of failing to upskill young people are significant. The profession runs the risk of being overly reliant on mid-career re-skilling and later-career transfer routes to fill gaps that require a longer pipeline. That would leave sectors competing for the same limited pool of experienced project professionals and would reinforce the shortages

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<sup>16</sup> Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. *Young people and work: interim report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report>

<sup>17</sup> APM. 2025. *APM survey finds generational differences around bringing new skills into the profession*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/apm-survey-finds-generational-differences-around-bringing-new-skills-into-the-profession/>

<sup>18</sup> APM. 2022. *World Youth Skills Day: Advice for emerging project professionals*. <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/world-youth-skills-day-advice-for-emerging-project-professionals/>

already identified. Major projects may face higher delivery risk because projects will lack sufficient people with both foundational project competence and the ability to learn sector context over time.

Young people may continue to be detached from work and learning at precisely the point where the economy needs new talent in growth-critical sectors. With an estimated 1.12 million young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK classified as NEETs, the Government needs to take stronger action to reduce this figure by providing training to develop their skills to work on Government-led projects.<sup>19</sup> This can be done by mandating their own government-led projects to upskill a percentage of NEETs. This would reduce economic inactivity, improve social value outcomes, and help strengthen the long-term talent pipeline in the project profession.

Upskilling young people should sit alongside re-skilling as part of a coherent national project skills strategy. The two are mutually reinforcing. Re-skilling the current workforce helps address immediate shortages and upskilling young people builds the future pipeline. Young entrants need access to mentors, live projects and experienced professionals, while experienced professionals need structured opportunities to pass on judgement, sector knowledge and delivery behaviours. This creates a stronger intergenerational skills model: one that captures knowledge from an ageing workforce, provides progression for early-career talent, and gives employers a more sustainable supply of project capability.

Without this, the UK risks a project skills system that remains reactive, fragmented and dependent on short-term labour-market fixes at the very moment when national delivery ambitions require long-term capability building. Bringing more NEETs into project-based careers would reduce economic inactivity and help address skills shortages in sectors critical to economic growth. It would also create sustainable pathways into skilled employment, while increasing productivity and long-term economic resilience. From a societal perspective, providing young people with access to recognised career pathways into the project profession can improve social mobility and reduce the risk of long-term disengagement from work and learning.

For the project profession, developing a pipeline of young talent would create a more geographically distributed and sustainable workforce, ensuring the UK has the delivery capability required to successfully implement projects and realise the ambitions of the UK's industrial strategy and wider economic growth agenda. Investment in upskilling should not be viewed solely as a skills intervention, but as an economic and social investment that delivers benefits for individuals, employers, communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Training to include support to achieve minimum requirements to be accepted onto the Level 4 apprenticeship standard.

## Recommendations

### For Government

**1. Professional project management competence should be recognised as a transferable foundation for reskilling and workforce mobility.**

Individuals with strong project capability can apply those skills across sectors, with sector-specific knowledge added through targeted induction, technical training and supervised practice. This approach reflects the reality that it is generally more achievable to teach sector context to an experienced project professional than to develop advanced project leadership, controls, governance and delivery capability from scratch within a sector specialist.

**2. Introduce a 10-year local project pipeline strategy to ensure local skills stay in the regions.**

To provide greater certainty and continuity in the delivery of infrastructure and development projects across the UK. By establishing a long-term programme of work at regional level through Combined Local Authorities, contractors and training providers can invest confidently in skills development, apprenticeships and workforce planning. A predictable pipeline of projects will help retain skilled workers within their regions

**3. Reform the growth and skills levy to support funding for professional qualifications that are supported by industry.**

Expanding the use of levy funding so that employers can pay for recognised professional certifications, not just apprenticeships. This would help employers develop the capability needed to deliver complex projects while providing individuals with recognised pathways into project leadership roles.

**4. Mandate a percentage of NEETs are upskilled to work on new Government-led projects.**

When the Government launches major projects such as infrastructure programmes, digital transformation initiatives, NHS modernisation projects, housing developments, or net-zero schemes, Government-led projects should be required to reserve a percentage of entry-level roles, apprenticeships, or trainee project management positions for NEETs, subject to minimum requirements.<sup>20</sup> This would reduce economic inactivity, improve social value outcomes, and help speed up the talent pipeline in the project profession.

**5. Review and update Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes and associated occupational mapping**

To ensure that project support, project management, project controls, project delivery and programme leadership are recognised as distinct and visible

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<sup>20</sup> Minimum requirement suggested as the standard for the Level 4 Apprenticeship (Pass Maths and English by the end of the apprenticeship)

occupational pathways, rather than being subsumed within broad management or leadership categories or being narrowly defined in specific sectors. Clearer classification would improve labour market intelligence, enable more accurate identification of transferable skills, and support targeted reskilling and upskilling interventions for individuals moving into project roles from adjacent sectors or occupations.

## For Industry

### 1. **Change the mindset and culture of project skills training.**

Work with the younger generation to upskill them to work on projects and work with professionals to reskill from other industries to increase knowledge and best practices from other project sectors.

## About APM

The Association for Project Management (APM) is the leading voice for the project profession. As the only Chartered membership organisation for the project profession in the world, APM represents over 45,000 members who are at the forefront of delivering complex change.

Every sector in the UK uses the project profession to deliver their programmes, which in turn creates economic growth and benefits across the whole of society.