

MANAGING PROJECT UNCERTAINTY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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The Promise vs. the Reality

AI has been widely identified as the next great engine of productivity growth; often compared to the transformative impacts of electricity or the internet. Yet despite billions of dollars invested, the productivity boost so far has been modest. Real-world gains remain incremental, narrow in scope, or uneven across sectors[1]. For many organisations, expectations have outpaced actual outcomes.

Why This Shouldn't Surprise Us

This gap between hype and reality should not surprise us. We are living through a period of structural uncertainty; caught between the established environment and an emerging one still taking shape. This uncertainty is reflected in organisational investment behaviour. In November 2024 a Deloitte survey identified 69% of business leaders were pausing capital expenditure[2]. Similarly in July, The Cube Research identified that 87% of businesses were taking a 'cautious approach' to tech spending[3]. In both cases, AI uncertainty was identified as a key contributor to this decision.

This makes sense when you imagine uncertainty in the context of a new project. Imagine you are responsible for:

- Launching a new public-facing ICT service – would you design your customer support entirely through a chatbot, knowing public trust in AI is still forming?
- Delivering a new case management system – do you integrate a generative AI search capability now, or wait until regulations clarify how client data can be processed?
- Leading a major workforce redesign – do you restructure roles now based on current automation capabilities, or wait, knowing AI may soon take on tasks we still consider uniquely human?

Each of these scenarios highlights the uncomfortable but inevitable reality of transition: we are building the plane while flying it.

The Role of Project Professionals

While there are significant ethical, regulatory, and technical challenges associated with AI adoption, the focus here is narrower and more practical: the role of project professionals. We are not passive bystanders. We have a responsibility to optimise our approaches, sharpen our processes, and support our stakeholders so that projects can navigate this uncertain terrain more effectively.



If AI is to deliver on its promise, it will not be solely because of algorithms or cloud infrastructure; it will be because project professionals made it possible to align people, process, and technology during a volatile period.

Principles for Managing the Transition

I believe there are four key principles that can help project professionals manage uncertainty:

1. **Clarity of strategic planning** – In a volatile environment, clearly articulating project goals and objectives is essential. Defining, documenting, and securing agreement on these goals ensures your project can navigate a radically changing landscape. Equally important is documenting assumptions — they provide a vital reference point when assessing whether the project is drifting off course.
2. **Flexibility in execution** – Embracing agile delivery methods provides the adaptability needed in times of change. I often use a Horizon delivery approach: setting regular planning windows to reassess progress and define the next tranche of outcomes, followed by focused delivery phases. This approach provides enough certainty for teams to deliver priority work while avoiding over-planning into an uncertain future.
3. **Flexibility in project governance** – Rigid governance can block timely decision-making. In volatile environments, this undermines a project's ability to deliver value. Instead, governance should empower teams with the autonomy to make tactical decisions while maintaining alignment with strategic goals. Real-time automated dashboards should replace static status reports, providing decision-makers with up-to-date visibility and reducing response lag.
4. **Embrace graceful project failure** – Even with the best planning and flexibility, project delivery remains risky. We need to foster an environment where failure is not stigmatised but managed. A graceful failure closes cleanly, recycles resources, and preserves trust. A catastrophic one bleeds money, morale, and credibility. Encouraging frank advice and trusting leadership to act decisively allows organisations to recover quickly and redirect investment to more viable initiatives.

AI may yet deliver a productivity revolution, but for now the returns are uneven and the environment unsettled. In this transitional era, project professionals are not just implementers — we are stewards of resilience and enablers of progress. By applying disciplined yet flexible practices, project professionals can ensure that AI's eventual productivity revolution is realised responsibly, efficiently, and with purpose.

[1]. <https://opendatascience.com/most-enterprise-ai-investments-deliver-no-return-mit-report-finds/>

[2]. <https://www.dentons.com/en/about-dentons/news-events-and-awards/news/2024/november/ai-investment-trapped-by-regulatory-uncertainty>

[3]. <https://thecubereseearch.com/283-breaking-analysis-tech-spending-remains-persistently-uncertain>