Why People Skills Lead to Project Success: Towards Dynamic Conditions for People Skills and Leadership in Project Management

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Abstract

This research explores the crucial role that people skills play in achieving project success in modern, complex project environments. As part of the UK's post-pandemic recovery strategy, the government committed £5.6 billion towards infrastructure projects, but project professionals are tasked with navigating increasingly dynamic conditions. Historically, as few as 20% of projects have fully met their planned objectives, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of success factors. Through research commissioned by the Association for Project Management (APM), we examine how project success is currently defined and how people skills, encompassing communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, and problem-solving, contribute to these outcomes. The survey conducted as part of this investigation illustrates that an overwhelming 97% of respondents identified these interpersonal skills as either important or highly significant to project success, thus affirming their pervasive and dynamic role as the foremost determinant of positive outcomes. These findings further infer that the cultivation of such skills compels direct, real-world engagement, wherein mentorship, hands-on experience, and the adaptation of innovative training modalities are dominant. In this vein, we present strategic recommendations aimed at fostering these skills within project teams, thereby enhancing project professionals' capacity to navigate the complex and often transient conditions of modern project landscapes. Specifically, through the development of a Dynamic Framework for People Skills and Leadership in Project Management conceptual framework, which outlines six key areas for practitioners, prioritising people skills, personalised leadership development, enhanced training methods, mentorship programmes, career pathway flexibility, and risk management in training.

Keywords: People skills, project success, emotional intelligence, leadership, mentorship, real-world experience.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sonjit et al., 2021a, 2021c), the UK government allocated £5.6 billion to expedite infrastructure projects, presenting these initiatives as central to the nation's economic resurgence (HM Treasury, 2021). Whilst this significant investment is necessary, it imposes a heightened responsibility on project professionals, who must now navigate environments imbued with complexity, uncertainty, and evolving stakeholder expectations (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021). Historically, project management has grappled with a low rate of consistent success, with only approximately 20% of projects fully achieving their objectives in terms of time, cost, and scope (APM, 2015). This statistic highlights a persistent challenge, that despite continual improvements in project management methodologies and tools, the human element remains a decisive factor in the success or failure of projects (Müller & Turner, 2007).

The dynamic and transient nature of contemporary project environments and technologies imposes a re-evaluation of the factors that engender project success (Brookes et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2021a). Historically, success has been predominantly measured against rigid performance metrics such as time, cost, and scope (Atkinson, 1999). However, emerging paradigms suggest that project success is increasingly contingent upon the ability of professionals to exhibit adaptability, leadership, and adept management of people within fluid, evolving contexts (Aga et al., 2016). In this vein, people skills, encompassing communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, and problem-solving, have become vital (Clarke, 2010). Despite this, a notable gap remains in understanding how these essential interpersonal competencies are cultivated and systematically leveraged to enhance project outcomes (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2005).

Whilst significant progress has been made in refining technical approaches and optimising processes within project management, these efforts alone have not been sufficient to ensure the consistent success of projects (Cooke-Davies, 2002). The inherent complexity of contemporary projects, marked by interdisciplinary teams, disparate stakeholder expectations, and external pressures, highlights the need for a more nuanced emphasis on interpersonal skills (Turner & Müller, 2005). Despite their importance, these 'soft skills' have been underrepresented in both academic discourse and industry practice, often overshadowed by the focus on technological development (Crawford, 2005).

Moreover, as projects become increasingly complex in nature, success can no longer be solely defined by the delivery of technological objectives (Hsu et al., 2021b; Kockum & Dacre, 2021). Instead, it hinges on the capacity to address emergent challenges with agility, collaboration, and emotional intelligence (Dong, Bailey, et al., 2021; Zhang & Fan, 2013). Without a robust framework for understanding how people skills coalesce with technical

competencies to influence project success, professionals risk being underprepared to manage the human dimensions of project delivery, resulting in deleterious outcomes (Müller & Turner, 2010). As such, this research seeks to bridge that gap by exploring the role of people skills in fostering project success and identifying effective modalities for their development.

This outline forms part of a larger commissioned study by the Association for Project Management (APM), which aims to redefine project success through an emphasis on dynamic conditions as critical enablers of successful project outcomes. Specifically, the research aims to examine how dynamic competencies may be intertwined with the successful delivery of projects, particularly in environments characterised by endemic complexity and unpredictability (Jugdev & Müller, 2005). Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study will synthesise survey data from project professionals alongside extant academic literature to address a number of salient themes, including (i) What is the relative importance of people skills in achieving project success, particularly in contrast with other factors such as processes and principles? and (ii) How can project professionals effectively develop these competencies through mentorship, experiential learning, and innovative training approaches?

The findings will inform both academic scholarship and industry practice by offering evidence-based recommendations for enhancing people skills within project teams. In doing so, the research will contribute to the evolving discourse on project management, framing it as a discipline that not only values technical acumen but also recognises the pivotal role of human dynamics in achieving success (Tite et al., 2021b; Turner & Müller, 2005).

2. Literature Review

2.1 People Skills and Leadership in Project Management

The increasing complexity and inherent uncertainty pervasive in contemporary project environments (Dacre et al., 2021), have engendered a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of project success, with an acute emphasis now placed on people skills as crucial determinants (Alvarenga et al., 2020). Research underscores that interpersonal competencies, such as communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving, constitute central elements in navigating the complex challenges extant in project work and in driving successful outcomes (Andersen et al., 2006). Despite the focus on technical competencies within project management training, such findings challenge the assumption that technical proficiency alone is sufficient for project success (Müller & Turner, 2010).

Communication, for instance, is cited as a fundamental competency for project managers, though it remains undervalued in practice (Stevenson & Starkweather, 2010). Effective communication is not only critical for ensuring stakeholder engagement but also essential in creating a cohesive project environment that enhances collaboration and problem-solving capacities (Andersen et al., 2006). Research supports the notion that communication failures are among some of the primary reasons for project delays and failures, reinforcing the impetus for project managers to be adept at managing communication channels effectively (Pinto & Slevin, 1987). The extant literature also highlights that the successful delivery of projects often hinges on the quality of communication between project teams and external stakeholders (Alvarenga et al., 2020). Conversely, the absence of effective communication can have negative effects on project performance, significantly undermining outcomes (Stevenson & Starkweather, 2010).

Leadership, likewise constitutes a source of people skills in project management, with a body of research illustrating its central role in directing teams and managing the human dimensions endemic to projects (Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013). Effective leadership, which facilitates clear decision-making, engenders team morale, and fosters commitment to project objectives, is linked with higher rates of project success (Alvarenga et al., 2020). Studies in different sectors also highlight that effective leadership increases project team satisfaction and retention, reducing attrition rates and improving long-term project outcomes (Aga et al., 2016). Nonetheless, leadership development within project management education remains inconsistent, as technical skills continue to hold priority (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015). In some instances, the profession continues to focus disproportionately on technical abilities, despite the growing recognition that leadership is integral to project success.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has similarly gained recognition as a key factor in managing the dynamic interpersonal dimensions of project teams, particularly within large, complex projects (Zhang & Fan, 2013). EI, in its capacity to navigate interpersonal conflicts and foster teamwork, emerges as indispensable in maintaining resilience under pressure (Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013). Studies within sectors such as the construction industry, illustrate that heightened levels of emotional intelligence correlate with enhanced project performance, especially in managing the nuanced dynamics of team collaboration and cross-functional communication (Zhang & Fan, 2013). EI also can help mitigate stress in high-pressure projects, particularly by enabling managers to remain calm and support their teams effectively during crisis situations (Clarke, 2010). However, a gap exists in the mainstream project management literature, where emotional intelligence remains underexplored, indicating a critical gap in both research and practice (Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013).

Problem-solving is another key interpersonal competency that has received attention in project management research (Iriarte & Bayona, 2020). The ability to address unforeseen challenges quickly and effectively is frequently linked to project success, as project managers are often required to make decisions in fast-paced, high-pressure environments (Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013). Problem-solving, when combined with effective communication and leadership, can significantly enhance a project manager's capacity to navigate complex situations and drive project outcomes (Iriarte & Bayona, 2020). This competency is particularly valuable in innovative and IT-intensive projects, where unanticipated technical or logistical challenges frequently arise (Ika & Hodgson, 2014).

Thus, the body of research delineates a consensus that, while technical skills remain necessary, the enduring success of modern projects is inextricably linked to a project manager's ability to master interpersonal competencies (Alvarenga et al., 2020; Creasy & Anantatmula, 2013). Nonetheless, project management education has historically lagged in embedding these critical skills within curricula, a deficiency exacerbated by the increasingly dynamic nature of project environments (Hadim & Esche, 2002). The persistent focus on technical competencies, at the expense of interpersonal skills, may leave project managers ill-prepared to navigate the complexities of modern project work, resulting in suboptimal outcomes (Walker et al., 2008).

2.2 Towards Dynamic Conditions for Project Success

Project success has traditionally been framed within the parameters of the 'triple constraint' of time, cost, and scope, focusing on delivering projects within these fixed boundaries (Atkinson, 1999). However, as project environments have grown more complex, it has become evident that these rigid metrics alone are limited in capturing the full spectrum of what constitutes success (Jugdev & Müller, 2005). This evolving understanding raises critical questions about how best to balance technical performance with more human-centred success criteria, such as leadership efficacy, stakeholder satisfaction, and team dynamics (Turner & Zolin, 2012).

Extant research has in some cases challenged the primacy of these traditional performance metrics, instead advocating for a broader, more integrated framework that accounts for both technical and human factors (Pinto & Slevin, 1987). For instance, Critical Success Factors (CSFs) highlight the importance of the project manager's performance alongside team and environmental dynamics (Belassi & Tukel, 1996). Such frameworks recognise the need to reconcile quantitative, measurable outcomes with qualitative, human-centred factors, which are often more subjective. This tension raises an important point, which is how should organisations prioritise between achieving budgetary targets and fostering team collaboration?

The compromises between technical success and human-centred outcomes reflect the growing complexity of modern projects. Leadership, for instance, plays a key role in determining project success, particularly in sectors where collaboration and communication are essential (Blaskovics, 2016). However, the variability in leadership styles across different contexts presents a challenge to standardising it as a success factor. Moreover, research suggests that leadership efficacy is often contingent upon the specific cultural and sectoral context in which it is applied, making it difficult to develop universal benchmarks for leadership success (Turner & Müller, 2005).

Similarly, human-related factors such as project procedures and team engagement are as critical as cost and schedule performance. Chan et al. (2004) suggest that human dimensions cannot be divorced from technical measures of success, with Chua et al. (1999) underscoring this perspective through a hierarchical model that integrates project characteristics, participants, and interactive processes, acknowledging the interdependence of these factors. However, this model raises further tensions underscored by the role of project managers in effectively navigating competing priorities within such an integrated framework. Moreover, as EI becomes increasingly recognised as a pivotal determinant of project success, this becomes markedly underscored by its indirect influence through interpersonal skills (Lima & Quevedo-Silva, 2020). However, the challenge lies in integrating such intangible and context-dependent factors into a formal success framework. EI, for instance, can be challenging to quantify and can fluctuate depending on team composition and external pressures.

Aligning project outcomes with stakeholder expectations with less linear approaches often proves more decisive in long-term success (Maqbool et al., 2020; Serrador & Pinto, 2015). For instance, agile methodologies provide an alternative approach by prioritising flexibility, stakeholder satisfaction, and team interaction over rigid adherence to predefined plans (Dacre et al., 2019; Dong, Dacre, et al., 2021b; Sonjit et al., 2021b). Whilst agile practices have been shown to yield higher success rates in terms of adaptability and customer satisfaction, their broader applicability across industries remains under scrutiny (Dong, Dacre, et al., 2021a; Esmaeili et al., 2013).

Moving towards a dynamic framework of project success acknowledges that no single factor or rigid set of metrics can capture the full scope of what constitutes success. Instead, successful project delivery depends on the ability to navigate an interconnected system of technical goals, human dynamics, and evolving stakeholder requirements and expectations. As project environments become increasingly complex, the relationship between success factors and project delivery becomes progressively intricate, requiring

flexible strategies that can adapt to changing conditions. These dynamic conditions highlight the importance of ongoing evaluation and adjustment, where both hard metrics and softer, human-centred factors are weighted and prioritised according to the unique demands of each project.

3. Research Approach

Primary data will be gathered through a structured survey distributed to project professionals across various sectors. It is planned that the survey will focus on assessing the perceived importance of interpersonal skills, such as communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving, whilst still drawing on traditional project success metrics such as time, cost, and scope (Atkinson, 1999; Belassi & Tukel, 1996). Respondents will be asked to evaluate how these interpersonal skills influence project outcomes, both in the context of overall success and in relation to specific challenges faced during project delivery. In particular, the survey will explore which interpersonal skills are considered most critical for navigating complex, dynamic project environments (Turner & Müller, 2005).

We will design the survey to also gather demographic information, such as industry sector, years of experience, and project size, to assess whether these variables impact perceptions of the relative importance of people skills (Crawford & Pollack, 2004). Through the use of descriptive statistics, we aim to summarise the overall trends in the data, while inferential techniques, such as correlation and regression analysis, will be employed to identify potential relationships between the importance placed on interpersonal skills and project success outcomes (Fellows & Liu, 2021). This should enable us to examine whether there is a statistically significant link between the skills identified and traditional project metrics, as well as uncover any emerging patterns across different industries or project types. We will contextualise our results with existing literature on project success, allowing us to critically examine how the findings align with or challenge established theories and frameworks (Jugdev & Müller, 2005).

4. Discussion

Our preliminary findings underscore the paramount importance of people skills in driving project success. Early survey data reveal that 97% of respondents affirmed that competencies such as communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving were either important or very important contributors to successful project outcomes. These findings align with extant research, which highlights the pervasive role of interpersonal skills within complex project environments, where technical expertise alone proves insufficient (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2005; Turner & Müller, 2005). This suggests

that while technical proficiency remains a crucial facet, it must coalesce with robust interpersonal capabilities to engender sustainable success (Tite et al., 2021a).

However, the cultivation of these nuanced interpersonal competencies presents significant challenges. For instance, it is unrealistic to assume that such skills can be fully developed through formal training alone, given their inherent complexity. Interpersonal, or 'soft' skills, are imbued with dynamic context-dependent subtleties that traditional pedagogical approaches may fail to capture. As such, experiential and role-based learning modalities emerge as more effective means of fostering leadership and problem-solving abilities than conventional classroom settings (Clarke, 2010). Findings suggests that real-world exposure, which enables professionals to navigate and internalise leadership, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving within transient and unpredictable scenarios, is vital to skill development (Crawford & Pollack, 2004; Dulewicz & Higgs, 2005). For example, while role-playing exercises may offer heuristic value in controlled environments, synchronous engagement in actual projects affords a deeper, more enduring learning experience.

Moreover, the development and execution of people skills is an inherently personal and iterative process, shaped by individual leadership aspirations and inherent stylistic preferences (Barber et al., 2021). It requires reflective practice, wherein professionals evaluate the type of leader they aspire to become, perhaps leveraging role models or leadership paradigms they wish to emulate. Structured opportunities for junior colleagues to hone these skills are crucial, however it is imperative that such opportunities are provided within supportive frameworks. As such, unresolved challenges that arise in the absence of adequate guidance may hinder long-term professional growth (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015).

Finally, while training opportunities should ideally involve some level of risk, it is important to manage these risks carefully to avoid overwhelming less experienced team members. Mentorship, where experienced professionals guide their junior counterparts through complex interpersonal situations, emerges as a particularly valuable tool in this regard. Although, it is essential to acknowledge that not every individual will aspire to leadership roles or seek to develop people skills in the same way. In acknowledging this, organisations can offer alternative career pathways that allow individuals to focus on their technical expertise while continuing to contribute meaningfully to project success (Crawford & Pollack, 2004). Such an approach not only preserves and disseminates critical tacit knowledge but also balances the triumvirate of technical, leadership, and interpersonal skills across the employees (Turner & Müller, 2005).

5. Conclusion

This phase of the research is part of a larger study commissioned by the APM. As the research progresses, we aim to make a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion on project success, with a particular focus on the development and application of dynamic conditions for project success. Nonetheless, these early insights provide a valuable foundation for actionable steps for project professionals. The central finding that people skills and leadership play a crucial role in project success highlights the need for project professionals to rethink how they approach the development of these competencies. Below are practical recommendations as part of a Dynamic Conditions for People Skills and Leadership in Project Management conceptual framework (Figure 1) in order to illustrate how project teams and organisations can start to address this gap and better integrate people skills into their projects.

5.1 Dynamic Conditions for People Skills and Leadership in Project Management

Project professionals should embrace a 'People Skills Priority' approach. The overwhelming response from our survey, 97% of respondents confirming the importance of people skills, signals a clear lesson. Project professionals need to place greater focus on developing key interpersonal competencies such as communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence. This isn't just a 'nice to have' skillset, it's essential for achieving sustainable success.

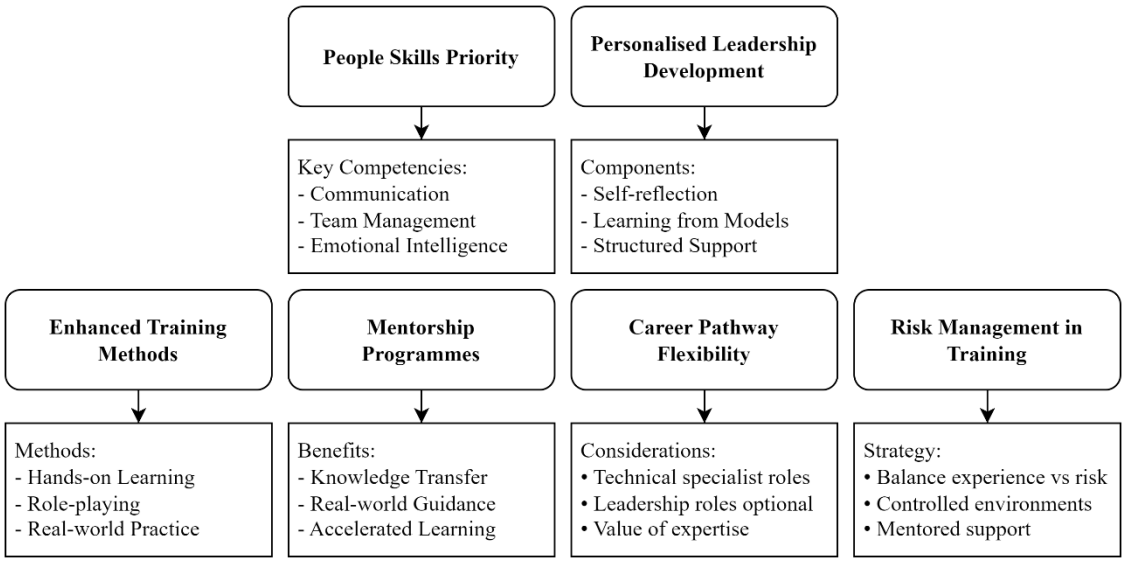

Figure 1: Dynamic Conditions for People Skills and Leadership in Project Management

Drawing on this, 'Personalised Leadership Development' should be tailored to individuals. We argue that developing as a leader is a personal journey. It's important that project professionals are given opportunities to reflect on what type of leader they want to be and to learn from those they admire. However, this needs to happen in a structured and supportive environment. Early career professionals should be encouraged to take on

leadership roles, but they must be provided with the right guidance to avoid unnecessary risks.

‘Enhanced Training Methods’ also need to be more than classroom sessions. For instance, traditional training methods, while useful, aren’t enough to develop the nuanced people skills required for today’s complex projects. Instead, training programmes should include hands-on, experiential learning. Activities such as role-playing can help, but there’s no substitute for real-world practice, where project professionals can navigate interpersonal dynamics in live scenarios. Practical exposure is key.

‘Mentorship Programmes’ are also critical for developing people skills. Specifically, experienced project professionals have a wealth of knowledge and interpersonal experience. Mentorship programs are a powerful device for sharing these skills. Therefore, guiding early career colleagues through real-world interpersonal challenges, becomes increasingly important for mentors to accelerate their development in a practical. This form of learning is invaluable and should be part of a comprehensive development plan.

Not everyone needs to be a leader, and that’s okay. Some team members may prefer to remain technical specialists rather than pursuing leadership roles. Project professionals should recognise this and offer ‘Career Pathway Flexibility’ that allow these individuals to continue advancing in their discipline, without driving them into roles that don’t align with their strengths. Technical expertise is just as valuable, and teams need both effective leaders and skilled specialists to succeed.

‘Risk Management in Training’ is also essential when providing opportunities for growth. Project professionals must balance the need for experience with the potential risks involved. Training environments should offer opportunities for development, but risks should be carefully managed. Mentorship and support from experienced professionals are crucial to help less experienced team members grow without jeopardising their career progression or project outcomes.

5.2 Closing Comments

The evolving dynamics of project management engender more than just technical proficiency. Project success increasingly hinges on the ability to navigate human dynamics. Project professionals must therefore cultivate a blend of technical expertise and interpersonal competencies, recognising that the latter can often be the difference between a project’s failure and its success. Undoubtedly project environments will continue to grow more unpredictable, but by investing in people and leadership skills, we can build teams that are not only capable of overcoming technical challenges but also equipped to

collaborate, innovate, and lead with confidence. The future of project management lies in this balance, shaping a more human-centred approach to project success.

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