

How to be a data influencer and close the AI trust deficit

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*Dacre, N. (2026). How to be a data influencer and close the AI trust deficit. Association for Project Management.
<https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/how-to-be-a-data-influencer-and-close-the-ai-trust-deficit>*

Abstract

Many organisations face an AI trust deficit. AI tools and data-rich dashboards are being deployed, but teams still rely on familiar manual reporting because they do not trust algorithmic outputs. Using an air-traffic-control radar analogy, the discussion frames AI as a decision-support signal that only becomes valuable when interpreted by people who understand both the data and the operational context. It proposes a shift from being a data presenter to becoming a data influencer, defined as someone who translates data into timely decisions while maintaining human agency. Drawing on research into digital transformation and AI in project environments, the post identifies three core capabilities; applying critical thinking to interrogate data provenance, processing, and alignment with project goals; recognising what algorithms cannot see, including contextual and human factors that shape outcomes; and curating information ruthlessly to manage cognitive load, attention, and reporting cadence. The discussion concludes that closing the AI trust deficit requires developing these interpretive and judgement-based capabilities alongside technical adoption, so that trust is built not only in data outputs but also in the human decisions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Decision-Making, Bounded Rationality, Digital Competencies, Project Management, Data Quality, Leadership.

Introduction

I was in London recently delivering a keynote at an event co-hosted by the APM and Asana. During the break a programme director shared with me that his team had just deployed an AI-powered dashboard capable of processing large amounts of data. This enabled him to spot risks he'd normally miss (1, 2). "The problem" he said, "is my team doesn't trust them. They still want the old spreadsheets I used to produce manually".

This is the artificial intelligence (AI) trust deficit we're living with (2, 3, 4). We've got the technology, we've got the data, but what we're missing are the people who know how to translate that data into the right decision, at the right time (3, 5, 6).

Luke Coleman from Vodafone/Three who also spoke at the event, shared a useful analogy. He compared AI to radar for air traffic control. Essential for seeing what's coming, useless without someone who understands the signals and knows what action to take. The radar doesn't land the planes, people do.

So, what does it take to be a data influencer rather than just a data presenter? Our research into digital transformation and AI for the APM points to three critical capabilities.

Apply critical thinking

Most people transmit data: they show the numbers, present the dashboard and share the AI recommendation (1). Data influencers translate it. They ask three questions before presenting anything: Where did this data come from? How was it processed into this recommendation? Does this actually serve our project goals?

This requires knowing when to trust AI and when to override it (2, 3). That judgement starts with critical thinking about the data itself. Our research revealed persistent concerns about data quality, and the fundamental challenge is this; small data errors cascade through entire projects (7, 8, 9, 10). Garbage in, garbage out, so a data influencer's first critical task is challenging the sanctity of the data before anyone treats the AI output as truth.(2, 9).

Recognise what algorithms cannot see

In its current form, AI excels at patterns but struggles with context (2, 3, 11). It can tell you the schedule performance index is 0.87, but it can't tell you that your team is exhausted, or that a key stakeholder has lost confidence (5, 6, 12). Data influencers know which questions algorithms can't answer. They understand cascade effects, organisational politics and human factors that don't appear in dashboards.(12, 13).

Our research found that whilst 68% of organisations report improved on-time delivery, only 38% saw reduced project management costs (14). A data influencer asks, if we're faster but not cheaper, what's happening elsewhere in the system that the dashboard isn't showing us?

Curate ruthlessly

Here's the counter-intuitive bit. Effective data influencers curate ruthlessly. They understand cognitive load and stakeholder attention spans. They also establish the right cadence for presenting information, knowing that too frequent updates create noise whilst infrequent updates leave stakeholders flying blind (1, 5).

Data influencers don't dump everything on the table. They select what deserves attention and provide context (2, 7). Like a museum curator, they create a narrative from careful selection. The difference between presenting data and influencing with it is knowing when to say "we need better data before deciding" rather than working with what you've got (2, 9).

Close the AI trust deficit

Our research revealed something policymakers find difficult to hear; organisations are adopting tools faster than they're developing capabilities to use them effectively (14). The technology is racing ahead. The human capability to use it well is lagging behind (2, 3, 15).

Being a data influencer isn't about technical competency alone. It's about bridging that gap. It's about maintaining human agency in the face of algorithmic confidence (3, 11, 13). It's about building trust, not just in the data, but in your judgement about when to use it and when to question it (2, 6, 9, 11).

AI can make us faster, more efficient and even more confident. But whether it makes us better depends on whether we can close the AI trust deficit (2, 4, 8). That requires people who can apply critical thinking, understand what's missing and know when less information delivers more influence (3, 12, 13).

Conclusion

AI-enabled dashboards can surface patterns and emerging risks, but they do not resolve the harder problem of collective confidence in what those signals mean. Trust is built when decision-makers can see how outputs connect to project objectives, when limitations are stated plainly, and when the most relevant information is presented with appropriate context and cadence. In practice, closing the AI trust deficit is less about adding more analytics and more about strengthening the social and organisational conditions for action: transparent assumptions, disciplined data governance, and clear accountability for when recommendations are accepted or challenged. Data influence, then, becomes a capability for turning insight into decisions without surrendering judgement to algorithmic certainty.

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Acknowledgement

The author thanks APM and Asana for co-hosting the event that prompted the reflections reported here and acknowledges the contribution of practitioner insights shared during that session, including the radar analogy attributed to Luke Coleman.