

The future of the project profession

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits



Introduction

We are in an era of rapid technological advancement and changing business landscapes. Digital disruption, the climate crisis and societal change are just some of the issues that project professionals must contend with, in order to evolve the profession so that it can meet the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.

Although the environment for delivery is becoming ever more complex, it is clear that project professionals are the strategic changemakers who will enable success. This paper shares insights from esteemed leaders on three important aspects of the project profession's future: sustainability, people, and AI and data.

This paper 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. Senior project experts, leaders and C-Suite-level executives attended to share ideas and examine challenging topics in new and creative ways.



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.



Nick Smallwood

Nick Smallwood is the Chief Executive Officer of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and Head of Government's Project Delivery Function. Nick is the former Vice President for Projects Engineering and Chief Projects Engineer at Shell. Nick has 40 years' experience of managing complex project portfolios and having developed Shell's Global Project Academy. At Shell, Nick was accountable for managing how projects were delivered and a variety of significant improvement programmes. Nick is also a former Trustee of the board of APM.



Karlene Agard

Karlene Agard is a Senior Expert at Oxford Global Projects. Karlene is an award-winning risk and value management practitioner who specialises in starting megaprojects for success. Karlene is an international speaker who has presented on risk, value, and megaproject management. She has written on these topics for *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes*, McKinsey and Deloitte. Karlene has completed an Executive Masters in Major Programme Management at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford and teaches project management courses at the University's Continuing Education Department.



Martina Blake

Martina Blake is a UK Government Advisor to the European Space Agency (ESA), supporting delivery of ESA's Space Safety Programme and ESA's Transformation Initiatives. Martina has a 25-year career in the UK government, leading and delivering complex and high-risk government major projects and programmes in areas such as the space industry, government security, defence, and transformation, both in the UK and internationally. Martina is the Lead of APM's International Space Sector Interest Network, and UK representative for the International Project Management Committee within the International Astronautical Federation.

*All information correct as of 2 December 2024

Sustainability



Sustainability involves taking individual and organisational responsibility to ensure outputs, outcomes and benefits are sustainable over their life cycles, meeting the current needs of stakeholders without compromising or overburdening future generations. Environmental considerations are a factor, but so too are social, economic and administrative considerations.

Sustainability challenges faced by projects now and in the future include:

- Changing weather patterns that will affect transport (infrastructure, logistics and accessibility).
- Rising water levels that will affect coastal projects.
- Making construction sites diesel-free by 2030 while minimising cost increases.

- ‘NIMBYism’ – overcoming resistance to the placement of new infrastructure that will support sustainability goals, such as new pylons.
- Making new technology sustainable. For example, providing water for cooling in AI data centres.



Climate change is a real issue. If project managers don't drive the focus on this, we're not going to improve. There is no plan B.

Nick Smallwood

The circular economy

The circular economy has been defined as “a regenerative system in which resource input and waste, emission, and energy leakage are minimised by slowing, closing, and narrowing material and energy loops. This can be achieved through long-lasting design, maintenance, repair, reuse, remanufacturing refurbishing and recycling!”

The following advice was offered for making projects and programmes more sustainable:

- Do not accept the status quo when it comes to standards and practices. Look at ways to enable smarter ways of working.
 - While it may not be feasible to train all existing staff on data use and literacy, project leaders must start to set up ways of working that will enable more digitally literate future generations to utilise data properly.
 - Drive improvement in the supply chain. Reduce waste through use of recycled materials, or reuse where possible. Implement sustainable procurement policies. Work with clients to ensure they play their part in environmental due diligence and improving transportation/logistics.
 - Consider ‘Productivity Packaging’ procurement models that can unlock greater capacity at a time of peak demand.
 - Where appropriate, utilise design and build approaches that support efficiency and/or economies of scale, such as ‘design one, build many’.
- On infrastructure projects, shift the focus away from simply ‘building things’ to creating social value. Engage with communities to understand what they want, alongside the basic ‘what’s needed’ requirements of the project.



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At the European Space Agency, as part of our Circular Economy concept, we are creating a sustainable ecosystem in Earth’s orbit through on-orbit refurbishment, manufacturing and recycling. We want to reduce, reuse and repurpose as much as we can to make space projects sustainable. The long-term objective is to move towards a circular economy in space by 2050, further cementing Europe’s role as a responsible leader in space sustainability.

Martina Blake

AI and data

AI is not a far-off future concept, but something that is already part of everyday life. Many project practitioners already acknowledge that AI is impacting the profession, as a poll conducted at APM's Windsor Project Summit shows.

Which trend do you believe will have the most significant impact on the future of project management?



There are reasons to be optimistic however. A separate poll by APM found that three-quarters (74%) of project professionals felt that advancements in AI will be positive for their industry sector.

Furthermore, people will still play an important role in an AI-enabled world. Project professionals have raised concerns that overconfidence in the reliability of AI-generated outputs could lead to a lack of human scrutiny, which could result in decisions being made based on incorrect information. The importance of measuring, checking and validating cannot be overstated.

Systems for gathering and/or processing data also need to be robust, with appropriate levels of back-up. Currently, much of the data that society uses day-to-day is gathered through 'single point of failure' systems, in which one point of failure is sufficient to render the entire system defunct.

It has been estimated that if society lost access to global positioning data, the UK economy alone would lose £1bn per day.



There is always going to be a role for project managers. We just need to be more data savvy.

Nick Smallwood

People

The importance of psychological safety

Psychological safety is “the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking... feeling able to speak up with relevant ideas, questions or concerns. It is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able – even obligated – to be candid².”

When the level of psychological safety in the workplace is low, colleagues may fear being humiliated or ostracised for speaking the truth. Low psychological safety therefore harms team performance and can have a negative impact on project success.

Research by the Project Management Institute has found that frequently cited enablers associated with higher project performance across sectors are:

- Mental health resources
- Training on resilience
- Employee resource groups



Cultivate an environment of psychological safety where people can contribute to the workforce without unnecessary barriers.

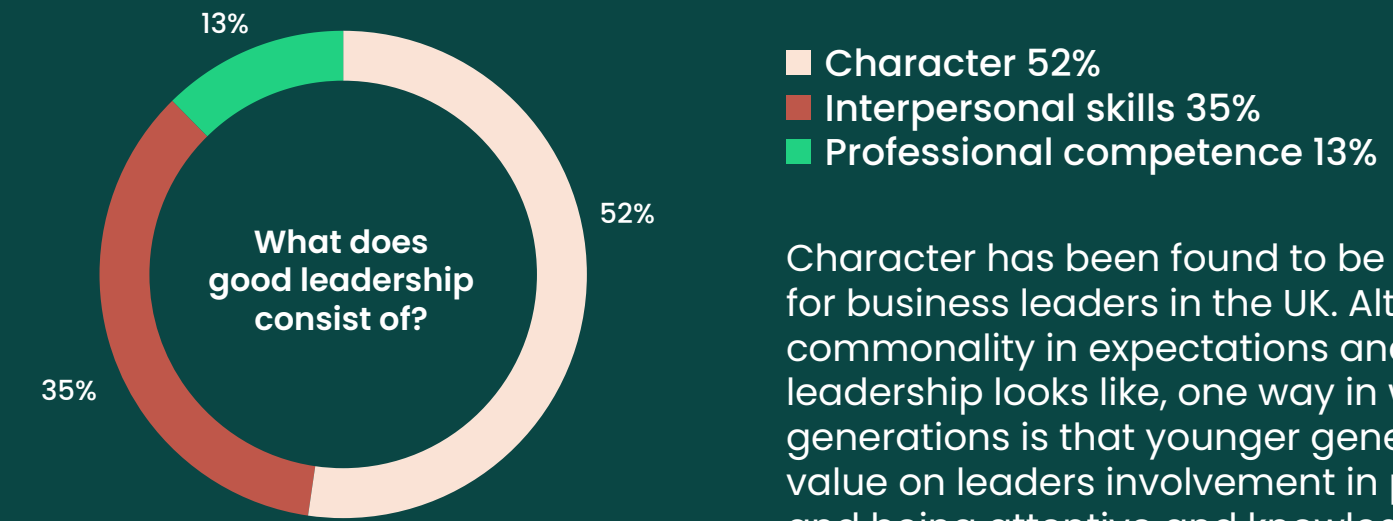
Karlene Agard

Changing expectations of leadership

Research has shown there are three main qualities associated with good leadership:

- Character – how a leader conducts themselves morally
- Interpersonal skills – how a leader relates to other people and builds relationships
- Professional competence – knowing what is required to be successful, being intelligent and having relevant experience

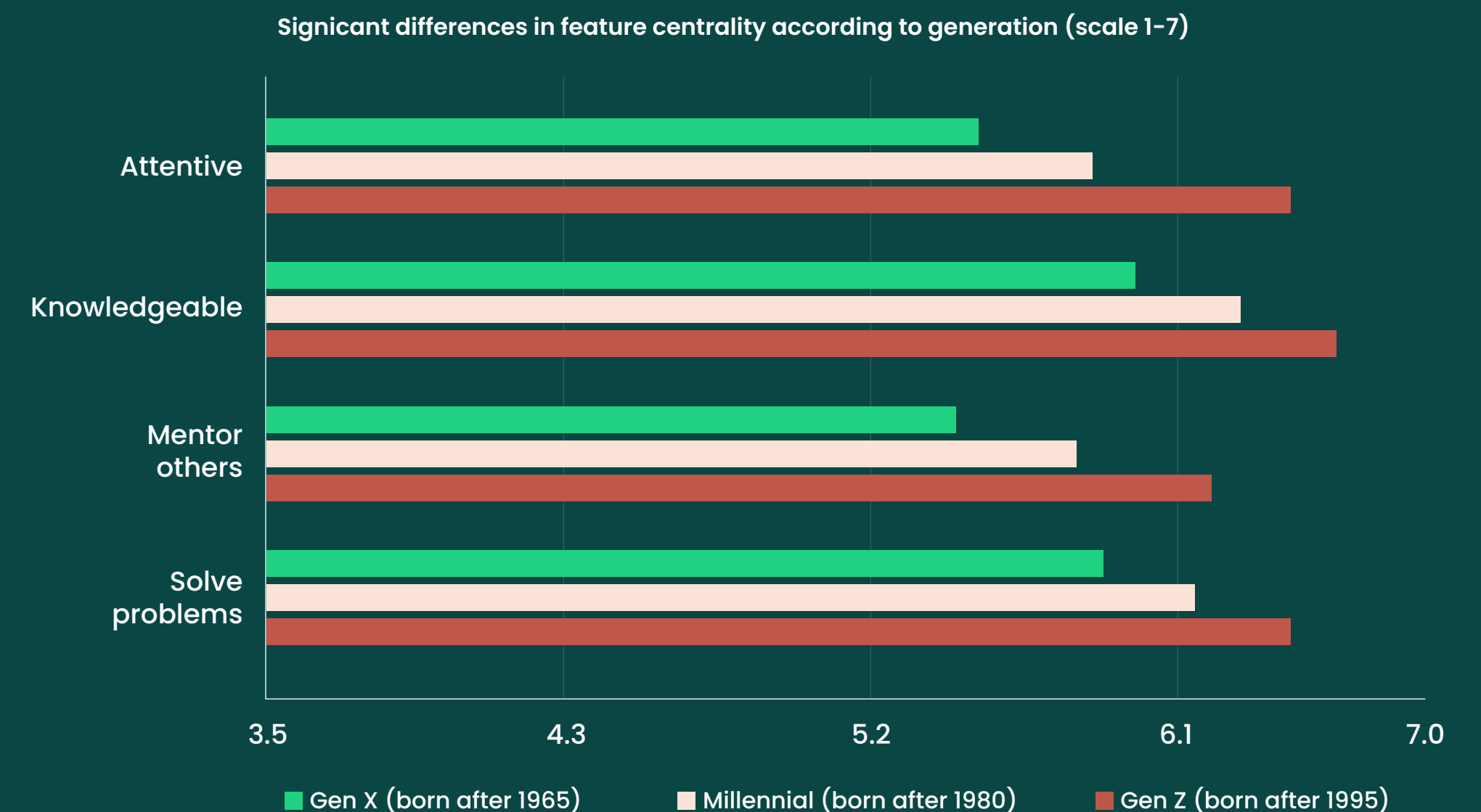
²Amy Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*, 2019.



Source: Oxford Character Project, 2023, Good Leadership in UK Business

Character has been found to be the most important quality for business leaders in the UK. Although there is a lot of commonality in expectations and perceptions of what good leadership looks like, one way in which this varies between generations is that younger generations place a higher value on leaders involvement in problem solving, mentoring and being attentive and knowledgeable.

Project leaders must consider what leadership looks like to the people within their teams, because expectations may vary based on their age but also on their personal experiences. The changing demographics of the workforce mean that leaders must continuously seek to evolve and adapt their leadership style in order to get the best out of their teams as more young project professionals enter the workforce.



Source: Oxford Character Project, 2023, Good Leadership in UK Business

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

Further resources

- [AI in the project profession – case studies](#)
- [APM Research: Sustainability and the circular economy \(on-demand session from APM Festival of Education and Research 2023\)](#)
- [APM Research: Are we ready for net zero in project management?](#)
- [APM Research: Artificial intelligence in project management](#)
- [Evolving Project Leadership by Gordon MacKay](#)
- [APM Space Sector Interest Network](#)
- [Enabling a Space Circular Economy by 2050, white paper involving contributions from operators, integrators, suppliers, academia and agencies at the ESA Clean Space Industry Days 2023](#)



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**

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