
Resilient Project Management ¹

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Abstract

The Faculty of Innovative Technologies of the University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) level started in January 2022 a study for the evaluation and monitoring of an organization with respect to the issue of resilience.

The study was based on a structured online google survey sent by email to a selected target. The target identified are companies located in Switzerland and Italy operating in different sectors, the size of which varies from small, medium and large. The survey includes both local and global organizations and former SUPSI project management graduates are part of this evaluation.

The aim of the entire study is to take a snapshot of the current situation and assess the maturity of project managers and organisations with regard to the issue of resilience. In particular, discover and highlight which practices are already implemented by organizations and which are the most critical and difficult to manage.

The faculty of Innovative Technologies of the University of Applied Science of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), as a training and research Institute, will therefore be able on one hand to define courses or study programmes to fill these gaps; on the other hand, to continue to disseminate information and useful content on the subject in order to increase the awareness of organisations related to the importance of resilience in project management.

Keywords – Project, Management, Resilience, Organisation, Change

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

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1 Introduction

What is meant by resilience? The term comes from the Latin *resilire* (to leap backwards or bounce back) and refers to the ability of a system to return to its initial state after being subjected to an imbalance.

Depending on the context, resilience can be oriented towards the concept of prevention (protecting oneself from unexpected events) or as an emergency response action in the face of unexpected changes.

According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, resilience is the ability of a system, be it an individual, a lake, a city or an economy, to cope with change and constantly adapt. Resilience occurs when nature or humans transform traumas such as a financial crisis into opportunities for renewal.

To be resilient therefore does not only mean to oppose adversity, but implies a positive dynamic, the ability to move forward, allowing the Re-building of an improved path or process to respond effectively to crises. So, organisational resilience, if properly represented, also offers companies the possibility of transforming an adverse event into a path of growth and learning.

Considering all the previous definitions and perspectives, the following definition of project resilience is the one considered most valid: *it is the ability of the project system to be aware of its surroundings, its vulnerabilities, and the capacity to adapt to recover from disruptive events and achieve its objectives.*

In a project lifecycle it is possible that several disruptive events happen, these can be known or unknown in the project phase. In this case, project management is under a lens that counts four main focuses: *technology, people, behavior, and organisation*. This concept of multidimensional focus has been the subject of various research over time in many disciplines and domains.

2 Methodology

The study starts with a structured online Google survey which was sent via email to a selected target working in companies located in Switzerland and Italy and operating in different sectors, whose size will range from small, mid-size to large, including both local and global organisations.

The study has been developed with the start of a survey in several languages.

The questionnaire has been structured with 27 questions divided into 5 main areas that cover the following main topics:

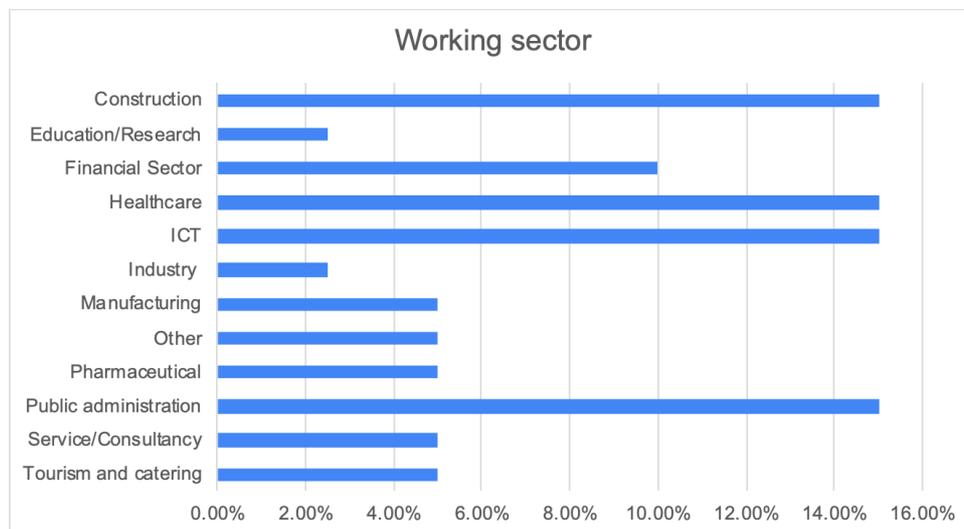
- **Identification;** information related to the context in which the participant operates and information about the company and the company structure.

- **Resilience maturity:** Information regarding the maturity of the organisations related to resilience in project management.
- **Disruptive factors:** which are the main factors that cause issues on projects and therefore need to be addressed by the project manager and the team
- **Resilient factor:** in every key focus and gathering information about the principal resilient factor in the context Technology, People, Behavior, Organisation
- **Influence of resilience on project/organisation success:** evaluating the success or failure of a single or various objectives and how being resilient affects the project/organisation.

3 Results

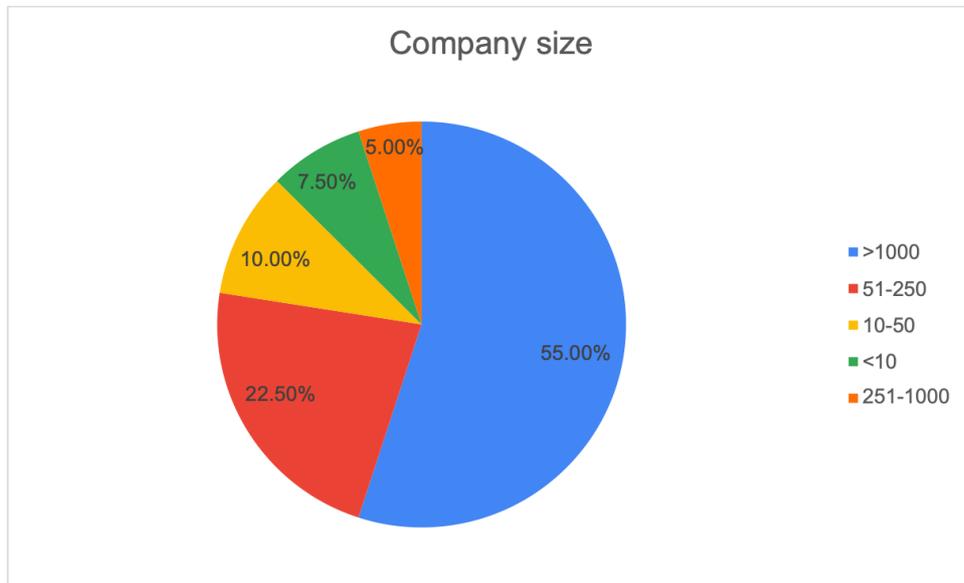
3.1 Identification

Referring to the identification area, the results show that among the companies surveyed, there is a majority of respondents from the respective sector that covered the 60% of the results: Healthcare, Building or Construction, Public Administration and Information and Communication Technology.

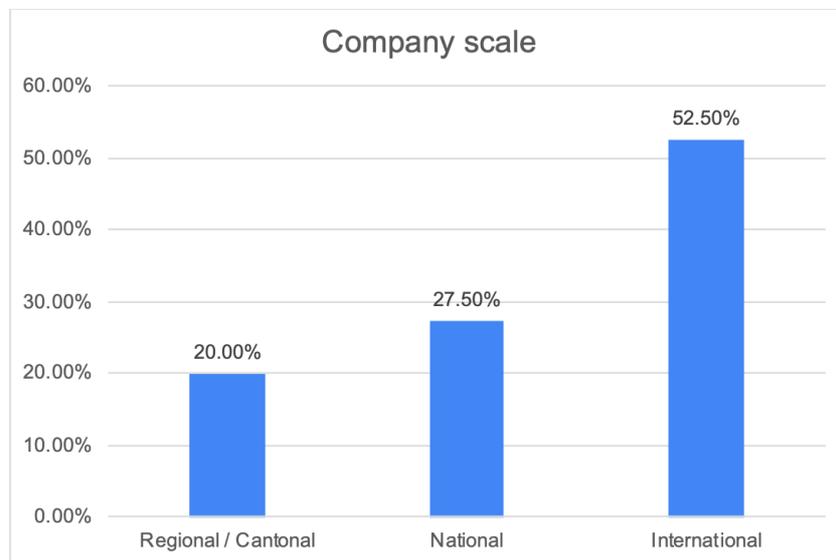


The vast majority of organizations that took part in the survey have a size of 1000 employees or more (large organizations) with the 55% of respondents. Data shows that the medium-large organisations are not the second biggest value, only the 5% of respondents fall into this category. The second major value are companies with a dimension with 51-250 employees (small-medium size) covered by the 22.50% of results.

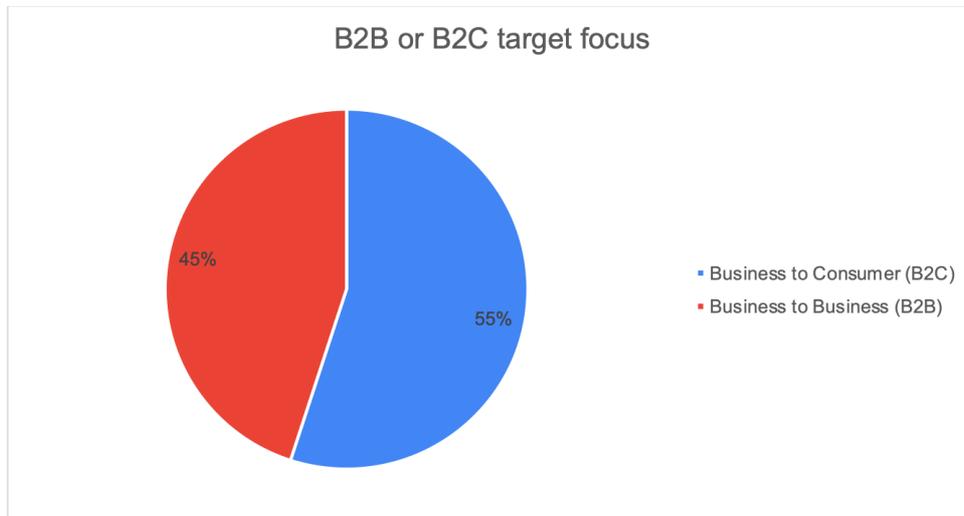
As shown in the chart below the organizations with 1 to 50 employees represents the 17.50% of the respondents.



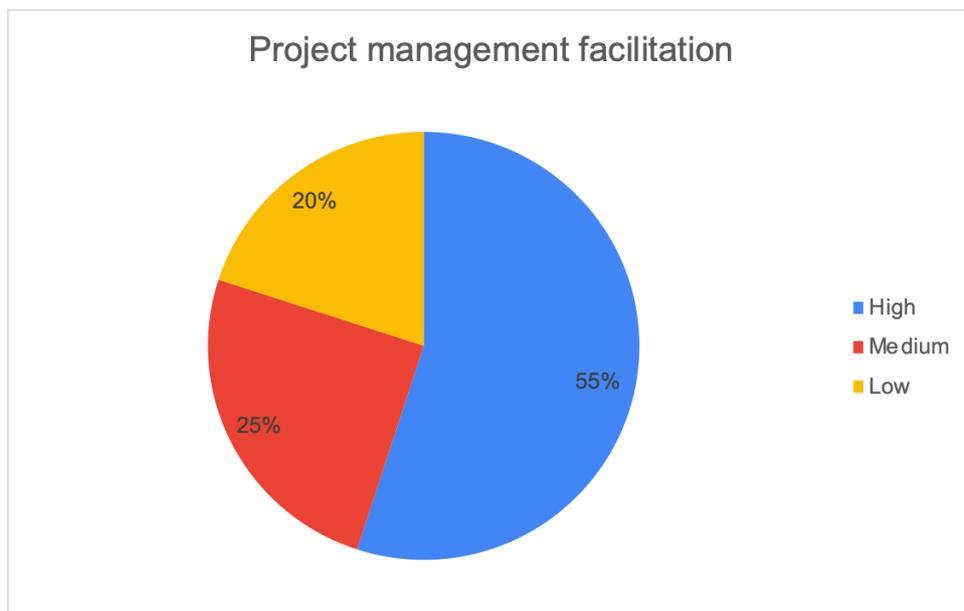
The most influential core business is the one that refers to an international scale of users with 52.50% of respondents. It can be noted that the National Scale and the Regional Scale are similar with 27.50% and 20% respectively of the respondents.



From the research emerges the distribution of companies by type of market: respectively 55% of the companies is definable as Business to Consumer (B2C) and 45% Business to Business (B2B).

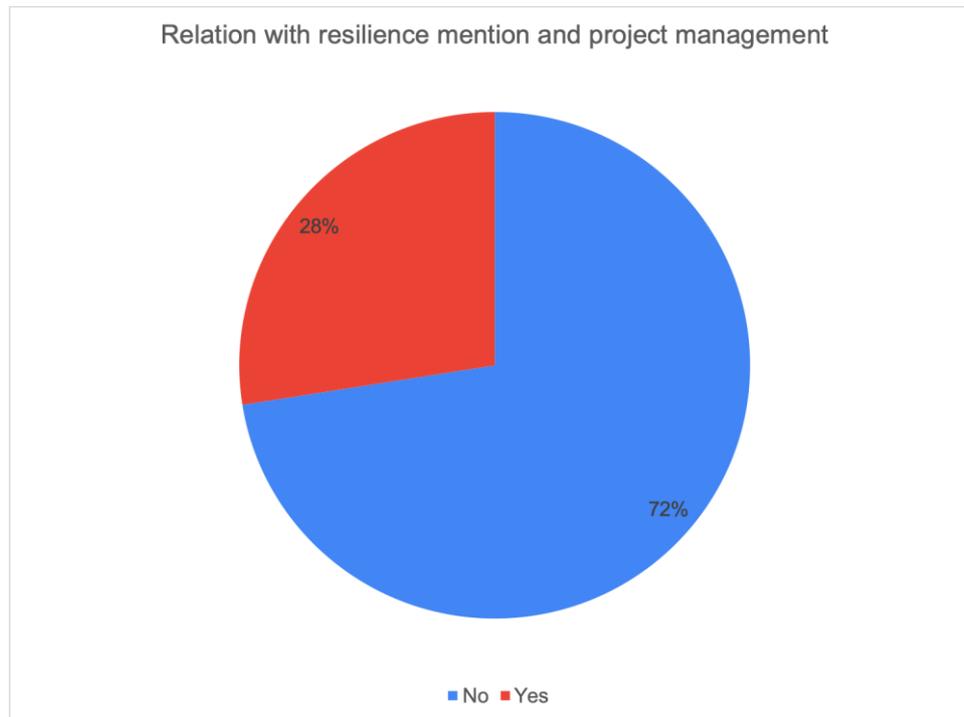


Regarding the impact of project management inside the company, the 55% claims that the project management facilitates the business activities and have a high importance. A medium importance is ascertained from 25% of the respondents, while the 20% indicate a low influence of the project management on business activities.



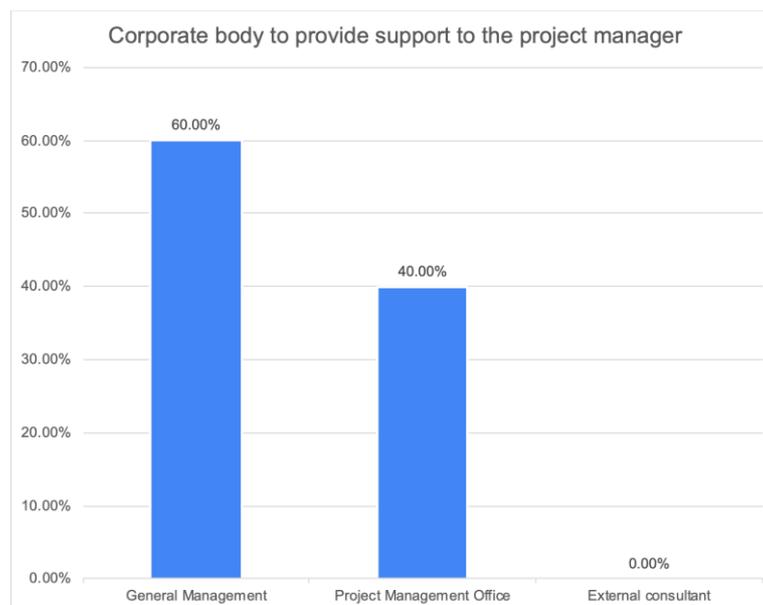
3.2 Resilience maturity

The survey analysis shows that in the business context, resilience is not explicitly mentioned in relation to project management. Our sample tells us that more than 70% do not talk about resilience.



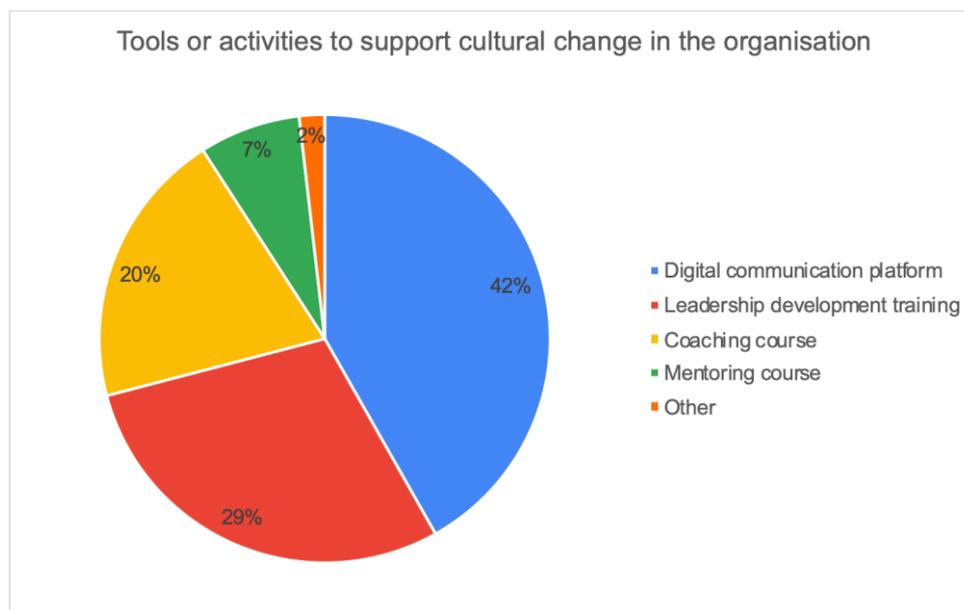
In light of this, it is therefore surprising to see that one out of two times when adverse events occur a corporate body is present to provide support to the project manager.

Specifically, 60 per cent of the time the support structure is the company's general management. Only in the remaining 40% of the cases does the support come from the project manager's office. It should also be noted that all respondents stated that they never use external consultants.



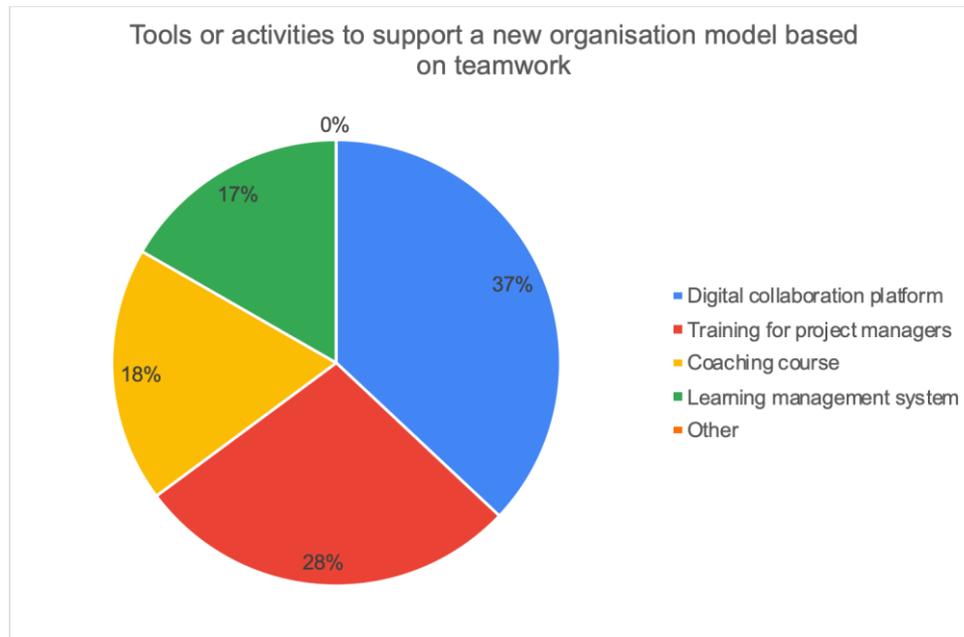
When asked whether "*the company in which you work has introduced tools or activities to support cultural change in the organisation*", 7 out of 10 respondents stated that their company has introduced processes aimed at change.

In 42% of the answers it was indicated that the company has created a platform for digital communication, in 29% it has set up a training course to develop leadership and in 20% it has created a coaching course.



Next, the analysis investigates whether the company in which the respondent works has introduced tools or activities to support a new organisational model based on teamwork. In 70% of cases, the sample responded positively.

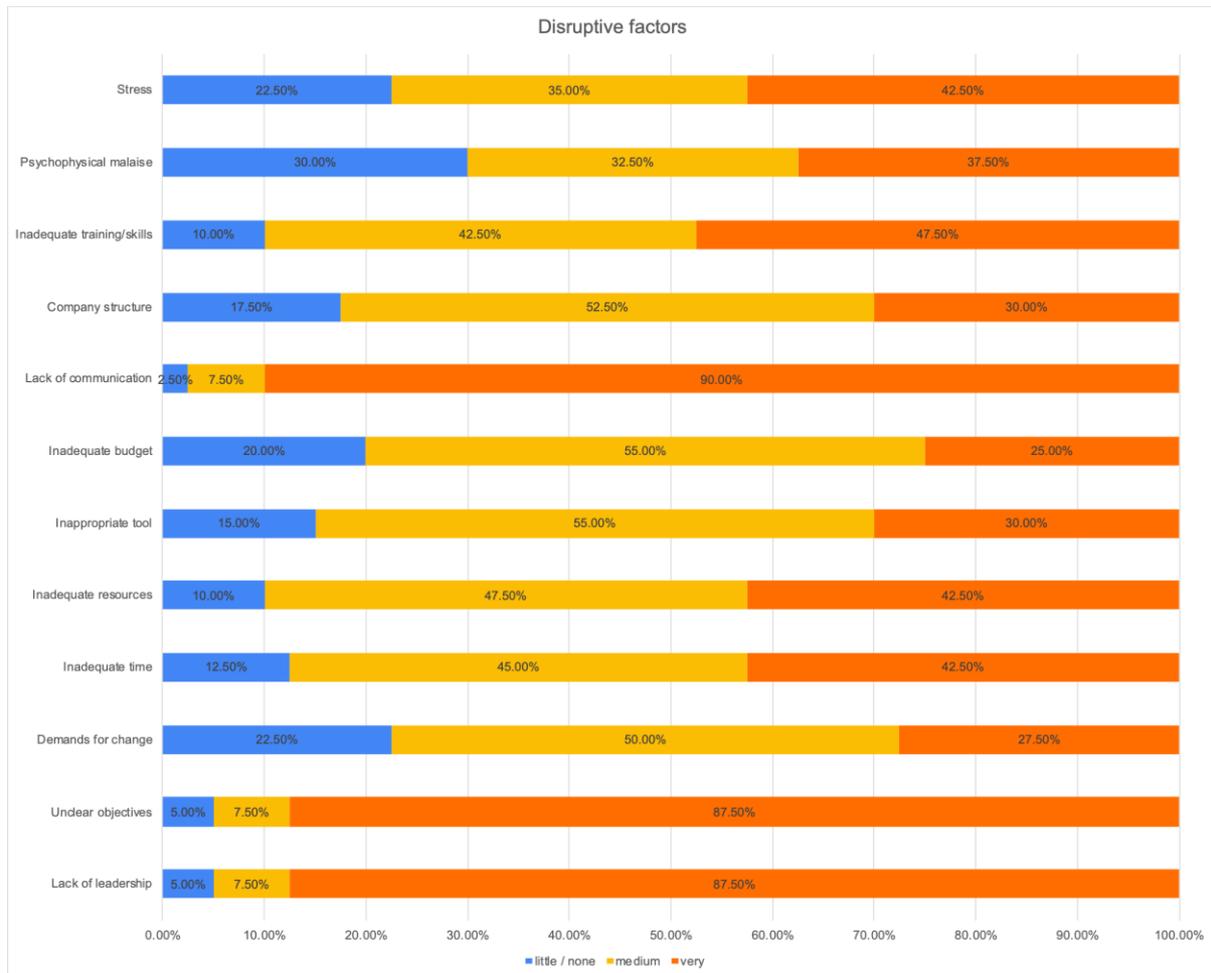
The most popular tool, with 37% of responses, was the digital collaboration platform, followed by training for project managers (28%), coaching (18%) and learning management systems (17%).



3.3 Disruptive factors

By carrying out a detailed analysis of the chart emerge a discomfort which will be created by a lack of leadership that leads to consequences in internal communication, in formulating and transmitting clear objectives.

This situation also generates an increase in business problems related to training with a low growth of targeted skills, the lack of adequate resources, unsuitable times and tools. A rigid company structure, the budget not in accordance with the needs and the continuous requests for the change that cause strong states of stress resulting in psychophysical sickness.



A step back to understand how the lack of certain aspects hinders the resilience of a company. With the reference to our graph we start to understand what are the causes and the effects when it comes to the communication.

We operate in a society in which the digitalization and the adaptation of new technologies have triggered profound changes in the business dynamic. This element that was most affected is undoubtedly the internal communication with a serious of 90% of the gathered responses in the survey.

In a corporate organizational context, the role of internal communication is essential for the strategy, because the success and effectiveness of the projects and the following achievements of the objects is shared by the management which depends on it. Although communication is essential for the company, it is often underestimated and considered with insufficient awareness, this reaches so far that the complete communication is lacking. Therefore both the stability of the business climate and productivity and turnover are put to the test, with negative results towards the resilience of the organization.

Another important aspect that must be considered as an obstacle to the resilience is the evident lack of leadership for about 87.5 % of the given responses. In fact the most important business goals for most executives around the world is to accelerate the pace of innovation to improve profitability and increase the market share. We can therefore define that the task of leadership has changed. Today's leaders and executives have to deal with team management both in presence and remotely, these are the aspects which leads to greater difficulty by creating new leadership models and to stimulate the environment.

The problem that emerges from our survey is that at the top of companies there is a lack of "leaders of the future" capable of driving change within their organization.

However, a careful distinction must be made between absent leadership, that is, lacking involvement with a team and, as in the concept of rent-seeking (taking value from an organization without giving value). These absent leaders who offers too much freedom (*laissez faire*) without giving guidance and without taking responsibility for team decisions are a major problem for the company structure.

On the other hand if the leader or manager is not able to generate a healthy structure in terms of a "great place to work" for the employees or has not the needed skills to give instructions and to guide, where you need courage, passion, confidence, commitment and ambition as well with a clear goal to be achieved it is a major problem for the company. It is needed to present a clear vision to be followed by the employees and a united vision and participation to achieve the ambitious goals.

This will be represented in our survey where we see clearly that the clarity of objectives takes place in 87.5% of the given responses. A group of people who don't receive clear, transparent and achievable goals tend to fulfil their duties in a certain monotony, this leads to a massive lack of motivation with the risk of wasting time in activities which are not in favour of the goals which need to be achieved. Consequently, the quality of the daily work diminishes, and a gap is created between the top management and the subordinates. The single employee does not feel part of one ore more projects and does not know how to proceed in his work with consequent economic losses and corporate prestige in the market.

In our days we see more and more specialized people within the companies than in the past, which translates into greater value and at the same time a greater need to know the medium and long term objectives. The communication with situational awareness and strategy becomes essential, therefore it is of vital importance to set one or more objectives in a detailed path. It is important to reach a point of arrival that allows collaborators to advance with awareness, avoiding disorganization and promoting business resilience.

Another important topic to consider is related to the inadequacy of resources at 42.5% due to the lack of targeted skills and continuous internal/external training that we can see from the graph with a clear 47.5%. The current job market is becoming more and more dynamic, new professions are being born that become highly specialized, some technical skills became obsolete, this leads to a skill mismatch (mismatch of existing skills and skills requested by employers). This can cause situations in where the employee has to adapt to positions that are lower than his qualification, this leads to expenses for the companies, namely the training to close the skill gap (development of additional skills that will help the person to become more effective and qualified). Another possibility is to train the person to fulfil a different role within the company with a completely new training for employees with insufficient skills.

Another point we have to consider is the difficulty of companies linked to perception, which is the case if the companies do not have enough time to complete all work activities, this we identified with about 42.5% and is caused by the following factors:

- lack of clarity of roles and duties
- bad communication and circulation of inaccurate information
- lack of aptitude in managing activities according to the criteria of urgency and importance
- poor ability to plan activities
- overload of responsibilities and activities to be carried out in a short time
- presence of frequent interruptions, consequent splitting and loss of efficiency
- increased stress and tension between colleagues
- lack of tools and devices suitable for the work to be done
- inadequate and outdated working methods.

However, there are techniques to optimize time management and to improve the quality of individual work, in addition to updating / purchasing means and devices that support the daily work of collaborators. Unfortunately, the rigid corporate structure experienced by 30% of the interviews turns out to be a reason why change management can encounter resistance to change and organizational resilience.

A correct calculation of the budget dedicated to a project is also an obstacle and there are two main reasons for it:

- failed to comply with the phases of a project leads to the necessary budget increase
- the expenses have been budgeted, but the budget planning is wrong

The fact that the budget is not adequate to the company/project needs is represented by 25% of the interviewed participants, in this case the company has a serious problem. For the company it is not acceptable to be halfway through the project and then to discover that there are not enough resources to support the achievements and the planned objectives, this has a destructive effect on the entire project and carries a high potential of frustration for all participants.

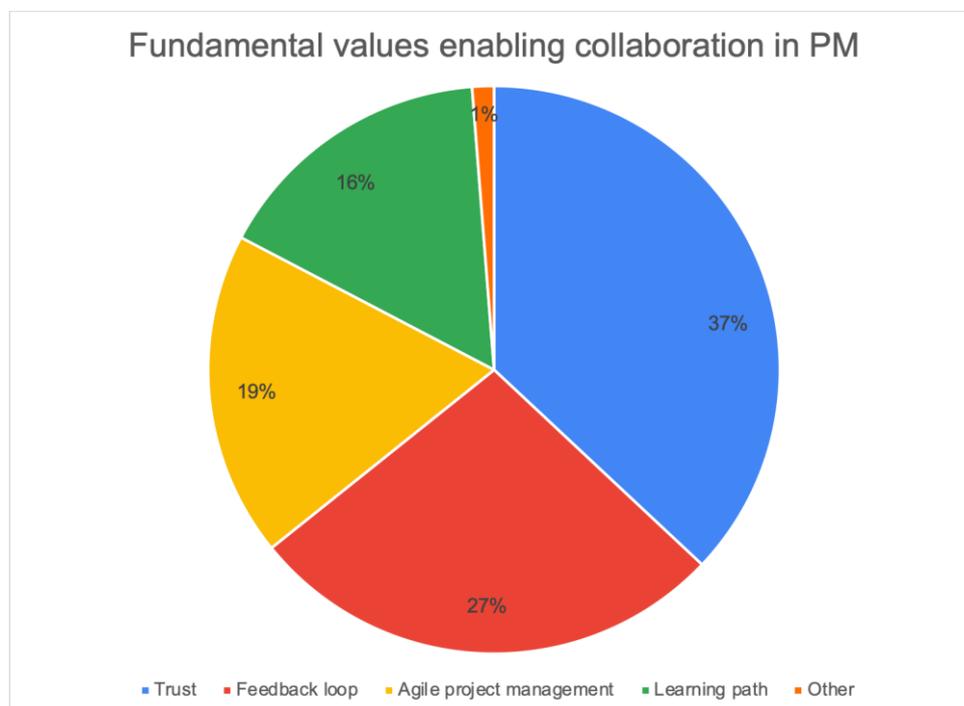
And finally, the survey shows that the continuous request for change is represented by 27.5% causes a strong possibility of stress which is represented by 42.5% and therefore psychophysical implications of the employees which comes up to 37.5%. This last condition gives rise to the increase in insurance and social health costs, the failure to meet deadlines, poor quality, no loyalty of employees, exhaustion of opportunities, lack of corporate maturity, this leads to a great obstacle for the company resilience.

3.4 Resilient factor

In the following cluster, numerous critical factors were analyzed including those that impact the development of resilience and how resilience can positively or negatively affect the different organizational activities in which the project manager is an integral part.

The human factor is intertwined with the need to develop adequate skills and is then declined in the various activities in which the resilience factor is “core”.

3.4.1 Fundamental values that enabling collaboration PM



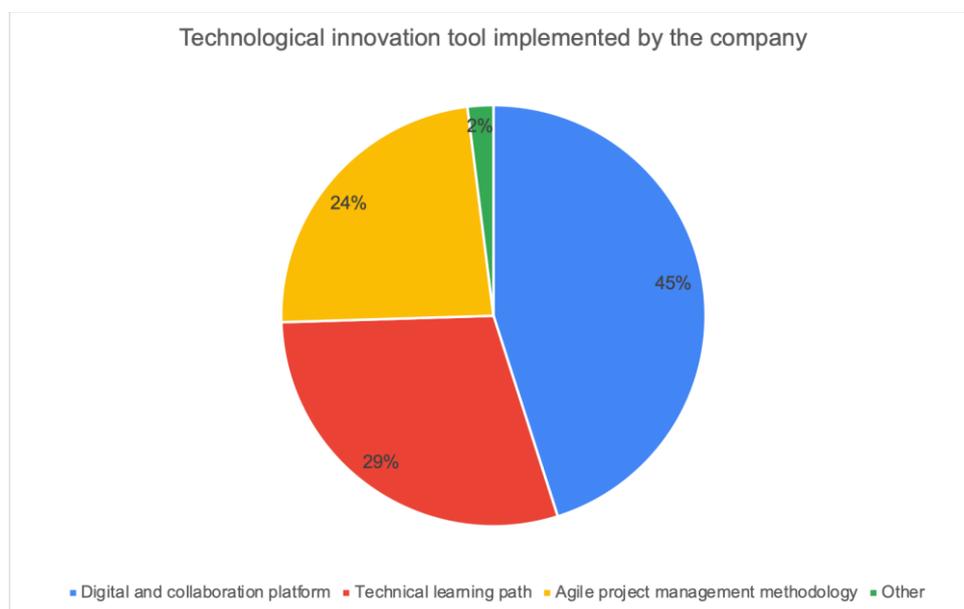
From the analysis emerges as central issue the "trust" element, expressed with the 37% (riferimento al grafico) : the Human factor is therefore critical for project manager team's activity in order to carry out operational activities smoothly.

Thus, the winning triptych emerges: Trust, Responsibility and Motivation that support productivity.

The value of feedback is very important to the project manager as it allows him to know how other team members perceive his business: 19% need to adopt a fast workflow management skills. In this context, "agile" methodologies are borrowed for the elimination of unproductive touch points in favor of streamlining the work process with the release of cognitive resources.

3.4.2 Continuous technological updating as an enabling factor for project management

The answers show an overwhelming predominance (75%) of the need for technological innovation as an enabling and facilitating factor for project management. Only 25% expressed a contrary opinion, not considering technological innovation as a facilitating factor in PM; this is probably to be found in the habit of adopting routine methods and tools and in the will not to face economic investments as well as not wanting to welcome a real radical change.

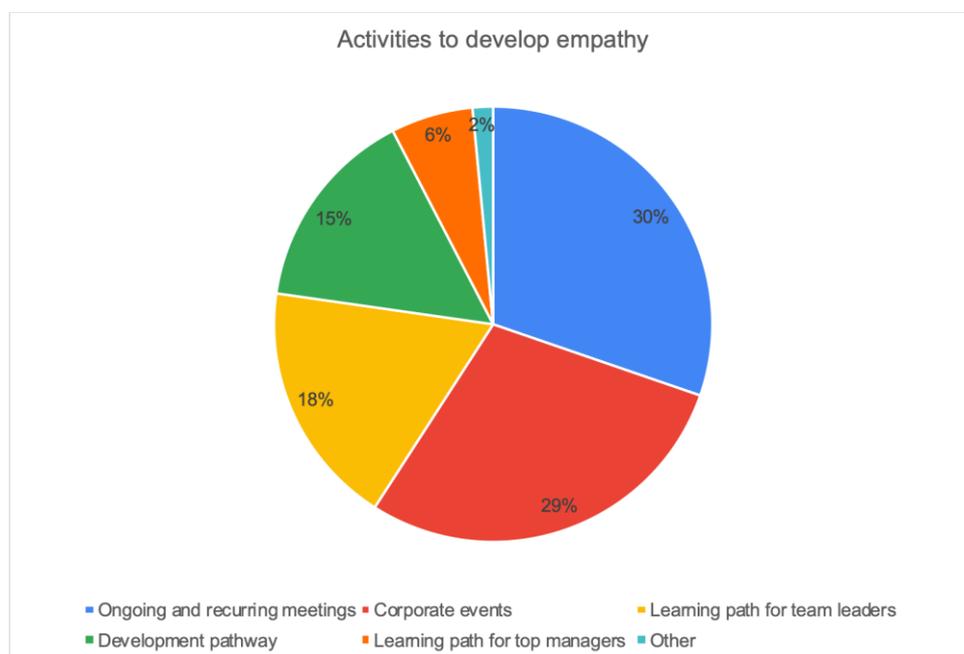


The answers received focus more on the adoption of collaborative digital platforms with a clear 45%. This confirms that, in the PM environment, the use of tools that allow team members to share contents and to be able to relate in real time by assigning tasks and receiving notifications is the indispensable element for a fluid and efficient workflow. On the other hand, 29% define as relevant the technical learning related to the skills needed to carry out the activities in a PM team.

3.4.3 Companies moments or actions to develop empathy among collaborative teams

There can be no resilience without a direct correlation with the "empathy" factor within the company organisation and its PM teams. The data shows that 63% of companies have already introduced activities to develop empathy between collaborating teams.

PM teams consist of and deal with multifunctional entities, making it necessary to train "empathy" so that there is harmony between the personal and professional characteristics of the members. Only 37% of the responding companies answered that they do not have any activities for the development of empathy, but this percentage is not considered relevant.



The relevant figure is the adoption of recurrent company meetings: 30%. Recurring meetings allow continuous interactions creating deeper knowledge of the individuals who have to work in PM activities and developing constant value.

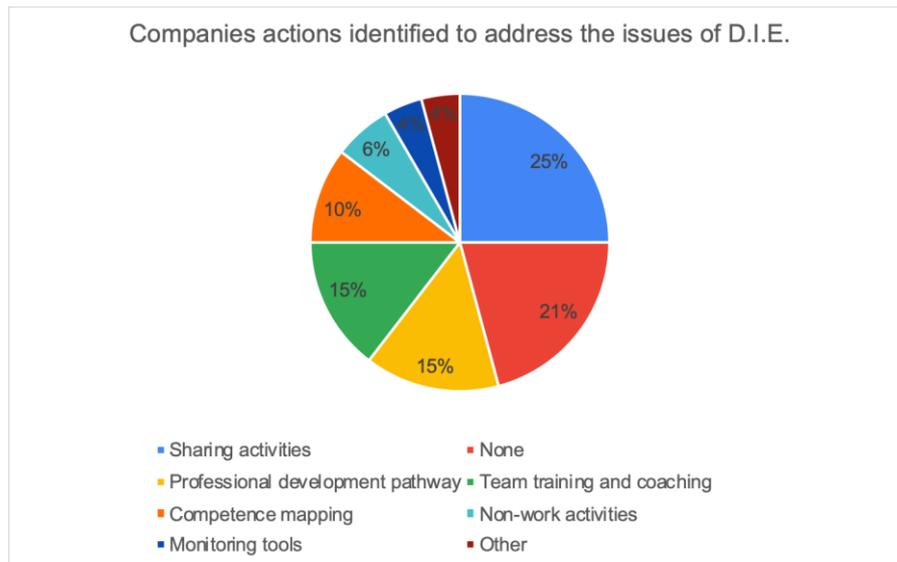
On the other hand, 29% show the relevance of organising corporate events in support of a theme of cultural change, dissemination of corporate values and, last but not least, transparency of strategic objectives then declined in the different PM objectives.

Only 18% state that they configure a "learning path for team leaders".

3.4.4 Companies actions identified to address the issues of diversity, inclusion and equity

In relation to the D.I.E. (Diversity, Inclusion, Equity), it's clear that the 25% of companies resort to activities aimed at encouraging "sharing to deal with D.I.E. problems".

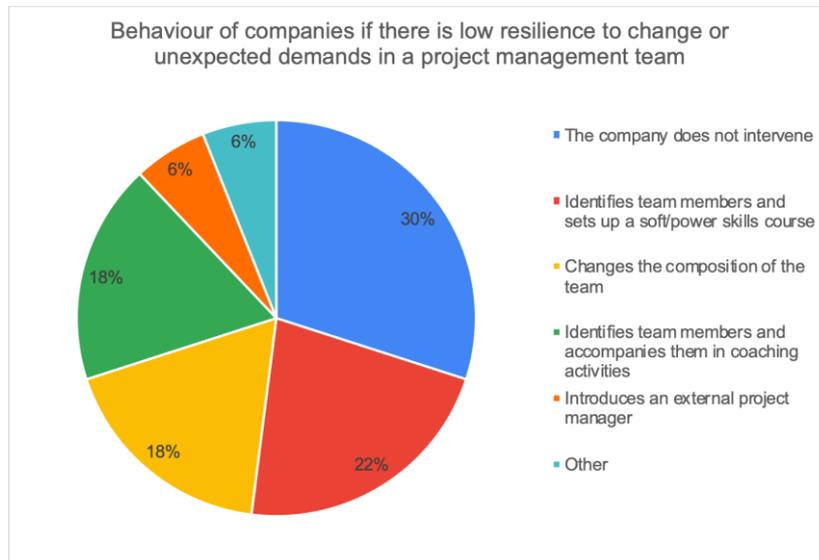
The activity of constant sharing within the company and/or PM teams helps mindshift and welcomes the development of resilience. However, 20.8% of companies that declare that they are not engaged in the D.I.E.: turns out to be a worrying fact. Therefore, companies should be made more aware of D.I.E. issues, starting with their business strategies and objectives.



3.4.5 Behavior of companies in case of low resilience to change or unexpected requests in a project management team

30% stated that the company as a whole does not intervene, leaving the PM team to deal with it. This result can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the company leaves management autonomy to the PM team, reinforcing the sense of responsibility and confidence in solving the problem; on the other hand, there is a lack of listening from executive entities, which must remain focused on the profit goals.

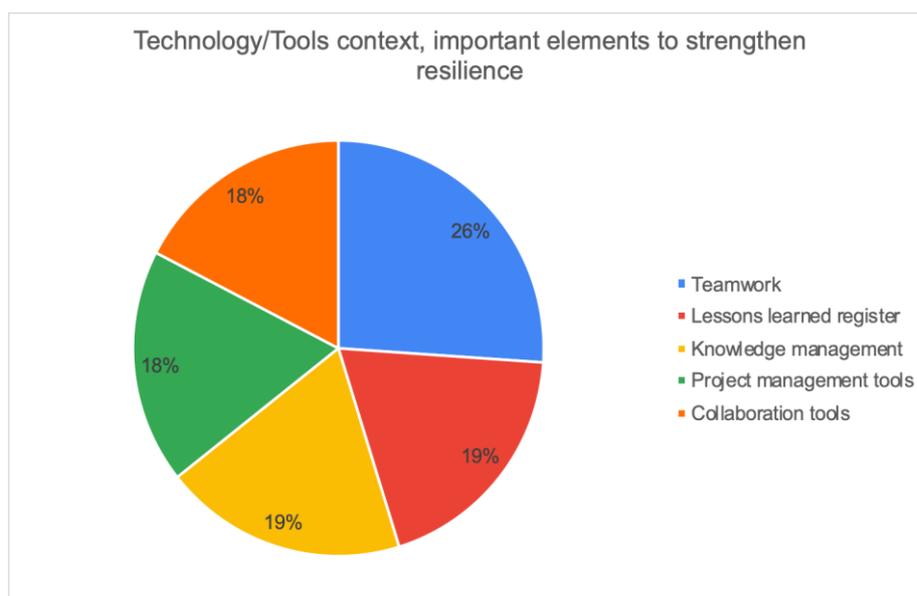
On the other hand, there is a lack of listening the management, which must remain focused on the target objectives. 22% of the data relates to the activity of directing team members who are not very resilient towards training courses dedicated to the acquisition of soft/power skills.



3.4.6 Elements to strengthen resilience

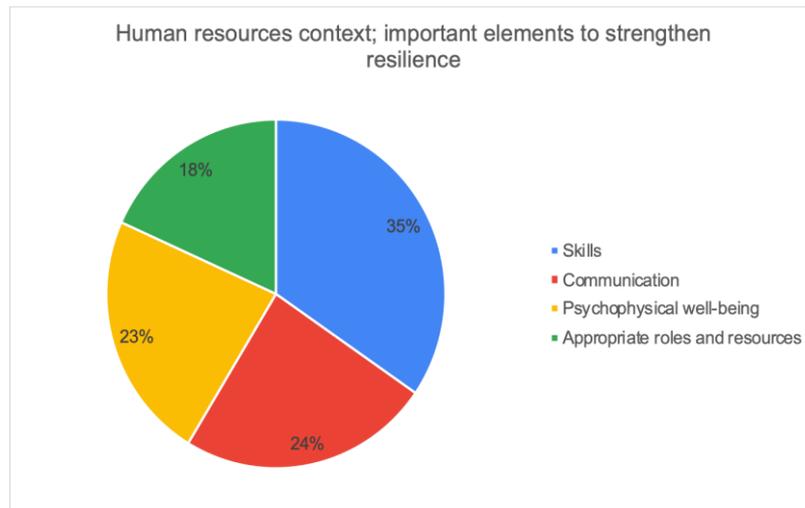
3.4.6.1 E Technology/Tools

"Teamwork" shows a 26% with a clear gap towards the other results. The human element is therefore still the driving factor but strongly facilitated by technology. The technological factor allows interaction within the PM team, constituting a productive gym for the development of resilience: it allows integration among members and gives everyone the opportunity to take advantage of operational moments in which growth and integration value are generated. Then there was 19% on lesson learned register and knowledge management.



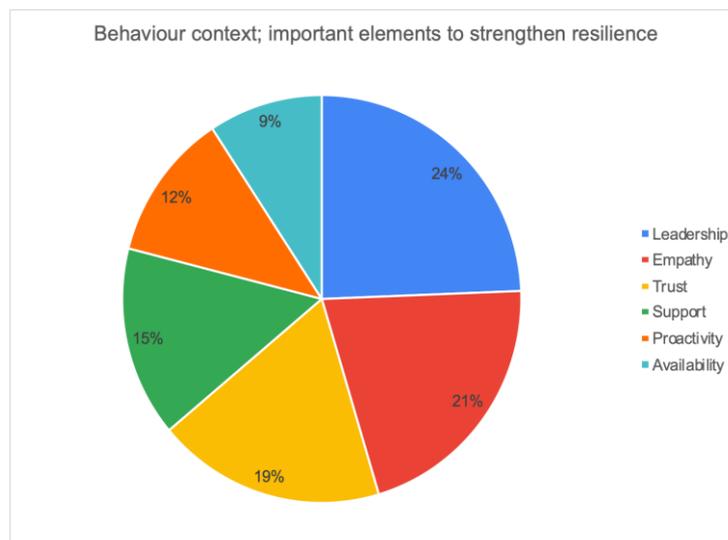
3.4.6.2 Human Resources

It emerges that companies need to embrace "skills development" (35%) as an essential factor for growth and strengthening resilience; followed immediately by the "communication" factor (24%). It emerges that competencies and communication are necessary in order to release personal and professional blocking factors, giving confidence in the abilities of individual members but at the same time accompanying them on a path of continuous improvement.



3.4.6.3 Behaviour

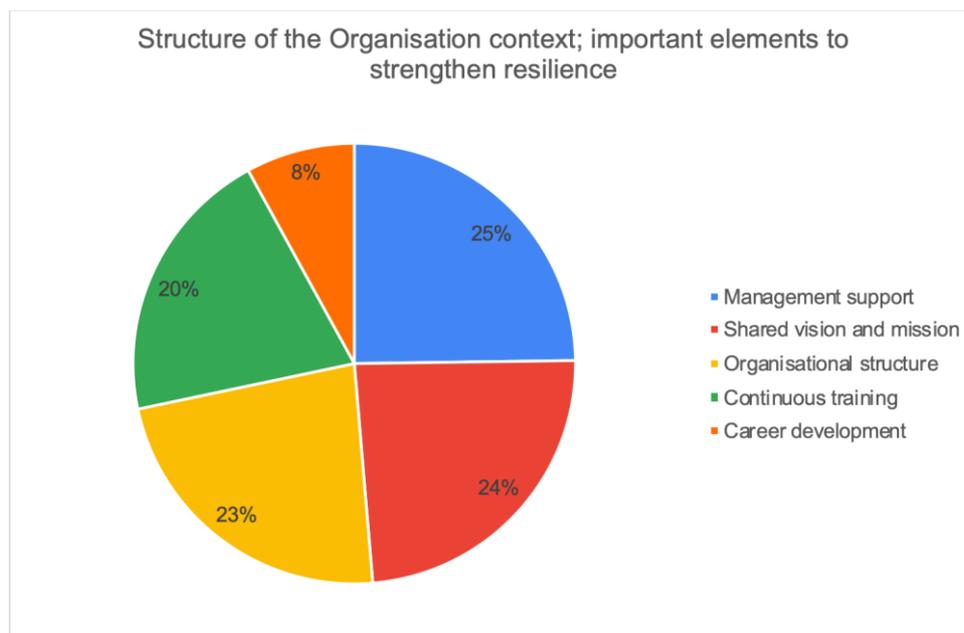
24% of companies identified *leadership* as the most important driver followed immediately by the empathy factor (21%). Companies identify the need to have people who are able to provide a vision and guide the team as a "coach" who knows the importance of the logic of team functioning and has an overall vision of the company strategy.



3.4.6.4 Structure of the Organisation

There is 25% for "support from management" and 24% for "shared vision and vocation" which show that resilience must be expressed with a "top down" approach.

Being considered and supported by management is a further fundamental lever that embraces the security of being able to be accompanied on a path of personal and corporate growth.



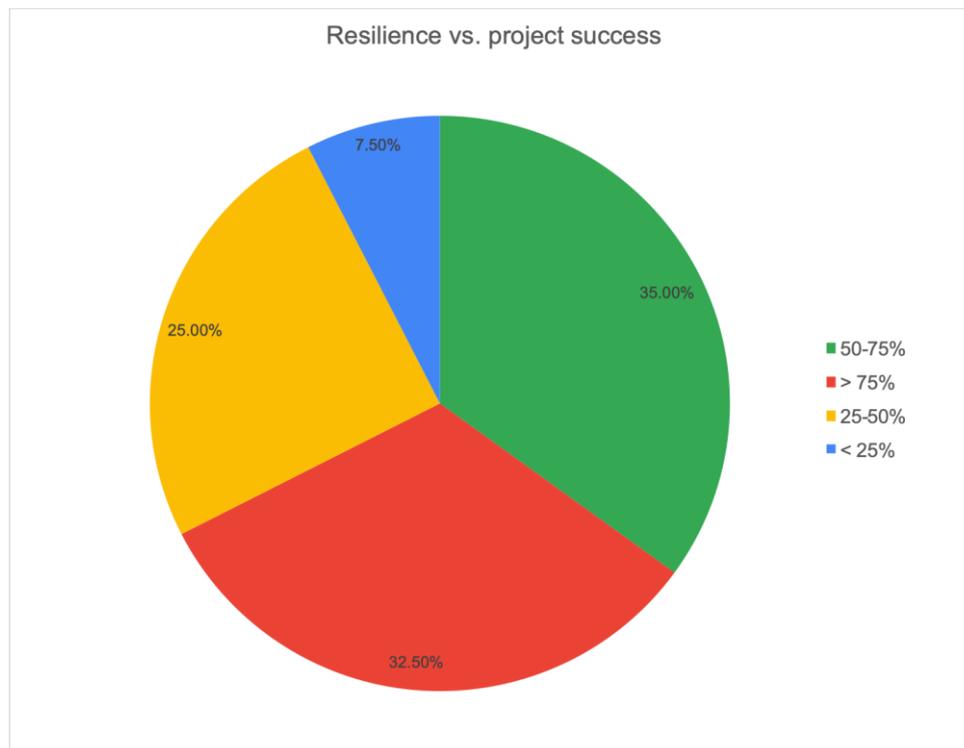
3.5 Influence of resilience on project/organisation success

One of the survey questions gave us a better understanding of how influential resilience actually is on project success.

67.5% of respondents believe that resilience determines 50% or more of the success of the project, in particular 35% confirm that success is influenced by resilience between 50 and 75%; 32.5% of respondents also believe resilience affects success by more than 75%.³

The residual percentage of, 25% believed that resilience influences success by less than 50%, while only 7.5% responded that resilience influences success by less than 25%.

³ The figure includes about one third of the interviewees.



These answers confirm what is the common feeling at this time, resilience is one of the primary factors in ensuring the success of a project or even an organisation.

It's not the only success factor, but it might be the most important one. The increasing complexity of the contexts in which projects are developed has a very significant impact on them and on the way they are managed. The project manager always finds himself in challenging situations, for which the tools traditionally available are not always sufficient. Ensuring that individuals, organisations and projects are resilient could be a key factor.

If we consider a question related to resilience maturity, it can be seen that as many as 72.5% of respondents answered negatively to the question whether resilience is a topic explicitly addressed in the business context

The results of these two questions, therefore, may appear to be in contrast. It may be, however, with an adequate number of attentive and enlightened project managers, who realise how influential resilience is in day-to-day project work, does not correspond to an open-minded and knowledgeable corporate mentality and culture on the subject.

4 Conclusions

Today, digitisation, automation, climate change and geopolitical uncertainty are set to have an increasing impact on organisations and projects, which will need to be more agile and adaptive.

Indeed, in today's organisational structures that are now forced to be extremely flexible, the transition from strategy to execution becomes the central point where the real change in roles, positions and emerging competencies is identified.

“Time” is a critical resource and PM activities must be totally in tune with the different demands and requirements coming from ever-changing organisational paradigms.

Companies must demonstrate that they are able to guarantee a consolidated organisational and operational resilience, based more on the approach to risk management and the ability to take risks, to the principles of business continuity, to cyber security, and above all to the ability and courage to leverage the will to acquire soft and power skills that allow to restore self-confidence.

Innovative technology enables and facilitates the workflow, but it is necessary to place a clear focus on people, who are the real engine of organisational and project change. The “resilience” factor thus becomes a corporate “mantra” that enters with vigour as a protagonist for the development and monitoring of transformational processes, a condition for proving oneself skilfully flexible, actively aware and strategically able to respond to any event in such a way as to become aware that organisational and project resilience are not static but are in continuous development.

It is therefore essential to ensure a resilient corporate culture based on:

- Frequent, two-way communication with open lines of transmission between employees and top management necessary to reach and engage people, share just-in-time information, give two-way feedback and keep up with business needs.
- Shared goals and direction with clear indications of team responsibilities, so that people can mobilise their skills effectively towards shared goals using also moments of participation and corporate communication channels in terms of lessons learned and goal-oriented success stories.
- Participatory sense of belonging, prioritising frequent moments of sharing among employees that are able to foster improvements in functioning, organisational resilience and overall team productivity.
- Promotion and support of psychological safety, open sharing of information and collaboration. fostering cross-functional teams able to work quickly and effectively to achieve real results.
- Barrier-free collaboration in new, increasingly virtual and international contexts with remote working.
- Top-Down support for employee well-being, it is of paramount importance that Top Management supports staff during periods of change by showing genuine concern for their

well-being and ensuring that work is optimised by regularly monitoring PM and team stress levels to reduce pressure.

- Flexible workplace and deep trust of the leader, high expectations of their teams, even when individual working hours, styles and environments seem or are perceived as very different.

It is essential for members of the PM team to "be open" and openness becomes a key attribute that includes:

- the ability to embrace innovation and transformation
- cultural openness to relate in a multidisciplinary team
- the ability to be one's own leader in order to give meaning to operational team activities.

In the overall examination of the values in favour of a broad vision of the elements of impact of resilience, the "human" factor turns out to be the central value detected first in the trust, in the feedback and last but not least in the "learning" with a substantial predominance compared to a mere factor of method (development with agile methods). This data shows how the human value must be placed at the centre of continuous and constant monitoring and attention in order to restore the necessary stability within the PM team after critical events.

In addition, in order to have an in-depth understanding of organisational and operational resilience and to define a clear roadmap of what they need to do to be ready for the next crisis, organisations will need to focus on the following knowledge:

- Anticipation: threats, insurance awareness, strategic risk, operational risk, financial risk.
- Protection and planning: occupational safety, cyber security, health, environment, insurance, governance, compliance and audit.
- Response: crisis and change management, communications, IT disaster recovery, Business Continuity.
- Recovery: Business Continuity, insurance, leadership, human resources, IT.

In summary, companies will need to adopt a holistic balance and harmonious innovation that improves communication and listening processes to promote cultural change. Communicating a clear vision that triggers emotions and leads to action, as well as explaining the reasons for the need to initiate change, allows people to feel more involved and led to act not only on the basis of individual motivations, but also in view of a purpose based on a deep sense of belonging and community. In addition to making sure that sufficient resources are available, creating solid processes and flexible structures, it is crucial to increase training (upskilling/reskilling) for both PMs and the *PM* team, in order to develop and acquire skills that ensure an openness to the continuous changes required by the market. To do this, it is necessary not only to invest in specific training in empowering skills, but also to build lifelong learning pathways that enable managers

to continually reinvent themselves through the application of 3 attributes: *enabling technology*, *mindset change* and *agile behaviour*.

Also, to be considered are learning paths focused on leadership and self-leadership issues together with coaching for project managers and project managers of the future. Within this balance, it is also necessary to optimise time management by making meetings efficient, dividing resources by skills according to needs, refining feedback methods and improving the transmission of objectives, and finally, investing in technological change and security, so as to ensure a sufficient degree of autonomy and diversification of PMs and teams for a mature organisation and a winning project.

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