

The way forward: Creating new principles in traditional and agile project management ¹

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Project management and artificial intelligence are two sides of the same coin. Project management focuses on the delivery of a product or service, and artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT and virtual assistants, focus on helping to deliver a product or service in a more efficient way. As project managers, we welcome newer more advanced tools such as artificial intelligence. At what cost do these new tools come to the project management field? Can we assume that generating and implementing new ideas by a project team will soon no longer be needed in project management as it will be replaced by other forms of artificial intelligence? I would argue for this being the case, but would like to note that there is a strong case for the belief that AI will be used to help more with decision making in the future by using its large repository of ideas.

It is predicted that by 2030, an approximate 80% of tasks will be done through artificial intelligence. The tasks AI can perform seem very helpful and encouraging as they can only do the following:

- Chat bots and virtual project assistants can help to solve problems in project management. Chat assistants can help to identify projects that requires urgent attention and chat bots such as ChatGPT can select options that a project manager can take to solve the urgent issues
- AI algorithms can improve the effectiveness of scheduling of tasks by calculating the available resources and ensuring there is no overallocation of resources. Rescoper is one such tool that is used to schedule tasks for resources.
- Predictive analytics can be used to predict future trends in data and the performance of projects
- Natural language processing (NLP) help to extract findings from project reports and obtain relevant customer feedback on projects
- Project management tools such as Asana provide the project manager with real-time data, such as identifying those resources who complete tasks early
- Tools such as Clickup help to select the team member most suitable for a task and assist to make accurate time estimations of tasks

¹ How to cite this article: Jaga, B. (2023). The way forward: Creating new principles in traditional and agile project management, commentary, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue VI, June.

The above is the positive view on the use of AI in project management. Counter to this, imagine a situation where a project manager is under pressure to make a quick decision and provide an answer to a client when there is an unexpected problem. The unexpected problems in South Africa can include equipment failures, load shedding and project politics. If an AI engine is asked to find the reasons for loadshedding, it would not necessarily be able to provide a comprehensive answer. Team members may need to respond fast to stakeholders as they are under time pressure to deliver on tasks and want to maintain good communication relations with them. These two situations can place the entire project team in a tight spot to deliver quick solutions that they desire to be effective in the long run. AI tools may not be equipped to respond fast to these and other unpredictable problems, and this can result in an ineffective untested solution that may not be achievable by a team.

This is where we can be sure in stating that a project is only as good as its team. Data collected and inputted into any AI platform may provide you with a few limited useful insights to help you solve these noted problems. AI tools are emotionless and have no element of interaction to be able to formulate a thorough and meaningful list of ideas that can solve problems in projects. As humans interact with each other, they share new ideas, formulate new opinions and acquire new information, known as socially situated learning – all of which work towards developing a novel solution. As AI agents have not yet learnt how to interact with people, they cannot provide new information to solve problems. AI tools can be a limited useful engine of ideas as they may be provided with insufficient and incorrect data by users.

The project manager should at this point in time play a more active role in teams by helping to build a problem-solving culture in an organisation and therefore foster the creation of new ideas. The project manager can encourage this culture by promoting the following activities in the team:

- **Build stronger relationships with project stakeholders:** If there is a significant issue, then it is fundamental for team members to communicate this to the relevant stakeholders, such as senior management. Building relationship takes time but can assist to manage complex problems in current and future projects. Communicating regularly with the client is just as important now as it can secure future projects.
- **Develop creative thinking:** new problems can be managed more easily as creative thinking is encouraged by a project manager. Brainstorming and mind mapping are project management tools that can help to get the creative ideas flowing in a team.
- **Select suitable team members with strong analytical skills:** team members still need to have the capability to identify issues as they arise in projects, such as new risks, and ask questions to help solve problems. Solving problems through analytical thinking helps team members to understand the relevance of information in a problem, review the success of the solution to that problem and note the lessons learned.

- Develop design thinking: by empathizing with stakeholders in a project, team members can better understand their needs and problems they wish to solve. Demonstrating empathy with stakeholders will help to explore more ideas and uncover solutions that may be more relevant for them to use. It will become easier to test ideas and also receive feedback from stakeholders.
- Encourage more communication among team members: this is needed when tasks are large and complex, and where AI cannot serve to meet the needs of the project. In these types of projects, team members and the project manager will need to engage more and share insights that can ensure the project is successful.

The role that AI has in the future project management seems to be fixed as much it is evolving. The current role of AI is to automate and replace most project management tasks as well as the project manager role. As the role of AI evolves, project managers should navigate the AI space more and in so doing, develop new fundamental principles of operations that can work in the traditional and agile project management space. There is now more a need than ever to develop a stronger team by creating these new principles of operations. By doing do, we can ensure that artificial intelligence does not replace innovative thinking.

About the Author



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Bhavisha Jaga is an educator with several years of experience in project management. She has acquired expertise in project management by working in various areas such as consulting, publishing as well as research. Core competencies include research, financial management, education and professional development.

Currently, she works as a lecturer and Program coordinator for the project management program at STADIO, a private higher education institution in South Africa. Her aim is to increase the engagement of students with the content in project management and contribute to the sector through always ensuring an exceptional high standard of education.

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