

# **The Transformation of Project Management: Strategic Realignment and Human Excellence as Key Themes of the 34th IPMA World Congress<sup>1</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Project management (PM) is undergoing profound change, driven by increasing complexity, global decentralization, and the need to support strategic corporate goals more effectively. The presentations at the 34th IPMA World Congress highlighted central trends that shaped modern project practice. The most important developments focused on the transformation of the Project Management Office (PMO) into a strategic value creator, the urgent necessity of integrating sustainability and benefits management, the mastery of hybrid work models, and the decisive role of human factors such as trust, culture, and adaptive leadership.

## **1. THE TRANSFORMATION OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICES: FROM METHOD ADMINISTRATOR TO STRATEGIC ENABLER**

One of the central trend topics was the redefinition of the role of the Project Management Office (PMO), which had to evolve from a purely administrative or method-oriented unit into a strategic business partner. Thomas Neumeier of Dayforce outlined a new success model for the PMO, built on three pillars: Projects, Methods, and Outcomes. The PMO was supposed to ensure that projects were prioritized in line with the business strategy (portfolio management: doing the right things) and delivered the right results. Neumeier emphasized that the PMO needed to focus on outcomes in order to generate added value. It became a competence center that enabled the organization to “do the right projects right.”

To fulfill this strategic role, support from management (steering committee) was crucial. The PM goes Boardroom expert group offered the “PMO Executive Kit” to support PMOs in enabling more effective steering committees. The PMO developed from a mere controller into a strategic advisor. According to Julian Michaelson and Amira Schmidt of Hamburg Port Authority AöR, this required a cultural shift in which the PMO acted as a

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“living home port” that created closeness instead of norms and fostered a culture of collaboration rather than serving as a “rigid standard setter.”

## **2. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND BENEFITS MANAGEMENT**

The alignment of projects and portfolios with overarching corporate strategy and the consistent management of expected benefits had been identified as an essential trend. A lack of strategic alignment was cited as one of the main reasons for project failure. The trend moved toward a benefits-first approach, in which the focus was placed on the desired end state. According to this approach, benefits were supposed to be identified, defined for all stakeholders, prioritized, planned over time, and actively tracked and measured. This process required a shift in thinking, which Dr. Arnis Leikarts described as the development of PMOs into strategy facilitators.

Closely linked to strategic value creation was the integration of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria into project portfolio management (PPM). Darija Ivandić Vidović and colleagues emphasized that sustainability was no longer just an image factor but had become essential for companies in terms of resilience and legitimacy. Projects served as the pathway to sustainability. In a case study at Triglav Insurance Croatia, ESG KPI assessments became a mandatory criterion for project selection, leading to transparent monitoring of sustainability and improved decision-making. The significance of ESG was also evident in the connection of PPM with UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9: Sustainable Innovation & Infrastructure.

## **3. HUMAN FACTORS AND LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS**

In a world characterized by complexity and hybridity, soft skills, culture, and leadership style were decisive for project success. Lars Gottschling-Knudsen emphasized that organizational culture shaped change and enabled project success. The individual perception of “readiness for change” was more decisive than national culture.

The central element was the building of trust. In virtual and global teams, establishing trust was more difficult. Feiyang Wei listed factors that influenced trust, including reliability, goodwill, and empathy. Michael Ryba saw trust and self-responsibility as crucial success factors for globally distributed hybrid teams, which he compared to “cave divers.” He recommended: “Build trust before the lights go out.”

Leadership continued to evolve. David Hudson examined the paradox of project leadership and observed that leadership was not only a matter of competence (knowledge, skills, aptitude) but also a question of context: should one lead or influence? Aptitude, which was harder to teach, included aspects such as patience, emotional

control, and intuition. Another important trend was shared leadership. Maximilian Müller explained that “no single leader possesses all the necessary skills to be the best in every situation.” Shared leadership seemed particularly advantageous in complex projects.

The new generation (Gen Z) also placed new demands on leadership: they expected “work that REALLY made sense” (for example, through an emphasis on sustainability). Felix Behm pointed out that young professionals wanted immediate feedback and preferred mentoring instead of mere instructions. A strong example of agile and positive leadership came from Constantin Hoya in his analysis of Ted Lasso, whose leadership was based on five pillars: empathy and relationship building, team building, a culture of honest failure, open communication, and positive leadership.

#### **4. HYBRIDIZATION AND SYSTEMIC AGILITY IN PROJECT EXECUTION**

The combination of predictive (traditional) and adaptive (agile) methods—the hybridization—was widespread in practice. Mag. Katharina Radlinger-Köhler and Dr. Dagmar Silvius-Zuchi observed that “both worlds existed (in 87% of all projects).” The issue was not which method was “old” or “new,” but rather “what fit best.” One focus was on integrating predictive and agile approaches into a single plan and clarifying roles in hybrid project organizations, since role clarity was not a given (for example, project manager versus Scrum Master).

At the organizational level, hybridization required systemic agility. Prof. Dr. Hubertus C. Tucek and Prof. Dr. Helge F. Wild presented the Agile Management Maturity Map (AM<sup>3</sup>) as a framework for overcoming the so-called “agile winter.” Agility was seen as the “central organizational element for an agile organization” and was referred to as *the* leadership principle of the future. The AM<sup>3</sup> highlighted six dimensions critical for agility, including the focus on customer value, value stream orientation, the iterative-incremental approach, the agile organization, the leadership principle of self-organization, and an agile learning culture.

#### **5. DIGITALIZATION AND DATA COMPETENCE FOR MORE EFFECTIVE DECISIONS**

Digitalization had been a driver of progress, growth, and resource reduction. It improved project management through the use of digital technologies such as 3D models and Building Information Management (BIM). For example, in the construction of a power plant in Poland, BIM had been applied for early collision detection in design to avoid “unwanted construction surprises.” In the field of water projects, digitalization had been used for “resilience, sustainability, and digital innovation.”

A key trend in dealing with digital information had been data storytelling, since data alone often did not lead to the desired decisions. Friederike Oehlerking quoted Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman: “No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.” The gap between data analysis and business strategy (the conceptual gap) often arose from poor communication of data. Data storytelling bridged this gap by combining data insights with easy-to-understand visualizations and a compelling narrative.

To successfully drive digital transformation, the quality of data management was essential. Milla Mazilu of Network Rail emphasized that effective approaches required an understanding of data ownership and clear data management policies that defined standards and responsibilities. She summed it up by saying: “If you decide to give someone scissors to cut wood, you’ll get some results, but it won’t be very neat, and you can’t blame the scissors”—highlighting the necessity of the right tools and competencies for handling project data.

## **6. AUTONOMY, CONNECTEDNESS, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MOTIVATION**

Increasing autonomy in agile teams had often been cited as a goal, but in practice it was experienced as a complex and individual phenomenon. Judith Armbruster examined the “paradox of experienced autonomy”: individuals acted as independent players but at the same time felt connected to the team. Autonomy was less a fixed sphere of individual control and more an individual experience influenced by organization, team, and leadership.

This led to a trend of putting more emphasis on individual needs. Felix Behm, an expert on Generation Z, stressed that young professionals expected “work that REALLY made sense,” often with sustainability playing a role. They also demanded more feedback, ideally provided immediately. Research showed that 59 percent of Generation Z rarely or never received a detailed feedback conversation, indicating a significant gap in leadership behavior. Instead of mere instruction, mentoring was preferred to ensure continuous development and qualification.

At the same time, the use of playful elements for competence development gained importance. Christoph Dennenlöhner and Dr. Olya Neef presented gamification as a valuable approach within a blended learning strategy. This approach used elements such as levels and skill trees to enable individual learning paths, with a focus on practical application and visible progress. In this type of learning, the community was more valuable than mere point scoring.

## **7. THE INTEGRATED DELIVERY MODEL (IPD) AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT (CM)**

In the highly complex environment of large construction and infrastructure projects, a holistic, value-oriented management approach was gaining ground. Yingchao Han described Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) management as a value-driven decision-making process that relied not only on technology or costs but on market demand and commercial objectives. A central feature of the IPD approach was investment control across the entire product life cycle, from concept design to decommissioning. Interdisciplinary collaboration within the Integrated Portfolio Management Team (IPMT)—comprising representatives from planning, cost estimation, legal, and finance—was fundamental to breaking down information silos. In this model, the cost estimator assumed the key role of “chief economist” in the construction project, analyzing, measuring, and reviewing economic operations.

Also in this context was the professionalization of construction management. BAE Yung-hwi of the Construction Management Association of Korea (CMAK) observed that in Korea, construction management (CM) was being established as the third pillar alongside design and construction. This was intended to strengthen competencies for managing complex and diverse projects while improving quality and safety. CM aimed to increase efficiency, quality, and safety, thereby enhancing the overall competitiveness of the industry.

## **8. MANAGING EMERGING ECONOMIC SECTORS: THE LOW-ALTITUDE ECONOMY**

A forward-looking strategic trend concerned the development of entirely new economic sectors made possible by technological breakthroughs. Xu Yang (LongDa HengXin Engineering Consulting) presented the low-altitude economy as a comprehensive economic system based on flight activities in low airspace (below 1,000 meters, extendable to 3,000 meters). This economy was driven by the interaction of new productive forces such as drones, eVTOLs (electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft), and intelligent networks. Application scenarios were diverse, ranging from industrial tasks (pipeline inspection, surveying) to logistics (courier services), public services (rescue operations), and even manned flights (air taxis).

The greatest challenge for implementing this national strategy lay in financing infrastructure, in contrast to the delayed commercial returns. Xu Yang proposed a “Funds Self-Balance Implementation Plan,” which included the commercialization of operational scenarios and the phased release of data value. The goal was to transform the trillion-dollar airspace resources from “unpriced public assets” into “self-balancing industrial capital.”

## **9. CONSOLIDATED WORK MANAGEMENT AND DATA GOVERNANCE (CWM)**

In light of the increasing fragmentation of work across emails, spreadsheets, and specialized tools, a central trend lay in the consolidation of work management (CWM) to achieve organizational efficiency at scale. Barbara Jezierska and Tobias Lauer (Smartsheet) emphasized that barriers to maximum impact persisted as long as work was distributed across spreadsheets, team chat/email, and point solutions.

The solution lay in establishing unified workflows and data aggregation that brought together processes such as demand intake (standardized recording of project requests), project work execution (management of schedules, risks, budgets), and portfolio reporting (real-time overviews for strategic alignment).

Closely linked to this was the necessity of clear data governance. Milla Mazilu (Network Rail) stressed that effective approaches had to be based on data ownership (clear roles for collecting, storing, and analyzing data) and data management policies (guidelines on responsibilities and data standards). She summed up the challenge metaphorically: “If you decide to give someone scissors to cut wood, you’ll get some results, but it won’t be very neat, and you can’t blame the scissors”—highlighting the need for proper tools and clear processes.

## **10. FUTURE READINESS AND THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN STRATEGIC PROJECT MANAGEMENT LEADERSHIP**

Project leadership increasingly had to integrate skills and concepts from other disciplines in order to succeed in a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous).

Prof. Dr. Silke Schönert emphasized that PM competencies had to be connected with insights from neuroscience and quantum physics. Neuroscience taught that “the brain cannot distinguish between imagination and reality,” forming the basis for mental training (for example, visualization of the target state). Quantum physics contributed the concept of “probabilities instead of certainties,” meaning that the future was a field of possibilities and not predetermined.

The trend moved toward treating PM as a “future skill.” Human strengths lay in interaction, adaptability, and the quality of relationships. Strategic leaders such as Jeff Bezos (“working backwards”: starting with the perfect press release) and Elon Musk (“first principles thinking”: starting from physical/technical fundamentals) demonstrated how visionary thinking and backward planning (start with the end in mind) could make decisions clearer and structure projects in ways that not only managed the future but actively shaped it. Jochen Mai summed it up: the PM role was shifting from controller to navigator.



## CONCLUSION

The key trends in project management reflect the necessity of modernizing both organizational frameworks and human capabilities. The transformation of the PMO into a strategic partner, the consistent steering of projects according to customer benefits and ESG criteria, the mastery of hybrid methods, and the building of trust and empathy in complex, often virtual teams define the current requirements for project managers and organizations. The future of project management lay in the synergistic connection of structure (governance, hybrid models) and human excellence (leadership, culture, data competence), in order not merely to manage projects but to actively shape the future.

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## About the Author



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**Sebastian Wieschowski** is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where

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Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at [s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de](mailto:s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de).