

On the subject of major infrastructure projects¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

6 February 2026

Dear David

I have long been puzzled by an apparently anomalous situation in the project management world with regard to major infrastructure projects, particularly in the transportation sector.

There has been an ongoing record of serious underperformance of such projects for some decades now. As long ago as 2003, Flyvbjerg et al reported that, on the multibillion-dollar mega infrastructure projects they had studied.

- Cost overruns of 50% to 100% in real terms are common, and overruns above 100% are not uncommon
- Demand forecasts that are wrong by 20% to 70% compared with actual development are common

I have not seen any current figures on these types of blowouts on major infrastructure projects. However, judging by the record of such projects in Australia, and anecdotal evidence from overseas (such as Miles Shepherd's monthly UK Project Management Roundup in this journal), substantial blowouts are still all too common. They are also often widely publicised in Australia, and I believe elsewhere. Amongst other negative consequences, they reflect poorly on project management in general, and thence on the effectiveness of its representative institutes, associations and like bodies.

How have our project management representative bodies treated this situation? As far as I can ascertain, by broadly ignoring it. Now, it would appear that our many different PM representative bodies have many different ranges of missions. This is perfectly reasonable. However, all of them must surely be quite directly concerned with improving PM performance. Therefore, ongoing poor performance of so many major infrastructure projects in their domain should be a particularly concerning issue. However, many, if not most, of our representative bodies appear to have basically ignored this ongoing abysmal record for a long time now, and evidently continue to do so.

Is this right?

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