Pulse of the Profession® 2026

Driving Success in Complex Projects: From Navigating Tasks to Navigating Systems

Project Management Institute.

PMI REPORT

Complexity is no longer the exception. It is the defining condition of modern project work.

This year's Pulse research, drawing on 2,534 respondents across 35 countries, reveals that 97% of project professionals managed at least one complex project in the past year, and 81% report that projects have become more complex in recent years.

The distinction that matters: a complicated project can be solved with expertise and effort. A complex project requires the ability to sense, adapt, and respond as conditions shift in ways that weren't anticipated at the outset. The professionals who do this well aren't outliers, they have made a deliberate shift in how they see their role.

Where complexity comes from: the three dimensions

Organizational
Internal friction from unclear decision authority, siloed teams, competing priorities, and misaligned objectives.

Environmental
External forces (e.g., AI, regulatory changes, etc.) that reshape project context faster than teams can plan for.

Human
Social and cognitive dynamics that impact decision-making and team confidence.

What complexity does to your projects

61%
VALUE/ALIGNMENT GAPS
Projects deliver outputs while losing sight of outcomes, crossing the line yet missing their purpose.

55%
DELIVERY DISRUPTIONS
Missed deadlines and operational inefficiencies that signal the system is performing below its level.

31%
HUMAN IMPACT
Decreased morale and engagement: often invisible, yet the most consequential for long-term capability.

Proven practices that move the needle

Sponsor Alignment
Establish a shared understanding of the project, success, and accountability before execution begins.

Stakeholder Engagement
Continuously evaluate which stakeholders need to be involved across the life of the project.

Team Momentum
Keep teams anchored in purpose and build psychological resilience throughout.

Scenario Planning
Identify emerging threats and map interdependencies before disruption compounds.

Complexity Frameworks
Give professionals a tool and a shared language for navigating complexity.

5×

Projects that manage complexity effectively are five times more likely to succeed. 88% of projects were rated very successful when teams managed complexity well, versus 14% when they did not.

Read the full report on PMI.org