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**South Africa PM Summit & Prestige Awards**

# Navigating Project Complexity

Building Resilience in Projects and Going beyond delivery

Ike Nwankwo, MSc, MBA, PMP

**Board Chair, Project Management Institute**



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CHAPTERS IN SUB  
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# Navigating Project Complexity - PMI Recently Funded Research

Explored four major international development projects across Africa

Two were infrastructure projects. One in Ghana and the other on the border of Botswana and Zambia. Two capacity-building projects in Nigeria and Zimbabwe were also included in the research.

- **Complexity is underestimated**
- **Resilience is undervalued**
- **Sponsorship is weak**

*“The application of standard project management practices as a response to disruptions induced by complexity is insufficient.” - Nhlabatski & Ika, 2023*

<https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership>

## STRUCTURAL FACTORS:

- Multiple Funders & Funding Conditions
- Project Reporting

## SOCIO-POLITICAL FACTORS:

- Multiple Project Stakeholders
- Intangible Capacity Building Goals

## EMERGENT FACTORS:

- Procurement
- Major Scope Changes

[https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/academic-research/published/navigating\\_project\\_complexity\\_white\\_paper.pdf?rev=f4f20e99e7ef4ec2bc8c06e5cbbb1698](https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/academic-research/published/navigating_project_complexity_white_paper.pdf?rev=f4f20e99e7ef4ec2bc8c06e5cbbb1698)

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# Summary of findings and lessons learnt

## Recognize and Address Complexity Dimensions

International development projects are shaped by three interacting dimensions of complexity:

**Structural complexity, Sociopolitical complexity and Emergent complexity**

## Build Resilience Through Awareness

**Awareness** means developing the capacity to scan, monitor, and anticipate disruptions:

## Embed Resilience into Project Mindset

Resilience is not just a set of tools—it is a **philosophy applied across the life cycle**: Treat resilience as a continuous practice, foster competencies and support **adaptive project environments**

## Go Beyond Standard Project Management Practices

Conventional “best practices” rooted in predictability and control are insufficient. Instead, apply **best fit, context-enabled approaches**:

## Strengthen Adaptive Capacity

Projects must be able to reorganize and respond when disruptions occur through: **Persistence, Collaboration and Transformation**

## Practical Implications for Implementers

**Apply complexity thinking**,: view disruptions holistically, **Integrate complexity factors into project design** and **Expand practitioner competencies**

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Successfully navigating project complexity in international development requires **shifting** from “**rigid practices**” approaches to **adaptive**, context-sensitive practices that **integrate** structural, sociopolitical, and emergent factors, while **embedding resilience** through awareness, collaboration, persistence, and transformation.

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# Navigating project complexity

## Going beyond traditional project delivery

# Our new definition of project success accounts for both execution and outcomes

## Project Success

*['prəˌjɛk(t) səkˈsɛs]*

The consensus view across intended beneficiaries, other stakeholders, and project participants that a project was perceived to have delivered value that was worth the effort and expense.



**Value > Effort + Expense**

Delivered value that was worth the effort and expense

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# Projects that contribute to sustainability and social good are more likely to be successful

2.0x

Sustainable projects are twice as likely to be perceived as successful<sup>1</sup>

Figure 6 – Projects that Align with Social Impact Have Higher Perceived Success Rates

Aiming higher when defining a project's intended benefits by connecting one or more to a broader societal benefit improves the chances for success.

NPSS of projects identified with benefits that contribute to a social good versus those that do not

Net Project Success Score (% rating successful – % rating failure)



68%

of organizations lack sustainability-aligned project practices<sup>2</sup>

17%

of UN SDGs are on track<sup>3</sup>

1. Project Management Institute (PMI). (2025). *Maximizing Project Success*. <https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/project-success>
2. Green Project Management (GPM). (2025). *Insights into sustainable project management 2025*. <https://gpm.org/images/PDF/Insights/Insights%20into%20Sustainable%20Project%20Management%202025.pdf>
3. United Nations (2025). *World on Track to Achieve Only 17 Per Cent of 2030 Agenda Targets, Speakers Warn, as Second Committee Takes Up Sustainable Development Reports*. <https://press.un.org/en/2025/gaef3604.doc.htm>

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# Gen AI Adoption and Project Management

## Individual barriers to adoption:

Fear of job displacement, need for upskilling, governance, ethics, lack of executive support

## Enterprise barriers to adoption:

Transparency, Reliability, Cost of use, Data quality, Ethics, Responsibility, Black box

“AI will not replace project professionals, but project professionals who understand and leverage AI will replace those who don’t.”

## Suggested Roadmap

- **Own your learning path:** Start with AI tools that align with your day-to-day work. Learn by doing.
- **Experiment and iterate:** Treat GenAI as a sandbox, not a solution. Try, fail, refine. Pilot a project.
- **Advocate for support:** Communicate your GenAI wins and needs to peers & leaders.
- **Mentor and share:** Help others get started. Build a GenAI culture in your team / organisation.
- **Think bigger:** Use GenAI not just to save time—but to reimagine how projects are delivered.
- **Demystify, Humanise and Embrace.** Think Automation, Assistance, Augmentation

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# M.O.R.E.

**M**anage perceptions

**O**wn project success beyond project management success

**R**elentlessly reassess project parameters

**E**xpand perspective

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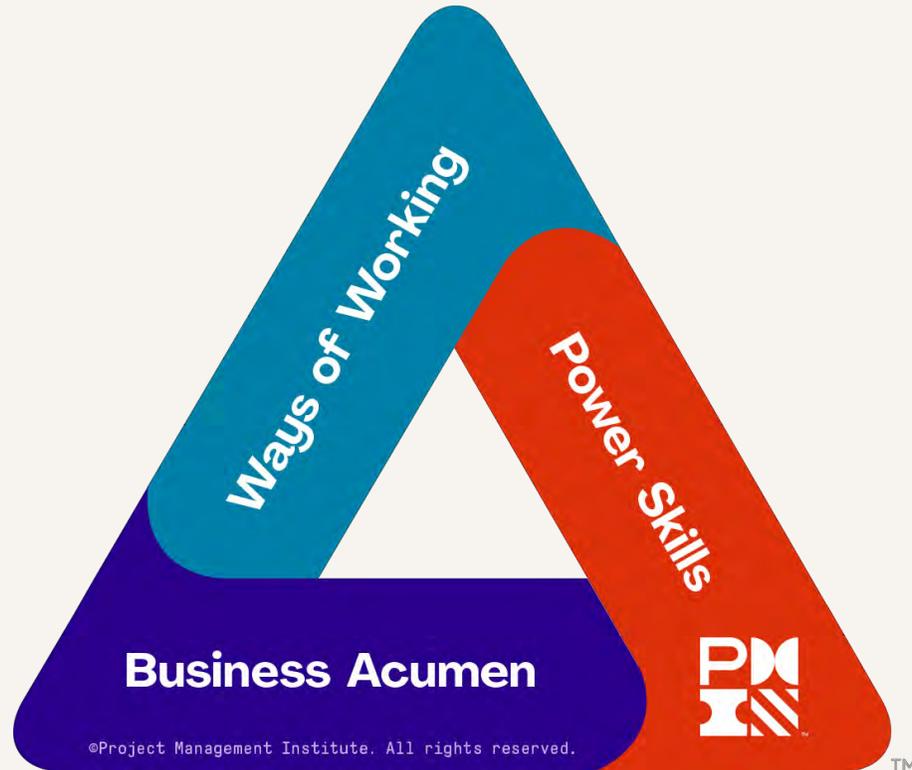
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# Close the Skills Gap

## PMI Talent Triangle



## Embrace Power Skills

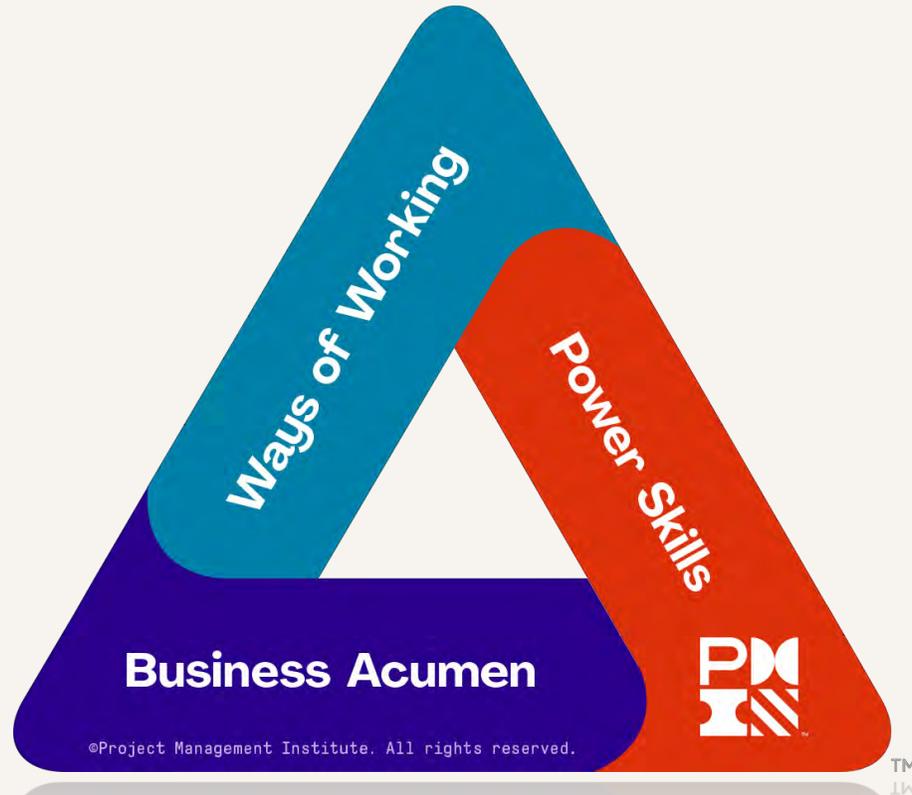
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— Deloitte

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# PMI and the profession in SSA



- Current State (2025) is over 2.6M Project professionals\*
- Projected Demand (2035) is Over 4.6M Project professionals\*
- As of 2025 the project Professional talent gap is over 2M professionals and growing !



**A Need for Qualified Project Professionals**

# Takeaways

We maximize project success to elevate our world

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Complexity is inevitable. Resilience is essential.

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Project success is not just about delivery – it is also about M.O.R.E.

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Sustainability and AI are both facilitators to project success – Embrace them

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The talent gap must be addressed through skill development

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Project Management and the profession – An opportunity to drive success

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**THANK YOU**

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