

Reinventing Project Management

The Project-Driven Organization: Beyond Agile¹

Antonio Nieto-Rodríguez²

For decades, we've treated projects like a side hustle.

In the traditional corporate worldview, operations were the "real work." They were the engine of profit, optimized for efficiency, repeatability, and scale. Projects? They were viewed as temporary interruptions—necessary evils used to fix a broken process or launch a product before everyone could get back to business as usual.

But as I explore in my new Harvard Business Review book, *Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age*, that mental model is dead. It belongs to a world that no longer exists.

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We have entered the **Project Economy**.

Today, almost every meaningful shift an organization undertakes—digitalization, AI adoption, sustainability, regulatory adaptation, post-merger integration—happens through projects. It's not episodic anymore; it's continuous.

Projects have quietly overtaken operations as the primary engine of human progress and business value.

The problem? Most of our organizations are still designed for the 20th century.

We are trying to run a hyper-fast, project-driven world on an operations-driven operating system. We are prioritizing stability when we should be prioritizing speed and adaptation.

The Shift We Didn't Ask For (But Got Anyway)

The pandemic didn't create the project-driven organization; it just stripped away the denial.

Think back to those early months of disruption.

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When global supply chains broke, and entire workforces went remote overnight, nobody waited for the annual planning cycle.

There was no time for the polite fiction of hierarchical decision-making.

The strategy had to be executed in real-time. Digital platforms were launched in weeks, not years. New services were prototyped, tested, and scaled at speeds that would have been considered impossible just months prior.

How did this happen? It happened because, for a brief window, we stopped obsessing over titles and started organizing around work.

Silos collapsed into cross-functional teams. Decisions moved to where the information was, not where the corner office was.

Almost everyone—from the C-suite to the front line—acted as a project leader, whether they called it that or not.

Then the crisis eased, and the gravitational pull of the "old normal" returned. Many organizations tried to snap back to their rigid hierarchies. But you can't unsee reality. We learned that we can move fast when we have to. The question now is: Why is it so hard to do it when we *want* to?

The "Implementation Gap": Where Value Goes to Die

The most expensive problem in business today isn't a lack of ideas; it's the inability to turn those ideas into reality. There is a massive, widening canyon between strategy design (the "what") and delivery (the "how"). We call this the **Implementation Gap**.

This gap is where value goes to die. It is filled with shiny strategic plans that gather dust, expensive transformations that stall at 60%, and teams exhausted by change fatigue.

Why does this happen?

It happens because we treat execution as a technical task for "project managers" rather than a strategic imperative for leaders. We celebrate the "dreamers" who write the strategy, but we underinvest in the "doers" who have to build it. In a project-driven organization, this distinction must disappear.

Strategy and execution are no longer separate phases; they are a continuous loop.

Why Your PMO Investments Aren't Paying Off

Over the last decade, organizations have poured billions into "fixing" project execution. We strengthened PMOs. We scaled Agile. We bought sophisticated reporting tools and certified thousands of staff in PMP and PRINCE2.

On paper, our maturity scores went up. We have better charts, better templates, and more qualified staff than ever before.

Yet, look at the results. Major initiatives are still overrun. Strategic benefits fail to materialize. The needle hasn't moved.

The reason is uncomfortable: We focused on *methodology* instead of *mindset*.

We built "Control Towers" when we needed "Value Engines."

We taught people how to fill out status reports, but we didn't empower them to lead change. We optimized for the "Iron Triangle"—Is it on time? Is it on budget? Is it within scope?—while ignoring the only question that actually matters: *Is it delivering value?*

You can deliver a project perfectly on time and on budget, yet still fail if it doesn't solve the business problem.

Conversely, a project might be late and over budget, but if it saves the company or opens a new billion-dollar market, nobody cares about the schedule variance. We need to stop managing for compliance and start leading for impact.

Why Agile Is Not Enough

For years, Agile was sold as the silver bullet. And to be fair, Agile transformed how teams work. It shortened feedback loops, killed the fallacy of perfect planning, and empowered cross-functional collaboration. For software development and product innovation, it was revolutionary.

But Agile was never designed to answer the hard, enterprise-level questions:

- **Prioritization:** How do we decide *which* initiatives deserve resources when everything is labeled "urgent"?
- **Resource Allocation:** How do we move scarce talent to the work that matters most without breaking their spirit?
- **Sponsorship:** Who owns the outcome—not just the deliverable?
- **Stopping Work:** How do we kill zombie projects early—without blame—when assumptions change?

Scaling Agile without addressing these structural issues just leads to "local speed and global chaos". You have teams sprinting in every direction, but the organization as a whole is standing still.

The Blueprint: The Eight Levers of Change

Becoming a Project-Driven Organization isn't about adopting a new framework or rolling out a maturity model. It is a fundamental shift in your operating model. It requires pulling eight specific levers simultaneously:

1. **Structure:** Moving away from rigid functional silos that guard resources toward dynamic, project-based teams that form and disband around problems.
2. **Culture:** Shifting from a culture of "risk avoidance" (where green status reports are rewarded) to a culture of learning and experimentation (where red flags are seen as early warning systems, not failures).

3. **Governance:** Evolving from periodic "control rituals" and steering committees to real-time decision-making bodies that empower teams rather than slowing them down.
4. **Leadership:** Transforming prioritization from an annual budget event into a continuous discipline. Leaders must be able to shift focus as the market shifts.
5. **Talent:** Creating a fluid talent marketplace where skills flow to value, rather than being trapped in static job descriptions.
6. **Performance Management:** stopping the measurement of activity (hours logged, tasks done) and starting the measurement of impact (customer value, strategic alignment).
7. **Value Creation:** Operational functions (HR, Finance, Legal) must stop acting as gatekeepers and start acting as enablers, supporting projects rather than policing them.
8. **Execution:** Moving from rigid "waterfall" planning to adaptive, iterative cycles focused on delivering value early and often.

None of these shifts happens by accident. And crucially, none of them can be delegated to the PMO. These are leadership responsibilities.

The AI Accelerant: Science vs. Art

If that wasn't enough pressure, Artificial Intelligence is about to make this shift mandatory.

AI is acting as a powerful accelerant. It is rapidly automating the "mechanics" of project management—scheduling, reporting, forecasting, and risk flagging. These are the tasks that used to consume 70% of a project manager's time.

This terrifies some, but it clarifies things for the rest of us. When the administration is automated, you can no longer hide behind spreadsheets. What remains is the "art" of leadership: Judgment. Negotiation. Stakeholder alignment. Sense-making. Decisions about what *not* to do.

In a project-driven organization, AI amplifies the difference between leaders who can navigate complexity and those who just hide behind process. It exposes unclear ownership, poor prioritization, and symbolic governance almost instantly.

The New Leadership Mandate

This brings us to the most critical point: **Project management is no longer a job title; it is a leadership competency.**

In the Project Economy, the "steady hand" executive is obsolete. The new job description for every senior leader is "Chief Project Sponsor." Leaders must spend less time managing steady-state operations and more time sponsoring the transformations that will secure the future.

If you are an executive and you cannot name the top three projects driving your strategy—and exactly what roadblocks you are removing for them this week—you are not doing your job.

Furthermore, we must democratize these skills. Every high-potential employee, regardless of their department, needs the ability to scope a problem, build a diverse team, manage stakeholders, and drive toward a clear outcome. These are life skills, not just technical skills.

A Final Reflection

Most organizations today are already project-driven by default. They simply refuse to acknowledge it.

They continue to organize people around functions while expecting cross-functional collaboration. They demand faster execution while maintaining slow decision structures. They celebrate strategy while starving the very projects meant to deliver it.

The result is predictable: overload, frustration, and underperformance.

The future of our profession isn't about finding a better chart, a newer software tool, or a stricter methodology. It's about power. It's about gaining the decision-making authority and political capital to redesign our organizations around the work that actually matters.

Projects aren't just something organizations do from time to time. They are how organizations *become*. Recognizing that reality is where the true reinvention of project management begins.

Disclaimer: ChatGPT was used to support editing and formatting. All substantive content is the author's original work.

About the Author



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Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, PMI Fellow, is one of the **world's leading experts in Project Management and Strategy Implementation**. He is the author of the "[Harvard Business Review Project Management Handbook](#)" (HBR 2021) and is the **most published author on project management matters in Harvard Business Review**. His upcoming book, [Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age](#), will be published by Harvard Business Review Press in early 2026.

Antonio has brought Project Management to the center of executive leadership, positioning it as a critical capability for transformation in the next decade. He is the creator of influential concepts such as the **Project Economy®**, the **Hierarchy of Purpose®**, and the **Project-Driven Organization™**, which argue that *projects have become the operating system of modern organizations—and the language of future careers.*

His global impact on management and leadership has been recognized by [Thinkers50](#), where he is **the only project management thinker included twice in a row** in the ranking of the world's most influential management thinkers. He is also the recipient of the prestigious **Thinkers50 Ideas Into Practice Award** and a member of the **Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches** community.

He was the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016 and has been recognized as a Fellow of PMI for his contribution to the project management profession. He led the creation of the Brightline Initiative, founded [Projects & Co](#), and co-founded the Strategy Implementation Institute.

His work focuses on advising senior leaders on how to prioritize and implement strategic initiatives and lead transformational change.

Antonio is also the author of “[Lead Successful Projects](#)” (Penguin, 2019), “[The Project Revolution](#)” (LID, 2019), and “[The Focused Organization](#)” (Taylor & Francis, 2014), and has contributed to seven other books. A pioneer and leading authority in teaching and

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He is a much-in-demand speaker at events worldwide. Antonio has presented at more than 800 conferences around the world, regularly evaluated as the best speaker. European Business Summit, Strategy Leaders Forum, Gartner Summit, TEDx, and EU Cohesion Policy Conference; are some of the events he has delivered inspirational keynotes.

He is former Sustainability Program Director and Head of Global Program Management Office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he also served as Head of Project Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis and Head of Post-Merger Integration at Fortis Bank, leading the acquisition of ABN AMBRO, the largest in financial service history. He also worked for ten years at PricewaterhouseCoopers, becoming the global lead practitioner for project and change management.

Born in Madrid, Spain, and educated in Germany, Mexico, Italy, and the United States, Antonio is fluent in five languages. He is an Economist, has an MBA from London Business School and Insead's IDP. You can follow Antonio through his [LinkedIn Newsletter - Lead Projects Successfully](#). For more information, visit his website at www.antonionietorodriguez.com. He can be reached via email: antonio.nieto.rodriguez@gmail.com