

The Challenge for 2026: Redefining Project Success to Realize True Transformation ¹

Stop thinking about digital initiatives as launching new tools. It's time to see digital projects for what they are: springboards to new ways of working.

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Despite deep investments in digital solutions, many organizations are still struggling to fundamentally change how work gets done. Platforms are deployed, but real transformation rarely follows. In 2026, this gap is becoming much harder to ignore.

The most common reasons digital initiatives fall short are not technical but organizational. Recent APQC research finds that poor integration with existing systems, unclear return on investment, and resistance from employees or culture are the main reasons initiatives fail to meet expectations. But these challenges generally stem from one underlying issue: projects are delivered, but the work of understanding and sustainably changing core business processes is left unfinished.

Project managers will recognize this pattern immediately. When projects move forward without clear agreement on how work is supposed to change, familiar problems follow. Success is measured by delivery milestones rather than business results. Stakeholder engagement drops once requirements are approved. Plans are slow to adapt as new information emerges. These challenges may appear distinct, but they can often be traced to the same dynamic that undermines digital transformation at large. Projects are delivered without anyone forcing clarity on how work should flow differently once new systems are in place. The mechanics are handled, but the operating reality is not.

In 2026, as generative AI and automation become part of everyday work, organizations face a moment of truth. Will project leaders step up? Will they be empowered to help project teams move beyond this familiar hurdle?

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Decades of process management research

In APQC's research, digital initiatives, weak integration, unclear ownership after delivery, and inconsistent adoption repeatedly show up as leading challenges in process and project management work. These issues often stem from deeper misalignments in how people understand and approach the work and who is accountable for sustaining it once the project closes.

APQC's survey results and decades of experience working with companies have shown that addressing these challenges and improving outcomes requires focusing not just on execution, but on how project outputs are absorbed into workflows, how responsibilities are assigned, and how performance will be measured against business goals going forward, after projects close.

For project managers and PMO leaders, this marks a critical shift. The work of project leaders now extends beyond coordinating tasks, tracking milestones, and managing risks. It must include shaping how work changes and ensuring that those changes endure. By reframing digital initiatives as business transformations and designing for adoption from the outset, organizations can position projects as engines of sustained performance improvement.

Why Digital Transformation Raises the Stakes for Project Management

As AI and automation move deeper into everyday operations, the nature of project risk changes. Projects no longer affect a single team or discrete workflow. They increasingly shape how work moves across functions, how decisions are made, and how performance is measured. Large and small language models, automation solutions, and enterprise platforms depend on consistent processes, reliable data, and clear ownership to function as intended. When those conditions are missing, teams experience delays, rework, manual exceptions, and growing frustration in day-to-day operations that often span multiple functions and business units.

At the same time, in digital initiatives, project decisions quickly become permanent operational constraints. Design choices about workflows, data definitions, and approval logic are embedded directly into systems that teams rely on every day. Once those solutions are in use, changing them is slow and expensive. This helps explain why integration with existing systems remains the most frequently cited challenge in implementing digital solutions. The issue is rarely technical expertise – the problem is that systems are being asked to support work that was never aligned across functions in the first place. Digital tools expose differences in how teams interpret policies,

handle exceptions, and make decisions. What once felt like manageable variation becomes a barrier to scale.

Unclear return on investment follows the same pattern. As digital initiatives grow more complex, value becomes difficult to defend unless organizations are explicit about how business processes will operate differently after delivery. When project goals are framed around implementation rather than outcomes, benefits remain abstract. Leaders struggle to connect investments to measurable improvements in performance, even when the technology itself is sound.

Digital transformation also tests how organizations apply flexibility. Many teams adopt agile or iterative methods to manage uncertainty, but flexibility without clarity about the intended future process can accelerate misalignment rather than correct it. Adjusting scope or timelines may protect delivery, but it does not guarantee that the right work is being redesigned. In digital initiatives, adaptation must be anchored to a shared view of how work should operate, or speed simply compounds confusion.

These organizational challenges are often treated as strategic issues that senior leaders should foresee and map out in advance. In practice, they are shaped by decisions made inside projects. And unless those decisions are reinforced through governance structures and performance measures after delivery, even well-designed changes will erode over time.

From Managing to Leading Projects

The uncomfortable truth for project managers is that a project can be expertly managed and still fall short of improving performance. Planning, coordination, and risk control matter. But they do not, on their own, ensure that what is delivered will change how the business operates.

APQC's work on project capabilities highlights this difference. Managing a project means delivering an agreed-upon scope. Leading a project requires stepping back to consider whether that scope will produce the intended results. It involves connecting design decisions to strategic intent, adjusting course as new information emerges, and pressing on questions that affect long-term performance.

In digital transformation projects, systems embed decisions about process flow, authority, and measurement. If those decisions are made narrowly, or deferred in the interest of staying on schedule, the organization inherits constraints that are difficult to unwind later. Managing tasks keeps the project moving. Leading ensures the project is moving in the right direction.

Practical Considerations for Project Managers and PMO Leaders

Designing projects for lasting results starts early. The projects that deliver real value in digital transformation are different not because they use better tools, but because project leaders make different choices while the work is still underway. They lead with a clear understanding of how new systems should alter processes, how the results will be measured, and how the teams that step in once the project closes will sustain the changes long term.

Here are some concrete actions project managers can adopt to begin moving in this direction.

Start with the future way of working, not the solution.

Before scope is finalized, teams need a shared understanding of how work is expected to operate once the project is complete. That includes end-to-end process flow, decision points, and handoffs across functions. When this future state is vague, design decisions default to convenience rather than impact.

Treat process ownership as a project deliverable.

Every digital initiative that changes how work is done should leave behind a clearly identified process owner. That role cannot emerge informally after go-live. Ownership needs to be agreed on early and reinforced throughout the project so accountability does not disappear when the project team disbands.

Build measurement methods into the project plan.

Projects still need delivery metrics, but they also need outcome measures tied to business performance. Cycle time, error rates, rework, customer response, or decision speed should be defined during the project and monitored after go-live. Without this, success remains subjective and value is difficult to defend.

Keep operational leaders engaged past requirements and design.

Stakeholder engagement cannot peak early and fade. Operational leaders need to stay involved through testing, transition, and stabilization, when design tradeoffs most directly affect how work will actually be done.

Use flexibility to protect outcomes, not just schedules.

Adapting plans is essential in digital initiatives, but changes should be evaluated against the intended future process, not just delivery timelines. Flexibility that preserves scope at the expense of usability often shifts cost and risk downstream.

For PMOs, these practices need to be reinforced at scale. Standards, governance, and reporting should encourage clarity around processes, ownership, and outcomes, not just compliance with delivery milestones. Developing project leaders who can navigate these issues is as important as refining methods or tools.

Redefining Project Success in 2026

Digital transformation is not failing for lack of ambition or investment. It falters when delivery is mistaken for change. In 2026, as AI and automation move into core workflows, that distinction carries real operational consequences. Projects that stop when implementation is complete leave value unrealized.

For the project management profession, this moment clarifies what success now requires. Managing scope, schedule, and risk remains essential. But lasting impact depends on whether project leaders ensure that new systems reshape processes, define ownership, and strengthen performance. The organizations that close the gap between delivery and transformation will be those that view projects not as endpoints, but as catalysts for durable change.

About the Author



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Madison Lundquist leads APQC's research on process and performance management. She uncovers best practices and performance metrics that help organizations improve efficiency and agility. Known for blending quantitative analysis with practical strategies, Madison's work helps organizations develop data-driven process programs and adopt proven approaches to continuous improvement.

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