

# **Back to Basics in Project Delivery Management: The Role of Competency Frameworks in Strengthening Professional Project Management <sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The rapid evolution of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and agile delivery approaches is reshaping the project management profession. Despite these developments, the fundamental principles of project management: Scope, Time, Cost, Quality, Risk, and Stakeholder engagement, remain essential for effective project delivery. This article examines the importance of revisiting foundational project management practices through a competency-based perspective. Drawing on competency frameworks such as the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards and professional designation structures implemented by Project Management South Africa, the article clarifies the distinction between frameworks and methodologies and highlights the role of demonstrable competency in project success. The discussion illustrates how competency frameworks support lifecycle-based project delivery and enable project managers to effectively apply knowledge, skills, and professional behaviours in complex organizational environments.

## **1. Introduction**

Project management as a discipline has evolved significantly over the past decades as organizations increasingly rely on projects to implement strategic change, digital transformation, and innovation initiatives. However, despite the emergence of agile methods, hybrid approaches, and digital project management tools, research consistently highlights the importance of foundational project management principles in achieving successful project outcomes.

Industry reports by the Project Management Institute demonstrate that organizations with mature project management capabilities achieve significantly higher project success rates

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and improved benefits realization compared to those with lower levels of project management maturity. Organizations that prioritize leadership, communication, and stakeholder engagement skills experience substantially better project outcomes.

Academic research similarly emphasizes that project success is strongly linked to effective governance, stakeholder management, and disciplined planning rather than the specific delivery methodology used. Classical studies on project success factors by Murphy, Baker, and Fisher (1974), Pinto and Slevin (1987), and Morris and Hough (1993) identified key determinants of project success such as clear objectives, executive support, stakeholder communication, and effective project leadership.

These findings suggest that while methodologies continue to evolve, the underlying competencies required for effective project management remain largely consistent.

## **2. Frameworks versus Methodologies in Project Management**

One of the persistent challenges within the project management profession is the confusion between frameworks and methodologies. Methodologies such as Agile, Waterfall, or Hybrid models define the processes and techniques used to deliver projects. Frameworks, on the other hand, define the competencies and capabilities required by project professionals.

The PMBOK Guide represents a knowledge-based standard that provides guidance on processes, knowledge areas, and best practices. In contrast, agile methodologies focus on iterative delivery, adaptability, and continuous stakeholder collaboration.

Competency frameworks such as the GAPPS framework emphasize demonstrable performance rather than prescriptive processes. These frameworks define what competent project managers must be able to perform across the project lifecycle.

Recent research further supports this distinction. Studies examining project delivery approaches across hundreds of projects found no statistically significant difference in project performance between predictive, agile, and hybrid methodologies, suggesting that project outcomes are influenced more strongly by management capability and organizational maturity than by methodology selection alone.

This reinforces the argument that professional competency is a critical determinant of project success regardless of the chosen delivery approach.

### **3. Competency-Based Project Management**

Competency in project management extends beyond theoretical knowledge and formal certification. Instead, it represents the integrated application of knowledge, skills, behaviours, and professional judgment within real project environments.

A systematic literature review on project manager competencies highlights leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence as essential dimensions of project management competence.

Similarly, empirical studies have demonstrated that project manager competencies encompass multiple dimensions, including technical expertise, managerial capability, leadership skills, communication effectiveness, and methodological knowledge.

These competencies significantly influence project performance. Research in the public sector shows that project managers possessing strong communication, leadership, and decision-making capabilities are more likely to achieve project objectives and deliver successful outcomes.

Within the South African professional environment, Project Management South Africa incorporates these principles into its professional designation framework, which is aligned with the GAPPS competency model. The PMSA designation structure recognizes progressive levels of project management capability, including Project Manager (PM), Senior Project Manager (Sr.PM), and Professional Project Manager (Pr.PM).

This model integrates professional experience, educational qualifications, and demonstrated performance evidence, thereby reflecting international trends toward competency-based professional certification.

### **4. Competency Across the Project Lifecycle**

Competency frameworks become particularly valuable when mapped across the phases of the project lifecycle. Project delivery typically progresses through stages including initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and control, and closure.

Research into project control variables confirms that core project management elements such as scope, cost, schedule, quality, and risk remain fundamental determinants of project success. These variables are strongly interdependent, and mismanagement of any one element can negatively affect overall project performance.

Furthermore, empirical studies on project leadership indicate that leadership behaviour and communication clarity significantly influence project efficiency, team collaboration, and stakeholder satisfaction.

These findings reinforce the value of competency frameworks in guiding professional practice across the project lifecycle.

## **5. The Strategic Value of Returning to Fundamentals**

In contemporary organizations, projects increasingly serve as mechanisms for implementing strategic change and innovation. However, many projects continue to experience delays, budget overruns, or failure to achieve intended benefits.

Research linking project governance, innovation, and high-performance work practices demonstrates that project success is strongly influenced by governance structures and organizational capabilities that support effective project management practices.

Similarly, studies on agile project success factors show that people related factors, such as team effectiveness, leadership, and project management competence remain central determinants of project success even in adaptive delivery environments.

Returning to foundational project management principles therefore represents not a regression but a strategic reinforcement of professional discipline within the profession.

## **6. Conclusion**

The project management profession is undergoing rapid transformation driven by technological innovation, digital transformation, and evolving organizational needs. Nevertheless, foundational project management principles remain critical for effective project delivery.

Competency frameworks provide a structured approach for ensuring that project professionals possess the necessary capabilities to apply these principles effectively. By distinguishing between frameworks and methodologies and emphasizing demonstrable performance across the project lifecycle, professional bodies and organizations can strengthen the effectiveness of project management practice.

Ultimately, the concept of returning to “back to basics” represents a strategic reaffirmation of the professional competencies required to deliver projects successfully in increasingly complex organizational environments.

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## AI Declaration

*AI was used as reference point to understand if similar publication were completed before and if this study does indicate a gap in the industry.*

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## About the Author



### **Fortune Mbele**

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**Fortune Mbele** is a seasoned Industrial Engineer and Project Management Professional with more than 15 years of experience leading Projects within ICT and Real Estate ( PropTech) projects across South Africa’s retail, higher education, and technology sectors. He currently serves as National President of Project Management South Africa (PMSA), where he enforces governance, professional development, and continental expansion initiatives.

Fortune has held senior project leadership roles at various organisations delivering multimillion-rand programs that blend Agile, SAFe, Traditional (waterfall) and Hybrid methodologies. Known for his ability to simplify complexity, align diverse stakeholders, and embed governance frameworks, he is also pursuing an MSc in Project Management at UCT where he is looking at investigating a hybrid project management approach that balances Agile flexibility with governance accountability and compliance, specifically within rigid governance and complex stakeholder dynamics organisations.

His career reflects a commitment to advancing project management standards, professionalising project management, empowering teams, and shaping sustainable, strategic outcomes across industries. Fortune can be contacted at [fortunembele@gmail.com](mailto:fortunembele@gmail.com)