

# Professionalisation of Project Management: A Return to Personal Responsibility<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines the professionalisation of project management as a movement away from command-and-control practices toward individual accountability and professional judgement. It argues that modern project environments require ethical responsibility, self-management, and continuous development rather than increased bureaucratic oversight. Professionalisation is presented as a return of responsibility to the project manager and a necessary step in the evolution of project management as a recognised profession.

**Keywords:** *Project Management Professionalisation, Professional Responsibility, Ethics in Project Management, Project Governance, Command and Control, Professional Judgement, Self-management, Continuous Professional Development, Project Management Competence, Project Management Profession*

## 1. Introduction

For many years, project management has been associated with a structured environment characterised by detailed planning, strong oversight, and clearly defined reporting lines. This approach emerged naturally from large infrastructure and engineering programmes where predictability and compliance were essential. In such environments, success was often equated with tight control and disciplined execution.

While these practices remain important, the continued reliance on rigid control structures is increasingly difficult to reconcile with the realities of modern project environments. Projects today operate in conditions marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and complex stakeholder relationships. In this context, professionalisation of project management should not be understood as an attempt to strengthen bureaucratic oversight. Rather, it represents a shift toward greater responsibility resting with the individual practitioner.

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Professionalisation, in essence, restores accountability to the project manager.

## **2. From Supervision to Professional Judgement**

Traditional management thinking often assumed that people needed close supervision in order to perform effectively. Douglas McGregor described this perspective in his well-known Theory X model, which assumes that employees must be directed and monitored to ensure satisfactory performance. Elements of this thinking remain visible in many project environments through extensive reporting requirements, rigid procedures, and layers of approval.

However, experience across industries suggests that complex project environments demand something different. Effective delivery depends not only on technical competence but also on judgement, initiative, and collaboration. Research in organisational behaviour has demonstrated that individuals tend to perform more effectively when they are trusted with meaningful responsibility and are able to apply their skills with a degree of autonomy.

The role of the project manager is therefore evolving. Instead of acting primarily as controllers of activity, project professionals increasingly serve as custodians of value delivery. Their responsibility is not simply to enforce compliance, but to create the conditions in which sound decisions can be made and sustained performance can be achieved.

This evolution is reflected in the standards and practices of the profession.

## **3. Ethics as the Foundation of Professional Practice**

At the centre of professionalisation lies ethical responsibility. A profession is distinguished not only by technical competence but also by a shared commitment to professional conduct.

The PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct identifies responsibility, respect, fairness and honesty as fundamental values guiding professional behaviour. These principles assume that project managers exercise independent judgement and accept accountability for their actions rather than relying solely on prescribed procedures.

Professional conduct requires individuals to:

- Accept ownership of decisions and their consequences.
- Communicate openly and truthfully.
- Treat stakeholders in a fair and balanced manner.
- Remain accountable for professional actions and outcomes.

Similarly, competence frameworks such as the IPMA Individual Competence Baseline emphasise personal integrity, self-awareness, and continuous development. These characteristics cannot be imposed through compliance mechanisms; they must be developed by the individual practitioner.

Professionalisation therefore depends as much on internal discipline as it does on external standards. A mature profession is guided by an internal sense of responsibility rather than by supervision alone.

#### **4. Self-Management in Modern Project Environments**

Contemporary project delivery approaches increasingly rely on empowered teams and distributed decision-making. The Agile Manifesto emphasises the importance of individuals and interactions and recognises that effective delivery requires responsiveness rather than rigid adherence to plans.

These approaches assume that project professionals are capable of organising their own work, adjusting to feedback, and taking responsibility for results. Such capabilities cannot be created through procedural control alone.

Even structured project methodologies recognise the importance of professional judgement. PRINCE2, for example, incorporates the principle of management by exception, which delegates authority within agreed tolerances. This principle assumes that competent professionals can operate responsibly without constant intervention.

Professionalisation therefore strengthens governance while at the same time reducing unnecessary supervision. Clear boundaries remain important, but within those boundaries professionals are expected to exercise judgement.

#### **5. The Limits of Command-and-Control Thinking**

The limitations of command-and-control approaches have been recognised for many years in fields such as quality management and organisational systems thinking.

W. Edwards Deming argued that organisational performance is influenced more by the design of systems than by the actions of individuals. Excessive inspection and control, he suggested, often inhibit improvement rather than encouraging it.

John Seddon later demonstrated how command-and-control management can reduce effectiveness in service organisations by emphasising compliance rather than purpose. These insights are particularly relevant to projects, which function as dynamic systems involving people, information, and decisions.

Professional project managers therefore focus on creating environments that support:

- Clear communication.
- Useful performance information.
- Learning from experience.
- Continuous improvement.

Such conditions allow projects to adapt and improve in ways that detailed supervision alone cannot achieve.

## **6. Continuous Development as a Professional Obligation**

Professionalisation also implies an ongoing commitment to learning. Professional status is not a permanent achievement but a continuing responsibility.

Competence frameworks across the profession emphasise the importance of maintaining and developing professional capability. The PMI Talent Triangle®, for example, recognises that project professionals require a balance of technical knowledge, leadership capability, and business understanding.

Projects operate in environments characterised by constant change. New technologies, new delivery approaches, and evolving stakeholder expectations require professionals who are willing to learn continuously.

No system of control can substitute for informed professional judgement. Only practitioners committed to ongoing development are able to respond responsibly to changing circumstances.

## **7. Professionalisation as a Return of Responsibility**

Seen from this perspective, professionalisation represents a movement away from dependence on organisational control and toward individual accountability.

Professional project managers accept responsibility for:

- Ethical conduct.
- Delivering value.
- Managing their own performance.
- Learning from experience.
- Maintaining professional competence.

Professional bodies provide standards, designations and guidance, but they cannot replace the judgement of the individual practitioner. Ultimately the strength of the profession depends on professionals who can be trusted to exercise responsibility.

Professionalisation is therefore not about tighter control. It is about enabling competent professionals to act responsibly and holding them accountable when they do not.

## **8. Conclusion**

Project management continues to evolve from a discipline focused primarily on planning and control into a recognised profession grounded in ethics, competence, and responsibility.

The long-term development of the profession will depend less on expanding control mechanisms and more on developing practitioners who are capable of managing themselves and supporting others to succeed.

Professionalisation represents, above all, a return of responsibility to the project manager.

### ***Acknowledgement of AI Assistance***

*Artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this article to assist with language refinement, structural editing, and readability improvement. The conceptual framework, arguments, and professional perspectives presented remain those of the author. AI tools were used solely as editorial support to improve clarity and style and not to generate original concepts or research findings.*

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## Transparency Note

*This article was refined with the assistance of AI-based editorial tools. All perspectives, interpretations, and professional insights remain those of the author.*

## About the Author



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