Humanity at the Helm: GPM Focus 2026 Redefines AI as a Leadership Mandate[1]

Sebastian Wieschowski

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence has undoubtedly become the dominant hype topic in project management, promising to fundamentally redefine how teams operate. However, while the potential for transformation is vast, many project professionals find themselves lacking the time to integrate these technologies in a structured and meaningful way. Despite the widespread enthusiasm, several critical questions regarding the daily application of AI remain largely unresolved for many practitioners.

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To illustrate these challenges, project leaders often find themselves asking: What can AI truly achieve in today's project environment, and where are its practical risks and limitations? How can I choose the most suitable AI tools, such as ChatGPT or Microsoft 365 Copilot, to meet my specific requirements? Which new roles and responsibilities are emerging within project management as a result of AI integration?

In response to these uncertainties, the GPM German Project Management Association is introducing a new, hands-on working format called GPM Focus. Rather than a traditional congress or lecture series, this format provides a dedicated space for teams to move beyond the hype and develop practical, impact-oriented results. Participants will work directly with experts to test methods, clarify individual questions, and leave with immediately applicable tools and templates for their own project contexts.

The inaugural event took place on March 24th in Frankfurt. The central thesis of the day was clear: AI is no longer a peripheral IT tool but a fundamental leadership and design challenge that requires human "pilots" to maintain accountability while digital "co-pilots" handle operational responsibility.

AI-SUPPORTED RISK MANAGEMENT IN PROJECTS

Risk management has long been considered the "unloved child" of project management, yet it remains a critical factor for success. Led by Prof. Dr. Helge Frank Wild, this workshop explored how Large Language Models (LLMs) can transform this discipline by identifying, structuring, and evaluating risks more efficiently than manual methods. The session aimed to move participants past the "subjective haggling" often found in risk assessments toward a more objective, data-driven approach.

Participants engaged with synthetic project data to test the limits of simple chat interactions. By applying structured methods and specific tools, they learned how to track risks dynamically as project information evolves, rather than relying on static, one-off matrices. The workshop highlighted a significant finding: the use of AI in risk management leads to disproportionately higher user satisfaction, as it automates the most tedious aspects of the process.

The session concluded with a look at advanced methodologies and a specialized beta tool provided to attendees. The primary takeaway was that while AI provides powerful analytical support, the "human in the loop" remains essential to interpret complex scenarios and maintain final oversight. Attendees left with a clear roadmap for integrating LLMs into their own projects, turning a chore into a strategic advantage.

EFFECTIVE PROJECT COMMUNICATION WITH AI

Katrin Friedel opened her workshop with a stark reminder: projects rarely fail due to bad plans, but frequently due to communication that fails to arrive or resonate. Her core message was that effective communication is not a matter of talent, but of structure. The session focused on using AI to refine project-critical messages—ranging from status updates to management summaries—to ensure they are clear, authentic, and inclusive.

The workshop demonstrated AI's role as a "sparring partner" for perspective shifts, helping managers tailor information for diverse stakeholders. Participants practiced using AI to filter "detail deserts"—the overwhelming streams of data often produced in technical projects—into decision-ready facts. This structural approach helps leaders maintain control and trust, even when communicating under high pressure or during crises.

Finally, the session addressed the "emotional adjustment" AI can provide, helping managers stay objective and professional in stressful situations. Attendees developed a practical communication framework and a custom prompt library to streamline their daily interactions. The result was a shift in perception: AI is a powerful reflection tool that enhances a leader's ability to guide their team through clear, consistent messaging.

WHEN EMPLOYEES FALL OUT

Bernhard Konrad Schwab addressed one of the most significant yet neglected project risks: the sudden loss of expertise due to illness or turnover. He noted that the cost of losing a key expert can reach up to 200 times their annual salary when the loss of specialized "head knowledge" is factored in. The workshop explored how AI and digital project twins can serve as an insurance policy against such disruptions.

Through realistic scenarios, participants saw how AI can quickly reconstruct project knowledge and partially compensate for missing expertise. AI agents were shown acting as "digital sparring partners," guiding junior staff through complex tasks and ensuring quality standards are maintained even in the absence of senior mentors. This approach moves knowledge management from a passive archive to an active, resilient system.

The workshop provided concrete guidelines and tools to buffer expertise loss and strengthen team resilience. Schwab emphasized that by using AI for continuous audits and resource forecasting, managers can provide the board with data-driven predictions rather than mere gut feelings. The session helped "demystify" AI, presenting it as a practical tool for maintaining operational continuity during crises.

EFFECTIVELY USING AI TOOLS & MICROSOFT 365 COPILOT

Tanja Förster, often called the "On-Board Tool Queen," focused on maximizing existing corporate resources like Microsoft 365 Copilot to avoid a "tool zoo". The goal was to achieve tangible relief in daily planning, steering, and documentation. Förster argued that the real power of AI lies in its integration into the existing workflows that teams already use every day.

Participants used a "canvas" to identify specific points in their project cycles where AI could automate routine burdens. By building automated "toolflows," they practiced delegating administrative tasks—such as meeting transcriptions and email sorting—to their digital assistants. This automation is designed to reclaim time for human interaction, allowing project leaders to focus on leading people rather than chasing data.

The session concluded with the development of an "application-ready toolset" tailored to each participant's project context. Förster emphasized that the challenge is often not the technology itself, but the "outer perception" and fear associated with it. Attendees left with a clearer understanding of what AI can realistically achieve and a process to implement it starting the very next day.

PM AI DESIGN SPRINT

Torsten J. Koerting and Anja Holz led a high-energy "Design Sprint" to systematically anchor AI across the entire project lifecycle. This format allowed participants to move rapidly from identifying technological possibilities to validating specific use cases. The sprint focused on the "how"—the concrete application of AI within the unique constraints of each participant's organization.

The groups worked through various project phases—from conception and requirements analysis to monitoring and closing—identifying where AI offers the highest value. For example, "nerds" might explore using AI for test case derivation from business requirements, while others focus on optimizing steering board communications. The workshop emphasized a pragmatic approach, considering factors like existing licenses and organizational maturity.

The result of the session was an individual AI deployment plan featuring defined use cases for each project phase. Beyond simple email drafting, the sprint enabled participants to see AI as a way to solve deep-seated procedural problems and satisfy strategic needs. The framework provided a blueprint that can be scaled across an entire PM portfolio or organization.

GOVERNANCE & TRUST IN PRACTICE

Michael Schmid and Carsten Wittmann tackled the critical intersection of ethics, data protection, and compliance. They noted that projects today fail more often due to a loss of trust than due to technological failure. Their workshop was designed to show how AI can be used efficiently and responsibly by establishing clear "guardrails" that scale confidence rather than uncertainty.

Instead of viewing compliance as a "brake," the facilitators presented it as a design tool that provides the necessary structure for innovation. Participants developed practical guidelines (Do’s and Don’ts) for sensitive scenarios such as meeting transcripts and data analysis. A key principle emphasized was "Human in the Loop"—ensuring that while AI handles the work, a human remains legally and ethically responsible for the outcome.

The workshop's output was a "Responsibility Framework" directly applicable to any team. By moving away from diffuse fears toward actionable checklists, participants gained the ability to integrate AI into their project management methods safely. The session successfully reframed compliance as an "enabler" that allows teams to act with courage and clarity in a complex digital environment.

LEADERSHIP IN THE AI AGE

Marc Widmann explored how AI is fundamentally reshaping the role of the project leader through the concept of Hybrid Leadership. He described the transition of AI from a productivity tool to an active "team member" that can pre-decide and escalate issues. The workshop centered on the vital distinction between Accountability (which stays with the human) and Responsibility (which can be delegated to AI).

Using the Future Leadership Canvas, participants mapped out the skills needed to manage a hybrid team of humans and digital agents. A provocative "Ethics Check" revealed that different AI models can react entirely differently to the same moral dilemma, such as whether to downplay a project issue to a client. This reinforced Widmann's point that managing these models is a core leadership task, not just a technical one.

The session concluded with a live demonstration of AI agents managing complex workflows, proving that this is a current reality rather than a future scenario. Attendees left with a new perspective on delegation and trust, realizing that as AI gains more autonomy, the leader’s role in defining the "flight route" becomes more critical than ever.

The day’s collective "aha moments" confirmed that while AI offers exponential efficiency, the human project manager remains the "Pilot" of the project—responsible for culture, ethics, and strategic direction. As GPM President Prof. Dr. Peter Thuy summarized, the event achieved its goal of turning professional insights into a concrete plan for action, ensuring attendees returned to their projects not just with ideas, but with the tools to implement them immediately.

About the Author

Sebastian Wieschowski

Nuremberg, Germany

Sebastian Wieschowski is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where he focuses on strengthening the visibility and public relevance of project management through editorial formats such as storytelling.

Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de.