

Escaping the Major Projects Echo Chamber

Highlights

Highlights from the Major Projects
Association 2022 Annual Conference held
on 23rd-24th January 2023 (*postponed from
September 2022 following the passing of Her
Majesty Queen Elizabeth II*)



**MAJOR PROJECTS
ASSOCIATION**

Background

This conference built on the findings of the **2021 Annual Conference**, which considered the past, present and future practice of initiating and delivering major projects and identified a number of practices that should be consigned to the past and others that should be brought back.

It is clear that the major projects delivery environment of today is unrecognisable from that of the past. It is also clear that a number of current practices no longer fit our current and future needs, such as:

- A hierarchical delivery model.
- An inherently linear project life cycle in a complex dynamic world.
- Return on investment/cost-benefit models that do not reflect how we get value from systems.
- An assumption of infinite resources where growth is the goal/solution.

A change in approach is vital. But the conference heard that simply refining our approach incrementally based on our past successes or failures risks solving past problems rather than tackling those of today and tomorrow. To free ourselves from the shackles of past paradigms we need to escape the major projects echo chamber.

'How do we make sure that we're getting the right inputs into major projects? It will involve all of us in this room and way beyond to make sure that we are rolling up our sleeves and bringing many voices into those discussions to act with urgency, and with speed.'

Emma Howard Boyd CBE, Chair, Major Projects Association

Understanding the echo chamber

There are many definitions to describe an echo chamber, explained Professor Harvey Maylor of Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. The question for major project professionals is to recognise that they exist and understand how they can impact decisions.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes an echo chamber as 'an environment in which somebody encounters only opinions and beliefs similar to their own and does not have to consider alternatives'.

The premise is that echo chambers are undesirable, as they lead to wide acceptance of extreme views, stifle innovation and hinder new thinking. However, there is also a view that if properly managed, group discussions – whether

deliberately or accidentally formed – can deliver beneficial effects, for example think tanks, committees or consultation working groups.

Major projects can take steps to avoid creating and sustaining echo chambers – and the poor outcomes from them – by taking a number of actions:

- Embrace systems thinking and diverse views that use analysis, and make change at multiple levels.
- Ensure there are incentives for change, and a strong narrative and compelling reasons to innovate.
- Invest in people and leadership – substitute the 'superhero leader' with the 'complete team'.

At the heart of these actions across major projects is an integrator who is able to introduce doubt to the assertions made by the project team with a steady stream of contrary viewpoints.

For major projects, breaking out of echo chambers and cracking the addiction to confirmation bias is really tough. As is the step change – the so-called 'epistemic reboot' – required in questioning how we know what we know.

'Echo chambers are deliberate, and they work by the manipulation of trust. Simply providing evidence against the beliefs held in the chamber, will not break the chamber. Evidential pre-emption will prevent a shift in thinking unless we open up to challenges and want to hear and to listen. And that's one massive leadership challenge.'

Professor Harvey Maylor, Senior Fellow in Management Practice, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

Major projects - not fit for purpose or led with purpose?

Major projects are exciting, and major projects professionals like to focus on the outcomes after completion and the benefits that they will bring through greater connectivity or faster communications. Everyone involved in the project is desperate to get just beyond the point at which it could be stopped.

The result is that projects become unstoppable, with a rush to build, an escalation of commitment leading to the conclusion that the only way forward is 'to keep digging'. Good leadership is the key to breaking out of this echo chamber – introducing curiosity and a diverse mindset to create an environment where people feel able to speak up.

'There's this escalating commitment that starts to build within the project team, people feeling "it's too big to fail", and we have to continue going.'

Andrea Powell, Partner, EY

Government often creates its own echo chambers that promote and sustain the view that to lead a project, or be in charge of a programme, you have to go on a certain set of courses or have had specific training to gain the skills and experience required.

While this can be limiting, it can also be positive in terms of building talent and promoting ability. The key is to try to keep in the good part of the echo chamber – to build out the positive elements by working together to reinforce training, experience and the sharing of best practice.

Creating that positive group culture is key – in particular, building psychological safety across teams to ensure that individuals feel comfortable that they can speak out and express views.

'Delivery in the private sectors and public sectors are undoubtedly different – but not as different as we have convinced ourselves of in our respective echo chambers. Being curious and keeping an open mind through better sharing of ideas, practice and lessons learnt all help with breaking through our biases.'

Karina Singh, Director of Function, Profession and Standards, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

Many major project leaders focus too often on what has gone well in the past, rather than what still has to be done in the future to secure success. Any dissent from this approach or suggestion that there may be trouble ahead is often seen as being rather 'glass half empty'.

While there may well be people on the project who sense there is a problem, a lack of diversity of perspective means that there is no challenge to the senior leadership's view that 'we've done it before so we can do it again'.

'We found people who knew their "Spidey senses" were tingling, often at more junior levels, but they couldn't find a question or killer fact or a killer piece of evidence to break through the wall. A huge problem was that there was a lack of curiosity.'

Lee-Anne Murray, Director, UK National Audit Office

Large programmes can actually create echo chambers within echo chambers, where a delivery community, convinced that it can achieve certain targets, is overlaid by a customer or a committee convinced that everything the delivery team says is untrue and so should be treated sceptically.

The result can lead to gross generalisations on both sides, so as these different echo chambers interact, the differences become particularly fixed and sharp, and extremely difficult to break down.

'Everyone can find the data that fits their point of view but so often what's missing is the narrative that provides a genuine balanced assessment of what's really going on.'

Richard Corderoy, Managing Director, The Oakland Group

Getting the basics right

A clear focus on outcomes and clarity about what you want to achieve to enable open and early discussion with stakeholders is the critical first step towards achieving major project success, according to Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

Highlighting his eight-point plan for project success, he said that breaking out of the cycle of project failure would mean doing things differently, bringing new parties from across the asset delivery life cycle to the table early to have 'a robust conversation about what is really possible'.

'75% of major projects fail. So what do you need to do to be in the 25% that don't? It's a different lens. When you look at the 25% that don't fail, they do basic things really well. And they also have a passion for knowing who is the best and they want to be better than that.'

Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

Building on experience gained over years spent delivering major projects in the private sector for Shell, he highlighted that public sector clients too often remained wedded to understanding what projects will cost and how long delivery will take, way before the scope of the projects was agreed.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority's **Transforming Infrastructure Performance: Roadmap to 2030** was, he said, central to ensuring that the public project delivery community embraced new thinking. Through use of digital tools and data in particular, this would help to break out of the old echo chamber that perpetuated poor project delivery performance.

He also pointed to the work being carried out across government to build capability, and to help both civil servants and ministers change their culture and mindset to ask critical questions and to really understand what a good outcome for society looks like.

'Officials want to do a good job for citizens and that doesn't always match up with politicians' wish for change to be implemented at a rapid pace. So part of the challenge is really understanding how you can show politicians that value often comes from taking the time to get it right.'

Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure and Projects Authority

Principles for project success

- **Principle 1: Focus on outcomes.** Be clear about the outcomes to be achieved before starting the project, and who commissioned them.
- **Principle 2: Plan realistically.** Invest time in thorough up-front planning to ensure the project is deliverable and affordable.
- **Principle 3: Prioritise people and behaviour.** Plan ahead for the diversity of people, skills and experience needed to deliver the project.
- **Principle 4: Tell it like it is.** Foster an open project culture, where people feel safe to challenge and raise risks and issues.
- **Principle 5: Control scope.** Agree project scope from the start and stick to it at each stage.
- **Principle 6: Manage complexity and risk.** Reduce complexity and risk where possible; where not, plan for them and manage them.
- **Principle 7: Be an intelligent client.** Build a clear understanding of user needs and design the project accordingly.
- **Principle 8: Learn from experience.** Seek out relevant experience from other projects and use it in planning and delivering the project.

Breaking the paradigm – NASA vs SpaceX

Serendipitous curiosity is, according to Stephen Carver, Senior Lecturer in Project & Programme Management, Cranfield University, the key to breaking out of echo chambers and driving forward towards new ideas and innovation. Born from the unplanned desire to do something, it sits at the heart of US space agency NASA's rise and fall, and the subsequent success of Elon Musk's SpaceX organisation.

The average age of the NASA team in 1964 was 27. By July 1969 this team of young problem solvers had achieved the goal set by US President Kennedy and landed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the Moon through passion, enthusiasm and a single-minded pursuit of the aim. However, this moment of success signalled the start of NASA's demise, as the average age increased, enthusiasm waned, and funding scrutiny intensified.

The free-thinking Apollo programme era gave way to the echo chamber environment of the Shuttle programme's 'faster cheaper better' era. Reports into the 1986 Challenger and 2001 Columbia disasters both demonstrated graphically how dissenting voices were not heard in an organisation hamstrung by bureaucracy and fear.

NASA's decline contrasts with the rise of Elon Musk's SpaceX business which, in under a decade, has taken over from the US space industry establishment to become the supplier of choice for cargo and now staffed space flight. SpaceX's young, fun, chaotic, free-thinking 'failure is an option' approach, and a culture where all views are good views, have reimaged space flight with autonomous reusable vehicles, cars in space, funky space suits and the mantra to 'go fast, break things and fix them'.

'Is chaos bad? Well, actually, a little chaos breeds innovation and life whilst strict order can lead to habit and lethargy. Sometimes you have to let go of control to get control.'

Stephen Carver, Senior Lecturer in Project & Programme Management, Cranfield University

New paradigms in action

The **Project 13 initiative** came about as a recognition that industry needed a new delivery model. It is a recognition of the need to tackle the industry's poor productivity, move away from unsustainable contracting business models that leave little opportunity for innovation or investment in new skills, and to break through the barriers to digitalisation.

The aim is to move from transactions to enterprises, and to focus all the parties involved in major projects around better outcomes. The next generation of delivery strategies will be derived by consolidating cross-sector learning, where value for money and outcomes are key enablers of that integrated, collaborative delivery.

'From the outset of Project 13 there has been a recognition that this is a journey. It is not an overnight change. Given so much of it is about behavioural change and a different attitude to relationships, about developing business-to-business relationships, it can only be a journey.'

Dale Evans, Director, Avista Strategy

The Programme and Project Partners (PPP) procurement model has created new long-term partnerships between Sellafield Ltd and four separate partners – Kellogg Brown and Root Ltd (KBR), Jacobs, Morgan Sindall Infrastructure and Doosan Babcock – to deliver major projects across the vast nuclear site over the next 20 years.

The approach features 20-year individual lot contracts for the partners with a reimbursable model for actual costs (including overhead) and a nominal level of sustainable profit through delivery. Additionally, there is an aligned agreement that binds the partnership which motivates and incentivises collaboration and long-term decision-making, creating an alignment of values and culture. This agreement includes a fund that provides the bulk of profits upon successful project delivery, giving all partners a very large amount of skin in the game to encourage innovation and new ways to tackle the complex programme of work across the Sellafield portfolio.

The result is already delivering huge gains in terms of productivity, costs avoided and realising additional financial benefits. However, it has required big cultural change across the teams with a new approach to collaboration and openness to new ideas.

'At Sellafield our historic approach to complex project delivery had fallen short. We were driven by short-term thinking, and we weren't sufficiently learning or collaborating across projects. And when you've proven that the traditional way, the way you've always done it doesn't work for you anymore you have to look at new ways of doing things.'

Lauralee Doughty, Client Head of Culture and Sustainability, Sellafield Ltd

Where is the biggest echo? Where do we need new voices?

- Leadership should be facilitating and not directing.
- More new voices to determine the right policies at the start of project planning.
- The younger voices and the voices of critics must be heard.

'We can't keep sharing best practice to solve the same problem time and time again. We need to drive continuous improvement through having a new problem to solve each time. It has to be about sharing experiences and knowledge that will enable us to do that, otherwise we will stay in the echo chamber.'

Richard Wood, Director, Turner & Townsend

A case study

The Palace of Westminster has been the home of democracy in England for 1000 years and now hosts debates and the democratic business for over 1400 Members of Parliament and the House of Lords. With over 1100 rooms and offices over five levels and 160 plant rooms in the basement, it is a sprawling hive of activity.

However, despite being a historic monument, a World Heritage Site and the fifth most recognisable building in the world, the Palace is in desperate need of repair. Decades of underinvestment in maintenance plus a lifetime of adaptation and retrofitted electrical and heating systems have left the building unfit for purpose.

The Restoration and Renewal Delivery Authority is charged with looking at four key areas to tackle, including removal of asbestos, restoring the building fabric, introducing more fire safety and protection, and re-engineering the building services.

The Delivery Authority is tasked with the major project to plan and deliver this vast programme and as it prepares options to present to Parliament, is acutely aware of the need to seek ideas from across the sector around key issues such as:

- Hierarchical organisation models.
- Linear delivery in a dynamic environment.
- Mismatch of investment models to complex cause-effect systems.
- Growth goals based on assumption of infinite resources.

‘There are plenty of lessons out there, whether it be for major programmes, other similar buildings or other parliamentary buildings. The question is whether we are going to be humble enough to learn all those lessons, inwardly digest them and use them – the answer has to be yes.’

Andy Haynes, Commercial Director, Restoration and Renewal Delivery Authority Ltd

Sustaining a series of honest conversations

The themes of the Association’s Landmark Objectives: Environmental Sustainability, Diversity and Capability, provided a thread that ran through much of the programme of this year’s conference and the projects that it referenced.

Breaking out of the echo chamber implies not simply giving voice to unheard stakeholders but also to previously muted themes, such as sustainability, which provide purpose, benefits and direction for the industry and the projects that we deliver.

‘...that ability to have refreshingly honest conversations around major projects, I think, is something that is really important for us all...The more that we’re working together, through organisations like the Major Projects Association, to have these honest conversations and reflect on how we need to change the way we work for the future to keep on delivering in the real world is something that is going to be vital to us all.’

Emma Howard Boyd CBE, Chair, Major Projects Association

Points for further discussion

- How can the major projects sector be encouraged to ‘borrow shamelessly’ from the successes of other sectors?
- In the rush to build, how do we encourage clients to ‘start slow to finish fast?’
- To drive innovation how can we encourage less push and more pull for new ideas?
- How can the major projects sector bring new younger voices to the delivery discussion?
- Can the superhero leader ever be ignored in the major projects setting?
- Can a ‘failure is an option’ culture ever be acceptable in major projects?

Chair

Emma Howard Boyd CBE, Chair, Major Projects Association

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Andy Haynes, Commercial Director, Restoration and Renewal Delivery Authority Ltd
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Lee-Anne Murray, Director, UK National Audit Office
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Karina Singh, Director of Function, Profession and Standards, Infrastructure and Projects Authority
Nick Smallwood, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure and Projects Authority
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Participating organisations

Advance Consultancy Ltd	Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
AECOM	PA Consulting
Amey plc	Projecting Success Ltd
Anglian Water	PwC
Arcadis LLP	QinetiQ
Arup	ResoLex
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