

UK SMEs struggle with Project Management skills gap

June 3, 2024



A new survey by the Association for Project Management (APM) reveals a concerning skills gap in project management within UK small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The survey, polling over 500 project professionals working for SMEs across various sectors, found that 83% believe their employers need to improve project management skills across the workforce. This skills gap is a significant hurdle for SMEs, impacting their overall project growth.

While inadequate technology infrastructure was the most selected challenge (35%), a lack of skilled project professionals came in a close second (33%). Interestingly, 31% of respondents also highlighted a lack of investment in training and development, suggesting a potential disconnect between recognising the skills gap and actively addressing it.

Soft Skills Top the List

The survey also delves into the most crucial skills for project success. Soft skills reign supreme, with team management leadership, communication/interpersonal skills, and adaptability/flexibility each selected by 14-17% of respondents.

The survey outlines several approaches to bridge the project management skills gap in SMEs. Training and upskilling existing employees (46%) emerged as the most popular choice, followed by broader recruitment across different professions (45%) and increased awareness of project management as a career path (45%). Apprenticeships were also seen as a valuable tool (36%).

Despite the skills gap, the survey reveals some positive aspects. 70% of respondents believe their employers value project management training and development, while 88% felt their SMEs have sufficient time and resources available for such initiatives.

Professor Adam Boddison OBE, Chief Executive of APM, said: “SMEs are the engine of UK growth with over 5.7 million driving innovation and productivity. But at the forefront of delivering growth and change for our economy and society are project professionals who need the right skills to provide solutions for tough challenges in real time.

“Our survey sheds vital light on the critical need for SMEs to prioritise investment in project management. While it is encouraging that most employers appear to realise the unique value of project professionals, it is concerning that 83% of respondents believe their SME needs to improve project skills at such a critical time with net zero, technology and global events disrupting business activity.

“As SMEs navigate an increasingly volatile business landscape, the need to manage projects effectively becomes ever more important for sustained growth and success. By taking action now to invest in project skills, SMEs can streamline their operations effectively and help ensure projects succeed.

“It can be a tricky balance for SMEs when funding is needed in other areas, but having skilled project professionals at the heart of your organisation increases efficiencies and mitigates losses. As our latest Golden Thread report demonstrates, demand for projects to be designed, managed and directed by skilled project managers has now become a fundamental need for organisations, whatever the size. As the chartered body for the profession, APM is committed to helping SME leaders across all sectors to overcome any barriers they may face to bridge the skills gap with support, qualifications and resources.

The survey underscores the critical need for SMEs to prioritise project management skills development. By investing in this area, SMEs can enhance their project delivery capabilities, drive innovation, and ensure long-term success.