

Vlerick Study: Targeted action trumps blanket fixes in Project Management

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A new study by Vlerick Business School sheds light on how project managers can navigate unexpected challenges and project deviations more effectively. The research, led by Professor Mario Vanhoucke, emphasises the importance of focused action over generic solutions.

The study highlights the ever-present reality of project disruptions across industries. Time and resource constraints, coupled with inevitable deviations from initial plans, create a complex environment for project managers. Professor Vanhoucke, alongside colleagues from Ghent University, investigated the most effective responses to these deviations.

The research reveals that implementing a limited set of carefully chosen corrective actions surpasses the effectiveness of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to get projects back on track. Focusing on a smaller number of critical activities ultimately proves a more efficient strategy, saving valuable time and resources.

Traditionally, project managers have relied on simulation-based models to prioritise corrective actions. These models capture project complexities and suggest potential areas for intervention. However, the study demonstrates that a problem-solving or analytical approach delivers superior results. This method offers a more accurate and reliable way to rank interventions, particularly compared to simulation-based solutions.

“All managers have been there – when an important project is over time or budget. Perhaps disruptions along your supply chain means the materials you needed are not where they need to be, or your costs have gone up due to no fault of your own,” says Professor Mario Vanhoucke.

“Our research shows that when things happen that are not part of the plan, project managers are better off finding precise actions to improve the situation, rather than thinking of blanket policies to try and get the project back on the original timeline.”

The research involved running simulations on various project plans to analyse how factors like task dependencies, resource allocation, and project structure impact outcomes. By gaining a deeper understanding of project uncertainties, businesses can make more informed decisions throughout the planning and execution phases. This translates to effective resource allocation, realistic deadlines, and robust contingency plans that mitigate potential risks.

The Vlerick Business School study empowers project managers with valuable insights for navigating project deviations. By prioritising focused actions and employing analytical methods, project leaders can overcome challenges and ensure successful project completion.