

Mind the Mobilisation Gap: Fixing the Weak Link in Major Projects

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In the world of major projects, the pressure to deliver results quickly can be overwhelming, with stakeholders, politicians, and the public expecting visible progress from the moment a project is announced.

However, this race to the build phase of a project often leads to poorly planned and poorly executed mobilisation — a crucial stage that brings together the key resources needed to begin delivering the project and to start on-site.

This so called “Mobilisation Gap,” can result in delays, cost overruns, inefficiencies and low team morale, leading to serious consequences for the long term success of the project.

In order to bridge this gap, [Lisa Martello](#) and [Tony Llewellyn](#) from [ResoLex](#) have written a Perspectives Paper titled “Mind the Mobilisation Gap: Why we’re still getting mobilisation wrong on major projects, and how we can do better. You can find the full Perspectives Paper: <https://resoalex.com/resources/>

“At ResoLex, we operate at the intersection between theory and best practice to truly optimise the way we deliver projects. In September 2023, ResoLex facilitated a workshop with the Major Projects Association to identify the common issues affecting mobilisation. This article, and the more detailed Perspectives Paper, include insights from the original workshop, subsequent working groups, and experience and perspectives from the ResoLex team”

Edward Moore, CEO, ResoLex

Where are we going wrong?



Project Mobilisation - Where are we going wrong?

Uniqueness Bias

One of the most common mistakes in project mobilisation is treating every project as completely unique. While it is true that every project has its own characteristics and complexities, the core principles of good mobilisation remain the same. Yet, instead of consulting and learning from past projects, teams often start from scratch, ignoring or discounting valuable lessons that would have avoided a wasteful cycle of trial and error.

Lack of Industry Standards

Despite the many guidelines available for the project management profession, there remains a noticeable lack of industry standards focused specifically on mobilisation. Many organisations and leaders struggle with the heavy (often overwhelming) mobilisation workload – recruiting, onboarding, and aligning teams, setting up systems, and integrating contractors – and without clear processes and good leadership, the project can begin in a state of disarray, leading to inefficiencies from day one that are hard to recover. It is clear from the numerous blogs, thought pieces and social media posts that there is an appetite for more rigorous and defined professional standards and guidance when it comes to project mobilisation, but at the moment, less formal, more social content is leading the way.

Political and Stakeholder Pressure

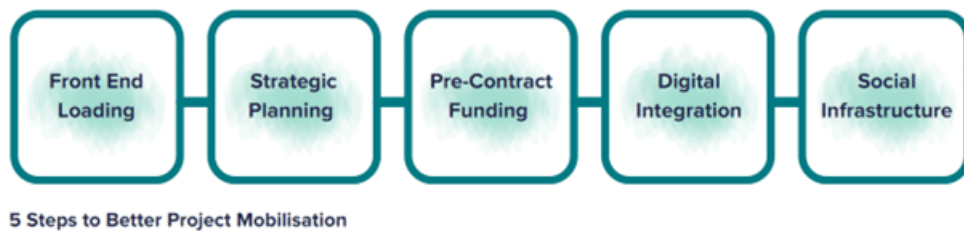
Major projects, particularly those with government funding, are under intense scrutiny, with politicians and stakeholders demanding quick, visible progress to justify funding and maintain public support. Though of earnest origin, this pressure creates an urgency within major projects to demonstrate tangible and visible progress, pushing leaders and teams to start some form of physical activity that shows the works are underway before they're ready. Seeing physical construction works begin can create a false sense of progress and security for project participants (internal and external), but can buy the team short-lived relief from the scrutiny and pressure from senior stakeholders.

The “Hero Leader”

In addition to the premature action catalysed by political pressure, it is important to note the personal and organisational biases at play here. *‘The delivery stage is for many, more tangible, measurable, and gratifying than the paperwork-heavy stages of the project life cycle.’* (Martello, 2023), and many/most organisations are guilty of hiring delivery-centric leaders who they believe can lead the team expertly

through any and all stages of the project life cycle, despite their experience and CV only really covering one or two. Complex projects require different leadership skills at different stages – a sort of leadership relay race through the project life cycle that sees us bring in the right skills for the right stage, and incentivise the safe and efficient handover rather than the end result.

How can we do better?



Front-end loading: plan first, build later

Front-end loading is all about setting aside time at the start of a project for thinking through the project's implications and needs, and dedicating resources and effort to in depth planning before moving into execution. This involves:

- Clearly defining project goals and expected outcomes.
- Establishing governance structures and decision-making processes.
- Identifying potential risks and creating mitigation strategies.
- Ensuring alignment between stakeholders and delivery teams.
- Leadership and team profiling and competency development.

This slow thinking at the outset might feel frustrating to some, but time and effort spent at the front end will speed up project execution in the long run, by reducing conflict, confusion and inefficiencies later on.

Strategic planning for complexity

Strategic planning must go beyond technical execution and include the identification of the sources of complexity that are likely to create uncertainty as the project progresses through the life cycle. Projects are both *complicated* and *complex* – the construction process is *complicated* in that whilst many interacting elements must be connected and sequenced, those with knowledge and experience broadly understand the mechanics. The *complexity* arises from the multiple sources of interaction between individuals and groups, with either a direct or indirect interest in the project. To ensure successful strategic planning, the following things need to be taken into account:

- Stakeholder identification, management and engagement.
- Cultural and behavioural success factors (and associated action plans) within the project team.
- Decision-making structures that enable agility while maintaining good governance.

- A shared vision, values and common purpose.

By identifying potential challenges early, teams can proactively address them rather than ‘fire-fighting’ later.

Pre-contract funding for mobilisation

One of the biggest barriers to effective mobilisation is the lack of access to funding / the inability to spend before contracts are finalised. Many project teams assemble resources and personnel but cannot begin meaningful work due to funding and resourcing restrictions. Allocating pre-contract funding for mobilisation activities ensures that planning, setup, and team formation occur seamlessly before the build phase begins.

Early attention to digital integration

Digital tools are essential for modern project management, yet they are often an afterthought in mobilisation which comes back to haunt project teams later. Early investment in digital strategy should include:

- Selecting and integrating project management software in consultation with partners and stakeholders.
- Ensuring compatibility and access with partners and stakeholders.
- Training teams on digital tools before mobilisation begins.

Digital technology offers project teams significant benefits in terms of planning, design, knowledge sharing, and timely and accurate record-keeping. A well-integrated digital approach streamlines communication, reduces errors, and enhances project efficiency.

Prioritising social infrastructure

Technical and commercial aspects of projects are often prioritised over social infrastructure — the people, culture, and behaviours that drive success. Deeply thinking about what a good project culture looks like, and working hard to establish and nurture it at the outset of a project helps to ensure collaboration, trust, and high performance. This can be achieved through:

- Selecting the right leaders and team members based on skills, competencies *and* behaviours.
- Creating a Project Charter that outlines shared values, objectives, and expectations.
- Conducting alignment workshops to build trust and collaboration.

In conclusion, effective mobilisation is the foundation for project success. By challenging outdated practices, slowing down our early thinking, and prioritising all types of ‘infrastructure’ (social, technical and commercial), major projects can avoid repeating the costly mistakes of the past.

Slowing down at the start enables faster, more efficient execution later, so let's bridge the gap with smarter, more strategic and more social mobilisation practices.

About the Author



Lisa Martello is a Director at strategic consultancy, Resolex which specialises in building social competency in major projects teams, and a member of Association for Project Management's (APM) Board of Trustees.

A project manager by trade, Lisa has over 15 years' experience leading major rail, aviation and construction projects in the UK and Australia with a focus on *how* we do things, and *how* we treat people, not just *what* we achieve in the end.