

# PROJECT MANAGEMENT TURNOVER: CAUSES, TIMING, AND IMPACTS ON PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

Project management turnover, the departure of key project managers, is a pervasive issue with significant implications for project performance and organizational success. This research explores the multifaceted dimensions of project management turnover, focusing on its causes, timing, and impacts. A comprehensive review of literature reveals critical drivers, including organizational factors, project characteristics, and individual motivations, while emphasizing the pivotal role of turnover timing in project success. The study finds that both early and late turnover events disrupt knowledge continuity, delay deliverables, and compromise quality. Recommendations include proactive succession planning, robust knowledge transfer mechanisms, and fostering a supportive organizational culture to mitigate the adverse effects of turnover. By addressing these challenges, organizations can ensure smoother leadership transitions, sustain team morale, and enhance project outcomes.

## Keywords

Project management turnover, project performance, succession planning, knowledge transfer, organizational culture, lifecycle management.

## JEL Classification

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## Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Significance

Project management turnover is emerging as one of the most pressing challenges in industries where projects are the primary means of achieving organizational objectives. Modern industries—ranging from aerospace and construction to healthcare and IT—rely heavily on projects to drive innovation, deliver products and services, and meet competitive demands. In these contexts, the project manager plays a pivotal role, serving as the linchpin between strategic goals and operational execution. Their responsibilities are multifaceted and encompass critical domains, including: 1. Team Leadership: Project managers must motivate, direct, and resolve conflicts among team members, ensuring alignment with project objectives. 2. Stakeholder Engagement: Effective communication with internal and external stakeholders is essential for maintaining support and managing expectations. 3. Resource Coordination: Allocating and optimizing financial, human, and technical resources is a core competency of project managers.

Turnover among these crucial roles can severely disrupt project workflows, leading to cascading challenges such as delays, cost overruns, and deteriorating team morale. In high-stakes industries, such disruptions not only jeopardize individual project success but also erode an organization's strategic advantage and market reputation [32]. For instance, a delayed product launch in the technology sector due to managerial turnover could result in lost market share and revenue opportunities, while in construction, turnover might lead to safety compliance issues and legal liabilities [1,2]. Moreover, project manager turnover amplifies risks related to knowledge loss, particularly in complex projects where technical details and institutional context are critical. Successor managers often face steep learning curves, requiring time to acclimate to project-specific nuances. This transition period is frequently accompanied by productivity losses and inefficiencies, further compounding the negative impacts [33].

### 1.2 Research Problem

Despite the recognized importance of project managers in ensuring project success, academic research on project management turnover remains fragmented [35]. Existing studies predominantly focus on general employee turnover, often neglecting the unique challenges posed by the project-based nature of managerial roles. While broader turnover theories provide valuable insights, they fail to account for critical nuances specific to project management contexts, such as lifecycle dependencies, role-specific stressors, and the temporary nature of project teams [34].

Key gaps in the literature include: 1. Root Causes: While studies highlight factors such as job dissatisfaction and organizational culture, there is insufficient analysis of how these drivers interact with project-specific challenges, such as tight deadlines and resource constraints [36]. 2. Timing: Turnover timing is particularly critical in projects, as the departure of a manager at different phases—initiation, execution, or closeout—can have vastly different implications. Current research does not adequately explore these lifecycle effects. 3. Consequences: Most studies emphasize financial and schedule impacts but overlook less tangible yet equally important consequences, such as team morale, stakeholder trust, and knowledge retention.

This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a holistic approach to understanding project management turnover. Specifically, it examines how organizational, project-specific, and individual factors drive turnover; evaluates the lifecycle timing of turnover events; and explores their multidimensional impacts on performance [37].

### 1.3 Research Questions

To provide a structured investigation, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the primary causes of project management turnover?

This question explores the interplay between organizational culture, project characteristics, and individual motivations in driving turnover among project managers.

2. How does the timing of turnover impact project performance across life cycle phases?

Understanding the implications of turnover at different stages of a project—such as the initiation phase versus the execution phase—can inform strategies for risk mitigation.

3. What strategies can mitigate the adverse effects of project management turnover?

This question focuses on identifying actionable solutions, such as succession planning, knowledge transfer mechanisms, and leadership development programs.

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to generate insights that extend beyond theoretical frameworks, offering practical guidance for industry practitioners.

### 1.3 Contribution

This research contributes to the academic and practical discourse on project management turnover in several key ways: **Theoretical Integration:** By synthesizing insights from organizational behavior, project management, and human resource literature, the study bridges disciplinary silos to present a comprehensive view of turnover dynamics [38]. **Lifecycle Perspective:** The research uniquely evaluates the timing of turnover events, highlighting how the impact of managerial transitions varies across the project life cycle [39]. For instance, turnover during the concept phase may disrupt goal setting, whereas turnover during execution can derail progress toward deliverables. **Actionable Recommendations:** Drawing on both academic insights and industry best practices, the study outlines strategies to minimize turnover, such as fostering a supportive work environment, implementing robust succession planning, and institutionalizing knowledge transfer processes [40]. **Industry Relevance:** By focusing on project-intensive sectors such as aerospace and construction, the findings are tailored to address real-world challenges, making them directly applicable for industry practitioners.

In essence, this research aims to provide organizations with the tools to proactively address project management turnover, ensuring smoother leadership transitions, sustained team cohesion, and improved project outcomes. By deepening our understanding of turnover dynamics, the study seeks to empower organizations to navigate this critical challenge more effectively [41].

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Causes of Project Management Turnover

Project management turnover stems from a complex interplay of factors, which can be broadly classified into three categories: organizational, project-specific, and individual drivers. Each dimension reflects distinct stressors that collectively shape turnover tendencies.

Organizational culture, policies, and practices play a pivotal role in influencing project management turnover. Dissatisfaction with inadequate pay structures, limited career progression opportunities, and weak leadership consistently emerge as critical drivers of turnover. A lack of work-life balance exacerbates dissatisfaction, particularly in industries where project schedules are demanding. Research highlights that organizations with strong leadership support and competitive benefits have lower turnover rates, as they create an environment of engagement and motivation [2,3]. High-performing organizations often adopt retention strategies such as: Career Development Programs: Structured opportunities for skill enhancement and vertical mobility [4]. Flexible Work Arrangements: Options like hybrid work models to improve work-life balance. Recognition Systems: Incentives to acknowledge achievements and build loyalty.

The nature of the project itself can significantly contribute to managerial burnout and eventual turnover. Projects with high complexity, ambiguity, or poorly defined scopes place considerable stress on project managers, leading to decreased job satisfaction. Fast-paced schedules and constrained budgets demand rapid decision-making and resource allocation, heightening stress levels [5]. Specific challenges include: Dynamic Requirements: Shifting project scopes often leave managers struggling to align team efforts. Stakeholder Pressures: Meeting expectations from diverse stakeholder groups, including clients and regulatory bodies. Resource Limitations: Managing large teams with limited technical and financial resources.

Failure to implement coping mechanisms, such as team-based decision-making or automated project tracking tools, intensifies these stressors.

Personal aspirations and life circumstances also heavily influence turnover. Many project managers leave roles due to misalignment between their career ambitions and the opportunities provided by their organization. Furthermore, familial responsibilities or mental fatigue may prompt individuals to seek less stressful or more flexible roles. Studies reveal that top-performing project managers—often those handling the most demanding projects—are disproportionately affected, leaving organizations vulnerable to the loss of their most valuable leaders [6].

Category	Key Drivers	Mitigating Strategies
Organizational	Pay dissatisfaction, poor leadership, work-life imbalance	Competitive benefits, career development
Project-Specific	Complexity, ambiguity, resource constraints	Decision-making tools, stakeholder alignment
Individual	Career aspirations, familial responsibilities, burnout	Flexible roles, workload management

**Table 1: Key Drivers of Project Management Turnover**

The timing of turnover within a project’s life cycle can drastically affect its outcomes. Each phase of the project life cycle—concept, planning, execution, and closeout—has unique leadership requirements. Turnover at different stages introduces specific disruptions. Early Turnover (Concept and Planning Phases)- During the initial stages of a project, the foundation for success is laid through goal-setting, stakeholder engagement, and strategic resource planning. Turnover at this stage destabilizes project objectives, delays critical decision-making, and forces organizations to restart critical processes

[7]. Disrupted alignment of project goals with organizational strategy. Increased time required to onboard and familiarize new managers. The execution phase represents the most resource-intensive and operationally active part of the project life cycle. Here, the project manager's role expands to encompass team coordination, issue resolution, and stakeholder communication. Turnover at this stage significantly disrupts workflows, leading to missed deadlines, cost overruns, and diminished team morale [8]. Compromised progress on deliverables.

The closeout phase involves finalizing deliverables, ensuring compliance, and transferring ownership. Turnover at this stage can lead to incomplete documentation, loss of critical knowledge, and difficulties in project handover. Successor managers, lacking contextual understanding, may struggle to achieve smooth transitions [9]. Extended project timelines due to delayed approvals. Reduced client satisfaction from inadequate closure efforts.

## 2.2 Impacts on Project Performance

The consequences of project management turnover can manifest in both direct and indirect ways, often compounding to create systemic inefficiencies. These impacts include: Recruitment: Hiring a replacement incurs costs, including job postings, interviews, and selection processes. Training: Onboarding new managers requires time and resources for acclimatization and role-specific training. Turnover results in the loss of institutional memory and project-specific expertise. Successor managers face steep learning curves, which often lead to inefficiencies in decision-making and operational execution [10]. Team morale and motivation suffer as turnover disrupts established communication channels and leadership dynamics. Uncertainty among team members may lead to decreased productivity, further exacerbating delays and cost escalations.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

A mixed-method approach was adopted to gain a nuanced understanding of project management turnover. The research combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore both subjective experiences and objective patterns. Specifically: Literature Analysis: A systematic review of peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and case studies provided the theoretical foundation. Empirical Survey: Insights were gathered through a targeted survey of project managers, allowing for a detailed examination of turnover trends and their impacts. This dual approach ensures the robustness of findings by triangulating data from multiple sources [10,11].

### 3.2 Data Collection

Data collection involved: Survey Distribution Surveys were distributed to 150 project managers within a leading aerospace organization. Participants represented diverse functional areas, such as engineering, operations, and procurement, ensuring a comprehensive view of turnover dynamics. A total of 67 responses were received, yielding a 45% response rate. Questionnaire Design The survey included: Demographics: Capturing age, educational background, and tenure. Turnover Timing: Identifying phases in which turnover was most frequent. Causes of Turnover: Exploring organizational, project-specific, and personal factors. Performance Impacts: Measuring effects on cost, schedule, and

team dynamics. Ethical Considerations Participants provided informed consent, and data confidentiality was maintained through anonymized responses [12, 13].

The collected data were subjected to rigorous analysis: Quantitative Analysis: Responses from Likert-scale questions were aggregated and statistically analyzed to identify trends and correlations. Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended responses were coded and thematically analyzed to extract actionable insights.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Causes of Project Management Turnover

The survey revealed that project management turnover is driven by multiple interconnected factors. Respondents emphasized the following causes:

**Career Aspirations (56%)** Over half of the participants highlighted the lack of growth opportunities as a significant driver of turnover [14]. This aligns with broader organizational research, which emphasizes that employees, particularly high performers, are more likely to leave roles that lack upward mobility or opportunities for skill enhancement [16]. **Underlying Issues:** A lack of clear career pathways or defined promotion criteria often leaves project managers feeling stagnant. This is especially prevalent in rigid hierarchical structures where lateral mobility is limited. **Industry Implications [15]:** In competitive sectors like aerospace, retaining talent is critical due to the high cost and time involved in onboarding replacements [17]. Career stagnation becomes even more acute in long-duration projects where managers may not see immediate rewards for their efforts.

Dissatisfaction with ethics, team dynamics, and organizational values emerged as the most cited factor. An environment lacking trust, collaboration, and transparency erodes morale and motivation. **Challenges:** Toxic workplace cultures discourage engagement and foster negative stress, leading to higher turnover rates [18]. For project managers, who often navigate cross-functional teams, such environments amplify challenges [20]. **Best Practices:** Successful organizations actively invest in fostering inclusive and transparent cultures through leadership training and team-building initiatives. Ethical leadership, in particular, is vital in mitigating dissatisfaction [19].

Almost half of the respondents identified burnout as a critical reason for leaving their roles. High-stress environments, unrealistic deadlines, and poor work-life balance exacerbate mental and physical fatigue. **Contextual Drivers:** Industries with tight project timelines, such as IT or construction, often overburden managers, leaving little room for recovery. Continuous exposure to such conditions reduces resilience and increases the likelihood of turnover. **Mitigation:** Organizations can implement measures such as flexible schedules, wellness programs, and equitable workload distribution to combat burnout [21].

These findings suggest that addressing organizational culture and providing clear growth pathways can significantly reduce turnover rates. The survey identified key trends in turnover timing across project life cycle phases. The execution phase emerged as the most vulnerable, with 58% of turnover events occurring at this stage. The closeout phase followed, accounting for 53%. These trends underscore the importance of phase-specific strategies to mitigate disruptions. Execution Phase (58%) [22]

**Why It's Critical:** This phase involves the highest levels of resource utilization and activity. Managers are tasked with leading teams, resolving conflicts, and ensuring deliverables meet stakeholder expectations [23]. **Impacts of Turnover:** A change in leadership mid-phase disrupts workflows, forcing teams to adapt to new management styles. Successor managers often require time to familiarize themselves with ongoing tasks, leading to delays and cost escalations. Closeout Phase (53%) **Why It's**

Critical [25]: The closeout phase involves ensuring that deliverables meet quality standards, completing documentation, and transitioning ownership. Impacts of Turnover: Successor managers lack the historical context and nuanced understanding of final-stage tasks, leading to incomplete documentation or delayed project approvals [24].

Turnover during the concept phase is less common but equally disruptive, as it delays foundational activities like stakeholder alignment and goal setting. These findings emphasize the need for continuity strategies, particularly during resource-intensive phases like execution[26].

## 4.2 Impacts on Performance

Turnover effects were reported across multiple performance dimensions, with respondents highlighting communication breakdowns, cost overruns, and delays as primary challenges. Communication Breakdown (72%) Key Issue: Turnover disrupts established communication channels, forcing teams to recalibrate under new leadership. Stakeholder relationships also suffer, as successor managers may lack the rapport built by their predecessors. Impact: Reduced team cohesion and stakeholder dissatisfaction often result in diminished overall productivity. Cost Overruns (34%) Key Issue: The financial impact of turnover is twofold: direct costs related to recruitment and onboarding, and indirect costs due to inefficiencies and rework. Impact: Successor managers frequently face steep learning curves, delaying project milestones and increasing resource expenditure [27].

Delays (43%) Key Issue: The adjustment period for new managers creates lag in decision-making and task execution. Delays become particularly critical during time-sensitive phases, such as execution and closeout. Impact: Prolonged timelines increase project costs and jeopardize client satisfaction. Addressing these challenges requires both proactive planning and responsive strategies [28].

## 4.3 Mitigation Strategies

To address the adverse impacts of project management turnover, organizations must implement targeted strategies: Lifecycle-Specific Succession Planning Approach: Identify potential successors early and provide them with phase-specific training to ensure smooth transitions. Outcome: Ensures that knowledge is retained and transitions are less disruptive. Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms Approach: Develop standardized documentation processes and institutionalize handover procedures. Tools like centralized knowledge repositories can be used to retain institutional memory. Outcome: Minimizes the learning curve for successor managers, ensuring continuity [29].

Approach: Foster a culture of collaboration, transparency, and ethical leadership. Employee engagement programs can help build trust and reduce turnover tendencies. Outcome: Improves morale and encourages long-term retention [30].

To effectively combat project management turnover, organizations should adopt the following recommendations. Adopt Succession Frameworks Implement mentorship programs where senior project managers mentor emerging leaders. Use job-shadowing to expose potential successors to key aspects of project management [31]. Expand Support Systems Introduce wellness programs aimed at reducing stress and improving work-life balance. Allow flexible work arrangements to accommodate personal commitments. Optimize Recruitment Utilize psychometric assessments to evaluate candidates for resilience, adaptability, and leadership potential. Offer role-specific training programs to ensure a strong fit between candidate skills and job demands.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that project management turnover significantly affects performance metrics, including cost, schedule, and team morale. The findings highlight the importance of addressing root causes—such as career stagnation, organizational culture, and burnout—while leveraging proactive strategies like succession planning and knowledge transfer mechanisms. By implementing these measures, organizations can reduce disruptions, retain talent, and improve project outcomes. Future research should explore the following areas- Predictive Models: Develop tools to identify turnover risk factors early. Industry-Specific Analysis: Examine turnover dynamics in diverse sectors such as healthcare, IT, and education. Technological Solutions: Investigate how tools like AI-driven knowledge management systems can support smoother transitions and enhance retention.

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