



**The Benefits of  
Client-Side Project Management Support**

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*An evidence-based perspective on why independent, client-side project management is one of the most consequential decisions a client can make.*

2026



## **Executive Summary**

*Construction projects are complex, high-stakes undertakings. For organisations that do not engage in them routinely, the absence of dedicated, independent project management expertise on the client side is one of the most consistent and preventable causes of project failure.*

This paper draws on peer-reviewed academic research, professional body guidance and industry evidence to set out the case for appointing a client-side project management professional on building and construction projects. It examines why many client organisations lack the internal capability to manage construction projects effectively; what a client-side project manager does that no other member of the professional team provides; and what the evidence says about the impact on project outcomes.

The conclusion is straightforward: the appointment of a competent, independent project manager acting exclusively in the client's interest is not a cost to be weighed against the project budget. It is a risk mitigation measure, a quality assurance mechanism and, in most cases, a sound commercial decision.



## 1. The challenge facing clients

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Most organisations that commission building projects do not do so regularly. A manufacturer investing in a new production facility, a real estate fund developing a hotel, a charity building a publicly funded visitor centre: each of these clients enters the construction process without the accumulated institutional knowledge that repeat experience provides. Nonetheless, they bear full legal and financial responsibility for the project.

### The capability gap

Academic research has consistently identified client capability as a decisive variable in construction project outcomes. A landmark study presented at the CIB World Building Congress, and drawing on surveys with recent UK construction sector clients, established that project outcomes are directly influenced by clients, particularly with respect to their needs and responsibilities in the project life cycle. The same study identified a structural problem that many client organisations will recognise: when starting a construction project, many client organisations do not have a suitable person to appoint to a leadership and coordination role for the project.

This is not a failure of intent. It reflects the reality that project management is a specialist discipline, accumulated over years of practical experience across development appraisals, procurement, design management, risk management, contract administration, cost control and programme management. An organisation's finance director, operations manager or estates officer may be highly capable in their own domain; but that capability does not transfer automatically to the management of a construction project across all its phases, from feasibility through to funding, planning, procurement, construction, handover and operations, all operating under their own contractual, technical and commercial logic.

*“Project outcomes are directly influenced by construction clients, particularly with respect to their needs and responsibilities in the construction process.”*

Kometa, Olomolaiye & Harris, Journal of Construction Management, 1995

The consequences of this gap are well documented. Problems that arise in the construction phase, such as defects, cost overruns, programme delays and contractual disputes, very often have their root causes in decisions made, or not made, at the briefing, design or procurement stage. By the time the problem becomes visible on site, the cost of resolution has multiplied many times over.

### Why the design team alone is not sufficient

It is a common assumption that the architect, or the lead consultant, will manage the project on the client's behalf. In practice, this conflates two fundamentally different roles. The design team is appointed to design and specify the building; its primary obligation is to the quality of the design outcome. The client's project manager, by contrast, is appointed to protect the client's interests across the full spectrum of the project: programme, cost, procurement strategy, risk allocation, contractor performance and the alignment of the built outcome with the client's operational objectives.

These roles are not in conflict, but they are distinct. The research is clear on this point. Where the client has no independent representation, decisions are frequently made without adequate appreciation of the consequences for the client's interests. The client, unaware of the implications, accepts design proposals, procurement structures or contract terms that expose them to unnecessary risk they would have avoided had they been properly advised.



## 2. The role of client-side Project Management

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Client-side Project Management, variously described in research and professional practice as the client's Project Director, client's Project Manager, client's representative, the owner's representative or the Employer's Agent, occupies a specific and irreplaceable position in the project team. Unlike the contractor's project manager, whose objective is to deliver the works profitably, or the architect, whose primary commitment is to the integrity of the design, the client-side Project Management consultant has a single, undivided mandate: to achieve the best possible outcome for the client.

A 2024 study published in the journal 'Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management' examined the knowledge and skill competencies required for client-side project managers in public construction projects. It concluded that the most critical competencies for effective client-side project management are leadership, problem-solving, scope management, decision-making and teamwork; and, notably, that soft skills are more crucial than hard skills. This is significant: the value of a good client-side PM lies not only in technical knowledge, but in judgment, communication and the ability to navigate complex stakeholder dynamics.

### What the role encompasses

The scope of a client-side project manager's engagement typically spans the full project lifecycle, from feasibility and brief development through to post-completion review. At each stage, the focus is on protecting and advancing the client's interests in ways that the rest of the professional team, by virtue of their own roles and obligations, cannot.

In the early stages, this means translating the client's operational objectives into a clear, well-defined project brief; stress-testing assumptions about cost and programme; and establishing the governance structures that will underpin the project through delivery. During design development, it means ensuring that design decisions remain aligned with the approved brief and budget, and that the client understands the implications of the choices being presented to them. At procurement, it means structuring the market approach to achieve genuine value, selecting the right contract form and allocating risk appropriately.

During construction, the client-side PM monitors progress against programme and budget; manages variations and their contractual consequences; maintains the client's position in any dispute; and acts as the single, authoritative point of communication between the client and the delivery team. At handover, they ensure that the building the client receives is the building they commissioned, and that the client is equipped to manage it going forward.

*"The client's representative should behave as if they are the client, or part of the client organisation, even if they are in fact an external consultant. This may include taking an office within the client organisation, using the client's headed paper, business cards and so on. If they do not do this, there is a danger that they will be seen as just another consultant."*

Designing Buildings Wiki, drawing on University of Reading research on roles in construction projects

### Independence as a core principle

A recurring theme in the research is the importance of independence. The client-side project manager's value derives in large part from the fact that they have no financial interest in any particular design solution, procurement route or contractor appointment. They are not seeking repeat work from the contractor; they are not protecting a design fee; they are not managing a subcontractor relationship. Their sole interest is the client's outcome.

This independence enables a quality of advice that no other member of the professional team can provide. It also creates a dynamic of accountability: when the client-side PM raises a concern about programme, cost or quality, that concern is raised from a position of structural independence, without the conflicts of interest that can compromise the advice of others on the team.



### 3. Evidence: what the research shows

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The academic literature on client-side project management in the built environment, consistently points in the same direction: client engagement and capability are among the most significant determinants of project success.

#### Client competency and project performance

A 2024 study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Administrative Sciences* analysed the effects of client competencies, defined across personal, social and professional dimensions, on construction project performance. The study found that client competence has a direct and measurable impact on project outcomes, including time performance, cost control and quality. The implication is direct: clients who are better equipped to participate meaningfully in the project process achieve better results. The appointment of a client-side project manager is, in practical terms, the mechanism by which most client organisations access that competence.

This finding is consistent with earlier work by Kometa, Olomolaiye and Harris (1995), whose research into client responsibilities in the construction process established that clients are not passive recipients of a service, but active participants whose decisions and behaviours shape the project from the outset. The research identified a clear correlation between the quality of client engagement and the quality of project outcomes.

#### The cost of under-representation

Construction industry research and professional practice consistently identify the same patterns of failure when the client is not adequately represented during the design and construction process. The consequences range from strategic to operational: funding that is not stress-tested at feasibility; weak governance affecting authority and decision making; scope creep that goes unmanaged because there is no independent party holding the baseline; briefing failures that result in design unsuited to the client's operation; and a lack of coordination between the main contractor and the client's direct appointments, whether for furniture, fixtures and equipment (FFE), technology infrastructure or specialist fit-out, that leads to costly abortive work, programme delay and unresolved interface risk at handover. These are not peripheral inconveniences. They are the structural consequences of a client entering a complex process without independent and professional representation; consequences that, once embedded in the project, become progressively harder and more expensive to resolve.

The same research noted that problems in many projects only became apparent at the construction stage, by which time they were costly to rectify. This is the fundamental argument for early appointment: the cost of preventing a problem during design is a fraction of the cost of remedying it during construction, and a fraction again of the cost of living with it after handover.

*“Where a client lacks construction knowledge, project decisions can be made without adequate appreciation of the consequences. The role of the client representative is critical to the success of the project.”*

CIB World Building Congress; drawing on Kometa, Olomolaiye & Harris, 1995

#### Programme and cost overruns: the systemic evidence

Beyond individual project case studies, the systemic evidence on construction project performance is sobering. Research by Flyvbjerg and others into major construction projects has documented a consistent pattern of cost overrun and schedule delay across sectors and geographies. While the causes are multiple, a recurring factor is the absence of effective client-side oversight during the critical early phases of project definition, where scope creep, optimism bias and inadequate risk allowances become embedded in the project baseline.

The UK government's *Construction Playbook*, the most recent edition of which was published in 2022, addresses this directly. It establishes that ensuring risks are owned by the party best able to manage



and bear them is key to delivering value for money and successful outcomes – a principle that requires a client who is both informed and well-advised. An uninformed client, without independent representation, is poorly placed to make rational decisions about risk allocation; and the consequences, as the Playbook notes, tend to arrive as cost overruns and contractual disputes rather than as line items in a pre-construction risk register.

### The CIOB evidence base

The Chartered Institute of Building, the principal professional body for construction management in the UK, has consistently emphasised the importance of client capability. Its Construction Client Guide: Leading Projects in the Built Environment, now in its second edition published in 2025, draws on the accumulated experience of its members to set out best practice for construction clients across the project lifecycle. The guide reflects a consensus within the profession: that clients who invest in understanding the process, and who surround themselves with the right independent advice, consistently achieve better outcomes than those who do not.

The CIOB's research into construction quality, conducted through its Construction Quality Commission, found that more than three quarters of construction professionals believe the industry's current management of quality is inadequate. The report identified poor client briefing, inadequate supervision and the fragmentation of professional accountability as principal contributors. Each of these failings is directly addressed by the appointment of a competent client-side project manager.

## 4. The case for early appointment

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One of the most consistent findings in construction project management research is that the timing of professional appointments matters. The earlier a competent client-side project management consultant is engaged, the greater the value they are able to add; and conversely, the later they are brought in, the more constrained their ability to influence outcomes.

This is a function of the project lifecycle. Decisions made during feasibility and briefing (scope, budget, funding, governance, programme, procurement route, site constraints and risk allocation), establish the parameters within which every subsequent decision will be made. If those early decisions are poorly made, or made without adequate professional input, the consequences compound throughout the project. A procurement strategy that fails to account for contractor capacity; a programme that leaves insufficient time for the tender process or statutory approvals; a budget that does not include adequate contingency: each of these creates problems that become progressively harder and more expensive to resolve as the project advances.

Client-side project management, engaged at feasibility stage, provides the strategic framework within which the project is set up for success. It is the difference between a project that is structured to deliver from the outset, and one that is managed reactively to address problems as they arise rather than preventing them from arising in the first place.

*“Construction owners [Clients] should engage client-side project management early, ideally before design starts or contracts are signed. This gives the client-side project manager complete control over setup, planning and delivery decisions that affect time, cost and risk.”*

Construction project management industry guidance, 2025

The practical implications of this are significant. A client-side project manager who joins a project after the contractor has been appointed, the design has been substantially completed, or the contract terms have been agreed, is in a fundamentally weaker position than one who has been involved from the outset. They may be able to manage the situation; they are unlikely to be able to transform it. The question for any client considering a construction project is therefore not only whether to appoint a client-side project management consultant, but when.



## 5. Key Benefits: a summary

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Drawing the research and professional evidence together, the benefits of appointing a client-side project management consultant can be summarised across five principal dimensions.

Benefit	What it means in practice
<b>Single point of accountability</b>	The client has one trusted adviser whose sole mandate is to protect the client's interests across the full project lifecycle, from brief to handover.
<b>Independent advice</b>	Unlike the design team or the contractor, the client-side PM has no financial interest in any particular outcome. Their advice is structurally independent.
<b>Early risk identification</b>	Problems identified at design or procurement stage cost a fraction of what they cost to resolve during construction or after completion. Early engagement prevents compounding.
<b>Commercial protection</b>	Procurement strategy, contract form and risk allocation are structured to serve the client's interests; variations and claims are managed from a position of contractual knowledge.
<b>Programme and cost control</b>	The client receives regular, accurate reporting on project status, and a professional capable of taking corrective action before minor delays or cost pressures become material problems.

## 6. Conclusion

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The decision to appoint a client-side project management professional is, at its core, a decision about risk. Construction projects carry inherent risks: strategy risk, scope risk, funding risk, governance risk, design risk, procurement risk, contractor risk, programme risk and cost risk. Some of those risks can be transferred, through contracts, to the parties best placed to bear them. But the client's own risk, the risk of not achieving the project they set out to build, within the time and budget they planned, to the quality they expected, can only be managed effectively by someone who is working exclusively in the client's interest.

The research evidence reviewed in this paper supports a consistent conclusion: that the presence of a competent, independent client-side project management professional is one of the most reliable predictors of a successful construction project outcome. Conversely, its absence is associated with cost overruns, programme delays, quality failures and, in some cases, projects that do not serve the client's operational needs even when they are technically "complete".

For organisations embarking on a construction project, whether for the first time or as an occasional client without dedicated in-house expertise, the question is not whether professional project management support is worthwhile. The question is whether to build that capability internally, which is rarely cost-effective for a single project or programme, or to appoint it externally from a consultancy whose sole purpose is to act in the client's interest.

Client-side project management is not an overhead. It is the mechanism through which a construction client exercises meaningful control over one of the most significant investments their organisation will make.



## Sources and further reading

The following sources were drawn upon in the preparation of this paper.

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