

# UNLOCKING HIGH-PERFORMING POTENTIAL IN MAJOR PROJECTS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on **19th April 2018**

Abraham Lincoln once said, 'Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.' In other words, planning is two thirds of achieving outstanding work. But with regards to major projects, while the sector focuses strongly on funding, scheme design, construction process, logistics and so on, the piece of the puzzle that gets the least attention is the people who will be delivering the job; people are often an afterthought.

Yet according to evidence from recognised high-performing schemes, getting the right people in place at the right time, engaging them in the project's culture and objectives, and caring for them so they remain loyal are the roots of success. Government's £31bn National Productivity Investment Fund has been created to help drive up UK productivity rates as part of the new **Industrial Strategy**. This Major Projects Association seminar heard how the realisation of productivity potential of people at all levels of an organisation, from leadership, middle management, supply chain managers, workforce and fabricators, is central to unlocking high-performing potential.

*'All too often we approach culture change from the organisation's top-down point of view, with a focus mostly on the processes and not enough on the people factors. A better way to look at creating deep and sustainable change is with the perspective of the people, those staff and customers who will be living with the change.'*

Chris Abbott, I Can Fix It Programme Manager, Defra

Several key people-focused themes emerged.

## INVEST IN HUMAN RESOURCES

The London 2012 Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) is a worldwide exemplar of what high performance in high-pressure major projects looks like. **The legacy lessons** are being assessed by organisations around the world. According to Imperial College Business School, one key lesson is the need to 'invest in human resources and organisation development'. They believe that this is as significant as comprehensive project/programme management, being an intelligent client and full project funding.

*'Imperial College noted that investment in human resources and organisational development was not normal in most construction projects and the ODA's focus on that was remarkable and worthy of note.'*

Wendy Cartwright, HR Lead, Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme

## PUT PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

Major projects are finite; the people working on them know the project will come to an end, so they will either lose their job or return to home organisations. Those organisations seeking to deliver high performance need to attract good people and keep them motivated and reassured throughout the life cycle of the project, even as their role is coming to an end and they face losing their job. Equally important is collaborative working, backed by people-focused values such as health, safety and well-being that are driven down through the supply chain.

*'Collaboration is an outcome, not a thing of itself. And process won't change all the behaviours.'*

Rob Jones, Director, Organisational Development, Arup

As part of the drive towards systems thinking at the Environment Agency and Defra, the 'I Can Fix It' programme has been successful in changing corporate culture so that people understand and embrace the need for collaboration, and the impact their actions have on others, explained Chris Abbott, Defra's I Can Fix It Programme Manager. To unlock higher individual performance, the programme aims to make it easier for everyone to improve the way they work, take responsibility and feel supported by colleagues with more and different experience.

Central to that is the one-page Personal Development Map (PDM) for each individual as they start a new role. The map lists, among other things, each person's own skills and capabilities, those they need to develop -- including the standards that are particularly important for their job -- and, crucially, useful contacts so that each person starts out with the basics of a network of people to whom they can turn for advice. The PDM immediately engages each individual in their organisation and builds their confidence and understanding.

## FIND YOUR LEADERS

High-performing projects need leaders at every level, not just in senior management – but such people do not just appear fully formed, they have to be sought out and developed.

Rob Jones of Arup listed the different types of collaborative leader:

- The resilient – who can turn defeat into victory but do not need to win all the wars.
- The secure – who are happy to accept they do not know everything.
- The inspirational – who are brave, provide air cover so their teams can challenge the ‘we can’t change that, it’s in the contract’ mentality, recognise team performance but never blame anyone except themselves when things go wrong.
- The realistic – who can spin multiple plates, know when to disrupt and recognise that there is no one thing that gets a project to high performance.

## THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

The event also heard about three processes that can support high-performing projects and people – lean thinking, artificial intelligence and blockchain technology in HR management.

*‘The incremental innovation of Lean Principles forces a focus on the customer and a realisation that people are integral to the value stream in unlocking high-performing potential.’*

[Dr Rosie Hughes, Innovation & Continuous Improvement Lead, Strategic Highways, AECOM](#)

*‘Blockchain won’t print a house, it won’t chat to us online, but it could be the most impactful development for the future of society.’*

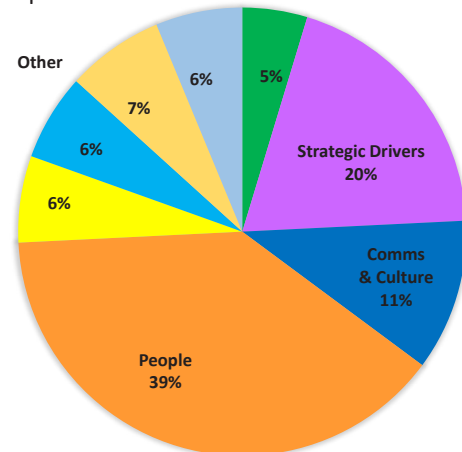
[Andy Spence, Strategic Workforce Advisor, Glass Bead Consulting](#)

## THE DELEGATE VIEW

The Major Projects Association surveyed the event delegates about how to unlock high performance. 82%

responded, and the results highlighted that people not processes or technology have to be the focus in any quest to unlock high-performing potential in major projects. In answer to the question, *How do you rate high performance in your organisations or projects?* the average score was 6.9 out of 10. Everyone was aware of the need for improvement.

Delegates believed the key drivers for that improvement were all personnel related.



In answer to the question, *What are the future challenges to high performance?* the overwhelming response was ‘talent’, with 30% of attendees highlighting that as an issue. Impact of technology was second, with 15%.

*‘If high-performing projects are all about people, how much time does your organisation get to spend on people and personnel issues? A rhetorical question, but I know it will be not enough.’*

[Wendy Cartwright, HR Lead, Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme](#)

## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How can major projects create more time for people issues?
- How much should major projects invest in HR?
- Does your project have an offboarding plan – is it clear to anyone outside of HR?

### Chair:

[Wendy Cartwright, HR Lead, Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme](#)

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