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IPMA
Berlin 2025 | 34th World Congress

EXPERIENCE DRIVES SUCCESS
IN SME PROJECTS

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60 YEARS | IPMA international project management association

Holger Barth

My project background

25 years in projects

- IT, automotive, digital printing, engineering
- NPD, NPI, procurement, organizational change
- Fast moving project environments
- Cross-corporate

- **Director R&D** (BDT Media Automation GmbH)
- Lecturer, Project Management (HFU Business School)
- MSc, Project Management (University of London)
- IPMA® Level A
- Dipl.-Ing. (FH) Mechanical Engineering (Hochschule Furtwangen)

Motivation

SME´s economic importance

- 99% of EU companies are SMEs and account for 64.4% of employment (European Commission, 2023)
- 35% of Germany’s GDP is generated through project-based work (GPM, 2023)
- **Projects often do not meet expectations**

Project success in SMEs is a neccesity!

Motivation

Observations from the last 2 decades SME practice

- Complex projects are often managed by “part-time PMs”
- More informal structures
- Arbitrary methodology selection
- PMs in SMEs have often more decision-making freedom
- Generally, project complexity tends to increase
- **Project success rates differ broadly**

Have we normalized failure in projects?

The same patterns repeat

- Which role does **project complexity** play ?
- Which role does **PM experience** play ?

Imagine...

Derived research objectives

1. Clarify how complexity & PM experience influence SME project success.
2. Assess whether and how PM experience influences the complexity-success relationship.
3. Examine how experienced PMs adopt PM-methodologies to optimize project success.

Methodology snapshot

Data Analysis

- **65 TECH PROJECTS** in a medium-sized German technology firm
- Project records from 2001-2024
- Variing durations, sizes, budgets, locations, multidisciplinary teams
- Project-types mainly NPD, NPI projects
- Internal/external project sponsors

Variables

- **PROJECT SUCCESS** (10 criteria), systematically assessed based on works by Pinto & Slevin, 1988; Baccarini, 1999; Shenhar et al., 2001.
  - PM success (3 criteria)
  - Beyond the Tripple Constraint (7 criteria)
- **PROJECT COMPLEXITY** (66 criteria), systematically assessed according to Maylor et al., 2013.
  - Structural complexity
  - Socio-political complexity
  - Emergent complexity
- **PM EXPERIENCE:** years as a PM
- **PM METHODOLOGY:** “more classic”, “hybrid”, “laissez-fair”

Mixed-Methods

- Correlation
- Regression
- ANOVA, post hoc testing, fisher´s exact test
- Interviews (limited to experienced PMs)

Limitations: As the study is based on a single tech SME, generalizability is limited. Future research should broaden the scope to include multiple firms and sectors.

Key quantitative findings

Project manager experience-success relationship

- Non-linear pattern, diminishing returns as experience increases.
- Supports learning curve theory (e. g. Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981) and heuristics mastery (Flyvbjerg, 2024).
- Very large success-variance in the first years, it significantly decreases as experience increases.

Large success-change-rate in the first 5 years

Key quantitative findings

Isolated Impact of complexity and experience on project success

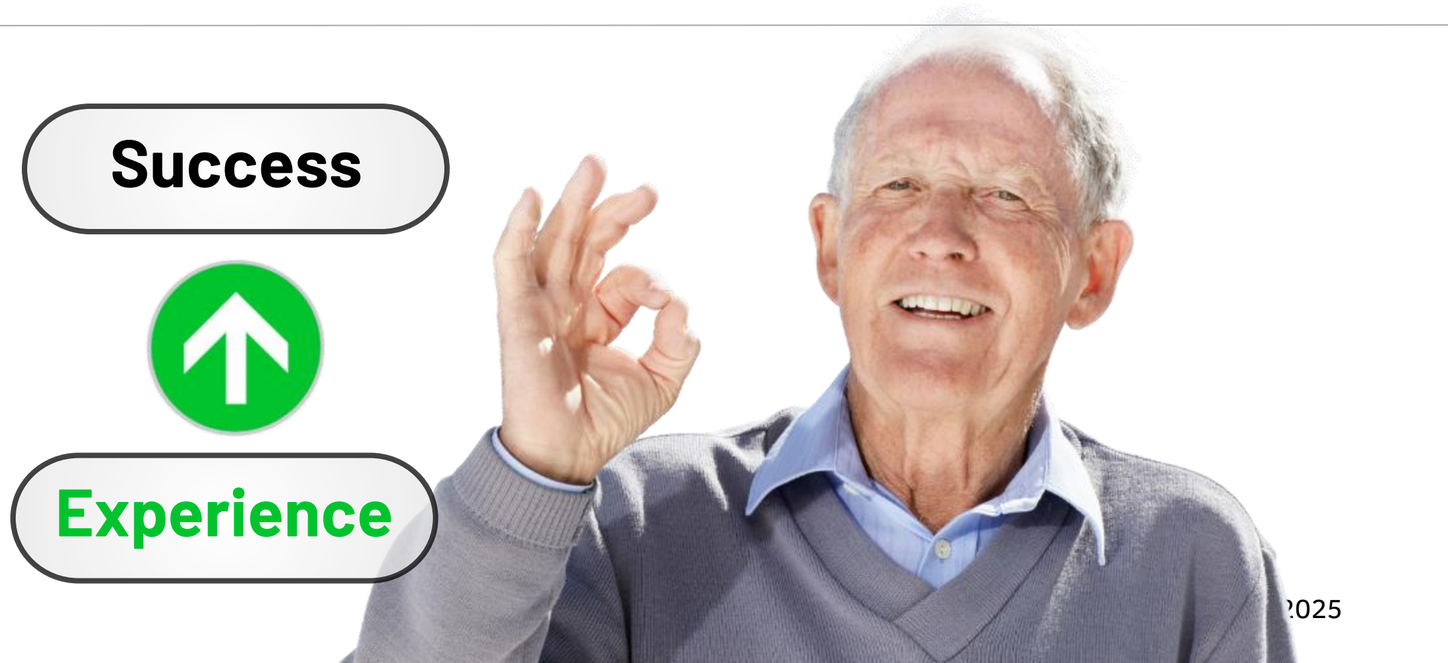
Regression Analysis

Complexity affects success

- **Strong negative relationship**
- $\beta = -0.49$; $t = -4.458$; $p < .001$

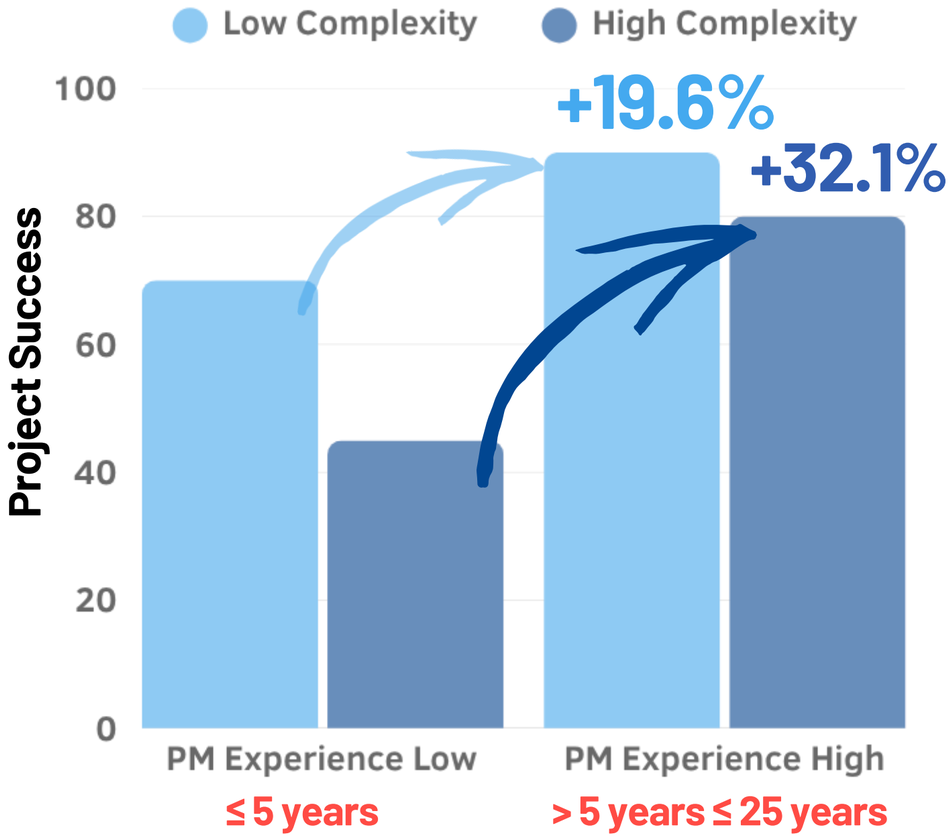
Experience increases success

- **Strong positive relationship**
- $\beta = 0.583$; $t = 5.698$, $p < .001$



Key quantitative findings

Impact of experience on the complexity-success relationship

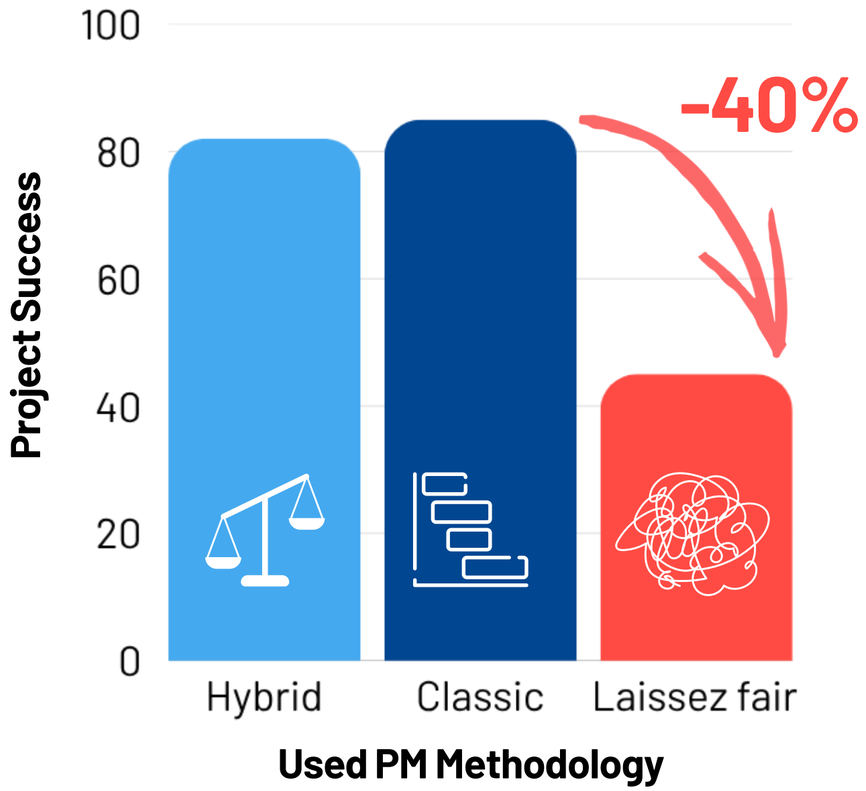


ANOVA

- Complexity lowers success.
- Experience reduces the negative effects of complexity on success.
- In high complexity projects, the role of PM experienced is more pronounced.

Key quantitative findings

Impact of used PM methodology on project success



ANOVA

- No difference between hybrid or "more classic" approaches on success.
- Classic/hybrid outperform "laissez fair" (large mean-difference)

Applying "laissez-fair PM", success rate drops by 40%!

Key quantitative findings

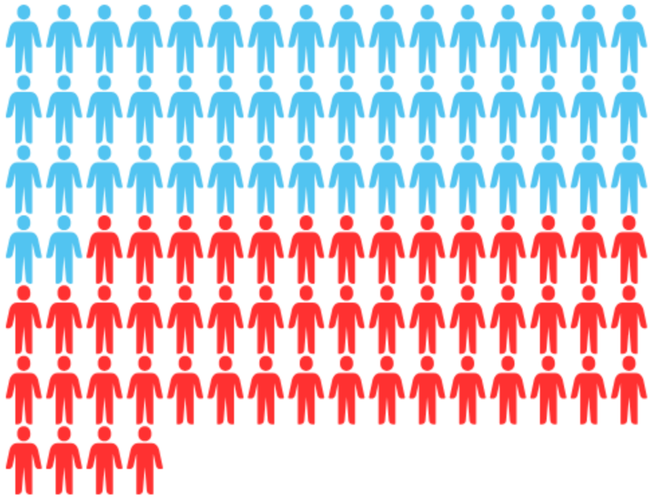
Data lead to the question...

Which role does project manager **experience** play when selecting specific methodologies?

Key quantitative findings

Choice of PM methodology based on PM experience

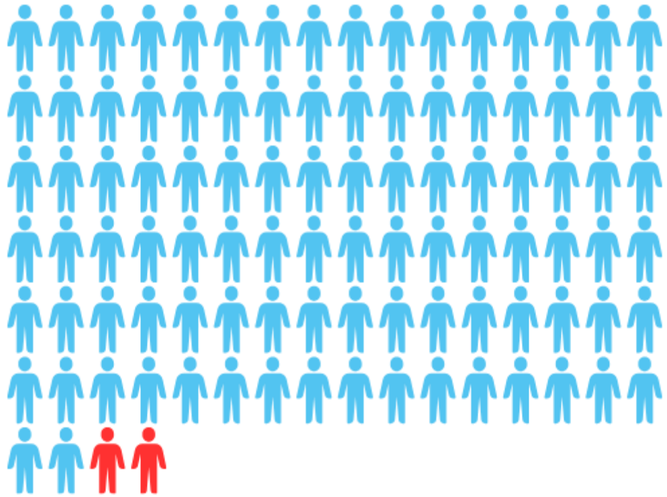
PM experience ≤ 5 years



50% more classic/hybrid

50% laissez fair

PM experience > 5 years and ≤ 25 years



98% more classic/hybrid

2% laissez fair

Fisher's Exact: $p < .001$

Key qualitative findings

How do experienced PMs navigate complexity in SME projects?

- **PMs rely on intuition** - and not theory - when managing complexity.
  - Lack of tools for systematically adressing complexity.
  - Theory-practice gap, related theories are absent from SME vocabulary.
- **Experienced PMs adopt methodologies**, focus is on “what works.”
- **Perceived importance of PM experience**

What can be concluded?

Project Success = *f* (Experience x Methodology – Complexity Impact)

experience increases success

experience contributes to tailored methodology selection

experience mitigates complexity-impact

What can be concluded?

Summary

Experience Drives Success!

1. **Project manager experience is the key-enabler** of success
   - Mitigates complexity´s negative effects
   - Enables tailored methodology selection
2. **SMEs lack knowledge** of research-backed complexity assessment.
3. **Experienced project managers predict success** more reliably.

Implications for practice

How can SMEs improve success rates?

1

Manage complexity actively!

- Treat project complexity as a manageable risk.
- Measure complexity systematically – not by gut feel.

2

Match PM experience to complexity level!

- Requires early complexity analysis to inform staffing decisions.
- Avoid underestimating complexity.

3

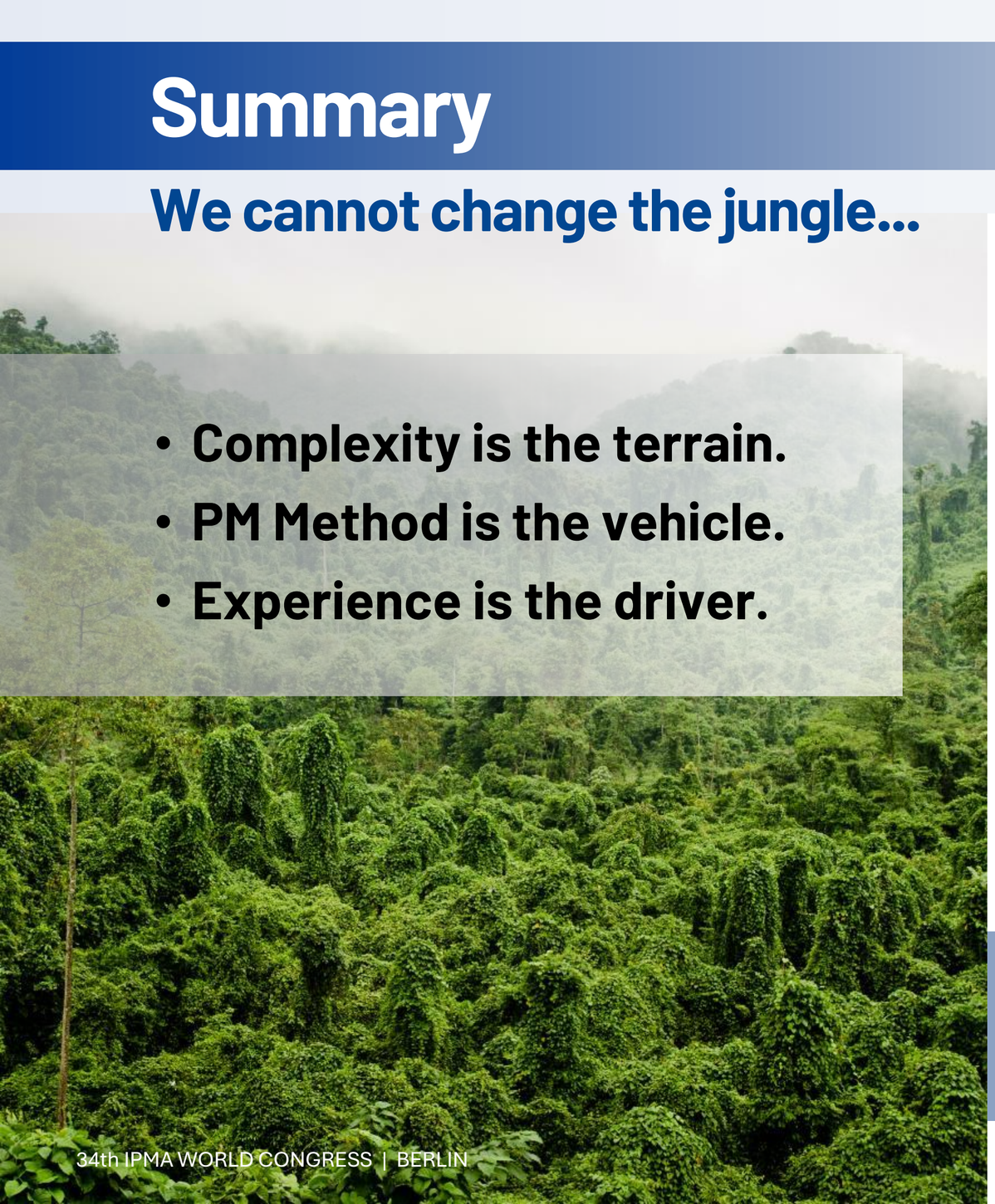
Adapt your PM methods!

- Constantly adapt methods to the evolving context.
- Use flexible but formal governance to cover emergent complexities.

Summary

We cannot change the jungle…

- **Complexity is the terrain.**
- **PM Method is the vehicle.**
- **Experience is the driver.**



- To maximize SME project success, we must stop running in the hamster wheel.
- Measure complexity,
- Value PM experience, and adapt methods to context —
- Because in the heart of chaos, experience is your compass.

Invest in your project managers, they´re an asset.

Holger Barth, 09/2025

THANK YOU

For your attention and participation

Ready to maximize success in your projects?

Connect

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