Reclaiming Time, Protecting Margin

The Case for Connected Project Delivery

UNIT4

Contents

Introduction

Professional services (PS) are under growing pressure to deliver more value, adapt quickly to changing requirements, and protect their profit margins. At the same time, a significant share of project capacity and value is being lost inside project delivery. Our research finds that 28% of project time is spent on unplanned work, while nearly nine in ten organizations say operational inefficiency is negatively affecting their financial performance.

Some disruption is inevitable because delivery rarely follows the path initially laid out. The bigger issue for PS is the additional effort needed when teams are having to adapt to these changes with fragmented information and disconnected ways of working. Today, almost nine in ten organizations lack a unified, real-time view across project, resource, and financial data, with nearly eight in ten relying on manual workarounds to complete their work.

This day-to-day operational challenge translates quickly into a commercial one, with weaker margins, reactive decision-making, and less ability to take on new work and grow the business.

The research also shows that this doesn't have to be the way. Organizations with more connected project, resource, and financial information are far more likely to manage project performance proactively or predictively rather than reacting after problems emerge.

This report draws on the views of 650 senior and mid-level decision-makers in operations, delivery, and finance roles across midmarket and enterprise PS firms. It explores where project capacity is being lost, what *Connected* organizations are doing differently, and how better visibility, automation, and intelligence can help PS act earlier and protect project and business value.

Key findings

Unplanned work is consuming project time and value

28%

Across a typical project, operations and delivery professionals estimate that over a quarter of project team time is spent on unplanned work

~ One working day

For mid- and senior-level operations and delivery managers, inefficiency and unplanned work consume 15% of their own working week – equivalent to almost one working day

87%

Nearly nine in ten report that operational inefficiency negatively affects financial performance

8%

Finance leaders estimate that around 8% of their organization's project revenue is lost because of inefficiencies

Fragmentation is forcing people to compensate

88%

Almost nine in ten organizations have yet to achieve a unified, real-time view across project, resource, and financial data

79%

Eight in ten respondents rely on manual workarounds to complete their work effectively

Connectivity improves how organizations perform

28%

While only 12% have achieved a fully unified, real-time view, 28% of organizations have reached the research's *Connected* threshold, meaning their project, financial, and resourcing data is managed in largely integrated systems or a unified platform

75% vs. 18%

Connected organizations are more than four times as likely to manage project performance proactively or predictively (75%), compared to *Disconnected organizations* (18%)

AI ambition is outpacing adoption

96%

Almost all believe that AI-enabled tools could improve project decisions...

26%

...yet only 26% currently use AI widely across multiple areas of project or financial management

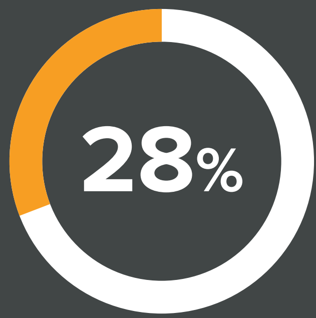
Section 1 – The hidden cost of unplanned work

Professional services organizations are losing a significant amount of project capacity to work that was never planned for.

Our research finds that 28% of the time spent across a typical project lifecycle is attributed to unplanned work. For operations and delivery managers themselves, inefficiency and unplanned work consume 15% of their working week: approaching the equivalent of almost one working day wasted.

Week				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
3rd ✓	4th ✓	5th ✓	6th	7th ✓

The equivalent of **1 working day** of **an operational and delivery mid-manager's week** is believed to be lost due to inefficiencies or unplanned work *(Mean average)*



of a typical project's time can be attributed to **unplanned work**

Some degree of change is inevitable in project-based businesses, as client requirements and delivery challenges emerge. But when more than seven in ten (71%) respondents say a significant proportion of their working time is wasted on low-value activities – activities that are not bringing direct value to the business – you can see that the amount of additional effort required is having a tangible impact.

More complexity, less room for inefficiency

The problem of unplanned work is becoming more pronounced. Over eight in ten (81%) say that the amount of unplanned work in their organization has grown in the past 12 months. So why is that?

Some of the pressures behind this rise will be familiar to any PS firm—more frequent changes in project scope and client requirements, and in a similar vein, those client expectations changing without the corresponding rise in budget.

But some of these pressures are being worsened by the way the organization operates. More than half say they are spending more time coordinating across systems, teams, and locations (55%), and that project data is becoming harder to access, trust, or reconcile (51%). When project and financial information is fragmented across systems, responding to change becomes harder to do efficiently and teams waste time locating information and reconciling different versions of it before they can move forward.

"The reality is so much different from the plan. You have your project plan, but the outcomes are not predictable, and you start losing time and money very early into the project."

Mid-management operations, media & publishing, Belgium

Top reasons why unplanned work has increased over the past 12 months
(% selecting as a top three reason)

55%	**52%**	**51%**	**50%**
More time needed to coordinate across teams, systems, or locations	**Project scope or client requirement changing more frequently**	**Project data being harder to access, trust, or reconcile**	**Client expectations increasing without equivalent increases in budget or fees**

At the same time, the external environment is raising expectations of what PS should be able to deliver. *McKinsey's State of Organizations 2026* finds that 72% of organizations are being affected by geopolitical uncertainty, while 55% expect AI to deliver exponential productivity gains[1]. Clients are therefore facing greater uncertainty themselves, while also seeing AI promise more efficient ways of working.

For PS, that creates pressure from both directions. Clients are increasingly expecting greater value and flexibility, but there is limited room to pass this additional effort on through higher fees, and in an increasingly competitive market, PS are being asked to absorb that effort and complexity while delivering more value from the same, and sometimes fewer, resources.

> ***"The cost of cross-departmental communication is too high. A simple issue needs to be confirmed back and forth many times."***
>
> ***Mid-management operations, architecture & engineering, UK***

[1] McKinsey & Company, State of Organizations 2026, *https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/business%20functions/people%20and%20organizational%20performance/our%20insights/the%20state%20of%20organizations/2026/the-state-of-organizations-2026.pdf*

Lost time becomes lost revenue

The impact of this lost project time is already showing up in the bottom line. Nearly nine in ten (87%) say that operational inefficiencies negatively impact their firm's financial performance, and not marginally: on average, finance leaders estimate that around 8% of project revenue is lost in their organization because of inefficiencies or unplanned work.

8%

Of project revenue is lost due to inefficient or unplanned work

87%

agree that operational inefficiency negatively impacts their organization's financial performance

"Accurate forecasting of project cash flows becomes difficult when actual expenditures deviate significantly from the original estimates."

Senior finance, business & professional services, DACH region

Across the projects represented in the research, respondents' estimates equate to an average of $22.5 million* of revenue at risk across the project portfolio, or approximately $54,000 for every project delivery professional[2].

$22.5million

Revenue at risk*
across the live project portfolio
(Mean average)

$54,000

Of project revenue at risk
per delivery professional

[2] The commercial estimates are based on respondents' reported project portfolios and are influenced by organizational scale. Larger organizations naturally manage more and higher-value projects, which increases the mean values reported. They should therefore be viewed as an indication of potential commercial exposure across the sample rather than a market-wide average

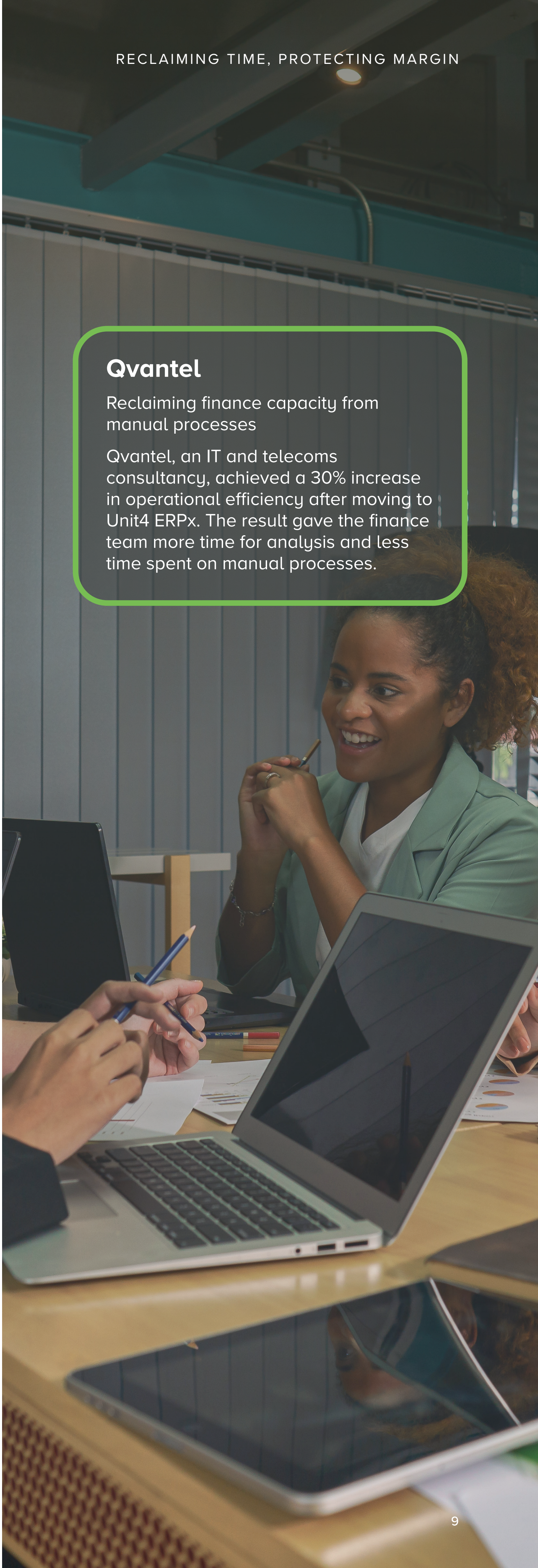
These figures vary considerably according to the size and project portfolio of each firm but help to illustrate how quickly relatively small inefficiencies can accumulate when repeated across multiple people and projects.

The consequences extend beyond the margin on the projects being delivered today. Almost two-thirds (65%) say inefficiencies in project delivery negatively affect their organization’s ability to take on new work. Left unchecked, unplanned work therefore creates a double constraint: it affects the value of work today and constrains future growth.

Market lens: where pressure is building fast

The challenge of unplanned work is widespread, but some markets are feeling it more acutely than others. In the DACH region, 91% say unplanned work has increased over the past 12 months. Across industries, architecture & engineering stand out, with 88% reporting an increase.

The reasons are likely to differ, but the wider findings point to a common tension: increasing project complexity can be harder to absorb when teams are working across fragmented systems and reactive processes.



Qvantel

Reclaiming finance capacity from manual processes

Qvantel, an IT and telecoms consultancy, achieved a 30% increase in operational efficiency after moving to Unit4 ERPx. The result gave the finance team more time for analysis and less time spent on manual processes.

Section 2 - Project management remains too reactive

While project delivery has become more complex, many PS also lack the visibility needed to anticipate problems before they affect delivery.

Just 34% of respondents say that their organization takes a consistently forward-looking approach to managing project performance, either through proactive planning or by predicting and preventing issues before they occur. For most, project management remains reactive.

A lack of timely, complete information forms a major part of this problem. More than three quarters (76%) say project decisions are at least occasionally made without full visibility of key information, and 78% regularly reverse or reconsider project decisions made because they were made with incomplete data. This adds further time and effort as teams are forced to course-correct when new or more complete information emerges.

Fragmented systems keep teams working manually

Visibility is closely linked to how project information is managed. Nearly nine in ten (88%) respondents have yet to achieve a unified platform that provides a single real-time view across project, resource, and financial data, and 79% report often relying on manual workarounds or fixes to complete project work effectively.

88%

Do not have a unified platform that provides a single real time view across projects, resources, and financial data

79%

agree that they often rely on manual workarounds or fixes to complete their project work effectively

> ***"We only rely on offline spreadsheets to arrange manpower, so we can't track real-time workloads. This leads to unbalanced resource allocation, overloaded team members, and delayed project milestones."***
>
> ***Mid-management operations, architecture & engineering, US***

Many of the activities needed to understand and manage project performance also remain primarily manual:

Top 5 project or financial activities that remain primarily manual

- **47%** Budget tracking
- **46%** Project forecasting
- **45%** Expense management
- **44%** Resource planning
- **42%** Financial analysis

None of these activities operate in isolation. A change in project scope can affect resource requirements, forecasts, and ultimately margin. When that information sits across different systems and has to be brought together manually, it becomes harder to build a current view of performance, and harder to respond quickly when circumstances change.

This creates a cycle of friction: fragmented information drives up manual work; manual work makes it harder to maintain an up-to-date view of performance; and this limited visibility leaves teams responding to issues after they have emerged. This, in turn, creates more of the rework and unplanned effort that PS firms are already struggling with.

Section 3 - What Connected organizations do differently[3]

Almost three-quarters (72%) of respondents describe the way their organization stores and manages project, resource, and financial data as *Disconnected*, with just 28% who consider themselves *Connected* — with one unified platform or largely integrated systems in place.

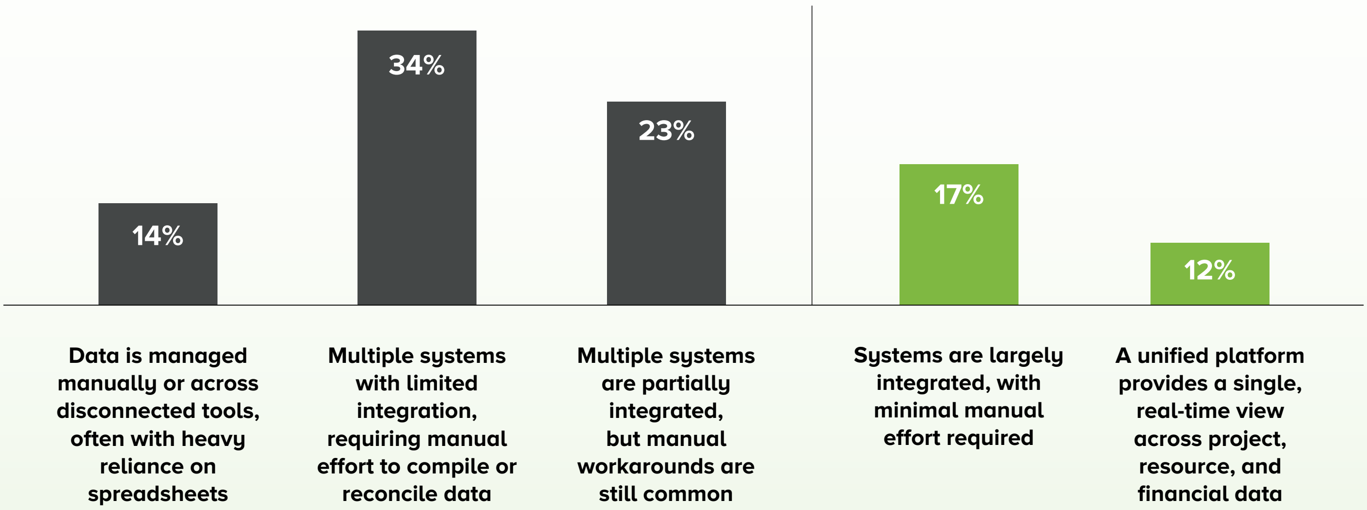
How organizations store and manage project, resourcing, and financial data

72% Disconnected

Have multiple systems and disconnected tools with manual effort and workarounds common

Just 28% Connected

Say they have a unified platform, or their systems are largely integrated



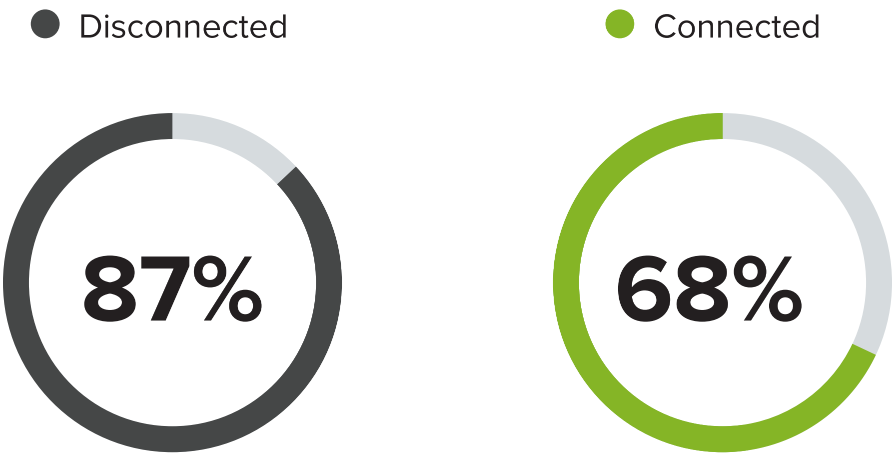
Comparing the two groups reveals some stark differences in decision-making, efficiency, and ability to manage project performance. While *Connected* organizations face many of the same pressures as their peers, the research suggests that they are better equipped to manage them with less manual effort and a more proactive approach.

[3] Where applicable, figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number

Less time spent compensating for disconnected systems

Just 57% of *Connected* organizations say that they often rely on manual workarounds or fixes to complete project work effectively, compared with 88% of *Disconnected* organizations. An even larger gap exists between those who say they waste a significant amount of time on low-value activities (43% of *Connected* vs. 82% of *Disconnected*).

Connected organizations have also experienced a smaller rise in unplanned work. While 87% of *Disconnected* organizations say unplanned work has increased over the past 12 months, this falls to 68% among *Connected* organizations.



% say **unplanned work has increased** over the past 12 months

Connectivity and system integration do not remove project complexity, but the findings suggest they can drastically reduce the additional effort required to manage it. With less need to manually find and move information between systems, teams keep more capacity for project delivery and other high-value work.

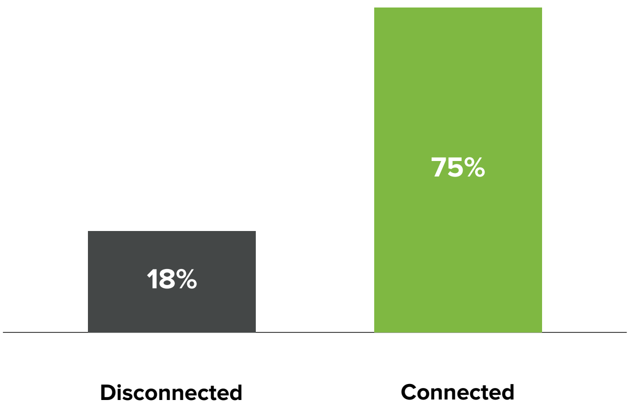
This reflects a wider shift in project management. The Project Management Institute's *Pulse of the Profession 2026* report finds that complexity is now the norm for project teams, and that the highest performers do not succeed because they face less complexity, but because they are better equipped to navigate it.[4]

[4] Project Management Institute, *Pulse of the Profession 2026: Driving Success in Complex Projects, https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/driving-success-in-complex-projects*

From reacting to anticipating

One of the clearest differences is in how PS firms manage project performance. Three quarters (75%) of *Connected* organizations take a proactive or predictive approach to this, compared with just 18% of *Disconnected* organizations.

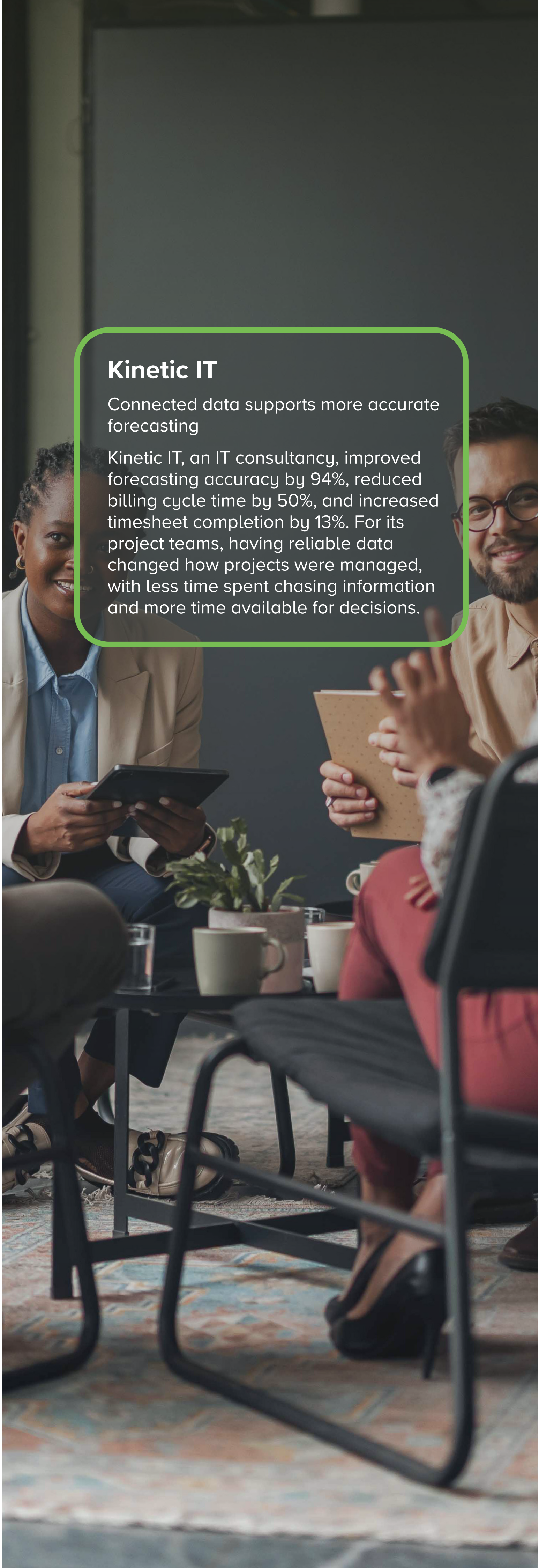
% take a consistently **forward-looking** approach to managing project performance (Proactive/Predictive)



Better visibility appears to play an important role here. While 88% of *Disconnected* organizations make project decisions without full visibility of key information at least occasionally, this falls to 45% among *Connected* organizations. *Disconnected* organizations are also much more likely to regularly reverse or revisit decisions made with incomplete data (89% of *Disconnected*, vs. 51% of *Connected*).

> ***"By the time I receive the actual figures, the decision will have already been made without me."***
>
> ***Mid-management operations, media & publishing, DACH region***

These findings suggest that *Connected* organizations are better placed to identify emerging issues and act before they cause extra work, delay, or unplanned effort.



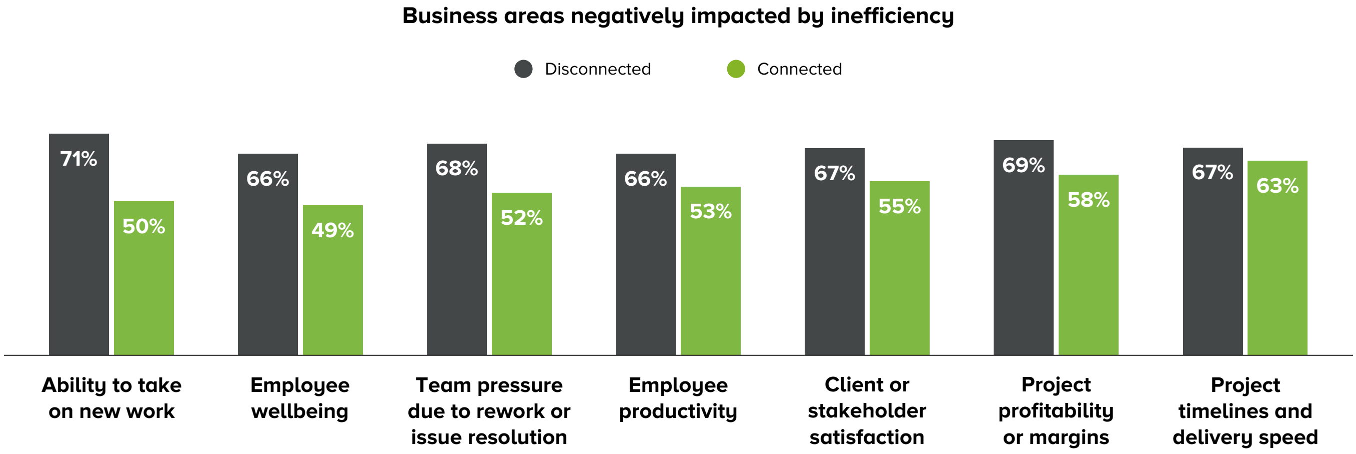
Kinetic IT

Connected data supports more accurate forecasting

Kinetic IT, an IT consultancy, improved forecasting accuracy by 94%, reduced billing cycle time by 50%, and increased timesheet completion by 13%. For its project teams, having reliable data changed how projects were managed, with less time spent chasing information and more time available for decisions.

More capacity for growth

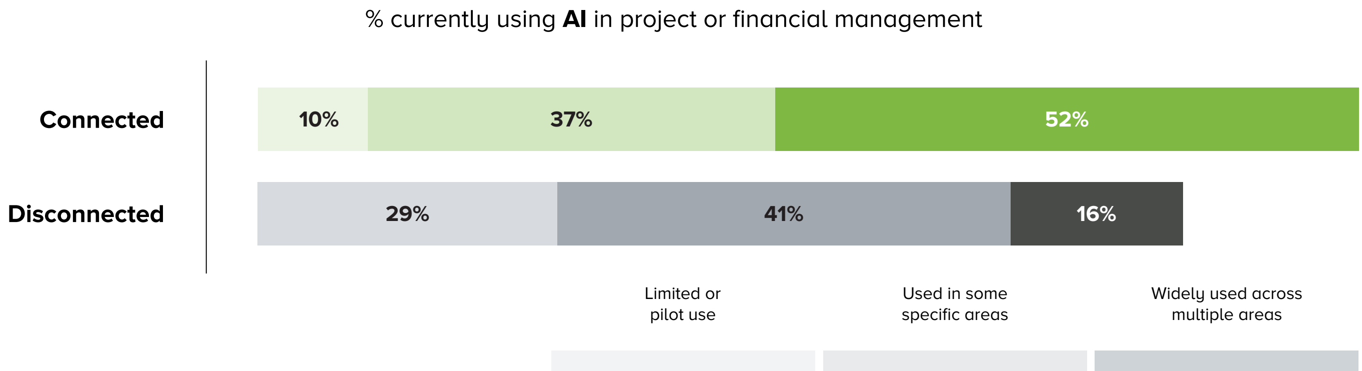
The differences extend beyond individual projects and day-to-day project management. Compared with *Connected* organizations, *Disconnected* organizations are more likely to report that inefficiency negatively impacts:



The largest of these gaps is in the ability to take on new work (71% vs. 50%). For PS, this is important as it highlights a critical link: when capacity is consumed by inefficient management of existing projects, there is less time to pursue and deliver future growth.

A stronger foundation for AI

Connected organizations are also further ahead in their use of AI within their project or financial management. More than half (52%) use AI widely across multiple areas, compared to just 16% of *Disconnected* organizations.



This suggests that greater connectivity might also provide a stronger foundation for the next stage of project management. As AI becomes more embedded in project and financial workflows, firms with better-connected information and systems may be better placed to apply it across the whole business.

Market lens: A maturity gap is emerging across geographies

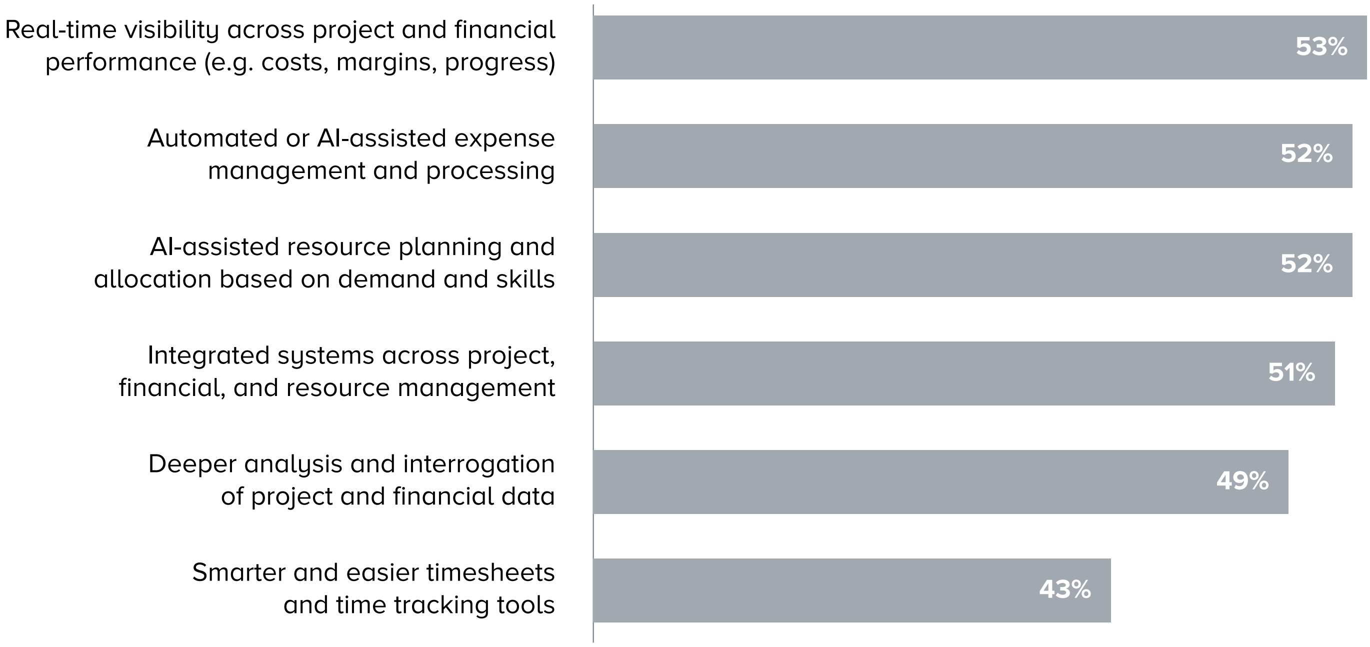
The country findings point to different levels of operational maturity. The UK reports the highest levels of connected project, resource, and financial data (46%) and forward-looking project management (52%), alongside the lowest reported overall impact from inefficiency (53%). DACH sits at the other end of the spectrum, with just 16% reporting connected data and 21% taking a forward-looking approach, alongside the sharpest rise (91%) in unplanned work over the past year.

Section 4 - From visibility to intelligence

For operations and delivery leaders, it is important to understand where the inefficiencies lie so that they can act on them. Moving from reactive to predictive delivery means creating the visibility, accessibility, and decision-making support that is needed to identify risks early and reduce the amount of time lost to manual intervention.

Respondents' priorities reflect this. Half or more think they would see significant value from real-time visibility across project and financial performance; automated or AI-assisted expense management; AI-assisted resource planning and allocation; and integrated project, financial, and resource management systems.

Most valuable improvements to project delivery systems/tools
(Ranked top 3)



> ***"I would centralize project information in one place. This would reduce time spent searching for updates and improve collaboration."***
> ***Operations mid-management, media & publishing, UK***

What connects these priorities is the need to bring information and action closer together. When project, resource, and financial data can be accessed easily in real time without manual intervention or reconciliation, teams have a stronger basis to identify emerging problems and respond before they impact delivery, the client, and the bottom line.

By reducing inefficiencies, respondents expect meaningful business value. Almost two-thirds (63%) believe it would improve customer satisfaction and retention, with 59% expecting improved profit margins, and 54% believing it would improve their ability to take on more projects.

This reinforces the wider story in the research. Reclaiming time from manual work and unplanned activity creates value twice: once, by improving margins and the client experience of the work already being delivered, and again, by releasing capacity for future work and growth.

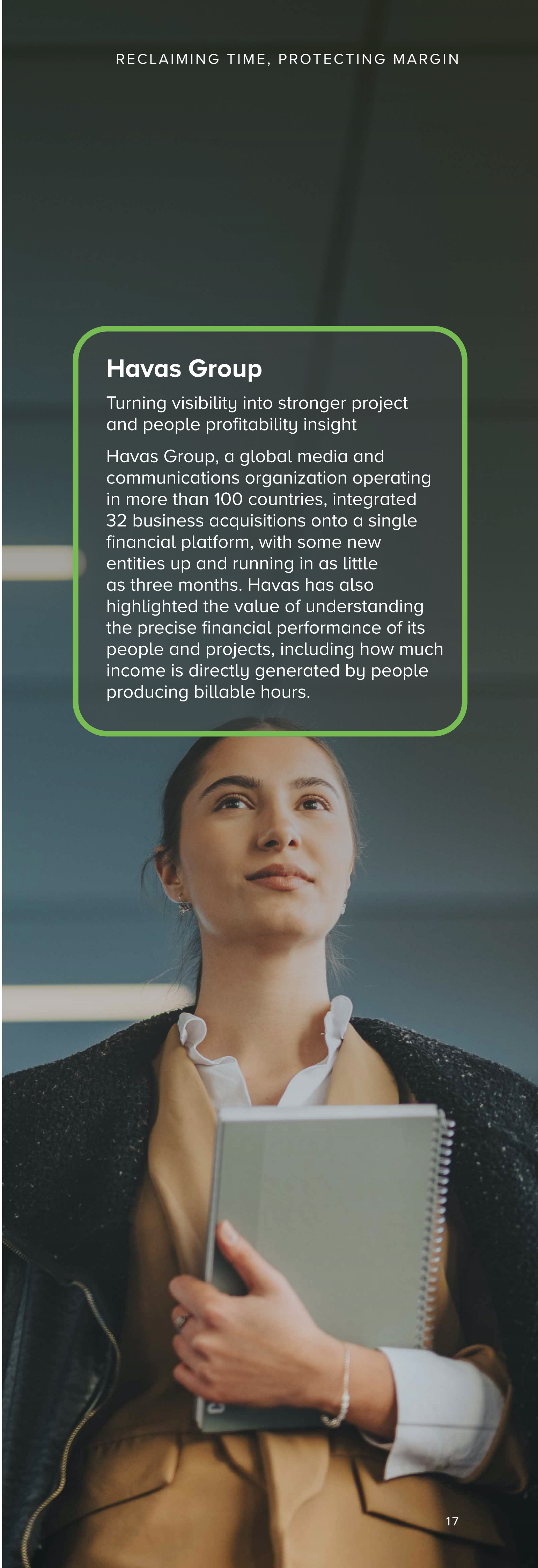
Market lens: AI priorities vary by geography

US respondents stand out for prioritising AI to improve project and financial visibility (74%), well ahead of every European market, alongside better-informed decision-making (60%). Meanwhile, European priorities are more varied. The Netherlands and UK place greater emphasis on predicting project risks earlier (55% and 53% respectively), while reducing administrative effort is particularly prominent in the UK (50%) and Nordics (48%). DACH most closely mirrors the US's visibility focus at 62%, while placing slightly greater emphasis on identifying client satisfaction risks (56% DACH vs. 53% US).

Havas Group

Turning visibility into stronger project and people profitability insight

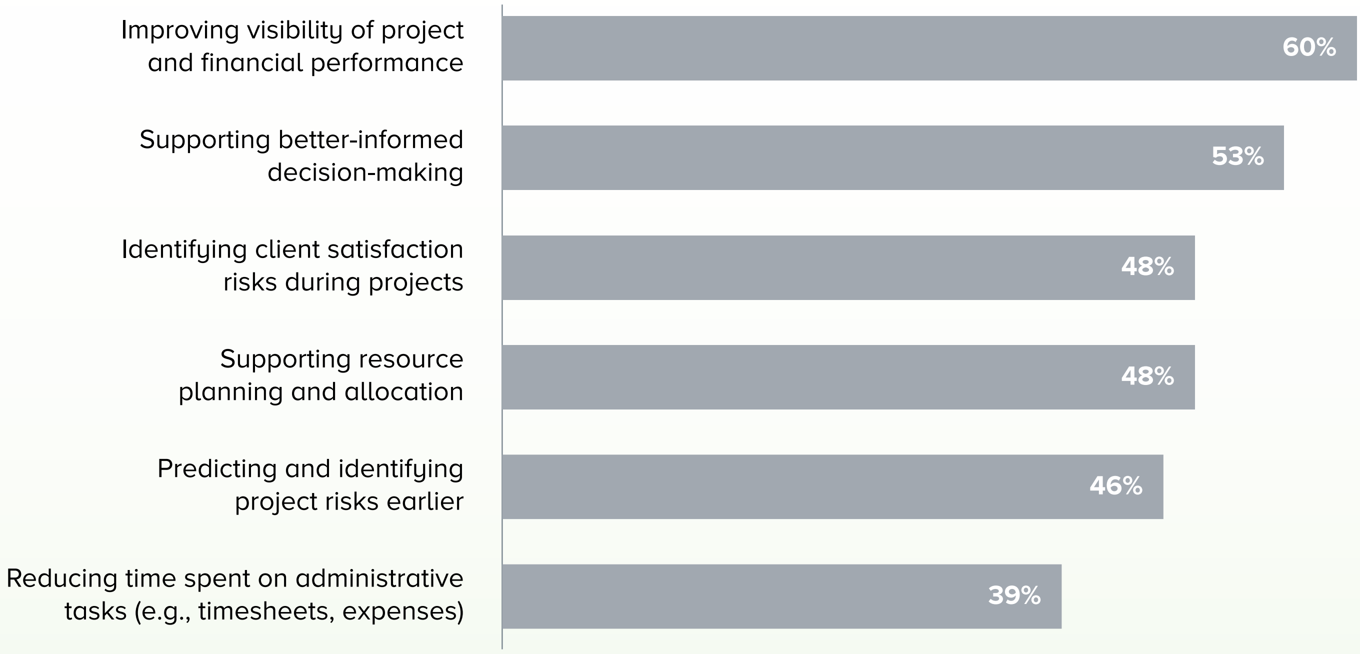
Havas Group, a global media and communications organization operating in more than 100 countries, integrated 32 business acquisitions onto a single financial platform, with some new entities up and running in as little as three months. Havas has also highlighted the value of understanding the precise financial performance of its people and projects, including how much income is directly generated by people producing billable hours.



AI can help teams act earlier

AI has the potential to move organizations beyond visibility and oversight and toward prediction and earlier intervention. Respondents see particular value in using AI to improve visibility of project and financial performance and support better-informed decision-making. Almost half recognize the potential to use it in identifying client satisfaction risks during projects, supporting resource planning and allocation, and predicting and identifying project risks earlier.

Where organizations believe AI can add the most value to project delivery



The strongest opportunity for AI here is not just automation for the sake of it, but instead the use of timely, connected information to help teams surface risk sooner, make better decisions, and support action while there is still time to make a difference to the outcome of the project. The *World Economic Forum* reports that more than $250 billion was invested in AI in 2025, but only 25% of companies say it is having a transformative impact[5]. Its research points to a common challenge where firms are layering AI onto existing processes rather than rethinking how work and decision-making happen around it.

There is, however, a gap between the potential of AI and its current adoption. Only 26% of respondents say AI is widely used across multiple areas of project or financial management.

[5] World Economic Forum, The AI-first Operating System: *A Blueprint for Operating and Business Model Innovation 2026, https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-ai-first-operating-system-a-blueprint-for-operating-and-business-model-innovation/*

Earlier action is the end goal

For PS, the objective isn't to end up with more dashboards, automated processes, and AI within isolated tasks if the day-to-day work still requires teams to manually reconcile and surface the information they need. Instead, they should be looking to shorten the distance and effort between what is happening in a project and the action required in response.

For operations and delivery teams, it could mean identifying a resource conflict before it affects a project milestone. For finance, it could mean seeing margin pressure before the end of the reporting period, while there is still time to influence it.

Visibility is therefore a starting point, not the destination. The opportunity is to turn connected project information into earlier action by reducing the time lost responding to problems after they occur and protecting more of the capacity, margin, and value that PS work to create.

"Real-time financial reporting would help catch issues before they grow."

Senior finance decision-maker, architecture & engineering, US

Conclusion

Professional services organizations can't remove every unexpected client requirement or delivery challenge, but they can lessen the amount of disruption caused when that happens.

Right now, too much project capacity is being consumed by admin, manual reconciliation, rework, and coordination. This lost time has a significant impact on operational productivity, but it also weakens margins, makes it harder to take on new work and leaves teams reacting to problems after they have already started to affect delivery.

The research shows that *Connected* organizations are better able to contain these effects. They still face rising complexity and unplanned work, but they rely less heavily on manual workarounds, spend less time on low-value activity, and are more likely to manage project performance proactively or predictively than their *Disconnected* peers.

This creates an important opportunity for PS. Better-connected project, resource, and financial information can give teams a stronger basis for acting earlier, while automation can reduce the effort required to keep that information current. AI can then build on this further by helping PS firms to surface risk and support decisions while there is still the chance to change the outcomes.

A practical agenda for reclaiming time and protecting project value

Connect the operating picture

Bring project, resource, and financial data into one trusted view so teams can see what is happening without reconciling multiple systems.

Remove avoidable friction

Simplify and automate the workflows that consume time, require manual effort, and create rework.

Protect value earlier

Use real-time data to identify margin erosion, resource pressure, delivery risk, and client issues before they escalate.

Turn insight into action

Embed intelligent support into everyday project and delivery workflows so operations, finance, and leadership can make better-informed decisions while there is still time to influence the outcome.

Methodology

During June 2026, Vanson Bourne surveyed 650 decision-makers working in operation and delivery mid-management (436) or senior roles (104), or in senior finance positions (110) in midmarket and enterprise-sized organizations. The sample was made up of respondents from the US [200], the UK [125], Netherlands [75], the Nordics [100], the DACH region [100], and Belgium [50]. Respondents worked in organizations with between **250 and 10,000 employees**, across a variety of business and professional service sectors including management consulting, IT and technology, architecture and engineering, and media and publishing. Where applicable, figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

About Unit4

Unit4 was purpose-built for professional services, where people are the product. Unlike horizontal ERP platforms, Unit4's next-generation enterprise resource planning (ERP) solutions bring together the capabilities of Financials, Procurement, Project Management, HR, and FP&A to share real-time information and deliver greater insights to help service-centric organizations become more effective. By combining our mid-market expertise with a relentless focus on people, we've built flexible solutions to meet customers' unique and changing needs. Visit www.unit4.com.

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