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Initial Post

by [Sergei Lebedev](#) - Sunday, 23 November 2025, 4:28 PM

I believe that, akin to the proverbial fish, projects also tend to rot from the head down: employees and contractors working on the project implementation usually lack power and influence to be responsible for the project's overall failure. They can affect it, but their impact is a risk that the project manager should anticipate and mitigate.

Agrawal et al. (2024) provide a detailed categorisation of the software design errors that lead to project failures. Study by Verner et al. (2008) also identify most common failure factors in 235 projects.

Most projects in the study were affected by deadlines set or communicated incorrectly, e.g. due to underestimations. This is an example of a **planning error**, which may stem from unclear communication with stakeholders, wrong assumptions by the project manager, or developers misrepresenting their workload.

Lack of information refers to cases where crucial decisions rely on faulty assumptions caused by missing information, gaps in software development lifecycle knowledge, or an incorrect understanding of the project scope.

Both of these issues, along with several others commonly reported, can be generally ascribed to **lack of competence**, where project managers, stakeholders, or developers are not equipped to contribute effectively. Managers and stakeholders may have incomplete understanding of software development, set incorrect goals, or suffer from tunnel vision and set incorrect milestones due to *The XY Problem* (no date). Developers may underestimate the workload or overlook significant parts of the project.

The failure of Windows Phone is an example of poor strategic decisions sealing a project's fate: missing backward compatibility, unexpected breaking changes, underestimating the ecosystem impact, and project goals misaligned with user needs, as well as poor timing ultimately led to the project closure, as well as Microsoft largely abandoning the mobile market (Wozniak, 2025).

Poor management does not only affect software development projects, but physical infrastructure projects as well. A vivid example is the Berlin BER airport, whose opening was delayed by many years and was plagued by cost overruns and major redesigns. For instance, smoke extraction system had to be fully replaced after it was originally designed by an unqualified person who was nonetheless hired for the project (The Local Germany, 2014; Glucroft, 2020; Penzer, 2025).

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Re: Initial Post

by [Lauren Pechey](#) - Monday, 15 December 2025, 12:12 PM

Hi Sergei,

Your argument that projects often “rot from the head down” presents a persuasive management-focused perspective on project failure. This view aligns strongly with Agrawal et al. (2024), who demonstrate that many software design and implementation errors originate from organisational and decision-making weaknesses rather than isolated developer mistakes. Your connection between planning errors, missing information, and managerial competence is also well supported by Nizam’s (2022) structured failure process model.

Your discussion of incorrectly communicated deadlines and incomplete information highlights how governance failures and stakeholder misunderstanding can derail projects early in the lifecycle. This reflects findings from NHS IT initiatives, where Verner and Sarwar (2021) identify leadership’s limited understanding of software development as a major contributor to failure. The reference to the “XY Problem” is particularly effective in illustrating how tunnel vision at management level can distort priorities and lead to flawed milestones.

The Windows Phone example further strengthens your argument by showing how strategic misalignment and poor managerial decisions can outweigh technical capability. This resonates with broader cross-sector case studies discussed by Sallai and Pepper (2025), which emphasise leadership and governance as decisive factors in project outcomes.

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