



Cross-industry project management: Insights into transition capabilities from Australian practitioners

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Abstract

This research examines how project managers effectively transition between industry sectors, drawing on qualitative insights from experienced practitioners across Australia. Despite the complexity and sector-specific challenges involved, many project managers successfully adapt to cross-industry roles. A comprehensive study involving interviews with nine senior project managers from various industries, including mining, healthcare, defence, and technology, was conducted to identify the skills enabling these shifts. Thematic analysis identified three key factors for success: flexible application of knowledge, strong interpersonal communication, and effective stakeholder management. Rapid learning of industry-specific language and contextual understanding also proved essential for smooth entry into new sectors. Additionally, the study emphasises the importance of reflective practice in helping managers process experiences, build confidence, and adapt to unfamiliar environments. By connecting practitioner insights with the Project Management Institute's Talent Triangle and the Project Management Competency Development (PMCD) framework, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Findings show that transferable skills and reflective practice enhance professional adaptability, while sector-specific awareness builds credibility. The results provide valuable guidance for recruitment, professional development, and workforce planning. Ultimately, the research highlights how organisations can fully utilise project management talent in increasingly dynamic and cross-sector environments.

Keywords: Career self-efficacy, Cross-sector mobility, Knowledge adaptability, Professional identity transformation, Project manager adaptability, Reflective practice, Stakeholder engagement, Transferable skills.

Citation | Poles, M., & Gunawan, I. (2025). Cross-industry project management: Insights into transition capabilities from Australian practitioners. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Management Studies*, 12(4), 69–76. 10.20448/ajssms.v12i4.7634
History:
Received: 22 August 2025
Revised: 30 September 2025
Accepted: 14 October 2025
Published: 31 October 2025
Licensed: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) 
Publisher: Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
Institutional Review Board Statement: The study involved minimal risk and adhered to ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of University of Adelaide, Australia. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.
Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.
Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

An analysis of project managers' cross-sector mobility is presented in this study, combining behavioural, structural, and institutional perspectives. By challenging ideas about sector-specific expertise, it enhances understanding of transferable skills, identity change, and adaptability. This paper offers practical implications for theory, recruitment, and professional development in dynamic project settings, based on insights from Australian practitioners.

1. Introduction

Project managers who can work flexibly and handle diverse challenges are in high demand in today's increasingly complex and dynamic project environments across all sectors (Sampaio, Wu, Cormican, & Varajão, 2022). Project managers usually possess deep sector-specific knowledge; however, global trends in project-based work, agile methodologies, and workforce mobility have shifted the focus to the transferability of project management skills across industries (Brandon, Allen, & Menefee, 2022). Despite the practical importance of this topic, there has been limited academic research on how project managers successfully switch between sectors and the skills required for this transition (Sankaran, Vaagaasar, & Bekker, 2020).

Previous studies have examined the competencies and behavioral traits that lead to project success within specific industries (Ribeiro Serra, Scafuto, Vils, & Mattos, 2021). However, little attention has been given to how these competencies support cross-sector transitions. For effective project delivery, existing literature implicitly assumes that domain-specific knowledge is essential. Nonetheless, the increasing fluidity of labour markets and the demand for agile, cross-functional teams challenge this assumption (Grunder, da Silva, da Silva, & Gonzalez, 2022).

This study investigates a less-explored area of project management by examining how experienced project managers navigate sectoral boundaries and what transferable skills they possess, such as adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication. It also discusses how individual traits influence professional identity and mobility in various project settings. As a result of bridging this gap, research improves theory by reshaping our understanding of project management expertise. It offers evidence-based advice on recruitment, training, and career development strategies that extend beyond industry boundaries.

Australian project environments provide a unique opportunity to explore cross-sector shifts in project management. Due to its diverse economic landscape, which includes construction, infrastructure, mining, healthcare, education, and digital innovation, Australia offers a dynamic setting where project managers increasingly need to operate across various sectors. The national labour market trends also emphasise the importance of flexibility, transferable skills, and workforce mobility, highlighting the need for project professionals to effectively manage these transitions (Australian Government & Relations, 2022).

There has been significant investment in public-private infrastructure and social projects across South Australia, creating opportunities for project managers to move between government, commercial, and not-for-profit sectors. In this context, it is possible to examine how cross-sectoral project delivery functions in practice and to identify the skills necessary to support such projects.

This paper begins by reviewing relevant literature on project manager competencies and sectoral mobility. It then outlines the qualitative research design. The results from interviews with experienced project managers in South Australia are presented, along with a discussion on the implications of these findings for both theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of project-based work, the emphasis has shifted from solely developing technical skills to encompassing broader behavioral and transferable skills. Several recent studies show that successful project delivery increasingly depends on leadership, adaptability, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement, rather than just sector-specific expertise (Turner, Baker, & Morris, 2021). As organisations adapt to rapid technological change, market disruptions, and complex stakeholder environments, these skills are becoming increasingly vital across various sectors.

The concept of professional identity in project management is closely connected to one's ability to learn, adapt, and communicate across boundaries (Ojiako, Maguire, & Chipulu, 2020), which has generated increased interest in identifying skills that support such cross-boundary performance. Building on this foundation, this literature review investigates the competencies required for effective project management across different sectors, with an emphasis on transferable skills. This paper discusses the shift in project competency frameworks away from solely technical expertise towards behavioural and adaptive skills. It then explores the challenges of cross-sector transitions and how transferable competencies assist project managers in managing them effectively. Finally, this review highlights gaps in the current literature that this study seeks to address.

2.1. Transferable Skills and Cross-Sector Moves

Project management demands transferable skills to move across various sectors. It is increasingly apparent that skills such as strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, emotional intelligence, and systems thinking are vital for adjusting to different organisational contexts (Loughlin & Priyadarshini, 2021). By honing these abilities, project professionals can effectively address the specific needs of different sectors, especially in roles involving cross-cultural, regulatory, and technical cooperation. For example, project managers moving from construction to healthcare or from government to non-profits often rely less on domain-specific knowledge and more on adaptability, interpersonal skills, and change management capabilities (Locatelli, Zerjav, & Klein, 2020).

Transitions of this nature demand the ability to quickly assess unfamiliar stakeholder expectations and navigate complex, ambiguous environments. According to researchers, these skills are not innate but can be developed through targeted learning and reflective practice (Zulch, 2021). Mentoring, coaching, and experiential learning are deliberate strategies that help professionals internalize and apply these skills across various contexts (Clarke, 2020).

Moreover, it has been shown that project managers with high emotional intelligence who actively use this EI during requirements changes tend to achieve better stakeholder alignment and team cohesion in cross-sector initiatives (Madampe, Dissanayake, & Wijesundara, 2022). Additionally, research indicates that soft skills such as collaboration and empathy are often underdeveloped, despite being vital to project success in multi-sectoral

contexts (Serrat, 2019). Particularly in sectors undergoing rapid technological change, digital proficiency has become a crucial transferable skill. Digitally skilled professionals are better prepared to sustain productivity and communication during transitions (Turner & Lecoivre, 2018). The capacity to manage ambiguity, motivate others, and test iterative solutions is increasingly linked to successful project delivery across various sectors (Den Hond, Keegan, & Van Osch, 2021).

Consequently, mastering transferable skills offers a strategic edge in today's complex project environments. Organisations are looking for practitioners who blend systems thinking, emotional awareness, and adaptive communication as sector boundaries become more flexible. This mindset can be developed through structured growth programs to ensure both individual career versatility and organisational readiness for cross-sector change.

2.2. Cross-Sector Mobility and Adaptive Capacity of Project Managers

Project professionals are increasingly expected to move between sectors as organizations shift towards more dynamic and project-driven structures. The concept of cross-sector mobility involves more than just switching industries; it also encompasses transferring and adapting relevant skills to different organizational contexts (Müller et al., 2022). In complex infrastructure projects, sustainability initiatives, and humanitarian efforts, the lines between the public, private, and non-profit sectors are becoming more blurred. A key factor in ensuring a successful transition is developing a flexible professional identity. Besides technical skills, individuals must also be able to adapt their competencies to different institutional logics and stakeholder expectations (Hodgson, Paton, & Cicmil, 2018). Professionals with high adaptive capacity often demonstrate critical reflection, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to reinterpret tools and practices across diverse domains (Biesenthal, Clegg, & Sankaran, 2021).

Furthermore, learning agility, the ability to acquire and apply knowledge in new settings, has been recognized as a key enabler of cross-sector collaboration. Professionals who engage in ongoing learning and adapt their practices are better positioned to manage sectoral changes effectively. Maintaining this flexibility is crucial in digital transformation sectors. This involves integrating practices from technology-driven industries into more traditional fields, such as healthcare or education. Project professionals who are open to reconfiguring their approaches and embrace continuous learning are more likely to navigate role transitions successfully. The capacity to adapt technology sector practices to conventional fields like construction and healthcare is vital in industries experiencing digital change. Organisational support mechanisms such as mentoring, cross-training, and leadership development programs have also demonstrated their ability to boost project managers' readiness for sectoral shifts. Moreover, these initiatives build confidence, adaptability, and the soft skills needed to succeed in unfamiliar environments (Too & Weaver, 2020).

For effective mobility, organisational mechanisms such as mentoring, leadership development, and structured cross-training are vital (Garavan & S. Watson, 2019). Furthermore, these initiatives foster reflective habits that improve knowledge transfer across different contexts. Aligning human resource strategies with project-based learning creates a supportive environment for professionals to develop skills that are both adaptable and sensitive to the context (Keegan, Ringhofer, & Huemann, 2019). Adaptive capacity is further strengthened through strategic human resource management practices such as job shadowing, rotational assignments, and role reconfiguration, which build resilience and promote cross-sector readiness (Sydow, Braun, & Müller-Seitz, 2021). Additionally, a systems-oriented approach to project leadership combines behavioral and technical skills, encouraging proactive change management and a comprehensive understanding of diverse project environments (Andersen, 2021).

Despite growing academic interest, a gap persists in integrated models that incorporate behavioural, structural, and institutional aspects of cross-sector mobility. This limitation hampers the practical application of current research and underscores the need for frameworks that foster the development of adaptable, future-oriented project professionals.

2.3. Barriers and Facilitators of Sectoral Transitions in Project Management

Despite increased cross-sector mobility in project management, several barriers still prevent professionals from transitioning between sectors. One challenge is the misalignment of institutional logics, as each industry has different beliefs about success, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. It is common for project managers to find that practices effective in one industry are incompatible or irrelevant in another (Brière, Proulx, Flores, & Laporte, 2020).

Professional stereotyping remains a significant barrier. Consequently, employers in certain industries are hesitant to hire candidates from outside their sector because of concerns about adaptability or cultural compatibility. In highly regulated fields like healthcare or public administration, sector-specific expertise is often valued more highly than transferable skills (Sankaran & Müller, 2019).

The literature also emphasizes key enablers for successful transitions. Engaging in trans-sectoral partnerships or multidisciplinary projects has been shown to enhance cognitive flexibility and interpersonal agility necessary for navigating diverse stakeholder environments (Clegg, Pitsis, & Pina e Cunha, 2020). Furthermore, collaborative leadership and workplace learning practices, such as mentoring, peer learning, and development-oriented interactions, can boost contextual awareness and build confidence when transitioning to a new industry (Garavan & Watson, 2019). Recent research highlights the psychological and identity challenges faced by project professionals when transitioning to a different sector. Displacement often arises from differences in norms, communication styles, and decision-making processes, especially when moving from highly commercial environments to more bureaucratic or socially oriented settings. These tensions can weaken confidence and slow down integration into the evolving workplace (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2018). As a key factor in successful mobility, career self-efficacy—the belief that one can adapt to changing roles—has also been recognized. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more inclined to pursue sectoral changes, adapt quickly, and persevere despite uncertainty. This trait is notably shaped by exposure to varied project settings, supportive leadership, and skills development (Greer & Kirk, 2019).

Apart from individual traits, structural enablers such as cross-sector fellowships, secondments, and transitional leadership roles have also proven effective in supporting mobility. Using these formal structures, project professionals can gradually integrate into new sectoral settings while maintaining their core identity and skills. In a supportive environment, they serve as 'bridging spaces' where skills are shared, networks are built, and contextual understanding is deepened (Wilkins, Calvard, & Jones, 2020). A strong learning orientation, along with

the willingness and ability to learn from new environments, has also been linked to successful transitions, beyond the impact of individual traits and structural supports. Those project managers who reflect on past experiences and apply those insights to new settings are more likely to succeed in unfamiliar sectors (Ahsan, Ho, & Khan, 2021). Furthermore, individuals with proactive learning mindsets often see cross-sector shifts as opportunities rather than disruptions (Ba, Nair, & Kedia, 2024). Considering these insights, there remains a notable gap in the literature. Most studies tend to focus solely on public-to-private transitions or are mainly descriptive. Behavioural, structural, and institutional factors are not adequately considered in the existing models. By offering a comprehensive framework that captures the complexity of sectoral mobility in modern project environments, we aim to close this gap.

As a result of these insights, it becomes clear that there is a significant gap in the literature. Current studies tend to focus mainly on public-to-private transitions or remain descriptive. The existing models do not adequately incorporate behavioural, structural, and institutional factors. It aims to fill this gap by offering a comprehensive framework that reflects the complexity of sectoral mobility in modern project environments.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three interconnected theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how transferable skills support cross-sector mobility among project managers.

3.1. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura) (Australian Government, 2023)

The Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the significance of self-efficacy and observational learning in influencing professional behavior and adaptability. The project manager must develop a range of advanced skills to address today's challenges and prepare for those of tomorrow. These include emotional intelligence, creativity, decision-making skills, and strategic vision. When these intelligences are harmoniously integrated, every project can become a platform for growth, innovation, and positive change (Bassi, 2025). Project managers who believe they are capable of learning and performing effectively across different sectors are more likely to undertake sectoral transitions. Through intentional learning and exposure to diverse environments, cross-sector adaptability can be cultivated (Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2021). According to recent research, project managers' digital literacy and openness to continuous learning are increasingly crucial for adapting to evolving technological and sectoral contexts.

3.2. Boundary-Spanning Theory

A boundary-spanning perspective describes how individuals navigate, bridge, and connect across different institutional, cultural, and sectoral boundaries. It is especially relevant for project managers working in complex environments where their roles require them to negotiate across organizational silos or sectoral differences. Successful transitions require boundary-spanning behaviors, such as collaboration, knowledge translation, and relationship building (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2021). As a result, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence are increasingly supporting boundary-spanning practices by improving collaboration, knowledge sharing, and innovation across different organisational and sector boundaries (Prasetyo, Peranginangin, Martinovic, Ichsan, & Wicaksono, 2025).

3.3. Institutional Theory

Institutional theory highlights the influence of sector-specific norms, values, and expectations on professional identity and behaviour. Managers in new sectors need to align their skills with the institutional demands of these sectors, which often vary in terms of accountability systems, stakeholder frameworks, and success criteria. To achieve effective integration and performance across boundaries, recognising these logics is essential (Söderlund & Locatelli, 2024). Recent contributions emphasize that institutional change is also driven by sustainability imperatives and digital transformation, and that project managers must navigate evolving pressures related to accountability and legitimacy (Martinez & Hughes, 2025).

3.4. Technological Enablers

Artificial intelligence is increasingly seen as a vital enabler of cross-sector transitions. By integrating diverse institutional logics, it supports data-driven decision-making, enables adaptive risk management, and encourages innovation (Moon & Alexander, 2025). Incorporating technology into the theoretical framework, this study illustrates how both human adaptability and technological tools influence cross-sector mobility.

Overall, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate how cross-sector mobility is influenced by both individual skills and broader institutional and contextual factors. Including these viewpoints enables this study to examine sectoral transitions as dynamic processes involving learning, identity work, and navigation of institutional norms.

4. Design/Methodology/Approach

The purpose of this study is to investigate how project managers develop and utilize transferable skills that support successful career transitions between sectors in a qualitative, exploratory manner. Considering the complexity of cross-sector mobility and the lack of integrated models in current research, this method was selected to obtain detailed insights from practitioners (Australian National Audit Office, 2024).

Nine project professionals based in Australia, each having experience in at least two different sectors such as construction, healthcare, public administration, or non-profit organizations, were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. To ensure a variety of experiences and sector backgrounds, participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling. The interviews focused on key skills, enablers, and challenges faced during sectoral transitions.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic and professional backgrounds of the nine project professionals interviewed in this study. It includes details such as participant ID, sector (public, private, NGO), role (e.g., Senior Project Manager, Program Director, Sustainability Officer), years of experience, and the nature of their sector transitions. This overview highlights the diversity of participants' careers, showing mobility among public, private, and non-profit sectors, as well as intra-sector experiences. By presenting these details, the table provides a

foundation for analysing how project managers develop and apply transferable skills during cross-sector transitions.

Table 1. Professional backgrounds summarized.

Participant ID	Sector	Role	Years of experience	Sector transition experience
P1	Public	Senior project manager	12	Moved from NGO to public
P2	Private	Program director	15	Moved from private to public
P3	NGO	Project coordinator	8	Moved from Public to NGO
P4	Public	PMO analyst	10	Moved within Public only
P5	Private	Construction manager	14	Moved from tech to construction
P6	NGO	Sustainability officer	9	Moved from private to NGO
P7	Public	Policy project lead	11	Cross-sectoral project exposure
P8	Private	Tech project manager	13	Moved from engineering to tech
P9	NGO	Humanitarian project manager	10	Worked in all three sectors

An inductive-deductive coding framework was used to analyze interview transcripts thematically. Initially, codes were developed based on themes identified in the literature, such as learning agility, professional identity, and contextual adaptability. As new themes emerged from the data, they were refined iteratively. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), coding was carried out manually to ensure contextual sensitivity and deep engagement with participant narratives.

The university's relevant research ethics committee approved the study, and all participants provided informed consent. To maintain confidentiality, identifying information has been anonymized. A qualitative approach was particularly effective in capturing the interpretive and experiential aspects of cross-sector mobility, including sensemaking, identity transformation, and perceived organizational support (Madampe, Williams, & Jones, 2022).

5. Results and Findings

The following section summarises the key findings from nine in-depth interviews with project professionals who have experience working across at least two sectors. As a result of iterative coding, three main themes emerged that illustrate how transferable skills are developed and utilised during sectoral transitions: knowledge adaptability, transferable skills, and experiential learning. In addition to being consistent across participant stories, these themes provide insight into the processes that facilitate cross-sector mobility.

5.1. Knowledge Adaptability

5.1.1. Sectoral Language Acquisition

To integrate effectively, several participants stressed the importance of learning industry-specific language and norms. "It's not about learning something completely new, it's about learning how people communicate and what matters to them." Adaptive communication has been shown to build trust more quickly (Hällgren, Rouleau, & De Rond, 2018).

5.1.2. Regulatory and Contextual Awareness

It is vital to quickly grasp the specific compliance protocols and policy frameworks tied to each sector, according to several interviewees. In the words of P3, "Regulations hit hard if you do not see them coming." Research confirms that understanding the context boosts credibility and responsiveness in new settings (Haider, Asad, & Fatima, 2021).

5.2. Transferable Skillsets

5.2.1. Interpersonal and Emotional Intelligence

Having a strong sense of interpersonal and emotional intelligence is crucial. Adjusting to new sectoral environments demands interpersonal sensitivity and emotional regulation. As P5 commented, "Even when you are unfamiliar with an industry, empathy helps you lead people." Emotional intelligence has been linked to effective leadership across various fields (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018).

5.2.2. Strategic Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Effective communication has become an essential enabler of transitions. As P7 noted, "You gain trust when you understand your audience, regardless of whether they are clients, regulators, or employees." These observations are in line with Miterev, Engwall, and Jerbrant (2020), who emphasize stakeholder fluency as a key project leadership competency.

5.3. Experiential Learning and Identity Transformation

5.3.1. Learning Through Disruption

Sectoral mobility has been described as both disruptive and transformative. Throughout her narrative, P6 states: "Every move challenged how I saw myself, but that's how I grew." Such narratives highlight the importance of learning from non-linear career paths (Pells, 2023).

5.3.2. Role Reinvention and Identity Fluidity

Participants described how they have developed their professional identities over their careers. It seems that research supports this change towards more flexible professional identities when crossing borders, as P9 states: "I no longer consider myself to belong to a particular sector, but rather to a certain skill set " (Eskerod, Huemann, & Ringhofer, 2019).

5.3.3. Confidence Building through Mastery

Having mastered various projects, a sense of confidence in handling unfamiliar challenges was developed. After some time, the principles are the same; you simply tweak them. This learning mechanism is supported by Bandura's mastery experience theory and its application in project settings (P4) (Luu, 2021). Figure 1 shows the frequency of

themes identified during cross-sector transitions, illustrating how often each theme appeared across participant interviews. The figure highlights that knowledge adaptability, transferable skill sets, and experiential learning were the most common areas, emphasising their key role in successful sectoral mobility. By visually depicting the prominence of these themes, the figure supports the study’s findings on the crucial factors that enable project managers to navigate diverse professional settings.

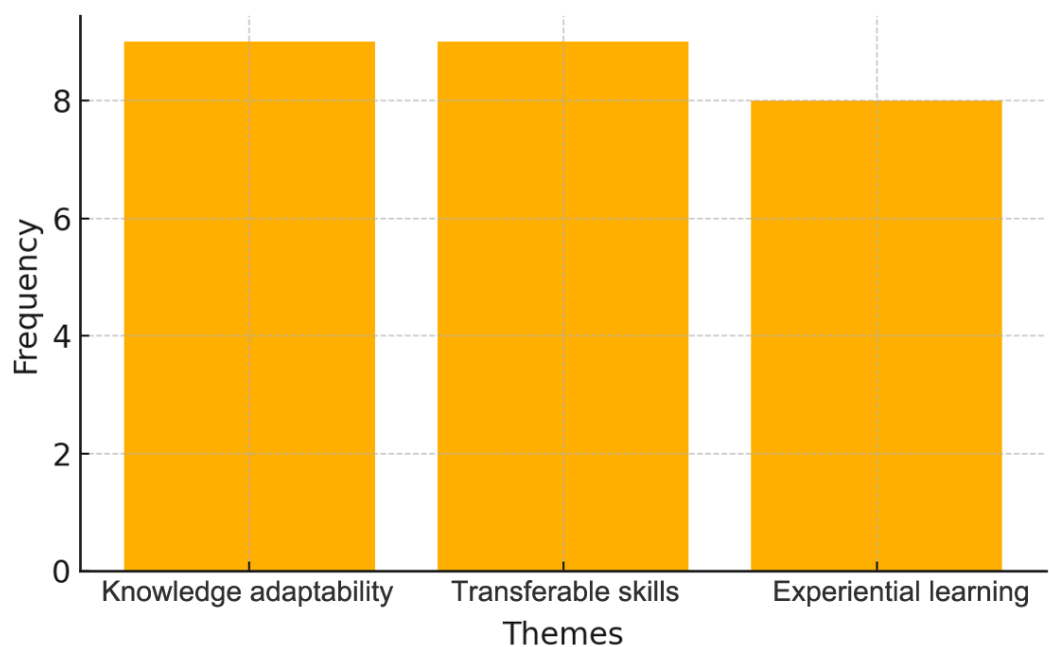


Figure 1. Theme frequency in cross-sector transitions.

6. Discussion

The study also identified the role of transferable skills, such as strategic communication, emotional intelligence, and stakeholder engagement, in helping project managers handle unfamiliar situations. Besides improving operational efficiency, these skills are essential for building credibility, trust, and legitimacy during sectoral transitions (Fuente-Sabia, Villaseñor, & Ferrer, 2023). Interpersonal skills, unlike technical abilities, can assist professionals in establishing authority and gaining acceptance in new settings, thereby speeding up their integration.

The findings show that sectoral mobility often involves periods of uncertainty and self-redefinition from a psychological and developmental point of view. This aligns with the evidence that identity transformation shaped through reflective practice and exposure to different institutional logics encourages adaptive learning and resilience in project-based careers (Dharani, 2024). Therefore, identity fluidity is not just a result of transition but also a resource that enhances professional versatility.

Additionally, the study highlights the significance of organisational legitimacy mechanisms, such as transparent information sharing, organisational listening, and cross-sector collaboration, which bolster trust and credibility when professionals assume unfamiliar roles (Kaplan & Norton, 2022). Achieving alignment between individual skills and organisational expectations supports the social integration of individuals and reduces resistance from stakeholders.

Finally, the results show that career self-efficacy affects cross-sector transitions. High self-efficacy is linked to increased motivation to take on unfamiliar roles and greater persistence in overcoming obstacles. The use of structured supports, such as fellowships, mentoring programs, and secondments, has proven to be an effective way of boosting self-efficacy and aiding the transfer of skills across industries (Borg & Scott-Young, 2023). These findings support the idea that transferable skills, identity development, organizational legitimacy, and self-efficacy are all interconnected mechanisms that influence the success of project managers in cross-sector environments.

While many of these elements have been discussed separately in existing literature, few studies have comprehensively integrated behavioural, structural, and institutional factors like this study. This paper aims to offer a multidimensional understanding of cross-sector mobility, focusing on the interaction between personal characteristics, relationship dynamics, and organisational support systems. A key mechanism for transitioning into project-based learning is identity work and confidence-building.

7. Conclusion

This study aims to explore how project professionals manage cross-sector transitions, focusing on the interaction of transferable skills, experiential learning, identity development, and institutional enablers. Successfully transitioning between sectors requires not only technical skills but also the ability to adapt, reflect, and actively engage with new organisational logics and cultural environments. The significance of learning agility and a proactive mindset for sectoral mobility emerged as key themes. Specifically, the study identified that psychological factors, such as career self-efficacy, along with formal transition mechanisms like secondments and fellowships, are crucial in building confidence and supporting professionals' integration into new fields.

Using behavioural, structural, and institutional enablers, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of cross-sector project leadership. In response to the literature's call for more cohesive frameworks, it provides new insights into how project managers can build credibility, resilience, and agility in evolving professional settings.

It is important to keep in mind certain limitations when interpreting these findings. Although the sample was diverse in sectoral backgrounds, it was geographically limited to Australia, and all participants had successfully transitioned at least once before. Researchers should explore longitudinal transition paths, including unsuccessful or abandoned moves, and compare these patterns across different countries or policy contexts in the future. This study provides insights into improving professional development, talent mobility, and leadership agility in an

increasingly dynamic, project-driven economy. Both academic understanding and practical application are supported by it.

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