

Grand Designs and the Quiet Misunderstanding of Project Management

Olivia Devereese 3 Minute Read

Anyone who has watched more than one or two episodes of Grand Designs will recognise the pattern. A bold idea, a brave budget, a timetable that is “tight but achievable”. And somewhere along the way, a homeowner becoming the de-facto project manager.

It makes great television. It also quietly reinforces the idea that project management is something anyone with enough enthusiasm can do regardless of experience and discipline, which for those of us who have spent years watching projects unravel for entirely predictable reasons, can be slightly maddening.

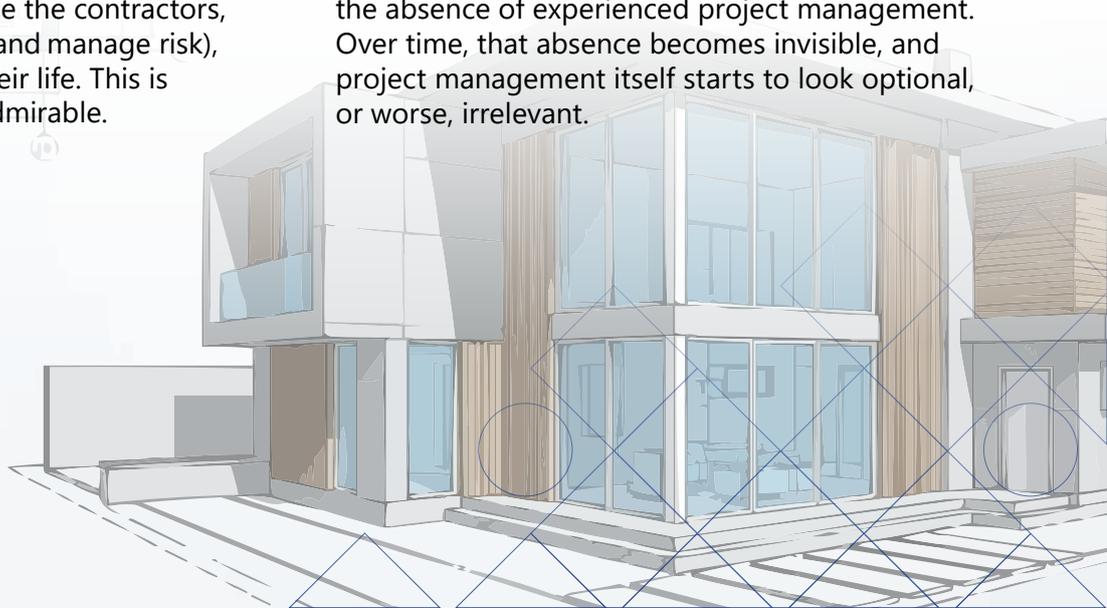
The bit the programme never says out loud

Let me start by saying, I LOVE Grand Designs. It is fantastic TV, and I’m not placing the blame for anything I’m about to write on the shoulders of the makers. That being said, I do think over the years that it has been on, it has contributed to how Project Management is seen by people in all industries, including the world of pensions (sorry Kevin McCloud!)

In Grand Designs, rarely does anyone ever formally appoint a project manager. The role just sort of... happens. The homeowner or a friend takes the decision that they will manage the contractors, budget and sequence work (and manage risk), usually for the first time in their life. This is presented as normal, even admirable.

When things go wrong, and they almost always do, the explanation is external. Planning delays, weather, supply chains, unexpected family changes. A contractor “letting them down”. What never quite gets said is that the project is being run by someone learning on the job, without the time, experience, or skill to manage a complex web of dependencies.

The result is a strange disconnect. We watch budgets blow and timelines slip, but we’re never explicitly invited to connect those outcomes to the absence of experienced project management. Over time, that absence becomes invisible, and project management itself starts to look optional, or worse, irrelevant.



Why this feels familiar to trustees

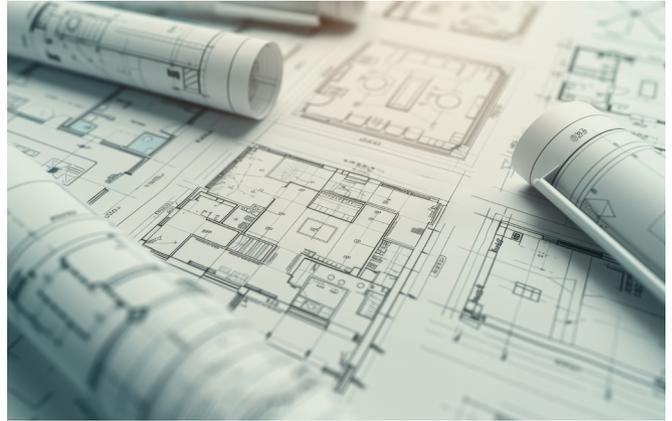
This pattern isn't confined to building sites. Pension scheme projects often start in a similar way. Everyone involved is professional, capable, and well-intentioned.

However, responsibility for "keeping things moving" is frequently given to someone whose role wasn't built for it, perhaps an administrator's client relationship manager, or a sponsor contact juggling several priorities. At first, nothing feels wrong. Milestones are agreed and progress starts being reported.

Then a small delay happens: a calculation phase might overrun. A key date might be missed. A homeowner decides that a glass staircase imported from Italy is essential. Suddenly there's rework, plan misalignment, confusion, and a growing sense that the project has become harder than anyone expected. Like *Grand Designs*, the explanation is usually "complexity". Rarely is it framed as what it often is: a project that never had someone properly holding the reins and looking at it holistically.

This is where a good Project Manager adds real value. Not by doing the technical work, but by keeping everything moving in the right order, at the right pace. Without experienced project management, a pension scheme exercise might start to feel like an episode of the show halfway through winter – good intentions, plenty of activity, but somehow a critical step has been missed and the roof still isn't on.

Grand Designs is full of moments where a 'small' late change; a glass staircase, a custom-made imported bathtub, a floor-to ceiling window for example, set off a chain reaction. This is where a strong change control process will come into play. A project manager will look beyond the idea itself and ask what impact it has on the whole project: the cost, timescale and resources that will be affected, and what now no longer fits into the original plan. Without that governance in place, changes are agreed in isolation and things start to snowball. Not because the idea was wrong, but because nobody joined up the consequences.



A project manager brings structure where there is often just a list of milestones, will identify and remove silos where advisers might be focused only on their own piece of work, and keep a close eye on timings so small slips don't become big problems. These are the things that stop a well-intentioned exercise from drifting off course when the weather turns.

In summary

Grand Designs is compelling because it celebrates ambition and persistence. It just happens to also undervalue project management as a role that anyone can pick up along the way.

For trustees, the takeaway isn't that projects are doomed to fail, or that advisers aren't doing their jobs. It's that complex, interdependent work benefits from someone whose sole focus is sequencing, risk, and delivery, preferably before things start to wobble.

Project management isn't glamorous. It doesn't make good television. But when it's missing, the effects tend to show up eventually, usually in the timetable, the budget, and the stakeholder experience.



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