

Effects of Using a Big Project Picture on Team Motivation

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Abstract

Contemporary project environments involve increasing complexity and psychological demands, while mental health remains underrepresented in project management research. This article presents the big project picture as a holistic visual approach to enhance shared understanding and reduce uncertainty in projects. Based on qualitative expert interviews, a study conducted by the author shows that its collaborative use supports orientation, reduces stress, and strengthens employee motivation, positioning it as a promising psychological support mechanism in project work.

Keywords: Mental health in the workplace, Employee motivation, Psychological well-being, Stress reduction, Burnout prevention, Visual management tools, Project management, Big project picture

Introduction & Background

Key characteristics of contemporary project environments include increasing complexity, dynamic requirements, and intensified cognitive and emotional demands on project employees. Identified stress factors in project work include unclear objectives, fragmented communication, and frequent changes in project conditions. These stressors can contribute to reduced motivation, increased psychological strain, and, in severe cases, lead to exhaustion and even burnout [1,2]. Despite these developments, traditional project management research and practice have predominantly focused on efficiency, planning accuracy, and performance indicators, while the mental health of project employees has received comparatively limited systematic attention.

Recent literature increasingly has conceptualized projects as social systems embedded in dynamic organizational and environmental contexts [3]. From this perspective, human factors such as shared understanding, communication quality, team culture, and the perceived meaningfulness of work emerge as critical determinants of sustainable project success. Studies consistently demonstrate that soft success factors and human factors—particularly motivation, identification, and engagement—are closely linked to employee well-being and productivity [4,5]. However, in

today's uncertain and dynamic environments, established project management approaches continue to rely heavily on text-based documentation and linear planning models, which often increase cognitive load and fail to adequately support psychological orientation, especially in complex and multicultural project settings [4].

Parallel research in cognitive psychology and visual communication shows that visual representations enhance comprehension, reduce cognitive effort, and evoke emotional engagement [6]. Thus, companies in domains such as healthcare and change management increasingly apply visual tools to support understanding and strengthen emotional stability [7,8]. The systematic and structured application of visual tools as mental health-supportive instruments in project management, however, remains underexplored.

This article posits that the use of a Big Project Picture as a holistic visual representation of a project—can positively influence project employee motivation and psychological well-being by reducing ambiguity, fostering shared meaning, and supporting cognitive and emotional orientation. Based on qualitative expert interviews, it is examined how this visual method of a Big Project Picture can be transferred into project practice to address mental health-relevant challenges in contemporary project environments [9].

The Big Project Picture Explained

Project management as a high-pressure work environment

Project management is commonly defined as the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet defined objectives within the constraints of time, cost, scope, and quality [1]. While this definition captures the formal and technical aspects of projects, it only partially reflects the lived reality of project work. In practice, projects operate under conditions of high uncertainty, rapidly changing requirements, and continuous stakeholder pressure, making them inherently stress-intensive and psychologically demanding environments for those involved.

Projects are typically characterized by tight deadlines, interdependencies across organizational units, limited resources, and frequent changes in scope or priorities. From a systemic perspective, projects can be understood as temporary social systems that must constantly adapt to internal and external influences [3]. For project employees, this results in elevated cognitive demands, emotional strain, and a persistent need to make sense of complex and often ambiguous situations. Research indicates that unclear goals, a lack of shared understanding, and fragmented communication significantly contribute to stress, overload, and reduced psychological well-being in project-based work [1].

Traditional project management approaches attempt to cope with this pressure primarily through documentation, control mechanisms, and formalized processes. However, these instruments are often text-heavy, fragmented, and difficult to integrate into daily project work, thereby unintentionally increasing cognitive load rather than reducing it. Against this background, there is a growing need for approaches that support orientation, shared meaning, and psychological relief in complex project environments.

Definition of the big project picture

The Big Project Picture is a holistic visual representation that integrates a project's central dimensions—such as objectives, key stakeholders, requirements, deliverables, interdependencies, constraints, and environmental influences—into a single, coherent image. Its primary purpose is not detailed planning or task control, but the creation of a shared understanding and orientation across the project system.

Unlike traditional project documentation, which distributes information across multiple artifacts (e.g., requirement documents, schedules, risk logs), the Big Project Picture provides an at-a-glance overview of the project as a whole. By visualizing relationships and dependencies, it enables

project employees to understand how individual tasks, roles, and decisions contribute to the overarching project purpose. This holistic perspective supports sensemaking in complex environments and reduces ambiguity, a key driver of psychological strain in project work [6].

From a mental health perspective, the Big Project Picture functions as a cognitive and emotional stabilizer. Visual representations are processed more efficiently than text, require less mental effort, and enhance memory retention [10]. By making complexity visible and structured, the Big Project Picture reduces perceived overload, strengthens perceived control, and fosters identification with the project. It also serves as a shared reference point that facilitates communication across hierarchical, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries, thereby mitigating misunderstandings and uncertainty [4].

Applying the big project picture in practice

To achieve maximum effect, the Big Project Picture should be developed and applied within a structured, collaborative workshop, ideally in the early phase of a project. In the empirical study underlying this article, practitioners describe workshop settings in which project team members jointly create the Big Project Picture under facilitation by the project lead. These workshops typically involve the identification and visual mapping of core project elements such as purpose, success criteria, key stakeholders, major dependencies, risks, and contextual constraints [9].

The collaborative nature of the workshop is essential. By actively involving project employees in the creation process, the visualization becomes a shared mental model rather than a top-down artifact. This participatory approach fosters psychological safety and open communication [3]. Participants reported that the visual format encouraged open dialogue, made implicit assumptions visible, and enabled contributions from team members who might otherwise remain silent—particularly in multicultural or interdisciplinary teams [9].

Importantly, the Big Project Picture is not conceived as a one-time deliverable. Rather, it functions as a living orientation tool that is continuously revisited and adapted throughout the project lifecycle, especially during phases of change or increased pressure. Used consistently, it complements established project management methods while directly addressing mental health-relevant risk factors such as uncertainty, cognitive overload, and loss of meaning in project work.

Effects on Employee Motivation

The empirical findings of the study demonstrate that the application of a Big Project Picture exerts a substantial

and multidimensional influence on employee motivation, primarily through its effects on orientation, stress reduction, and perceived meaningfulness of work [9]. These dimensions are closely connected to core determinants of psychological well-being in project-based work environments to avoid an overwhelmed project team. Particularly under conditions of increasing complexity and dynamic change, creative and alternative methods support solution-orientated collaboration [11].

Orientation and cognitive clarity

A recurring theme across the interviews with project managers and team leaders conducted in the study by Fichtinger (2025) [9] was the problem of insufficient orientation in complex projects. Prior to using a Big Project Picture, participants described their work environment as fragmented, cognitively demanding, and characterized by unclear goal structures and shifting priorities [9]. These conditions correspond to the challenges identified in the theoretical part of the thesis, particularly regarding requirements management and the lack of a shared understanding of objectives [9].

The interview results indicate that a Big Project Picture significantly enhances cognitive clarity and shared orientation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that holistic visualization allowed them to perceive the project as a system rather than as a set of disconnected tasks. This aligns with the conceptual definition of the Big Project Picture as “a visualization of the entirety of project dimensions and their interrelations, designed to create a common understanding among all project participants” [9].

One interviewee emphasized that after the introduction of the Big Project Picture, project discussions became more focused and efficient, as all team members referred to a common visual frame of reference. Similarly, another Project Manager reported that misunderstandings and repeated explanations were significantly reduced once the team began working with a shared visual representation [9].

This enhanced orientation is directly relevant to employee motivation, as clarity regarding goals and individual contributions represents a core motivational driver and prerequisite for sustained engagement and productivity.

Stress reduction and psychological relief

The interviews further revealed that the Big Project Picture contributes significantly to stress reduction. Theoretical findings in the thesis identify cognitive overload, complexity, and dynamic environments as major stress factors in project work, often leading to exhaustion and burnout [9]. These risks were repeatedly confirmed by the interview partners. Long project meetings and workshops were perceived as mentally exhausting and emotionally draining due to the volume of

fragmented documentation and constant changes. After introducing the visualization, a reduction in tension during meetings was reported together with an increased sense of direction and understanding of the project's objectives. These observations correspond to the theoretical framework of the psychological and emotional impact of visualizations, which emphasizes their capacity to reduce cognitive load, improve comprehension, and support emotional regulation [12].

Moreover, the collaborative creation of the Big Project Picture—typically conducted in a start workshop or kick-off meeting—was identified as a central stress-mitigating factor. One interviewee explicitly recommended separating the development of a strategic project vision from the operational Big Project Picture and involving different stakeholder groups in both processes to reduce pressure and uncertainty. While principals and management stakeholders gather high-level objectives, strategic direction, and core metrics, the project team gets to focus on user value and the operational path to accomplishing the goals within the constraints [9]. Such a participatory approach fosters psychological safety, open communication, and trust-factors that directly influence mental well-being and motivation [3].

Strengthening motivation and meaning

The strongest effects of the Big Project Picture emerged in relation to employee motivation and a sense of meaningfulness. Theoretical considerations indicate and empirical data demonstrate that visualizing the project context enhances identification with the project and strengthens employees' emotional connection to their work [9].

The interviews emphasized that employee engagement increases when individuals can see how their contributions influence the overall project outcome. A collaborative development of a Big Project Picture enables team members to perceive their work as meaningful rather than as isolated tasks [9]. These findings align with the thesis' argument that visualizations “create meaning by showing employees how their work contributes to overall project success, thereby strengthening identification with the project” [9].

Furthermore, the continuous use of the Big Project Picture throughout the project lifecycle – through regular revisiting, updating, and central display – was identified as a stabilizing motivational factor [9]. This practice supports long-term sustained engagement, even under conditions of high workload and time pressure, by maintaining a shared sense of purpose and progress.

In summary, the Big Project Picture influences employee motivation through three mechanisms: (1) enhanced cognitive orientation and clarity, (2) the reduction of stress and psychological strain, and (3) strengthening of meaning, identification, and intrinsic motivation.

These effects directly address the mental health-relevant risk factors identified in contemporary project environments, such as complexity, uncertainty, emotional overload, and burnout [9]. The results therefore support the central thesis that the Big Project Picture represents not merely a management tool, but a psychological support mechanism that fosters healthier, more motivated, and more resilient project teams.

Methodical & practical limitations

Methodological limitations of this study arise primarily from its qualitative research design. The findings are based on a limited number of expert interviews and therefore do not claim representativeness; selection and response biases cannot be excluded. Moreover, it remains unclear to what extent the reported effects can be attributed to the Big Project Picture as a visual artifact, the facilitated workshop process, or the role and expertise of external visualization consultants. Possible placebo or Hawthorne effects, as well as facilitator-related influences, were not systematically controlled.

The results allow for cautious statements regarding potential generalizability, particularly at the theoretical level. However, empirically robust validation requires further independent studies based on broader datasets. Accordingly, the findings should be regarded as exploratory and as a starting point for future research.

Practical limitations concern the feasibility and transferability of the proposed application model. The development of a Big Project Picture is relatively resource-intensive, requiring several hours of workshop time and, in many cases, the involvement of external experts, which increases costs. Teams with limited experience in visual working methods may face cultural resistance or challenges in maintaining the visual artifact, particularly in highly dynamic or remote project environments. While interview data suggest potential long-term benefits, no empirical cost-benefit analysis or case-based validation was conducted.

Conclusion & Suggestion

The study on which this article is based [9] demonstrates that the Big Project Picture represents a high potential, yet under-utilized intervention in project environments for addressing the challenges of complexity, uncertainty, and high psychological demands in contemporary project environments. The empirical findings show that its application significantly enhances employee motivation by improving orientation and shared understanding, reducing cognitive and emotional strain, and strengthening perceived meaning and identification with project work. These effects directly address key mental health-relevant risk factors such as ambiguity, overload, stress, and disengagement in project-based organizations.

Rather than functioning merely as a visual management tool, the Big Project Picture operates as a psychological support mechanism within project systems. By externalizing complexity into an integrated and accessible visual representation, it enables employees to regain a sense of control, coherence, and purpose fundamental prerequisites for sustained motivation and psychological well-being. The collaborative creation and continuous use of the Big Project Picture further reinforce psychological safety, participation, and trust, thereby strengthening team resilience under conditions of high pressure.

In practice, organizations are encouraged to apply the implementation guideline proposed in the original study [9] to realize the identified benefits of the Big Project Picture. The visual artifact should be introduced in early project phases and continuously adapted through structured feedback cycles to fit specific project contexts and team needs. Its effectiveness can be monitored through regular reflective sessions and qualitative participant feedback, enabling context-sensitive refinement over the project lifecycle.

For future research, quantitative studies could further examine the long-term mental health impacts of working with a Big Project Picture on indicators such as burnout, engagement, and job satisfaction across different industries and project types. Additionally, longitudinal research may provide deeper insights into how visual orientation tools influence psychological resilience and team performance over extended project durations.

In conclusion, strengthening mental health in project environments requires more than procedural optimization—it demands tools that support human cognition, emotion, and meaningfulness at work, including a sense of purpose. The Big Project Picture may offer a practical contribution to this challenge.

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