



Project Governance and AI Adoption Readiness: Qualitative Study of Sri Lankan Software Industries

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Abstract

This research investigates the current state of project governance structures within Sri Lanka's software industry and assesses organizational readiness for Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption in project governance. It addresses the misalignment between existing governance practices and AI's transformative capabilities, leading to inefficient AI integration and missed opportunities. Using a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews with 10 professionals from Sri Lankan software companies, the study identifies challenges and barriers to the effective integration of AI tools into existing governance frameworks. The findings inform actionable recommendations for enhancing AI-driven project governance, aligning with Sri Lanka's unique socio-economic context and globally recognized best practices. The study provides critical insights that enable Sri Lankan software firms to effectively integrate AI into their project governance frameworks, fostering sustainable digital transformation and enhancing global competitiveness. Furthermore, this study addresses gaps in the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on AI adoption challenges specific to the Sri Lankan software industry. It offers practical guidance on aligning project governance frameworks with AI capabilities, which is essential for software firms in emerging economies seeking to leverage AI to improve project outcomes. The research also contributes to the broader understanding of organizational readiness factors that influence successful AI integration in project governance.

Keywords: AI Adoption, Governance, Project Management, Software Industries

Introduction

Project governance, defined as the framework of policies, procedures, and decision-making structures guiding project execution, is a critical determinant of project success, particularly in the dynamic software sector (Ahola & Wikstrom, 2014). Effective project governance ensures alignment with strategic organizational goals, mitigation of inherent project risks (Hillson, 2009; Ward & Chapman, 2003), and the satisfaction of diverse project stakeholders (Aaltonen et al., 2015; Freeman, 1984; Olander & Landin, 2005). Sri Lanka's software industry, recognised as a growing contributor to the national economy (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, n.d.), faces unique governance challenges amid rapid technological advancements. The absence of robust governance frameworks can lead to project delays, cost overruns, and compromised quality (Khan et al., 2019).

Globally, artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming project governance through enhanced predictive analytics capabilities, automated decision-making processes, and streamlined stakeholder engagement (FUDA & Roccatagliata, 2022; Mikhaylov, 2021). AI's ability to process vast datasets and identify patterns can significantly improve project forecasting and resource allocation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Davenport & Kirby, 2016). However, the readiness of Sri Lankan software firms to effectively adopt and integrate AI-driven governance approaches remains underexplored mainly, despite the sector's strategic emphasis on digital transformation initiatives and the potential for AI to enhance project outcomes.

The integration of AI into project governance promises increased efficiency, reduced human biases in decision-making, and improved real-time adaptability to changing project conditions (Davenport & Kirby, 2016; Wang, 2019). Nonetheless, successful AI adoption depends heavily on organizational readiness, encompassing sufficient technological infrastructure, the availability of skilled personnel, and the presence of a supportive organizational culture (Lokuge & et al., 2019). While existing studies highlight governance deficits in other sectors within Sri Lanka (Ismail & et al., 2023; Khan & et al., 2019), limited research has specifically examined the nuances of project governance and AI adoption preparedness within the software industry. Furthermore, existing AI adoption frameworks often neglect contextual factors specific to emerging markets such as Sri Lanka, where resource constraints and skill gaps may pose unique obstacles (Papagiannidis et al., 2023).

This research addresses a crucial problem: the potential misalignment between existing project governance practices in Sri Lankan software industries and the transformative capabilities of AI. Fragmented governance structures, potentially evidenced by inadequate risk planning, communication gaps among stakeholders, and misaligned priorities, may significantly hinder the effective leveraging of AI technologies (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2018). Current literature on the application of AI in project management may lack the contextual understanding necessary for successful implementation within the Sri Lankan software industry (Gil et al., 2021; Mikhaylov, 2021). This gap creates a considerable risk of inefficient AI integration, missed opportunities to improve project outcomes, and potential project failures due to inadequate governance.

To address this gap, this research is guided by the following objectives:

- (1) To analyze the current state of project governance structures within Sri Lankan software industries, focusing on established policies, stakeholder roles, and prevailing decision-making processes;
- (2) To evaluate the organizational readiness of these industries for AI adoption in project governance, assessing technological infrastructure, skill availability, and cultural preparedness;
- (3) To identify specific challenges and barriers that may limit the effective integration of AI tools into existing governance frameworks; and
- (4) To propose actionable recommendations for enhancing AI-driven project governance, aligning with Sri Lanka's unique socio-economic context and globally recognized best practices.

This study aims to provide critical insights that will enable Sri Lankan software firms to effectively integrate AI into their project governance frameworks, thereby fostering sustainable digital transformation and enhancing their competitiveness in the global market.

Literature Review

Project Governance: Foundations and Frameworks

Project governance provides the structural foundation for directing and controlling projects, extending beyond traditional project management to encompass organizational strategy and stakeholder engagement (Ahola et al., 2014; Derakhshan et al., 2019; Kerzner, 2017; Müller et al., 2014). Effective governance ensures that projects align with strategic objectives, that resources are optimised, and that intended benefits are realised (Ward & Daniel, 2012; Young & Grant, 2015).

A variety of frameworks emphasize the importance of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes throughout the project lifecycle. For instance, Klakegg et al. (2008) and Winch (2001) describe governance mechanisms for public- and private-sector projects, respectively. Aubry et al. (2010, 2011) further expand on the evolution of project management structures, while Biesenthal and Wilden (2014) highlight the influence of both internal and external environments on multi-level governance. These studies collectively underscore the need for governance approaches that are context-specific and adaptable to project complexity.

Recent research has recognized that governance structures must evolve alongside organizational maturity and project complexity. Notably, Brunet (2019) and Brunet & Aubry (2016) examine governance-as-practice in significant infrastructure projects, while Lappi & Aaltonen (2017) and Serrador & Pinto (2015) explore governance in agile and public sector projects. Crawford (2014) cautions that overly rigid governance can stifle innovation, emphasizing the importance of adaptability in governance frameworks.

Table 1: Key Dimensions of Project Governance Frameworks

Dimension	Description	Key References
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Strategic Alignment	The degree to which project goals align with the broader organizational strategy.	Ahola et al. (2014), Kerzner (2017), Young & Grant (2015)
Risk Management	The processes and practices used to identify, assess, and mitigate project risks.	Hillson (2009), Perminova et al. (2008), Ward & Chapman (2003)
Stakeholder Engagement	The strategies and techniques used to communicate with and manage stakeholder expectations.	Aaltonen et al. (2015), Freeman (1984), Olander & Landin (2005), Rowlinson & Cheung (2008)
Decision-Making Processes	The mechanisms by which decisions are made throughout the project lifecycle.	Klakegg et al. (2008), Müller & Lecoeuvre (2014), Winch (2001)

Stakeholder Engagement and Project Success

Stakeholder engagement is a central component of effective project governance and a key determinant of project success (Freeman, 1984; Aaltonen et al., 2015; Rowlinson & Cheung, 2008). Stakeholders influence project outcomes through their expectations, power dynamics, and level of involvement. Olander and Landin (2005) provide methods for evaluating stakeholder influence, while Aaltonen et al. (2008) discuss stakeholder salience in global projects. In agile environments, McGrath and Whitty (2019) highlight the importance of stakeholder-defined success criteria.

Open communication, collaboration, and proactive management of stakeholder concerns are essential for mitigating agency conflicts and ensuring project success (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2018). The literature also underscores the evolving role of project managers in shaping success (Joslin & Müller, 2016; Müller & Turner, 2007) and the importance of managing risk attitudes within stakeholder groups (Hillson & Murray-Webster, 2007).

Table 2: Examples of Stakeholder Engagement Strategies.

Strategy	Description	Potential Benefits	Key References
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Stakeholder Identification and Analysis	Identifying all stakeholders and analyzing their interests, influence, and potential impact on the project.	Improved understanding of stakeholder needs and expectations, enabling targeted engagement strategies.	Aaltonen et al. (2015); Freeman (1984); Olander & Landin (2005)
Communication Planning	Developing a communication plan that outlines how and when stakeholders will be informed about project progress and key decisions.	Increased transparency and trust, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflicts.	Derakhshan et al. (2019); Rowlinson & Cheung (2008)
Consultation and Collaboration	Actively seeking stakeholder input and involving them in decision-making processes.	Greater stakeholder buy-in and support for the project, leading to improved outcomes.	Aaltonen et al. (2015); McGrath & Whitty (2019)
Proactive Issue Management	Identifying and promptly addressing stakeholder concerns effectively.	Minimized negative impact on project progress and stakeholder satisfaction.	Derakhshan et al. (2019); Hillson & Murray-Webster (2007)

Artificial Intelligence in Project Management and Governance

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly recognized as a transformative force in project management and governance (Dwivedi et al., 2021). AI applications range from risk assessment and mitigation (Hillson, 2009; Perminova et al., 2008; Ward & Chapman, 2003) to resource optimization, automated reporting, and enhanced decision-making. Levitt and Kunz (1987) were early proponents of using AI techniques to support project management tasks. FUDA and Roccatagliata (2022) have proposed conceptual frameworks for multi-level project governance empowered by AI. Hofmann et al. (2020) provide methods for developing purposeful AI use cases in project management.

By evaluating large datasets and offering predictive insights, artificial intelligence (AI) can improve decision-making (Wang et al., 2018; Wang, 2019). Project managers can concentrate on strategic activities by using it to automate repetitive work (Davenport & Kirby, 2016; Weng, 2023). The

application of AI smart tools in projects is covered by Lokhande (2022). An overview of the use of artificial intelligence in project management research is provided by Gil et al. (2021). But there are drawbacks to using AI in project management, including concerns about data privacy, ethical dilemmas, and the need for qualified staff (Schuett & Baum, 2020). The use of AI tools is systematically reviewed by Momade et al. (2021). Ismail et al. (2023) explain the Jordanian banking system's digital revolution. Wang (2019) examines how to apply AI technology in project management. Sharma et al. (2009) conducted research on IT governance and project management. Papagiannidis et al. (2016) discusses ethical AI applications in business decision-making.

Organizational Readiness for AI Adoption

Successful AI adoption requires organisational readiness, encompassing technological infrastructure, data quality, employee skills, and a supportive organisational culture (Lokuge et al., 2019; Papagiannidis et al., 2021). Lokuge et al. (2019) developed and validated a construct to measure organisational readiness for digital innovation. Papagiannidis et al. (2023) explore best practices and potential barriers to AI governance. Davenport and Prusak (1998) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) highlight the importance of knowledge management in creating a learning organization that can adapt to technological change. Rahimi et al. (2016) describe business process management and IT management. Liebowitz and Beckman (1998) explored knowledge organizations. Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2016) examine the digital work research agenda.

The Sri Lankan Software Industry Context

The software sector in Sri Lanka is expanding and has the potential to make a substantial economic contribution to the country (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, n.d.). However, the industry faces obstacles such as rivalry from other nations, infrastructure limitations, and restricted access to skilled workers (World Bank, 2017). Although governance challenges in other sectors of Sri Lanka have been studied by scholars such as Khan et al. (2019), little is known about the unique potential and challenges of project governance and AI adoption in the software industry.

Gaps in the Literature and Research Directions

There are still a few gaps in the growing field of AI and project governance research. First, additional research is needed to understand how AI can be practically applied in project governance, especially in emerging economies. Second, further research is needed to identify the specific organisational and cultural factors driving the software industry's adoption of AI.

Lastly, further research is needed to develop customised frameworks for AI-driven project governance that account for the specific opportunities and challenges faced by software companies in Sri Lanka. By investigating the current state of project governance in Sri Lankan software firms and assessing their preparedness for AI adoption, this study seeks to address these gaps.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, guided by Saunders' research onion framework, to explore project governance and AI adoption readiness in Sri Lanka's software industry. The research philosophy is rooted in interpretivism, which emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences and organizational contexts of participants, an approach well-suited for examining the nuanced, context-dependent nature of governance and technological change.

Research Design and Sampling

An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data rather than imposing preconceived frameworks. The study focused on Sri Lanka's software sector as a bounded system to ensure findings were contextually relevant.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 professionals, including project managers, AI specialists, and senior project executives, working in both local and foreign-owned software companies, ranging from large enterprises to SMEs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives relevant to project governance and AI adoption. The sample size of 10 was determined based on data saturation, in which additional interviews were unlikely to yield new themes or insights (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This approach is widely accepted in qualitative research for achieving thematic sufficiency.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place between March and May 2024. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams to accommodate participant preferences and ensure accessibility across different regions of Sri Lanka. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and followed a flexible guide that covered topics such as current governance frameworks, AI integration challenges, and indicators of organisational readiness. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Secondary data, including academic articles, industry reports, and policy documents, were used to contextualize findings, triangulate themes, and support interpretation of the primary data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Coding was performed manually using an open coding process to identify meaningful segments in the transcripts. These codes were then grouped into broader categories (axial coding), and overarching themes were developed through iterative discussion among the research team. Selective coding was used in the final stage to refine and relate themes directly to the research questions.

To enhance trustworthiness, a second researcher independently coded a subset of transcripts, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion, ensuring consistency and inter-coder reliability. The use of secondary data further supported the triangulation and validation of emergent themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was protected by assigning coded identifiers. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes.

This rigorous qualitative methodology, combining purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and systematic thematic analysis, ensures a comprehensive, contextually grounded investigation of project governance and AI readiness in Sri Lanka's software sector. The approach provides robust and actionable insights for both academic and industry stakeholders.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of governance practices in Sri Lankan software firms reveals a pattern of deficiencies that closely align with, and in some cases extend, the challenges identified in the project governance literature (Ahola et al., 2014; Müller et al., 2014; Klakegg et al., 2008). While participants broadly recognise the need for structured governance, prevailing approaches are characterised by rigidity and centralised decision-making. These two themes are closely intertwined: as reported by both ORG01 and ORG02, rigid frameworks often reinforce top-down control, which in turn stifles the adaptability required for successful AI integration. This finding echoes Crawford's (2014) caution that inflexible governance can hinder innovation and supports the literature on the need for agile, adaptive frameworks in software project management (Lappi & Aaltonen, 2017; Serrador & Pinto, 2015).

Moreover, this pattern of rigidity and centralisation directly contradicts the principles of agile governance, which emphasise iterative development, rapid feedback cycles, and decentralised authority, features widely recognised as essential for the successful adoption of AI and other digital innovations (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hofmann et al., 2020). The lack of flexibility not only impedes the ability to respond to changing project requirements but also limits opportunities for experimentation and learning, both of which are critical in the context of emerging technologies (Davenport & Kirby, 2016). These findings reinforce the argument that traditional governance models, while providing structure, may inadvertently create barriers to digital transformation if not adapted to contemporary project environments. As such, the Sri Lankan software sector's experience exemplifies the broader challenges faced by organizations in emerging markets, where legacy governance practices may lag behind the demands of rapid technological change and evolving client expectations (Papagiannidis et al., 2023; World Bank, 2017).

Table 3 summarizes the key governance challenges and their impact on AI readiness, with illustrative quotes from participants.

Governance Challenge (Merged/Linked)	Description & Illustrative Quotes	Impact on AI Adoption Readiness	Link to Literature

Rigid, Centralized Governance	“Our governance framework is quite traditional, and it does not accommodate the fast changes that happen in software development projects.” (ORG01); “The decisions are always made by the senior management...” (ORG01); “The decision-making process is too centralized...” (ORG04)	Limits flexibility and slows decision-making, hindering experimentation and rapid iteration, both essential to AI projects.	Contradicts agile principles (Serrador & Pinto, 2015); stifles innovation (Crawford, 2014).
Limited Stakeholder Involvement	“Clients are mostly involved at the beginning and end of the project, but their feedback is not integrated regularly throughout the project lifecycle...” (ORG02)	Risks misalignment of AI solutions with client needs; reduces feedback loops vital for successful implementation.	Supports stakeholder salience theory (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Freeman, 1984); undermines engagement best practices (Olander & Landin, 2005).
Inadequate Project Monitoring & Tools	“We use basic project management tools like spreadsheets and emails...” (ORG01); “There is no unified system for monitoring projects...” (ORG02)	Hampers real-time monitoring and adaptive control, leading to inefficient AI adoption.	Contrasts with recommendations for digital tool adoption (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hofmann et al., 2020).
Reactive Risk Management	“Risk management is not systematic. We address risks as they come...” (ORG03); “Our risk assessments are not regular...” (ORG05)	Increases risk of unforeseen challenges derailing AI projects.	Reinforces the need for proactive risk management (Hillson, 2009; Perminova et al., 2008).

Ineffective Communication	“Communication within the team is often through WhatsApp or email...” (ORG01); “Information does not always flow smoothly...” (ORG04)	Leads to misunderstandings and delays, which are critical barriers in complex AI initiatives.	Echoes findings on the importance of formal communication channels (Derakhshan et al., 2019).
Lack of Standardization	“There is no consistency in how governance is applied across our projects...” (ORG01); “Governance practices are very different between projects...” (ORG02)	Creates difficulties in scaling and replicating AI solutions.	Supports the call for standardized governance frameworks (Klakegg et al., 2008; Aubry et al., 2010).
Resource Allocation Issues	“The resource distribution problem arises very often...” (ORG05)	Limits capacity for AI experimentation and implementation.	Consistent with organizational readiness literature (Lokuge et al., 2019; Papagiannidis et al., 2021).

Contrasting and Divergent Views

While most participants highlighted governance deficiencies, a minority described positive experiences. For instance, ORG07, representing a foreign-owned SME, reported more adaptive governance and early experimentation with AI:

“We have a flexible governance model that allows us to pilot new AI tools quickly. Decisions are made within project teams, not just by management.” (ORG07)

Similarly, ORG09 noted that their firm had recently adopted standardized digital project management tools, improving monitoring and stakeholder communication. These contrasting cases suggest that firm size, ownership structure, and exposure to international best practices can foster more progressive governance and AI readiness findings that align with the literature on organizational maturity and digital transformation (Papagiannidis et al., 2023; World Bank, 2017).

Thematic Integration and Synthesis

The challenges identified are not isolated; they form a web of interrelated barriers. For example, rigid, centralised governance (merged into one theme) not only delays decision-making but also discourages stakeholder engagement and experimentation, both of which are essential for AI adoption (Davenport & Kirby, 2016). Inadequate tools and communication further compound these issues, underscoring the need for integrated, standardised, and agile governance frameworks, as advocated in the literature (Aubry et al., 2010; Lappi & Aaltonen, 2017).

Implications for Theory and Practice

These findings reinforce and extend existing frameworks by providing empirical evidence from an emerging market context. The results support calls for adaptive, participatory governance and highlight the importance of organisational readiness, particularly in resource allocation, tool adoption, and communication structures, for successful AI integration. The presence of a few firms with more agile practices suggests that change is possible and that best practices can be adopted more widely.

Addressing these multifaceted governance gaps is essential for Sri Lankan software firms seeking to leverage AI to improve project outcomes and competitiveness. The study's findings not only validate but also contextualize global governance and AI adoption frameworks, offering actionable insights for both practitioners and policymakers in emerging economies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has identified a set of interconnected project governance challenges, namely rigidity, centralised decision-making, limited stakeholder engagement, inadequate monitoring tools, reactive risk management, ineffective communication, lack of standardisation, and resource allocation issues, that collectively undermine the readiness of Sri Lankan software firms for AI adoption and global competitiveness. These findings reinforce and extend established governance and digital transformation literature, demonstrating that such deficiencies are systemic and require coordinated, strategic intervention.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study's findings are shaped by its methodological choices. The sample size was limited to ten professionals, which, while sufficient for thematic saturation in qualitative inquiry, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within Sri Lanka's software sector. Additionally, the study's focus on a single national context limits the generalizability of its conclusions to other emerging markets. Future research using larger or comparative samples could further validate and extend these insights.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research advances theoretical understanding by providing empirical evidence on how entrenched governance practices in emerging markets can impede digital transformation, particularly AI adoption. It contributes to the literature by contextualising project governance and AI-readiness frameworks to

the realities of Sri Lankan software firms, offering a model for similar economies. In practice, the study delivers actionable guidance for managers and policymakers seeking to align governance structures with the demands of contemporary AI-driven project environments.

Prioritized Recommendations

1. Adopt Agile and Decentralized Governance Models (Urgent)

Transitioning from rigid, hierarchical structures to agile, team-empowered models is foundational. This shift will foster innovation, accelerate decision-making, and support the iterative processes essential for AI projects.

2. Invest in Integrated Project Management Tools (Urgent)

Implementing digital platforms for real-time monitoring, automated reporting, and streamlined communication is critical to overcoming current inefficiencies and enabling effective AI integration.

3. Enhance Stakeholder Engagement (Foundational)

Establishing continuous feedback loops with clients and internal stakeholders ensures that AI solutions are relevant, accepted, and aligned with business needs.

4. Formalize and Proactively Manage Risk (Foundational)

Developing systematic risk management processes will reduce project disruptions and increase the likelihood of successful AI implementation.

5. Standardize Governance Practices across Projects (Supportive)

Creating clear, organization-wide governance guidelines will promote efficiency, facilitate resource sharing, and enable the scaling of successful AI initiatives.

6. Optimize Resource Allocation and Build AI Capabilities (Supportive)

Prioritizing investment in personnel, training, and technology will ensure teams have the skills and resources necessary for sustainable digital transformation.

Focusing on these prioritised actions will enable Sri Lankan software firms to establish more resilient, adaptive project governance structures while accelerating their readiness for AI adoption. As these improvements take hold, organizations will be better equipped to overcome existing barriers, respond to technological advancements, and leverage AI-driven opportunities. Ultimately, such a strategic transformation will foster sustainable growth, stimulate innovation, and position Sri Lankan firms to compete more effectively on the global stage.

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