

Inside Construction Delivery

A structured framework for understanding what drives project outcomes in major construction and infrastructure delivery

INTRODUCTION

Major construction and infrastructure projects are complex by nature. They involve multiple parties, significant capital, long delivery horizons, and continuous uncertainty. Despite that complexity, the patterns behind project success and failure are remarkably consistent.

Across projects of different types, sizes, and procurement models, the same issues recur:

- unclear early assumptions;
- breakdowns in communication;
- erosion of commercial discipline;
- unmanaged design evolution; and
- claims driven as much by pressure as entitlement.

Projects rarely fail because of a single issue. They underperform when smaller issues are left unresolved and are then tested under pressure.

This guide draws together the key themes from the [Inside Construction Delivery](#) series. It focuses on what actually happens inside projects — how teams behave, how decisions are made, and how risks emerge in real time — and distills those observations into practical insights and a usable framework.

Key contacts



Scott Thompson

Partner
View profile [here](#)



Natasha Hood

Partner
View profile [here](#)



Grant de Lisle

Senior Associate
View profile [here](#)

About this guide

This guide brings together the [Inside Construction Delivery](#) series into a structured framework for understanding what drives project outcomes in major construction and infrastructure delivery.

Article series

The following articles form the foundation of this guide:

1

[Contract administration and commercial discipline](#)

Construction contracts are hard to administer: What can you do about it?

2

[Early project set up and risk alignment](#)

The first 90 days: Why early planning sets projects up for success.

3

[Behaviour and the people factor](#)

Beyond the contract: How the people factor can drive construction disputes.

4

[Project pressure and distressed behaviours](#)

Navigating tactical behaviours in distressed construction projects.

5

[Design development and change management](#)

Managing design development and change: Why it causes so much project pain, and how to get it right.

6

[Claims strategy and commercial reality](#)

Navigating strategic claims: How to manage claims with contentious entitlement.

7

[What good looks like](#)

Lessons from major infrastructure projects: What every project team should know.

Guide structure

[Part One – What drives project outcomes?](#)

This section distils the recurring patterns observed across projects and disputes, focusing on how delivery actually unfolds in practice.

- Contract administration as a commercial control system.
- Early-phase decisions and operating conditions.
- Behaviour under pressure.
- Design governance and risk.
- Delivery pressure and project drift.
- Claims as both legal entitlement and commercial signal.
- How these factors interact in live delivery.

[Part Two – Project health and risk checklist](#)

A practical diagnostic tool that enables project teams to assess how well core delivery disciplines are functioning across the project, identify areas where risk may be emerging or compounding, and take early, targeted action to strengthen commercial outcomes.

How to use this guide

This guide can be used in three ways:

- as a **standalone reference** to understand the patterns that drive project outcomes;
- as a **diagnostic tool**, using the checklist to assess live projects; and
- as a **facilitation framework** to structure project reviews or leadership discussions.

What drives project outcomes?

Contract administration is the foundation of commercial performance

On most projects, contract administration is underestimated. It is often treated as a compliance exercise rather than the primary mechanism for managing commercial risk.

In practice, poor contract administration is one of the most consistent causes of:

- cost overruns;
- failed claims; and
- avoidable disputes.

The contract does not pause during delivery. Rights are lost through inaction. Obligations not enforced early become difficult to enforce later. Information gaps cannot reliably be reconstructed.

Well-performing projects treat the contract as an active management system.

- Core processes (variations, EOTs, payments) are clearly understood.
- Roles are filled by capable and empowered individuals.
- Decisions are made with awareness of contractual consequences.

This is not administrative detail. It is the mechanism by which projects protect value.

Early decisions set the project's operating conditions

The first phase of a project is disproportionately important.

Issues that emerge late in delivery — delay, cost escalation, disputes — almost always originate in early decisions:

- risk allocation not fully understood;
- scope or interfaces unclear;
- documentation standards not established; and
- behaviours not aligned.

These issues are manageable in the first weeks. Over time, they compound and become embedded.

Effective projects use the early phase to establish:

- a clear delivery strategy;
- communication and escalation protocols;
- agreed commercial processes; and
- a shared understanding of risk.

This effectively sets the project's operating conditions. When those conditions are clear, teams respond to issues quickly and consistently. When they are not, uncertainty grows under pressure.

Behaviour under pressure determines outcomes

Contracts and systems only take a project so far. Outcomes are ultimately shaped by how people behave — particularly under pressure.

Most disputes are not caused by drafting ambiguity. They arise from:

- communication gaps;
- reluctance to escalate issues early;
- overconfidence or entrenched positions;
- inconsistent instructions; and
- informal practices replacing agreed processes.

These behaviours tend to emerge gradually. As delivery pressure increases, teams take shortcuts, avoid difficult conversations, or prioritise momentum over discipline.

High-performing projects actively manage this.

- Escalation is expected, not avoided.
- Communication is clear, consistent, and documented.
- Authority is understood and respected.
- Decisions draw on appropriate expertise.

Where this does not occur, even well-structured contractual frameworks begin to break down.

Design development is a major and often underestimated risk

Many of the most significant project issues originate in design.

Design risk rarely arises from a single error. It emerges through:

- unclear design responsibility;
- incomplete or misaligned procurement assumptions;
- informal instructions and undocumented change; and
- poor coordination across disciplines.

Design development is inevitable — but only manageable if properly governed.

Projects that manage this well have:

- clear design leadership and responsibility allocation;
- structured change processes;
- disciplined documentation (RFIs, revisions, decision logs); and
- early escalation of uncertainty.

Where design is treated informally, it becomes one of the most consistent drivers of:

- delay;
- rework;
- claims; and
- relationship breakdown.

What drives project outcomes?

Delivery pressure exposes underlying weaknesses

As projects progress, pressure builds — commercially, technically, and organisationally.

Under pressure, behaviour shifts. Common patterns include:

- increased claim activity;
- reliance on contractual ambiguity;
- shifting delay narratives; and
- positional negotiation.

These behaviours are not unusual. They are predictable responses to strain.

The key question is whether the project's systems hold when this happens.

Projects that remain stable typically have:

- strong programme governance;
- robust contemporaneous records;
- consistent contract administration; and
- structured escalation pathways.

Projects that do not have these attributes tend to experience drift — where discipline erodes and issues escalate.

Claims reflect both entitlement and commercial reality

Claims are a normal feature of complex projects. Not all claims, however, are driven purely by clear entitlement.

Projects under pressure often generate strategic claims.

- Entitlement may be uncertain or contested.
- Evidence may be incomplete.
- Impacts may be real but difficult to isolate.

These claims reflect:

- commercial pressure;
- evidential gaps; and
- overlapping or complex causation.

Handled poorly, they escalate disputes.

Handled well, they can provide an opportunity to:

- identify underlying issues;
- align expectations; and
- stabilise delivery.

Effective claims management requires:

- clear separation of entitlement and quantum;
- objective, evidence-based assessment;
- disciplined communication; and
- awareness of both legal and commercial context.

Just as important is managing the project's own claims position — ensuring legitimate entitlements are identified early and properly supported.

Project outcomes are driven by interaction, not individual factors

Each of these themes — contract discipline, early setup, behaviour, design, claims — is important on its own.

However, project outcomes are driven by how they interact.

Projects tend to underperform when:

- early assumptions are unclear;
- behaviours diverge;
- contract processes are inconsistently applied;
- design evolves informally;
- pressure increases; and
- claims become positional.

By the time issues are visible, they have often been developing for months.

The most effective teams recognise this and intervene early.

What good looks like

Across projects, a consistent pattern emerges. Well-performing projects are not defined by the absence of issues. They are defined by how those issues are managed.

Three characteristics are consistently present:

Discipline

- Contract is actively managed.
- Documentation is robust and contemporaneous.
- Claims are assessed rigorously.

Clarity

- Roles, responsibilities, and processes are understood.
- Risk allocation is tested against delivery reality.
- Programme and dependencies are visible.

Behaviour under pressure

- Issues are escalated early.
- Communication remains clear and consistent.
- Decisions are objective, not reactive.
- Commercial and relationship dynamics are managed separately.

Project Health and Risk Checklist

A practical diagnostic based on the [Inside Construction Delivery](#) framework



Contract and commercial discipline

- Contract treated as an active management tool.
- Core processes (variations, EOTs, payments) working consistently.
- Rights protected through timely action.



Early-phase setup

- Delivery strategy established.
- Roles and escalation pathways clear.
- Risk allocation understood in practical terms.



Documentation

- Strong contemporaneous record.
- Programme and decisions properly documented.
- Claims supported by evidence.



Behaviour and communication

- Early escalation culture.
- Clear authority and instruction pathways.
- Consistent, disciplined communication.



Design governance

- Clear responsibility for design coordination.
- Structured change control process.
- Formal management of RFIs and revisions.



Programme and delivery control

- Reliable, logic-based programme.
- Clear understanding of delay drivers.
- Active management of interfaces.



Claims discipline

- Entitlement assessed before quantum.
- Positions grounded in fact and contract.
- Project's own claims actively managed.



Strategic claims management

- Claims assessed objectively (not emotionally).
- Commercial drivers understood.
- Structured pathways for resolution considered.



Distress indicators

- Watch for:
- increasing claim volume;
 - shifting narratives;
 - erosion of trust or collaboration; and
 - governance being bypassed.



Governance and leadership

- Clear alignment between project and leadership.
- Consistent decision-making.
- Effective onboarding and continuity.

Final reflection

The themes in this guide are not new. What is notable is how consistently they appear.

Across projects, the same behaviours, issues, and failure points recur. That consistency means outcomes are more controllable than they often appear.

Projects do not fail suddenly. They drift — as discipline erodes, assumptions go untested, and pressure exposes underlying weaknesses.

The difference between projects that recover and those that escalate is simple: **whether those issues are identified early and managed with discipline.**

[Inside Construction Delivery](#) reflects what we see inside projects every day. The patterns are consistent — and when they are understood early, they are manageable.
