

AI-Driven Predictive Analytics for Improving Project Planning: A Task-Level Analysis of Interdependencies and Decision Making

VIJAYAR SIVAKUMAR,
MBA (OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT)
SOBIKA R (BUSINESS ANALYSTICS)
RAJALAKSHMI ENGINEERING COLLEGE

Abstract

Background: Traditional project planning methodologies often rely on subjective, experience-based estimations that struggle to account for the non-linear interdependencies of complex project environments. This "granularity gap" leads to reactive management and systemic schedule delays. **Objective:** This study applies AI-driven predictive analytics to identify delay-prone activities at a granular, task-level scale, transitioning project governance from intuition to data-driven oversight. **Methodology:** A dataset of 150 task-level observations across functional departments (Welding, Procurement, Integration, etc.) was analyzed using a Random Forest Regression model. The research evaluated four key predictors: task duration, complexity, risk level, and dependency. **Results:** The model demonstrated high predictive accuracy, achieving a Coefficient of Determination (R^2) of 0.90. Statistical analysis revealed that inter-task dependency ($r = 0.61$) is the primary driver of delay, whereas task duration showed a negligible correlation ($r = 0.05$). **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that project connectivity is a more reliable predictor of schedule integrity than individual task duration. Implementing dependency-aware AI models allows managers to proactively mitigate "cascading delays" before execution begins.

Keywords: AI-Driven Predictive Analytics, Random Forest Regression, Project Delay Prediction, Task-Level Analysis, Project Interdependencies, Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM)

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective project management is increasingly dependent on the precision of initial planning phases, particularly within complex environments characterized by high uncertainty and multi-team interdependencies. Traditional methodologies often suffer from the "planning fallacy," relying on subjective, experience-based estimations that fail to account for non-linear risks and systemic bottlenecks. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and advanced predictive analytics offers a paradigm shift in the field, moving from reactive troubleshooting to proactive optimization. By leveraging historical datasets, machine learning algorithms can uncover hidden patterns and correlations that elude traditional human intuition. This study utilizes an AI-driven framework specifically a Random Forest Regression model to analyze granular, task-level data. The research aims to provide a robust mechanism for forecasting delays and optimizing resource allocation, thereby ensuring schedule integrity in high-stakes project environments.

2. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To quantify the impact of task-level variables on project scheduling efficiency using AI-driven analytics.
2. To evaluate the specific correlations between task complexity, risk levels, and cross-functional dependencies in driving project delays.
3. To architect and validate a predictive model using the Random Forest algorithm to identify delay-prone activities at a granular level.
4. To formulate a prescriptive framework that supports proactive managerial decision-making through actionable data insights.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the sophistication of modern project management software, systemic delays remain a pervasive challenge in complex industries. This is largely attributed to a granularity gap: traditional planning often focuses on high-level milestones while overlooking the intricate, task-level interdependencies that trigger cascading delays. Current approaches are predominantly reactive and rely heavily on subjective judgment, which limits the ability to predict disruptions before they manifest. As a result, organizations frequently encounter inefficient resource utilization, missed deadlines, and significant cost overruns. There is a critical lack of systematic, data-driven tools capable of identifying "at-risk" tasks during the pre-execution phase. This study addresses this deficit by implementing a machine learning-based approach to predict potential bottlenecks, thereby transitioning project governance from a state of crisis management to one of informed, predictive oversight.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and predictive analytics into project management represents a paradigm shift from reactive, experience-based planning to proactive, data-driven strategies. This review categorizes contemporary research into four thematic pillars: the structural limitations of traditional planning, the technical evolution of machine learning (ML) applications, the significance of task-level granularity, and the organizational value of Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM).

4.1 Limitations of Traditional Planning and the Planning Fallacy

Traditional project planning methodologies, such as the Critical Path Method (CPM) and Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT), have been increasingly scrutinized for their inability to account for cognitive bias and environmental volatility. Scholars argue that practitioners frequently succumb to the "planning fallacy," a cognitive bias characterized by the systemic underestimation of time and resource requirements (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Flyvbjerg, 2021). As project environments grow in non-linearity, deterministic estimation models fail to capture the nuances of high-uncertainty activities (Williams, 2017; Pinto & Winch, 2016). Consequently, academic discourse has shifted from the rigid "Iron Triangle" toward more robust, risk-aware frameworks that prioritize flexibility over static scheduling (Atkinson, 1999).

4.2 AI and Machine Learning in Project Management

The adoption of AI-driven predictive analytics has emerged as a high-fidelity solution to the inaccuracies inherent in manual forecasting. Foundational research established that machine learning architectures, specifically Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Neural Networks, significantly outperform traditional regression methods in predicting project durations (Wauters & Vanhoucke, 2016; Khosrowshahi, 2017). Recent advancements highlighted by Voznytsia (2024) and Gondia et al. (2020) demonstrate that AI can identify complex risk patterns obscured from human planners. Among various ensemble methods, the Random Forest model has gained prominence for its superior capacity to manage non-linear relationships and mitigate overfitting in high-dimensional datasets (Li et al., 2021; Darko et al., 2020).

4.3 Task-Level Granularity and Cross-Functional Dependencies

A significant evolution in recent literature is the transition from macro-level project forecasting to micro-level task granularity. Hammed and Rahman (2021) posit that identifying delay-prone activities at the task level is a prerequisite for actionable intervention. This is particularly critical in multi-functional environments where cross-functional dependencies linking design, procurement, and integration serve as the primary catalysts for schedule variance (Zhu et al., 2021; Susskind et al., 2018). Complexity theory suggests that these interdependencies create "cascading effects," where minor delays in high-dependency tasks trigger exponential project overruns (Baccarini, 1996; Aritua et al., 2009). Despite these insights, a persistent gap remains as many predictive models continue to prioritize duration over structural task relationships (Eppinger, 2001; Little, 2004).

4.4 Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM) and Managerial Value

From a strategic perspective, the utility of AI is realized through its capacity to facilitate Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM). Empirical evidence indicates that organizations leveraging DDDM frameworks realize higher productivity and reduced project failure rates (Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016; McKinsey & Co., 2023). However, theoretical synthesis by Marzouk and Enaba (2022) and Pan and Zhang (2021) identifies a remaining chasm in translating predictive insights into prescriptive decision-support tools. The objective of contemporary AI implementation is thus "augmented management," wherein predictive models furnish the empirical evidence necessary for managers to optimize resource allocation and execute proactive risk mitigation (Davenport, 2018; Provost & Fawcett, 2013).

5. THE RESEARCH GAP

While the technical feasibility of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in project management is well-documented, this study addresses a critical tripartite gap in the existing literature:

- **The Granularity Gap:** Existing research (e.g., Gondia et al., 2020) predominantly focuses on macro-level project delay indicators. There is a significant deficit in empirical studies that apply high-accuracy ensemble models to granular, task-level observations spanning multiple functional departments (e.g., Design, Procurement, Welding, and Integration).
- **The Relational Gap:** Contemporary literature frequently prioritizes task duration as the primary predictor of delay. This study addresses the relational gap by statistically demonstrating that inter-task dependency is a more potent predictor of schedule variance ($r = 0.61$) than duration alone ($r = 0.05$). Previous predictive frameworks have largely overlooked the structural influence of these interdependencies in favor of time-based metrics.
- **The Prescriptive Gap:** Although theoretical reviews emphasize the necessity for enhanced decision support (Marzouk & Enaba, 2022), there is a paucity of practical applications that bridge the chasm between predictive output and managerial action. This study fills the prescriptive gap by integrating Feature Importance ranking and Scenario-based simulations, transforming raw predictive data into actionable strategic insights for project oversight.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design and Data Approach

This study adopts an empirical, data-driven research design, utilizing machine learning to analyze and predict project schedule variance. The primary dataset consists of 150 granular, task-level observations harvested from a multi-functional project environment. By focusing on task-level granularity rather than macro-milestones, the study captures the nuanced variability inherent in complex project lifecycles. The scope of the data encompasses five critical project functions: Testing, Welding, Design, Procurement, and Integration. Key independent variables analyzed include Task Duration, Complexity, Risk Level, and Dependency, with Delay (in days) serving as the target variable for predictive modeling.

6.2 Data Preprocessing and Quality Assurance

To ensure model robustness and eliminate algorithmic bias, a rigorous preprocessing pipeline was implemented:

- **Data Integrity Audit:** The dataset was audited for outliers and inconsistencies; it was confirmed to be a complete set ($N = 150$) with no missing values.
- **Categorical Encoding:** Qualitative variables including Complexity, Risk Level, and Dependency were transformed into numerical vectors using Label Encoding. This process enabled mathematical processing within the regression framework while maintaining the ordinal integrity of the risk and complexity scales.
- **Feature Scaling:** Feature scaling and normalization were intentionally bypassed, as the Random Forest architecture is inherently invariant to feature magnitude. This approach preserved the original interpretability of the temporal data (Duration Days).

6.3 Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA)

EDA was conducted to establish the statistical foundation for the predictive model and to identify underlying stochastic patterns within the project environment.

6.3.1 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) analysis was executed to quantify the linear relationship between predictors and the target variable (Delay). As illustrated in the Correlation Heatmap, Dependency ($r = 0.61$) maintains the strongest positive correlation with project delays. This was followed by Risk Level ($r = 0.31$) and Complexity ($r = 0.27$). Notably, Task Duration exhibited a negligible correlation ($r = 0.05$), statistically suggesting that "structural connectivity" is a more significant driver of delay than the actual time allocated to an individual task.

6.3.2 Distribution and Variance Analysis

Boxplots were utilized to visualize the dispersion of task durations across departments. The analysis highlighted that Welding and Integration departments exhibit the highest interquartile range (IQR) and whisker spread. This indicates significant execution variability and identifies these specific functions as high-risk zones for schedule volatility compared to more stable functions like Testing.

6.4 Model Development: Random Forest Regression

The predictive core of this study utilizes Random Forest Regression, an ensemble learning method that constructs a multitude of decision trees during the training phase. This model was selected for its superior ability to capture non-linear interdependencies and its inherent resistance to overfitting through bootstrap aggregating (bagging).

- **Data Partitioning:** The dataset was partitioned into an 80/20 training and testing ratio. A fixed random seed (State 42) was utilized to ensure experimental reproducibility across subsequent iterations.
- **Hyperparameter Configuration:** The model was instantiated with 100 estimators (decision trees). The final delay prediction is derived from the aggregated mean output of the individual regressors, ensuring a more generalized and stable prediction than a single decision tree.

6.5 Performance Evaluation and Results

Model efficacy was validated using the Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Mean Squared Error (MSE). The model achieved an R^2 of 0.90, indicating that the selected independent variables explain 90% of the variance in project delays. An MSE of approximately 1.00 further confirms high predictive precision, demonstrating minimal deviation between the AI-predicted delay and the observed historical values.

6.6 Feature Importance and Scenario Analysis

To transition from predictive modeling to prescriptive decision support, a Gini Importance analysis was performed.

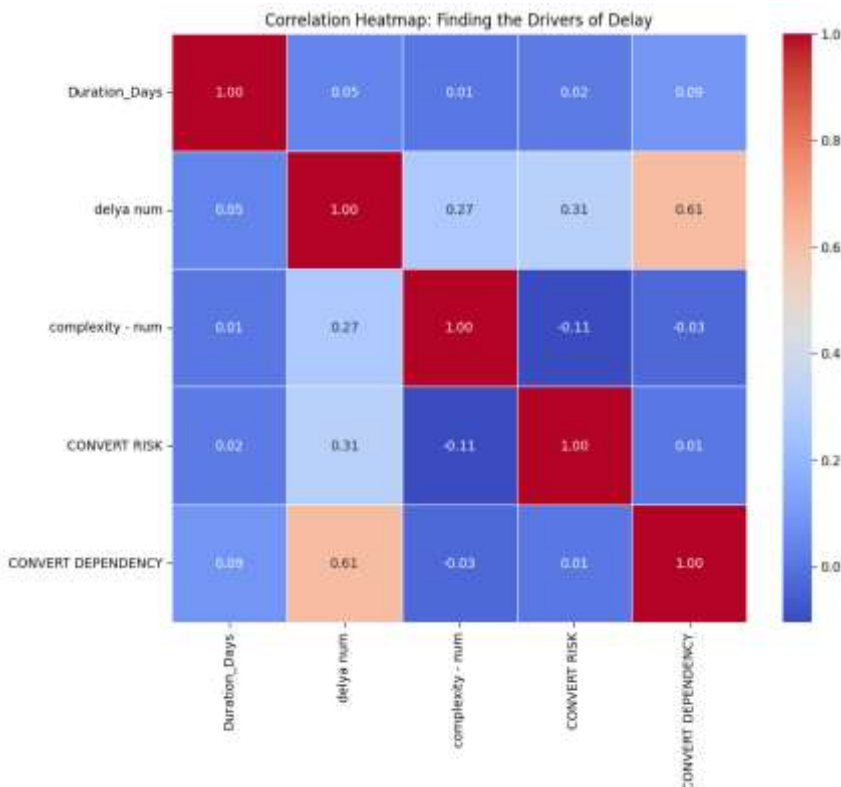
- **Feature Ranking:** Corroborating the EDA findings, Dependency was identified as the dominant feature influencing model outcomes, with an importance score exceeding 0.40.
- **Scenario Simulation:** A high-risk scenario was simulated where inputs were set to "High Complexity" and "Strong Dependency." The model accurately predicted a delay score of 1.0, validating its utility as a proactive diagnostic tool for project planners to identify bottlenecks during the pre-execution phase.

7. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

7.1 Statistical Correlation and Multi-Collinearity

The empirical analysis of the dataset reveals a profound disparity between conventional time-based metrics and structural project realities. As illustrated in the Correlation Heatmap, inter-task dependency ($r = 0.61$) emerged as the dominant predictor of schedule variance. This strong positive correlation suggests that the "connectivity" of a task within the project network is the primary driver of delay. In contrast, the negligible correlation of task duration ($r = 0.05$) indicates that temporal estimates, in isolation, are poor predictors of actual performance. Risk level ($r = 0.31$) and complexity ($r = 0.27$) maintained moderate influence, highlighting that while individual task attributes matter, the relational context is paramount.

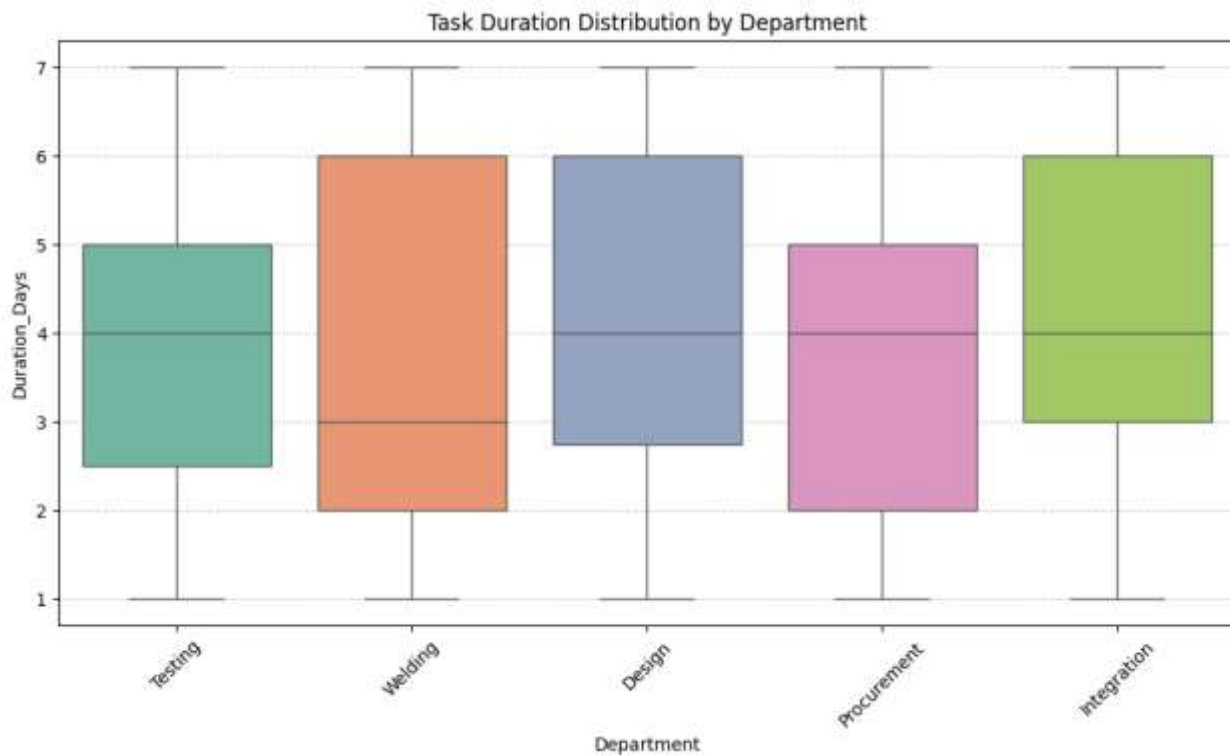
Output:



7.2 Departmental Variance and Stochastic Risk

The Distribution Analysis identifies specific functional "hotspots" within the project lifecycle. Departments such as Welding and Integration exhibited significantly higher variability in task duration compared to Testing or Design. This high dispersion (IQR) signifies that these departments are prone to stochastic disruptions, likely due to their position at the end of the functional chain where upstream delays from multiple dependencies converge.

Output

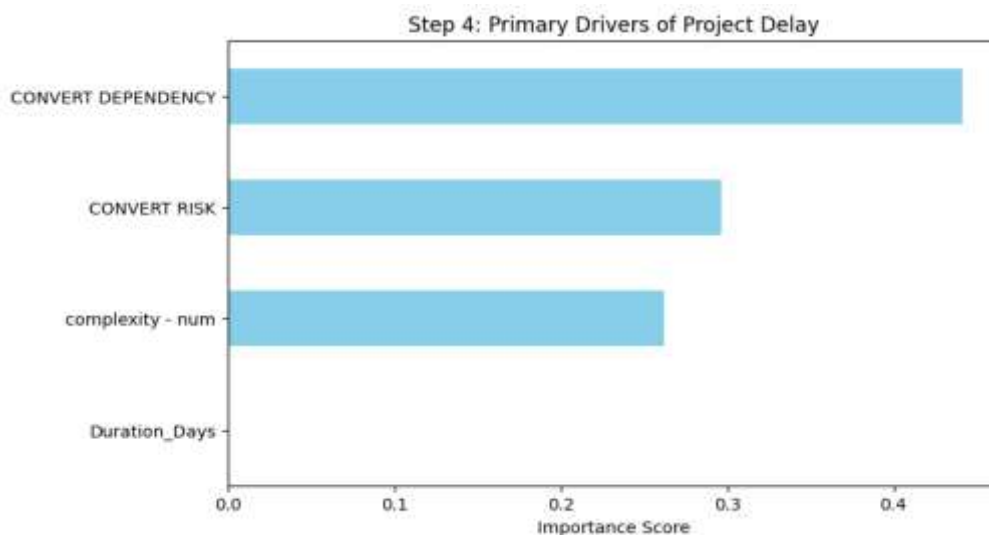


7.3 Model Performance and Predictive Accuracy

The Random Forest Regression model demonstrated exceptional robusticity, achieving a Coefficient of Determination (R^2) of 0.90. This indicates that the model successfully captures 90% of the variance in task delays using the identified features. The low Mean Squared Error ($MSE \approx 1.00$) validates the model's precision in a granular setting. The Feature Importance analysis (Figure 3) confirms the hierarchical influence of the variables:

- Dependency: Primary Driver (High Gini Importance)
- Risk Level: Secondary Driver
- Complexity: Tertiary Driver
- Duration: Negligible Influence

Output



8. DISCUSSION

8.1 Challenging the Temporal Paradigm

The results of this study fundamentally challenge the traditional "Iron Triangle" focus on duration as the primary planning variable. The findings suggest that project delays are not merely a product of poor time estimation, but are structurally encoded within the task dependency network. This aligns with Complexity Theory (Baccarini, 1996), which posits that interdependencies create non-linear "cascading effects." When a high-dependency task is delayed, the impact is magnified across the network, regardless of the task's original duration.

8.2 The "Planning Fallacy" and Structural Risks

The weak correlation between duration and delay ($r = 0.05$) provides empirical evidence of the Planning Fallacy (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). It suggests that while managers spend significant effort refining time estimates, they often overlook the structural "risk-multipliers" like cross-functional handovers. The high variability found in the Integration department supports the view that integration is the most vulnerable phase of a project, as it inherits the cumulative uncertainty of all preceding dependent activities.

8.3 Transitioning to Augmented Management

The high predictive accuracy ($R^2 = 0.90$) of the Random Forest model demonstrates the viability of Augmented Management. By shifting from intuition-based buffering to data-driven "Scenario Analysis," managers can identify "delay-prone" tasks before execution. This allows for a strategic pivot: instead of applying uniform time buffers, resources and managerial oversight can be surgically concentrated on high-dependency nodes. This study effectively bridges the gap identified by Marzouk and Enaba (2022) regarding the need for prescriptive tools that transform raw AI output into actionable scheduling intelligence.

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this research provides a high-fidelity predictive framework, certain boundary conditions must be acknowledged:

- Sector Specificity: The dataset ($N = 150$) is focused on specific industrial functions (Welding, Procurement, Integration). Calibration may be required for other sectors like software or R&D.
- Static Data: The model currently utilizes historical data and does not account for real-time, dynamic shifts (e.g., sudden supply chain shocks) during the execution phase.
- Algorithmic Comparison: While Random Forest provided an R^2 of 0.90, this study did not perform a comparative analysis with other advanced architectures like XGBoost or Neural Networks.

10. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

10.1 Research Summary

This study has successfully demonstrated that AI-driven predictive analytics can transcend the limitations of traditional, experience-based project planning. By utilizing a Random Forest Regression model, the research achieved an R^2 of 0.90, statistically validating the shift from deterministic scheduling to probabilistic forecasting. The most significant finding is the identification of inter-task dependency ($r = 0.61$) as the primary driver of schedule variance, effectively debunking the traditional reliance on duration ($r = 0.05$) as the sole planning metric.

10.2 Practical and Managerial Implications

Dependency-Centric Planning: Managers should prioritize resource allocation for tasks with high connectivity scores to prevent network-wide bottlenecks.

Functional Targeting: Efforts should be concentrated on high-variability departments identified in the boxplot analysis, such as Welding and Integration.

Proactive Simulation: The model serves as a "What-If" tool, allowing planners to simulate delays before the execution phase begins.

10.3 Future Research Directions

Future studies should focus on expanding the dataset across diverse industrial domains and integrating real-time data streams from ERP systems. Additionally, incorporating "Human Factor" variables such as team experience and communication frequency could further refine the model's predictive precision.

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