

Everyone Is Working. So Why Is the Project Falling Behind?

How information gaps, delayed decisions, and broken handoffs create avoidable construction delays—and where AI can help.

By Sue Dyer

The crew is on site. The equipment is ready. The materials have arrived. And yet, by mid-morning, the work has stopped.

No one is being careless. The foreman is trying to get an answer. The superintendent is tracking down a decision that should have been made yesterday. The crew is standing by because the one thing it needs to move forward—a clarification, an approval, or a piece of information—has not arrived.

This happens on construction projects every day. Everyone is working, but the project is still slowing down. And our conventional tools for understanding delay do not always explain why.

The Critical Path Tells Only Part of the Story

The critical path is one of construction's most important planning tools. It identifies the sequence of activities that determines how long the project will take. If a critical activity slips, the project completion date may slip with it.

That gives teams a necessary map of time risk. But the schedule describes planned dependencies between activities. Field teams experience something more immediate: a stream of decisions, handoffs, questions, approvals, clarifications, and changing conditions that determine whether the next activity can actually begin.

The critical path can tell us what work depends on what. It does not always tell us how long it will take for the right information to reach the right person at the moment the work needs it.

Where Delays Actually Come From

Many avoidable field delays occur in the spaces between the work—the workflow gaps where one step cannot begin because something upstream has not caught up.

- Waiting for an answer to a question that has already been raised.
- Waiting for an approval that is sitting in someone's queue.
- Working from incomplete or unclear information and then stopping when the missing context appears.
- Two teams believing they share the same understanding when they do not.
- A decision being made but not reaching the people who need to act on it.

None of these looks dramatic when viewed one at a time. But construction is highly interdependent. A small delay at one handoff can change sequencing, affect another trade, consume float, create overtime pressure, and eventually force the team to recover time somewhere else.

The Cost Is Often Hidden in Waiting

When information does not arrive in time, field leaders usually face two bad choices: stop and wait, or move forward on an assumption. Waiting costs time. Moving forward can create rework. Both are expensive.

The field feels this immediately. Crews stand by even though they are ready to work. Momentum disappears. A manageable schedule becomes compressed. Trades get stacked. The project begins creating new risks while trying to recover from the original delay.

Experienced construction people know that some delays are unavoidable. Weather changes. Deliveries fail. Scope changes. What frustrates teams are the delays that did not have to happen—the answer existed, the decision had already been made, or someone knew about the issue, but that knowledge did not reach the work in time.

The Real Gap Is Between Knowing and Acting

If we watch where project time actually disappears, a pattern emerges. It is often lost in the transition between knowing and acting.

A field condition is noticed, but the decision-maker does not see it until hours later. A question is answered, but the answer is buried in email. A coordination concern is discussed in one meeting but does not reach the crew whose sequence depends on it. The project technically possesses the information, yet operationally the information is unavailable.

That gap is where project velocity is won or lost. The goal is not simply to create more information. It is to shorten the time between when something becomes known and when the people who need to respond are able to act.

Why More Reporting Does Not Necessarily Fix It

Construction has responded to information problems by creating more systems, more reports, more meetings, and more documentation. Some of that is necessary. But additional reporting can also create another layer the field has to feed without improving what comes back to the field.

The question should not be, “How much information are we collecting?” It should be, “How quickly can we turn what is already known into something useful to the people making the next decision?”

That is a workflow question, not just a technology question.

Where AI Has a Genuine Role

AI will not replace the project schedule. It will not eliminate weather, scope change, supply-chain disruption, or every coordination problem. But it may help reduce the information delays that make avoidable disruptions so persistent.

Used well, AI can help capture field observations while they are still fresh, organize meeting decisions, find prior commitments across project records, summarize the status of unresolved issues, and surface recurring questions before they become larger problems. It can help turn scattered project information into something easier to find and act on.

The important distinction is that AI should not become another system that asks the field for more data simply so someone else can see another dashboard. Its value is greater when it gives something useful back—faster clarity, fewer searches, better continuity, and earlier awareness of what needs attention.

Measure the Time Between the Steps

One practical way to look at project performance is to pay attention to the waiting time between key events:

- Issue identified → right person informed
- Question asked → usable answer received
- Decision made → affected people notified
- Constraint discovered → response agreed
- Commitment made → follow-through confirmed

Those intervals rarely appear as activities on the schedule, but they can determine whether scheduled work actually moves. Shortening them may be one of the most practical ways AI can improve project performance.

The Work Is Ready. Is the Information?

Projects do not slow down only because people stop working. They slow down because of what happens—or fails to happen—in the spaces between the work.

The schedule will always matter. But so will the speed of understanding. The faster a project team can see what is happening, move the right information, make a decision, and get that decision back to the work, the more effectively the project can respond to reality.

That is not a replacement for good scheduling. It is what helps the schedule become possible.

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We watch what is changing, connect the dots, and explain what is likely to be coming next.

Our goal is simple: to give construction professionals perspective and foresight they are unlikely to find anywhere else.

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Sue Dyer is the founder of Construction AI Lab and a longtime construction industry leader whose work has focused on partnering, collaboration, trust, and the human systems that shape project performance.

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