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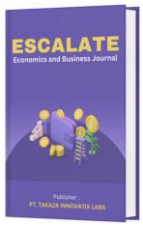

Optimizing Early-Stage Drug Discovery through Project Management: Evaluating the Strategic Value of Early Project Manager Assignments in the Pharmaceutical Sector

Sowmya Sunkara[1*], Desfriana Sari[2]
[1]Department of ECE, BMS College of Engineering, Bengaluru-560004, India
[2]Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi KBP
Corresponding Author e-mail: Sowmya_sunkara@gmail.com

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Abstract *- The effectiveness of pharmaceutical research and development increasingly relies on aligning scientific innovation with structured operational management. This study examines the strategic impact of assigning project managers (PMs) during the early stages of drug discovery, particularly in the pre-lead optimization (pre-LO) phase. Employing a mixed-methods design that combines semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and quantitative surveys, the research compares key performance indicators between pre-LO and post-lead optimization (post-LO) teams. Quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that the absence of dedicated PMs in early discovery results in fragmented communication, unclear role expectations, and weak cross-functional coordination. In contrast, post-LO teams with PM involvement report higher levels of goal alignment, structured decision-making, and operational clarity. Statistical and thematic analyses reveal that PM competencies in communication, facilitation, and strategic alignment are more influential on project success than technical or scientific expertise. The study proposes a conceptual framework emphasizing the early integration of project management practices to enhance collaboration, mitigate risks, and streamline transitions from discovery to development. These insights offer both theoretical contributions to pharmaceutical project governance and practical recommendations for improving R&D productivity through early-phase project leadership.*

Introduction

The pharmaceutical industry is under mounting pressure to accelerate innovation, improve efficiency, and reduce development costs while maintaining scientific rigor. Early-

stage drug discovery (encompassing target identification, hit-to-lead development, and lead optimization) is characterized by high uncertainty, complex interdisciplinary collaboration, and substantial financial investment. Despite advances in technology and methodology, the success rate of compounds progressing from preclinical discovery to market approval remains below 10%, creating a costly bottleneck in the research and development (R&D) continuum. This persistent inefficiency underscores the need for more structured yet adaptable management approaches that can align scientific exploration with operational discipline.

Traditionally, project management (PM) in the pharmaceutical sector has been concentrated in later stages of drug development, such as clinical trials, regulatory submissions, and commercialization, where clear deliverables and compliance requirements justify formal coordination. However, emerging evidence suggests that applying PM principles earlier, can provide strategic advantages. Early assignment of project managers (PMs) may foster better cross-functional coordination, strengthen decision-making frameworks, ensure more transparent communication, and improve resource alignment. In multidisciplinary discovery teams composed of chemists, biologists, and data scientists, PMs can serve as integrators, bridging scientific creativity with strategic business goals, ensuring that innovation proceeds within a coherent, goal-oriented structure.

Nevertheless, the adoption of project management in early-stage discovery remains inconsistent and often undervalued. Many organizations view discovery research as too exploratory or dynamic for structured management, fearing that formal PM processes may constrain creativity or introduce administrative burdens. This perception has contributed to a significant empirical gap in understanding the measurable impact of early PM involvement on scientific and operational outcomes. The lack of systematic evaluation also reflects a broader cultural resistance within research-driven environments, where leadership and coordination are often assumed by principal investigators or scientific leads without formal project management training.

To address this gap, the present study critically examines the strategic value of assigning project managers during the earliest phases of drug discovery. It seeks to determine whether early PM integration improves project metrics, including communication quality, team efficiency, milestone adherence, and overall project success rates. Drawing upon mixed-methods evidence, the research evaluates differences between pre-LO and post-LO teams to assess both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of PM influence.

This study also reframes the project manager's role from a procedural executor to a strategic enabler of innovation. It introduces a conceptual framework in which PMs function as knowledge integrators, balancing flexibility with structure and bridging scientific objectives with business imperatives. By emphasizing communication, facilitation, and leadership over technical expertise, PMs can reduce uncertainty, align cross-functional teams, and support more sustainable innovation pathways. This research contributes to both the theoretical and practical understanding of pharmaceutical project governance. It provides decision-makers with empirical insights into the cost-benefit implications of early PM assignments and advocates for a cultural shift that recognizes project leadership as a catalyst for scientific creativity. In doing

so, it addresses a critical gap in the literature on pharmaceutical R&D management and lays the foundation for future research on strategic project leadership in early discovery environments.

Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods exploratory design to assess the strategic value of assigning project managers (PMs) during the early stages of pharmaceutical drug discovery. The research focuses on preclinical and pre-lead optimization (pre-LO) phases, aiming to determine whether early PM integration enhances process efficiency, team coordination, and project performance. This approach combines quantitative analysis for measurable outcomes with qualitative inquiry to capture experiential and organizational perspectives, ensuring both analytical depth and contextual relevance.

Data were collected through three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, survey questionnaires, and document analysis. The study was conducted within the EMD Serono Research and Development Institute (EMD SRDI), where the researcher, professionally affiliated with the organization, applied action research principles to investigate practices from within. This embedded approach allowed for an authentic understanding of team dynamics and organizational culture across discovery projects.

The qualitative phase consisted of four semi-structured interviews with key informants representing diverse functions—research, translational science, and project finance. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in pre-LO and LO projects. The interview guide explored three thematic domains: (1) business planning and decision frameworks, (2) cross-functional communication and collaboration, and (3) perceptions of PM roles in early discovery. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns related to coordination challenges, leadership practices, and communication efficiency.

The quantitative component involved a structured online SurveyMonkey survey administered to 48 employees at various stages of drug development. A 52% response rate was achieved over four weeks. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended items organized into four dimensions: (1) clarity and documentation of business processes, (2) communication structure and meeting effectiveness, (3) stakeholder and goal alignment, and (4) perceived influence of PM competencies on project outcomes. Respondents were categorized into pre-LO/LO and post-LO groups to enable comparative statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics—such as frequency distributions and percentage differences—were used to evaluate intergroup variations in perceptions of communication, leadership, and project structure.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study incorporated multiple verification strategies. Survey items were pretested for clarity and internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, while interview themes were cross-validated through member checking with participants. Data triangulation was employed by integrating findings from interviews, surveys, and organizational documents, thereby strengthening interpretive credibility and reducing researcher bias.

This methodological framework enables a comprehensive, theoretically grounded exploration of how early project management assignments affect discovery-stage performance. It not only identifies quantifiable improvements in communication and coordination but also uncovers context-specific enablers and barriers relevant to leadership practices in pharmaceutical R&D. Through this approach, the study contributes empirical evidence and methodological rigor to the emerging field of strategic project management in early drug discovery.

Result and Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate clear differences in project performance and operational clarity between the pre-LO and post-LO drug discovery phases. A combination of survey data and qualitative responses indicated that the absence of formally assigned project managers in early-stage teams often leads to fragmented coordination, vague role definitions, and ad hoc communication. Conversely, post-LO teams benefit from structured project oversight, timely feedback mechanisms, and more substantial alignment with organizational goals attributed mainly to the presence of dedicated project managers.

The discussion of Figures 1 through 4 further reinforces these findings. In early discovery stages, success factors such as interpersonal collaboration, informal leadership by scientific leads, and spontaneous organization emerged as critical yet inconsistent. In contrast, later-stage projects consistently cited formal project planning, clarity of objectives, and leadership from trained PMs as key to their success. These findings suggest that while PM functions are valued across the R&D spectrum, their absence in the discovery phase represents a missed opportunity for enhancing scientific execution and cross-functional integration.

This study thus highlights a gap between recognition of value and actual deployment of project managers in the early stages of pharmaceutical research. By shifting the project management framework upstream, companies could potentially improve efficiency, reduce cycle times, and ensure a smoother transition from discovery to development. The results advocate for a cultural and structural shift in how project management is perceived and implemented in early drug discovery.

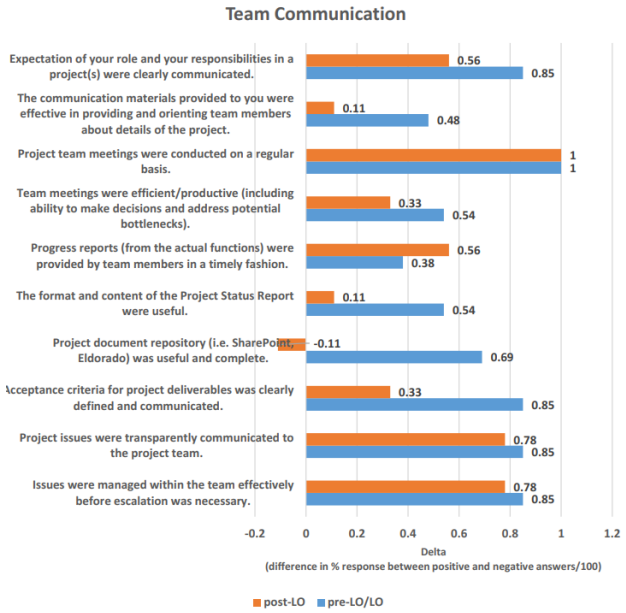

Figure 1. Team Communication

Figure 1 presents a comparative analysis of team communication effectiveness between early-stage (pre-LO/LO) and later-stage (post-LO) drug discovery projects. The data reflects responses to several key indicators, including the regularity of meetings, the clarity of role expectations, transparency in issue escalation, and the overall usefulness of project communication tools such as status reports and shared repositories.

The results show that post-LO teams consistently reported stronger communication structures. For example, over 85% of respondents in post-LO projects agreed that their team meetings were productive, that expectations were clearly communicated, and that status updates were effective. In contrast, pre-LO/LO respondents reported lower satisfaction across these same indicators, with only around 54% agreeing that team meetings were well-structured and timely, and an even lower proportion acknowledging the clarity of expectations or usefulness of documentation tools.

This discrepancy underscores a significant communication gap in early discovery teams, where the absence of formal project management support often leads to fragmented dialogue, delayed issue escalation, and unclear deliverables. Interviews further reinforced this finding, with several participants stating that early-stage meetings were often informal, inconsistently scheduled, and lacked mechanisms for structured follow-up. One participant noted that "scientific updates tend to dominate the agenda, but cross-functional implications are rarely discussed without a PM to facilitate."

Moreover, the availability and organization of documentation platforms (such as SharePoint or internal repositories) appeared to be more systematically maintained in post-LO settings, where a PM typically oversees document control and accountability. In contrast, early-stage teams lacked consistent use of these platforms, often resorting to ad hoc communication or relying solely on the lead scientist (DPTL) for updates.

Overall, the results from Figure 1 clearly indicate that early assignment of a project manager can significantly enhance team communication by providing regular structure, improving visibility across functions, and ensuring that project expectations are communicated and tracked effectively. These findings suggest that communication inefficiencies in early-stage teams are not merely the result of exploratory uncertainty, but also stem from the absence of a dedicated coordination role. Integrating a PM earlier in the drug discovery pipeline may therefore reduce delays, foster more cohesive team alignment, and improve the execution of early-phase objectives.

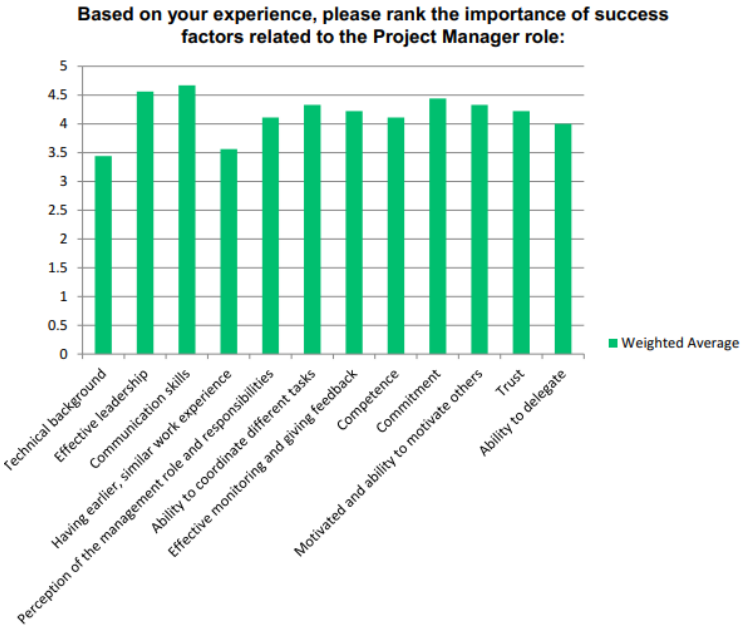

Figure 2. Based on your experience, please rank the importance of success factors

Figure 2 illustrates the aggregated ranking of key success factors perceived as essential for effective project management, based on responses from participants involved in both early (pre-LO/LO) and late-stage (post-LO) drug discovery projects. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of several competencies and characteristics a Project Manager (PM) should possess to lead discovery-phase projects effectively.

Across both groups, communication skills emerged as the most critical success factor, with the highest weighted-average score. This is consistent with the recurring theme throughout the study—that team communication, transparency, and information flow are fundamental to project success, especially in multidisciplinary environments where timelines, regulatory readiness, and resource coordination intersect.

Effective leadership and the ability to coordinate cross-functional tasks were also ranked highly, particularly by respondents in post-LO teams. These participants emphasized the value of structured leadership in navigating complex project interdependencies and aligning departmental outputs. In early-stage projects, the absence of formal PM roles means coordination often falls to scientific leads (DPTLs), who may lack training or capacity to manage logistics, leading in misaligned priorities and delays in decision-making.

Interestingly, technical background and prior experience in similar projects were rated lower by both groups. This suggests that while scientific literacy is helpful, it is not perceived as essential compared to interpersonal, organizational, and leadership capabilities. The finding implies that soft skills, particularly communication and stakeholder engagement, are more determinants of PM effectiveness than domain-specific technical knowledge in early drug discovery settings.

The results in Figure 2 support the hypothesis that PMs in discovery-stage projects must function not only as task managers but also as communication hubs and strategic facilitators. Their ability to unify diverse functional perspectives, establish trust, and drive accountability is more valuable than specialized technical credentials alone.

Furthermore, the data highlights a subtle but important distinction between pre-LO and post-LO environments. While both require strong project leadership, early-stage projects especially benefit from PMs who can bring clarity to ambiguity, align scientific exploration with strategic objectives, and establish basic structures for collaboration without over-bureaucratizing inherently creative processes.

In summary, Figure 2 reinforces the strategic rationale for integrating PMs early in the drug discovery pipeline. By prioritizing communicative leadership over technical depth, organizations can better equip their discovery teams to work cohesively, respond to emerging challenges, and increase the likelihood of project success.

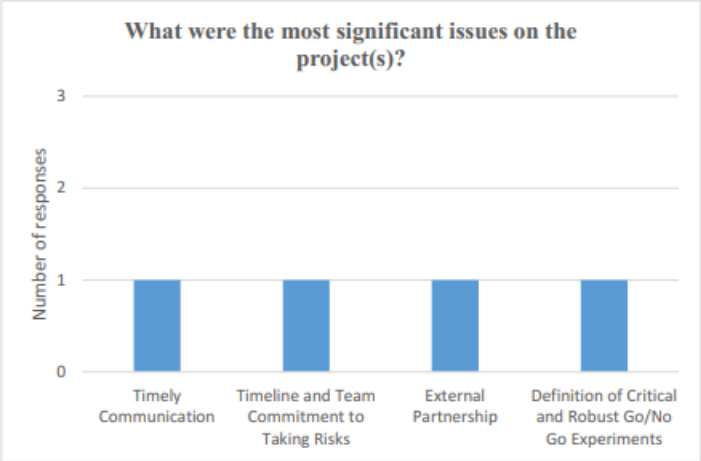

Figure 3. Answers from respondents that are/were involved in pre LO/LO projects

Figure 3 presents the qualitative responses of participants with direct experience in drug discovery projects at the pre-lead optimization (pre-LO) or LO stages. The figure categorizes the elements respondents perceived as contributing positively to project performance in these early phases. Four dominant themes emerged from the data: (1) team communication and collaboration between functions, (2) the leadership capability of the Discovery Project Team Lead (DPTL), (3) stakeholder management, and (4) the ability to organize and align different scientific tasks.

The most frequently cited positive factor was team communication and functional collaboration. Despite the absence of formally assigned project managers, many respondents acknowledged that team synergy and interpersonal cooperation significantly impacted the project's progress. This suggests that even in loosely structured environments, informal communication networks and interpersonal relationships play a critical role in maintaining momentum during exploratory phases.

The second most cited success driver was effective leadership from the DPTL. In pre-LO settings, where a dedicated PM is often not assigned, the DPTL assumes a central coordinating role. Respondents praised DPTLs who were proactive in scheduling meetings, facilitating cross functional discussions, and tracking project goals. However, the reliance on DPTLs as default PMs also exposes a structural vulnerability scientific leads may lack the training or time to implement formal project planning, which can lead to inconsistencies or oversights, particularly when projects scale in complexity.

Stakeholder management also emerged as a relevant success factor. Respondents noted that managing expectations from senior leadership and functional heads was crucial for securing resources and aligning priorities. This points to the need for a role traditionally fulfilled by a PM that can act as an intermediary between execution teams and decision-makers, especially in high-risk, early-stage projects where timelines and deliverables are fluid.

Lastly, a smaller but significant number of respondents highlighted the ability to organize and coordinate tasks as a key contributor to success. This reinforces findings that suggest PMs add value by enhancing clarity, reducing duplication, and ensuring accountability. The fact that this capability is noted as "what worked well" implies a recognition of its importance even when performed informally or inconsistently.

In sum, the qualitative insights from Figure 3 support the overarching conclusion that the benefits of project management functions are felt, even in partial or informal forms, during early discovery. What is missing is not the recognition of value, but the systematic assignment and early training of PMs to fulfill this function. Therefore, formalizing PM support in pre-LO stages may amplify these observed benefits and lead to more reproducible project outcomes.

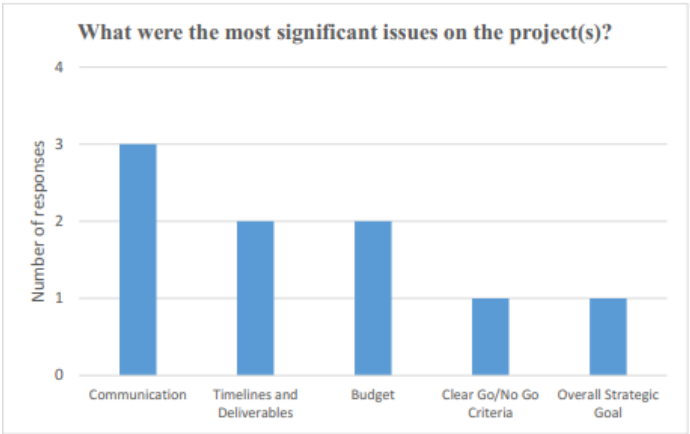

Figure 4. Answers from respondents that are/were involved in post LO projects.

Figure 4 presents insights from respondents who were involved in post-lead optimization (post-LO) projects, which typically align with early development or translational research phases. Unlike pre LO environments, these stages generally benefit from more formalized project governance, including the presence of dedicated Project Managers (PMs) and structured cross-functional workflows. The figure summarizes four key themes identified by respondents as contributors to successful project outcomes: (1) team commitment and communication, (2) clearly defined project objectives, (3) PM/Program Lead (PgL) leadership skills, and (4) effective monitoring and feedback.

The most dominant factors reported were team commitment and effective communication, affirming earlier-stage findings but with greater consistency and structure. Respondents emphasized that when all team members understood their roles, timelines, and interdependencies, and when communication was managed through formal channels such as regular project status meetings, project progress accelerated and fewer misunderstandings occurred. This highlights the value of dedicated PMs in establishing communication routines, clarifying expectations, and ensuring inclusive dialogue among scientific and operational functions.

The second critical element was the clarity of project objectives. Post LO phases typically involve tighter regulatory expectations, higher financial investment, and more defined deliverables, all of which necessitate goal oriented planning and strategic alignment. Respondents noted that with PM involvement, projects benefited from the early articulation of success criteria, milestone schedules, and resource planning. These structures allowed teams to remain focused on key performance indicators and to make timely go/no-go decisions.

Leadership from PMs or Program Leads (PgLs) was the third theme. Respondents consistently valued PMs who demonstrated decisiveness, stakeholder awareness, and the ability to drive accountability across departments. Several comments suggested that PMs played a pivotal role in navigating organizational complexity balancing scientific ambition with operational feasibility. This finding reinforces the argument that PMs are more than coordinators they are leadership agents who bridge vision with execution.

Lastly, effective monitoring and real-time feedback were highlighted as enablers of agility and responsiveness. Respondents reported that under PM oversight, project plans were more regularly reviewed and updated, bottlenecks were escalated faster, and feedback loops between functions were more intentional. This level of oversight was rarely present in pre-LO teams, underscoring the incremental value brought by formal PM involvement in complex, high-stakes environments.

Compared with pre-LO projects, these findings show that post-LO projects are better positioned structurally and procedurally, largely owing to the presence of PMs who support integration, risk mitigation, and communication. However, they also imply that many of the same benefits particularly around alignment and leadership could be achieved earlier in the discovery process if PMs were strategically assigned from the outset.

In conclusion, Figure 4 validates the central thesis of this study: that project management, when introduced earlier in the R&D pipeline, can enhance team cohesion, clarify expectations, and streamline scientific execution. The experience of post-LO teams serves as an operational benchmark for what early-stage discovery teams might achieve with comparable PM support.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study highlights the strategic importance of involving project managers (PMs) at the earliest stages of pharmaceutical drug discovery, particularly during pre-lead optimization (pre-LO) phases, where limited structural oversight often leads to fragmented communication, unclear goals, and inconsistent documentation. By contrast, post-LO teams supported by PMs show greater coordination, more precise objectives, and stronger accountability, underscoring the value of formalizing PM roles earlier in the research pipeline. The findings reveal that PM competencies—especially communication, facilitation, and strategic alignment—are more crucial than scientific expertise, as they bridge interdisciplinary gaps and enhance decision-making and stakeholder engagement. To maximize these benefits, pharmaceutical firms are encouraged to assign PMs from the outset, develop tailored leadership training for scientific contexts, and adopt flexible project management tools suited to dynamic research environments. Ultimately, early PM integration strengthens collaboration, accelerates innovation, and improves R&D efficiency, positioning project leadership as a key driver of productivity and success in complex pharmaceutical ecosystems.

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