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Portfolio prioritisation: why stopping work is a strategy

Most portfolios have too much in flight and too little finishing. Make stopping work a normal, evidence-based decision and delivery speeds up.

THE EIGHT-PHASE METHOD



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Changing how transformation is done

The EKSELENS360 family

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Ask any leadership team whether they have too many projects in flight and most will say yes. Ask them which ones they stopped in the last quarter and the room goes quiet.

Organisations are good at starting work and poor at stopping it. The result is a portfolio where everything is a priority, resources are spread thinly, delivery slows across the board and strategic initiatives compete for attention with projects whose case expired long ago.

Why work is so hard to stop

Stopping a project feels like admitting failure. Several forces keep work alive:

- **Sunk cost.** The more that has been spent, the harder it feels to walk away, even when the remaining cost exceeds the remaining value.
- **Sponsorship.** Every project has someone whose credibility is attached to it.
- **Optimism.** Status reports stay amber for months, and recovery is always one more phase away.
- **No mechanism.** Governance is designed to approve and monitor, not to compare initiatives and release capacity.

None of these is solved by better project management. They are portfolio problems.

Too much in flight slows everything

When a portfolio is overloaded, the effects compound:

- specialists are split across several projects, losing time to context switching;
- dependencies multiply, so one delay ripples across others;
- decision-makers cannot give any initiative proper attention;
- the most important work finishes later than it would with a smaller portfolio.

Limiting work in progress is one of the most reliable ways to increase delivery. Finishing fewer things faster usually delivers more value than starting more things at once.

Prioritise with a small number of shared criteria

Effective prioritisation compares initiatives on the same basis. Keep the criteria few and clear, for example:

- **strategic fit** — how directly it supports agreed objectives;
- **value remaining** — benefit still to be realised, based on evidence rather than the original business case;
- **cost to complete** — the remaining spend and effort, not what has already been spent;
- **risk and dependency** — regulatory deadlines, safety issues and what other work depends on it;
- **capacity demand** — the scarce skills and teams it requires.

Score initiatives consistently and review the ranking regularly. The ranking matters less than the conversation it forces about trade-offs.

Make stopping a normal decision

The organisations that prioritise well treat stopping, pausing and reshaping as routine outcomes, not failures. Practical ways to build that habit:

- set decision points in every initiative at which it must be re-justified to continue;
- ask for value remaining and cost to complete at every stage gate;
- celebrate capacity released by stopping work, and redeploy it visibly to higher priorities;
- record why initiatives were stopped, so the lessons are kept.

A PMO that helps leaders stop the right work adds more value than one that tracks everything perfectly.

Connect prioritisation to capacity

Prioritisation only works if it reflects the people who will do the work and the teams who will absorb the change. A ranked list that ignores capacity simply moves the overload around. Bring resource and change-impact views into the same forum, so that approving a new initiative means deciding what it will displace.

A practical first step

Take the current portfolio and ask three questions of every initiative: what value remains, what will it cost to finish, and what would we lose if we stopped it today? Most organisations find a handful of initiatives where the honest answer is "very little". Stopping them is the fastest way to speed up everything else — and the clearest signal that the portfolio is being managed, not just reported.

Want to talk this through?

Book a 45-minute discovery conversation. Bring one challenge, leave with three prioritised next steps — written up within 24 hours.

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