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Benefits Realisation in a Recession — What Does Value Mean When Survival Is the Goal?

A Practitioner's Perspective on Redefining Programme Success Under Economic Duress



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“When the definition of success shifts from growth to survival, every benefits framework built in calmer times becomes not just inadequate but actively misleading.”

1. The Benefits Framework Nobody Questioned

For the better part of a decade, benefits realisation has been the respectable end of programme management. Where project delivery concerns itself with the mechanics of execution — scope, schedule, cost — benefits realisation asks the harder question: did we actually achieve what we set out to achieve? It is the discipline that connects programme activity to organisational value, and in principle it is the reason programmes exist at all.

The frameworks we have built to support this discipline share a common assumption. They assume that value means growth: increased revenue, expanded market share, improved customer acquisition, enhanced capability. The benefits maps, the dependency networks, the realisation tracking mechanisms — all of them are calibrated for an environment where the organisation is moving forward, where the question is how much value was created, not whether the organisation will still be solvent in twelve months.

That assumption is now being tested. As credit markets seize and economic indicators deteriorate, organisations across every sector are entering a period where the strategic objective is not growth but survival. And in that shift, the entire apparatus of benefits realisation — the frameworks, the metrics, the governance structures — is being exposed as a fair-weather discipline, built for conditions that no longer obtain.

2. When Value Becomes Defence

The first sign that benefits frameworks are failing under recessionary pressure is linguistic. Programme boards that six months ago discussed "value creation" and "strategic alignment" now speak of "cost avoidance", "risk mitigation", and "capacity preservation". The vocabulary has changed because the strategic context has changed, but the frameworks have not changed with it.

Consider a programme originally justified on the basis of revenue growth — a new product platform, say, or a market expansion initiative. Its benefits case was built around increased sales, new customer segments, margin improvement. In the current climate, those benefits are not merely delayed; they may be structurally unachievable for the foreseeable future. Does this mean the programme has no value? Not necessarily. The technology investment may still be essential for operational efficiency. The capability being built may be critical for competitive positioning when conditions recover. But these are different benefits — defensive rather than offensive — and they require different measurement, different governance, and different expectations.

The problem is that most organisations lack the conceptual vocabulary to make this shift. Their benefits frameworks recognise revenue, cost reduction, and compliance. They do not recognise resilience, optionality, or strategic preservation — yet these are precisely the categories of value that matter most when the economic environment deteriorates.

The recession has not made benefits realisation less important — it has revealed that our frameworks were never as robust as we believed. They measured one kind of value in one kind of economy, and mistook that for universality.

3. The Three Failures

As I observe organisations grappling with this challenge, three patterns of failure recur with striking consistency.

3.1 Failure to Rebase

The most common failure is the refusal to revisit benefits cases that were written in a different economic reality. Programme boards continue to track benefits defined eighteen months ago, against baselines that assumed market conditions which no longer exist. The result is a peculiar form of organisational dishonesty: everyone knows the original benefits are unachievable, but nobody is willing to trigger the governance process that would formally acknowledge this, because doing so might threaten the programme's funding.

This creates a shadow reality in which the official benefits tracking shows green while the actual value delivered bears no relation to the plan. It is not that programmes are failing to deliver value — many are delivering genuine, important value — but the value they deliver is invisible to the governance framework because it was never part of the original benefits case.

3.2 Failure to Value Avoided Cost

The second failure is the persistent difficulty of valuing what does not happen. In a recession, some of the most valuable programme outcomes are defensive: a system migration that avoids the cost of maintaining an unsupported platform; a process redesign that prevents headcount growth that would otherwise be necessary; a data initiative that enables faster reporting, which in turn enables faster decision-making during a period when speed of response is critical.

These are real, quantifiable benefits, but they sit awkwardly within frameworks designed to track positive outcomes. Cost avoidance, in particular, is treated with suspicion by most finance functions — understandably, given how easily it can be inflated. But the alternative — ignoring it entirely — means that programmes delivering genuine defensive value cannot demonstrate that value through the official governance channels.

3.3 Failure to Account for Optionality

The third and most subtle failure is the inability to value optionality. Some programmes that appear to have no current benefits case are in fact creating options — the capability to act quickly when conditions change, the platform to launch new products when demand returns, the data infrastructure to support decisions that cannot yet be specified.

Option value is well understood in financial theory but almost entirely absent from programme benefits frameworks.

In a stable economy, this absence matters less because the direct benefits case is usually sufficient to justify investment. In a recession, when direct benefits are uncertain or absent, option value may be the strongest argument for continuing a programme — yet there is no standard way to express it within the governance framework.

4. Towards a Recession-Resilient Approach

What would a benefits framework look like that could function in both growth and contraction? The question is not academic — it goes to the heart of how organisations make investment decisions under uncertainty.

Several principles seem clear from observation.

Benefits cases must be living documents, not monuments. The practice of writing a detailed benefits case at programme initiation and then tracking against it for three years is fundamentally flawed in a volatile environment. Benefits cases should be reviewed and, where necessary, rewritten at least quarterly, with explicit acknowledgement that the value proposition of a programme can change as the economic context changes. This is not moving the goalposts — it is recognising that the playing field has shifted.

The vocabulary of value must expand. Resilience, optionality, risk mitigation, strategic preservation — these are not soft benefits to be noted in an appendix. In the current environment, they may be the primary benefits of a programme, and they deserve the same rigour of definition and measurement that we apply to revenue and cost reduction.

Baselines must be dynamic. A benefits case that measures improvement against a static baseline is meaningless when the baseline itself is moving. If the market is contracting at ten per cent and a programme holds revenue flat, that programme has delivered significant relative value — but a static baseline will show it as a failure. Dynamic baselining — measuring performance against what would have happened without the programme, given current conditions — is methodologically harder but substantially more honest.

Portfolio-level thinking must complement programme-level tracking. Individual programme benefits cases, however well constructed, cannot capture the interdependencies that determine real organisational value. A programme that delivers modest benefits in isolation may be essential because it enables three other programmes to deliver theirs. This portfolio view of benefits — understanding how value flows across programmes, not just within them — becomes critical when resources are scarce and every investment must justify its place.

5. The Deeper Question

Behind the technical challenge of redefining benefits frameworks lies a more fundamental question: what is a programme for in a recession?

The instinctive answer — survival — is not quite right, because pure survival would mean stopping all discretionary investment, and most organisations recognise that this is a recipe for long-term decline even if it preserves short-term cash. The more nuanced

answer is that programmes in a recession serve a dual purpose: they must contribute to immediate resilience while preserving the capacity for future growth. This dual mandate is inherently contradictory — resilience favours cost reduction and simplification, while future growth favours investment and capability building — and managing that contradiction is, I would argue, the central leadership challenge of programme management in the current environment.

“The organisations that will emerge strongest from this downturn are not those that cut deepest, but those that learned to distinguish between the programmes that were genuinely creating future value and those that were merely consuming present resources under the banner of strategic investment.”

Benefits realisation, properly conceived, is the discipline that should enable this distinction. That it has largely failed to do so is not an argument against the discipline itself, but against the narrow, growth-dependent form it has taken. The recession is forcing a reckoning that was overdue: our frameworks for understanding programme value were never as complete as we assumed, and the cost of that incompleteness is now becoming visible.

The question is whether organisations will use this moment to build something more robust — a conception of programme value that holds across economic cycles, that accounts for defence as well as offence, that values what is preserved as well as what is created — or whether, when growth returns, we will quietly return to the frameworks that failed us and wait for the next downturn to expose their limitations again.