

Project Management will Continue to Grow

Interview with Prof Darren Dalcher^{1, 2}

Founder and Director
National Centre for Project Management
Professor, Lancaster University Management School, UK



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Darren Dalcher is Professor of Project Management, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management. He works to foster interactive dialogue about the integration of successful practice with theoretical research in the management of projects.

He is an experienced academic with a successful track record of consulting and working with businesses, charities and governmental organisations. Passionate about solving real world problems, he has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the area of practice-based education and reflection in project management and information systems and has designed and developed the UK's first professional doctorate in project management, alongside an extensive suite of executive and professional masters programmes and diplomas.

Darren is the Editor of two project management book series published by Routledge and Editor-in-Chief of a leading software engineering journal published by Wiley, reflecting his hybrid interest in the connection between technology and its successful management. He has

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amassed the world's largest collection of failure stories, which he uses as a basis for refining the notion of sustainable success. His aim is to refresh and rejuvenate management and leadership practice through the breaking of silos, the sharing of transdisciplinary ideas and the co-creation of new innovations and insights. His research focuses on rethinking project success, reshaping the notion of agility and developing a longer term perspective on usage, benefits, and value in artefacts, systems and projects.

Prof Dalcher's key interests: The improvement of project practice, project excellence, strategic initiatives, managing change, systems engineering, decision making, narratives of success and failure, continuous improvement and development, the future of information, agile methods and the evolution of life cycles.

Interview

Q1. You've said that culture really matters. In the context of globalization, what are the keys to dealing with multi-cultural project environment?

Darren Dalcher (Dalcher): Diversity is a tremendous asset for problem solving, for identifying options and for making decisions. **Our strength is often in our differences**, which can open new opportunities for innovation and renewal.

In a connected world, collaboration will continue to hold the key to our shared and enduring success. Globalization means the blending across cultures, perspectives, religions and experiences, offering the potential to benefit from other points of views. The keys to dealing with collaboration revolve around: trust, respect, fairness, transparency, sharing and open communication, and the recognition of differences in terms of values, norms and practices.

Q2. As founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management in UK, from your perspective, what's the necessity and significance of building a nation-level project management organization?

Dalcher: There are many conversations that are needed around projects and their impacts. Not least, is the ability to create a dialogue between informed practice and relevant research and reach across the various silos and perspectives. The management of projects holds the potential to link strategy, stakeholders, benefits, usage of assets, facilities and capabilities. Being able to have these conversations, share new insights and identify new problems and challenges is essential to the developing maturity of the discipline of project and programme management.

Q3. In the fast-paced society featured by digitalization, how can an enterprise manage change in the era of VUCA?

Dalcher: Change management is where we start to consider people and their needs and

the impacts that our projects can have. The success of most of our endeavours is measured by the rates of people using them, and/or the money and benefits that those uses bring to the organization or to society. Change management can leverage our change efforts and therefore merits attention to the people impacted by change. A fast-paced society would require new modes for dealing with large change.

People, and society at large, seem to be in constant state of searching for improvements. In every generation, people appear to have been part of an unprecedented march towards improving, adopting new technologies, industrialising and the like. So we shouldn't be fazed by the impact and scale of changes around us.

We are operating in increasingly uncertain and unprecedented times. In order for change to be successful, we need to bring people with us and get them to change previous behaviour patterns and embrace new assets, technologies and ways of doing things. They need to learn to use them, often in new ways. We need a series of experiments in order to learn, but we need our change subjects to be part of the conversation and to take a lead in shaping these experiments, so that we are able to change behaviours and embrace change. We should learn quickly and make rapid adjustments. We should start with the end in mind and ask what steps could take us there, and ask lots of questions.

Ultimately, what we are really talking about is learning, learning about the change and how it may impact our lives in order to be successful. The challenge is that we are looking to get the stakeholders to participate in this learning journey with us and shape the change that follows. So, fortitude, curiosity and a willingness to learn and experiment would be key. We also need to adopt a more resilient stance that would allow us to cope with different alternatives, and new insights during this learning journey. If we are truly resilient, we might be able to adapt and adjust to whatever we discover and continue to achieve, and improve in a world that is replete with change and new challenges.

Q4. You are known to have amassed the world's largest collection of failure stories so as to refine the notion of sustainable success. Why is it so important to learn from failure and how should project managers learn from failure? Is it equally necessary to learn from success?

Dalcher: That is a fascinating question. **At the most fundamental level, failure enables learning. Indeed, failure triggers learning.** Success can offer mechanisms for replication and good ideas that have worked. However, failure teaches us that something is not working and that some kind of change is needed. **We do not need major failures to learn from. Small experiments could do as well because they may hint that we are making a mistake.**

The depressing part about collecting failures is that you see the same mistakes repeated. Adaptive and responsive methods allow us sufficient latitude to try things out and learn as we progress.

My hope is that if we become involved in sufficient conversation, we can play a part in influencing decisions, trialing out some of the implications in quick ways and adjusting our

projects so we can continue to deliver meaningful projects.

We can continue to replicate good lessons, but while we acknowledge that each project is somewhat unique, it is this uniqueness that adds up to risk, vulnerability, whilst also giving us a potential learning opportunity. Learning actively while we can would thus be better than learning passively when it is too late.

Q5. You have been named by APM as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008. From your viewpoint, what is the future trend of project management?

Dalcher: I believe the role of project management will continue to grow. We will also see a need for more project managers, but I also hope that we will become more involved in some of the strategic conversations. I see a greater focus on the definition and ultimate realization of benefits. I hope we participate in the upfront articulation of projects and business cases. I believe that we will also see a greater interest in integrating projects with change management and placing a greater emphasis on people and their needs rather than techniques. **We are increasingly adopting a longer-term perspective that extends the life cycle of the project** and I see a greater extension to a life cycle that starts with project conception and ends with the realization of the promised benefits.

Q6. You attach great importance to integration of successful practice with theoretical research in the management of projects. How do you view the gap between PM practice and theory knowledge? (e.g: Many project managers passed the PMP exam but can't apply the knowledge well.)

Dalcher: This is another interesting question. In general, practice and research in project management have evolved independently, often drifting from one another. In our work, I am looking to attain a balance between relevance and rigour, meaning that the research problems and knowledge are applicable and relevant to practitioners, whilst any knowledge and insights have been established through reliable and repeatable methods.

I have worked hard to create a space for having these types of conversations and beginning to address the gap between research and practice. The key is in creating a meaningful dialogue and offering all participants a useful and productive part in the conversation that will appeal to their personal interests.

Passing a knowledge-based examination does not make a good project manager. Knowledge is not a good predictor of success in project work. Developing good managers requires attention to skills, attitudes and capabilities that are not knowledge-based. For example, managers work with and influence people but making that kind of difference cannot be determined through multiple choice questions.

Q7. It is said that “no project fails at the end; it fails at the beginning”. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

Dalcher: Yes, absolutely.

Fred Brooks, the legendary project manager for IBM used to ask, “How does a project get to be a year late?”

“One day at a time.”

There are many opportunities to address failure as we proceed; however, **the most fundamental seeds of failure are sown upfront, and possibly even before the project has been started.** The dynamics, constraints and assumptions are established early on and therein lies the potential to influence, improve and mitigate failure.

Q8. Blockchain technology is a hot topic. As far as you are concerned, in what way will it influence project management?

Dalcher: Technologically, **Blockchain offers a potential platform for project management** that is secure, versatile, redundant and resilient. It can be implemented in most contexts, support globally distributed projects and provide a tamper-proof record of transactions. It can thus be used to indicate the completion of tasks, milestones or work packages, providing a single reliable source of information or simply provide more robust cloud space storage.

Perhaps, the key appeal might be the availability of a single global currency that can support supply chains and networks and will reduce the need for currency conversation and the threat of currency fraud.

Looking to the future, blockchain offers the potential to apply smart contracts across distributed projects, which can contain rules for delivery and penalties that can be applied without resorting to any local, geographical, legal, national or political jurisdictions. In an era of smart and digital technologies, blockchain technology seems to offer the potential to facilitate networked operations with greater reliability and greater ease. As we engage with smart contracts and digital assets blockchain could be the necessary link and technology needed to usher in a new era of global and collaborative project working. **Blockchain can thus become the driver for more global, more integrated and more trustworthy virtual world of projects.**

Q9. Having worked in the field of project management for so long, how do you conclude about this profession? Is it fun or challenging, or promising? Please offer some advice for newcomers.

Dalcher: Project management is certainly an exciting place to be, but we need to have a bigger conversation about our role in society. Project managers need to be involved in some of the conversation regarding the fuzzy front end of projects. We also need to understand the purpose of projects and consider the wider impacts. Also the connection between projects and strategy offers some opportunity for shaping and influencing. It is clear that the need for projects will continue to grow, but unless we are part of these conversations, our role may still diminish as others become involved in conversation around systems, change, users,

stakeholders or the enterprise.

My advice for newcomers is to try to understand the purpose of your project and look to the development of contextual and behavioural skills that will enable influencing and participating in the exciting conversations that I have envisaged above. It is also useful to develop a longer term perspective and consider how it applies to our project/s.

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About the Interviewer



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