

FEATURED INTERVIEW

Debbie O'Bray, PMI Fellow



Debbie O'Bray, PMI Fellow, CIM (Hons), is a former Chair of the Board of the Project Management Institute (PMI ®), and a past Director of the PMI Educational Foundation Board of Directors. Debbie has enjoyed a diverse and distinguished career in project management that includes twenty one years in the telecommunication industry followed by ten years in project management consulting. During her consulting career, Debbie worked extensively in China, Mexico, and Europe with organizations in a variety of industries including banking and finance, new product development, mining, aerospace, and environmental engineering to improve their performance through better project management. Debbie is currently with Investors Group Financial Services, Inc., where she is responsible for the project management practice across an enterprise IS organization, which spans five companies in both Canada and Europe.

A passionate PMI volunteer since 1992, Debbie has served in many capacities at the local, national, and international levels. She is a founder of the PMI Manitoba Chapter and served on the chapter's Board of Directors for five years, including three years as Chapter President. In 1992 she joined the PMI Standards Committee, serving as a core team member and key contributor to the development of the 1996 edition of the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. Debbie's contribution to standards development was recognized with a PMI Presidential Citation in 1995.

At the international level, Debbie served on the PMI Board of Directors for a total of six years in positions of increasing responsibility. Prior to assuming the role of Board Chair in 2003, she held the positions of Secretary-Treasurer, Executive Committee Member, Vice Chair, and Chair of the Strategic Planning and Program Alignment Committee. In 2004, Debbie was named Chair of the PMI Ethics Standards Review and Ethics Standards Development Committees where she led a team of internationally respected professionals from twelve countries through the development of a new ethics code for the Institute. The PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, which applies to approximately 300,000 professionals worldwide, came into effect on January 1, 2007. Debbie resides in Winnipeg, Canada.

Editor's note: This interview was conducted by PM World Journal managing editor David Pells.

PM World Journal (PMWJ): How did you first get interested in "project management", and when did it happen?

Debbie O'Bray (O'Bray): Project management is often described as an accidental profession and that was certainly my experience. I was introduced to project management twenty five years ago while working at a large telecommunications firm. There were a handful of project management practitioners scattered across the company, but overall, the organization wasn't well informed about project management. Recognizing that much of the company's work was project based, the executive team engaged a consultant to introduce them to the fundamentals. They liked what they saw and committed to developing project management as a competency across the organization. I don't know why they chose me to spearhead this effort, but it proved to be my calling so I am truly grateful that they did.

PMWJ: Over your 30+ year career, what has been your most memorable project? Why, and what role did you play?

O'Bray: I struggle to select just one project, but when I think back on the projects that were most memorable for me, there is a common theme – they all had a significant "organizational change" component. Whether it's a corporate merger, or the introduction of new systems and processes that fundamentally change the way people work, I am fascinated by the people side of project management. As challenging as it is to integrate organizations, or implement state of the art technology for your workforce – helping people to embrace change is even harder. For me, it is the most rewarding aspect of a project. I have been involved in organizational change projects as a team member, a Project Manager, an Executive Sponsor, and as a stakeholder who was impacted by the change. I find the experience invigorating regardless of the hat that I am wearing.

PMWJ: How did you get involved with the Project Management Institute?

O'Bray: While attending a PMI conference I learned about the newly formed PMI Standards Committee; a group of project management practitioners from a broad range of industries that was tasked with developing a standard for project management. The mandate of the committee was to produce a document that was applicable to most projects, most of the time. "That sounds interesting," I thought to myself. As luck would have it, there was a vacancy on the team and I fit the industry and demographic profile they were looking for. I seized the opportunity; contributed to the best of my ability and learned as much as I could. The product that the team produced ultimately became known as the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. I had never been part of such a seasoned and passionate team before. I was hooked - and so began my career as a PMI volunteer.

PMWJ: What were some of the most memorable activities or events from your days leading the PMI Manitoba Chapter?

O'Bray: I was in a leadership position during the chapter's formative years, so most of the memorable events for me pertain to chapter start up activities. The chapter formation team came together in 1993 and the chapter received its charter at the Vancouver conference in October 1994. Email wasn't main stream yet so meeting coordination, and chapter communications were all done via postal mail, which wasn't conducive to rapid progress.

I remember a meeting where we needed money for something and everyone reached into their pockets, put what they had on the table, and somehow we scraped together enough to pay the bill needed to be paid. I believe we had 26 members when the chapter received its charter, just barely exceeding the minimum requirement of 25. It was hard work to get the last 10 people to join – we painted a picture of a thriving local project management community and promised that we would never ask the founding members for anything more.

Of course that didn't hold true for long, and most of the initial chapter members soon found themselves serving on one committee or another. There wasn't a big pool of people to draw upon, so the Board largely stayed intact for the first few years – we used to laugh about the fact that everyone would just move one seat to the left and take on a new role each year. Slowly but surely the chapter grew into a vibrant and engaged community, just as the founding members always hoped it would. Today the chapter offers a robust array of programming and networking events, and the chapter is well known and well regarded in our local community.

PMWJ: When did you serve on the PMI Board of Directors? What were some of the major developments or trends that were affecting PMI at that time, or issues that came to the attention of the PMI board?

O'Bray: I served six consecutive years on the PMI Board of Directors, commencing in January 1999.

The Board's priority for the first two years of my tenure was the implementation of Policy Governance. PMI membership had voted to adopt this new model, which represented a fundamental change in the way the organization was governed. It was a challenging transition, as the Board learned to govern by establishing the outcomes to be achieved, and then empowering staff to deliver the results.

During this same period, PMI was experiencing unprecedented membership growth. In the early 90's membership was in the 8,000-10,000 range and by 2000 it was approaching 100,000. In addition to implementing Policy Governance, the Board focused heavily on putting the infrastructure in place to service the burgeoning membership.

With the transition to Policy Governance complete and membership continuing to grow at an unprecedented rate, the Board embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process in 2002. The Board employed a robust stakeholder engagement process to solicit input from across the organization. The outcome of the strategic planning exercise was a bold new vision and roadmap to achieve it.

A hallmark of the strategic plan included the globalization of PMI, and this became an important focus for the Board for the next couple of years. Of course, globalization is a journey that will never be complete, but these were the years when the initial steps were taken. I personally found this to be an especially exciting and rewarding time to serve.

Towards the end of my tenure, the Board determined that it was time to refresh PMI's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Much like the strategic planning exercise, the Board designed a process to encourage member participation from around the globe. I had the great honor of leading that effort for PMI. The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct was approved by the Board in October 2006 and came into effect on January 1, 2007.

PMWJ: What were some of the most memorable accomplishments during your year as Chair of the PMI Board?

O'Bray: I served as PMI Chair during a period of many "firsts" for the Institute. I cut the ribbon at the grand opening of the Brussels, Belgium service center, the first PMI center outside of North America. I also had the opportunity to open the first PMI Congress outside of North America in The Hague, Netherlands.

One of the accomplishments that I am especially proud of involves a partnership with another project management professional association. In 2002, I was invited to serve on a small team comprised of senior leaders from PMI and senior leaders from the International Project Management Association (IPMA). The group was exploring opportunities for our two organizations to work together in areas of mutual interest. Our efforts culminated in an historic agreement; "The Principles for Joint Collaboration By and Between IPMA and PMI", which I signed, along with the Chair of IPMA, in Moscow, Russia in July 2003.

All of these milestones were cause for celebration, and reflected a turning point in PMI's evolution from being largely North American centric, to becoming a more global organization.

PMWJ: What was the most stressful aspect of serving on the PMI Board?

O'Bray: Without question, it was time management. During the early part of my tenure, PMI was undergoing significant change with the implementation of policy governance, and I was working at a large company that was also undergoing significant change. The hours were long, and the sleep was minimal. Later in my tenure, I was working in project management consulting, which took me all over the world. As I assumed positions of increasing responsibility with PMI, the travel requirements also grew. The business travel coupled with PMI travel meant that I was away from home upwards of eight months per year. This was only possible thanks to the unwavering and enthusiastic support of my family.

The other aspect that I found stressful, initially, was public speaking. The world of teleprompters, media interviews, public Q & A sessions that could go in any direction – this was all foreign to me. The first time I stepped in front of a crowd of 3,300 at congress

was daunting. Through a combination of professional development and experience, I honed my skills, and hopefully, did a good job for PMI.

PMWJ: What was the most fun?

O'Bray: Operating at the strategic level and making decisions that would profoundly shape the future of PMI - and doing this work with fellow Board members who hailed from every corner of the world. My Board colleagues were bright people who brought vastly different perspectives to the Board table. Through rich debate we were able to reconcile the different perspectives and make good decisions for the Institute. Serving on the PMI Board gave me an opportunity to work with these leaders, who I otherwise would never have met. I have maintained friendships with a number of Board colleagues that will last a lifetime.

PMWJ: During your time on the PMI board, how many countries have you visited? What were some of the most memorable places (or circumstances) where you made presentations on behalf of the Institute?

O'Bray: I visited close to 30 countries during my time on the PMI Board. When I think back on the most memorable, there were some serious moments and some lighter moments too. It is always the warm hospitality of the people, and their passion for project management that stands out.



While representing PMI in Ljubljana, Slovenia, I had the opportunity to meet with a group of dignitaries from a country that was struggling to rebuild after years of conflict. The needs were great and resources were scarce. Should their next investment be a hospital, a highway, or a university? - one member of the group, wondered aloud. Recognizing the magnitude of their decision, the group set out to learn everything they could about project portfolio management in order to make the best decisions for their citizens. It was an overwhelming responsibility and I was profoundly touched by how committed they were to getting it right.

In Istanbul, I had the privilege of speaking at the inaugural conference of the newly chartered chapter. Attendees hailed from all over the world, and language barriers proved to be no match for their determination to make it a valuable experience for every attendee. The chapter's passion for project management and commitment to building a thriving local project management community was inspiring.

In Alice Springs, the heart of the Australian outback, I represented PMI at the Australian Institute of Project Management conference and awards gala. At the end of the evening there were no taxis to be found, so my colleague and I walked home in our glamorous ballroom gowns and bare feet, arriving at our hotel covered in the red soil of the outback. Representing PMI internationally has had its serious moments and light hearted moments too!

At the end of the day, project management practitioners are united by a common goal – to leverage the precious, but limited, resources entrusted to them – so they can make a

meaningful impact for stakeholders and their community. I will always treasure the time I spent with project management colleagues around the globe.

PMWJ: In your opinion, what are the two or three most important developments in the world of project management over the last ten years?

O'Bray: Ten years ago, when my son entered university, he didn't know what a Project Manager did, and was definitely not aware of project management as a career choice. He is now an accountant working at a software consulting company. A couple of weeks ago he announced; "Mom, I think I am a Project Manager." Over the past 10 years, project management has made the transition from niche to main stream profession. Degree granting programs in project management, once a rarity, are now widely available and well attended. This is good news because there is a chronic shortage of Project Managers globally.

Another development that I am very excited about, is the uptake of project management by not for profit organizations. From health based organizations focused on eliminating cancer, to sport based organizations serving under privileged youth, not for profit organizations have increasingly recognized that much of their work is project based – and they are investing in developing their project management capabilities. This is a welcome development because not for profit organizations are often fiscally constrained, so learning how to maximize their limited resources is a win for both the funders and the beneficiaries of their cause.

Finally, I am very encouraged to see a renewed focus on the basics. For the past dozen years or so, there has been a focus on leadership and other "soft skills" of project management. Soft skills are absolutely important but they are required in addition to the fundamentals – not instead of. Project Management practitioners need to know how to build a proper WBS, how to estimate, how to create a schedule. Recently, I have seen increased emphasis on the basics and I view this is a positive development.

PMWJ: Where is project management headed? What does the future of project management hold in store? Where will it be in 5, 10 or 20 years?

O'Bray: There is an interesting debate underway as to whether project management is a profession or a life skill. I would argue that, to some extent, it is both. Allow me to use an analogy. As a parent, I am not a medical doctor, but I am educated and competent on the basics of first aid and can recognize when my children need a professional for more advanced medical care. I view project management in a similar light. Basic planning skills are invaluable for everyone – and there is a lot of work underway to make the basics mainstream, but a professional brings a much more advanced skill set to the table. It is my belief that project management will increasingly be recognized as a bona fide profession.

Further, in this highly competitive global economy, it is my belief that the demand for capable project managers will continue to grow – and I am hopeful that we will be well on our way to closing the skills shortage gap. I believe that project management will be

a deliberate career choice for young people, rather than an accidental career that they stumble into at some point in their professional career.

I expect that methods and practices will continue to evolve – for everything from aligning key stakeholders around the project vision, to estimating, scheduling, risk management, etc, but I also expect that the fundamentals which serve us well today will continue to serve us well tomorrow. I also believe we'll see greater emphasis on program management as organizations grow to understand the benefits of this delivery system.

Finally, I believe that there will continue to be a plethora of certifications, but I don't believe that project management will become a licensed profession, with global reciprocity agreements between governments, etc. – the way that other professions are. Perhaps I will be surprised.

PMWJ: What are some of the biggest challenges to the PM profession today?

O'Bray: At one time, project management training and consulting was fairly specialized, but over the past 15 years or so, it's really become commoditized. An internet search will turn up hundreds of project management consulting firms to choose from. While anyone can hang a shingle on their door, the reality is that not all consulting firms are equal. I have seen organizations make significant investments only to receive questionable advice from the "expert" that they hired. When this happens, it is easy for an organization to conclude that "project management is not for us". This story is a long way of saying that one of the challenges PM profession faces is the reputational impact when organizations fail to achieve the outcomes they were looking for.

A second challenge for the PM profession is the need to develop competence more expeditiously. It is easy enough to develop knowledge through training and education, but competence is another matter entirely - and competent Project Managers are what organizations need to achieve results. It typically takes years of experience to develop professional judgement, but we have a chronic shortage of Project Managers and an aging workforce, so we need to find ways to bring practitioners up to speed more quickly. Some industries and some organizations have made inroads, but overall, there is real work to be done in terms of how we bring new practitioners along.

PMWJ: What are some of the major challenges facing PMI now?

O'Bray: I am not a spokesperson for PMI so I can't speak authoritatively on this subject, but as a PMI member I can imagine that PMI must be challenged to meet the needs of nearly half a million members who represent a broad range of industries, geographies, and levels of professional expertise. For example, I would expect that seasoned professionals in the sunset of their careers are looking for something different than new graduates who are entering the workforce for the first time. Undoubtedly, members have vastly different reasons for joining PMI and vastly different expectations of what PMI should do for them once they become members.

Building on the membership theme, I would also imagine that it is challenging to provide value to members on ongoing basis. PMI frequently adds to its portfolio of certifications

and standards – but at some point I assume the list of project management related topics against which to develop certifications or standards will be exhausted – and a new set of product and service offerings will emerge.

Beyond the realm of membership services, I would expect that there are some very practical challenges associated with doing business in dozens of countries around the world – challenges related to taxes, currency conversion, time zones, etc. Given the frequency with which regulations change, it must be a formidable challenge to operate in so many jurisdictions.

Finally, from an association management perspective, there are very few peer organizations that PMI can draw on for advice and lessons learned. In most cases PMI is leading the pack and forging new ground without the benefit of others having gone first.

PMWJ: Who were some of your mentors? Which individuals have had the most influence on you and your professional career over the years?

O'Bray: There is not enough space to properly acknowledge all of the kind people who have taken me under their wing, and have shaped my career in profound ways. I'd like to recognize four of them.

When I was first asked to bring project management into my organization, my direct manager and her leader, the divisional Director, did more than encourage me – they literally pushed me out of the nest. They said “Not only can you do this, you are going to do this, and you are going to be wildly successful. Tell us what you need and we will make sure you have it.” They knew when to push me, they celebrated my mistakes, and they were always there to offer guidance and advice. Many years later when I was named PMI Chair, my local chapter threw a party to celebrate, and both of these leaders were the first to arrive and last to leave. How can you be anything but successful when you have that kind of support?

On the PMI front, one of my early mentors was Brian Fletcher. Brian was PMI Chair in 1987 and became a PMI Fellow in 1988. Brian taught me about consensus building and he also taught me his approach to selling idea, when to press, when to back off, and if the group was not ready – how to position yourself for action when the group becomes ready. Brian was instrumental in preparing me to lead large, diverse groups and to build consensus around a decision or a course of action.

A very special mentor was PMI Founder, Eric Jenett. Eric and I worked together on the PMI Standards Committee for a number of years. Eric was a passionate, no nonsense leader. He liked to keep it simple and he was a big believer in telling it like it is – he was not afraid to say something unpopular. Eric taught me how to give feedback. He could offer criticism in such a way, that you always felt he had your best interests at heart, and you always left the conversation motivated to do better. When Eric had praise for you, it meant a great deal, because you knew it was genuine. As a leader, I strive to deliver feedback with the same genuineness and sensitivity that Eric did.

PMWJ: What are the three most important traits or skills for project managers today?

O'Bray: The first is emotional maturity. Project Managers need to be self-aware. They need to understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, they need to understand what drives their behavior and their decision making, what motivates them, what their personal values are, what pushes their hot button, and they need to have impulse control. Project Managers are first and foremost influencers. Frequently, they find themselves in politically and emotionally charged situations, and they must respond appropriately. To me, understanding and being able to manage oneself, is a prerequisite for being able to choose the best response or best course of action in a given situation.

The second is communication generally, but more specifically, the ability to ask good questions. Asking the right question can give a Project Manager insight into issues that may not be readily apparent from reviewing metrics and stats. Perhaps there is a fundamental flaw with the planning assumptions, or an unhealthy dynamic brewing within the team that puts the safety of others at risk. The ability to ask good questions will help the Project Manager sort through the noise and zero in on the aspects of the project that require immediate attention.

The third is the ability to work well with others. At the end of the day, Project Managers need to work effectively with people in order to deliver. They need to work well with the people they report to (funding bodies, sponsors, etc.), and they need to work well with the people who report to them (team members, vendors, etc.). You may have a sponsor on one project that is demanding and another that is indecisive. You may have one team member who is aggressive and another who is passive. The Project Manager needs to adjust their style to work effectively with different types of personalities. That's a significant challenge and one that a Project Manager can spend their life time mastering.

Something that I didn't mention is project management technical skills – such as WBS, estimating, scheduling, financial management, etc. These skills are the price of admission. I assume that all Project Managers have the fundamentals (and are continuously upgrading their skills in these areas). The attributes that I mentioned above are those traits that, in my opinion, position a Project Manager to be truly successful.

PMWJ: What advice would you give to a young person just getting started, who might be interested in making project management her or his career path?

O'Bray: There is a saying that opportunity often presents itself disguised as hard work. Opportunities will present themselves – but the timing is not always convenient. My first word of advice is "Say YES whenever you possibly can". It may mean a short term sacrifice for a long term benefit. I have few regrets about the things I've done with my life, my biggest regrets are the opportunities I did not seize when I had the chance. That said, if you say YES to an opportunity, you must deliver. Your word is all you have. Ensure that your word is good and that when you commit to something, it is a certainty that you will follow through.

Second, expect to do the hard work. Don't be too proud to take on an entry level assignment. Good work begets more opportunities. If you believe that the assignment you are being offered is below your skill set – that's great, it means that you will definitely knock it out of the park and will be given a more challenging opportunity next time. Sometimes it's not as easy as it looks and you might get a bit of a wake-up call about where you need to further develop your skills. Either way, if you are offered an entry level assignment, accept it because only good things can come from it. If you choose to hold out for a more prestigious opportunity, you might find yourself waiting a long time...

Finally, try to meet with employers in your area who hire project management practitioners. Find out what is important to them, what they are looking for in terms of education, experience, personality traits, etc. and solicit their advice on how you can prepare yourself. This will achieve two things. It will provide valuable information, and it will also make you known to prospective employers. Even if they are not hiring immediately, they will be hiring eventually and you want to be top of mind. Too often, prospective employees try to impress me with things that are unimportant – they don't understand what I am looking for, and as a result, they miss the mark and don't get the job. I am happy to share when someone asks what I am looking for, and I expect that most employers will be happy to share as well.



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PMI Global Congress North America
October 2011*