

## **Interview with David L. Pells<sup>1</sup>**

Managing Editor  
*PM World Journal*



***Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan***  
*Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)*

### **Journalist's notes**

*PM World Journal* is an influential professional eJournal for program and project management. Lots of scholars, students, PM practitioners in China regard it as a reliable source for trends and updates in the field of project management. The journal enjoys great popularity in China.

I feel honored to have an interview with David L. Pells, Managing Editor of the *PM World Journal*. With over 35 years of experience in project management, David L. Pells shares generously with us his thought-provoking viewpoints and insightful observations about the profession. On behalf of PMR, I extend sincere gratitude to David L. Pells.

### **Notes from David Pells**

Dear Spring (Yu Yanjuan), Thank you very much for this opportunity to share my thoughts and perspectives with your readers in China. I have followed the PMR since it began publication and want to congratulate you and your editorial team for supporting the advance of professional project management in China. I am honored to be interviewed.

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine, in China in March 2018. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. [To see original version with Chinese introduction, click here.](#)

## Introduction of David Pells

David L. Pells is Managing Editor of the *PM World Journal*, a global eJournal for program and project management, and Executive Director at the PM World Library. He is also the president and CEO of PM World, the virtual organization behind the PM World Journal and Library, and president of PM World Services, a U.S. firm providing high level PM advisory services for major government programs.

David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 35 years of experience on a wide variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, defense, transit and high technology, and project sizes ranging from several thousand to ten billion dollars. He continues to act in advisory roles for several global programs and organizations. He has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, served on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice, and founded and led the Global Project Management Forum, a series of meetings of international PM professional leaders from around the world, during the 1990s. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award in 1999. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK, Project Management Associates (PMA – the national PM society of India), and of the Russian Project Management Association SOVNET. From June 2006 until March 2012, he was the managing editor for PMForum.org and of the globally acclaimed eJournal PM World Today. David has published widely, speaks at conferences and events worldwide.

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## Interview

**Q1.** You have more than 35 years of experience in project management; what changes have happened in PM?

**David L. Pells (Pells):** In 35 years there have been many, many changes in the project management field. When I began to work in major projects in the mid-1970s, such important concepts as critical path planning, work breakdown structure (WBS), earned value management (EVM), quality assurance (QA), resource leveling and others were already well developed. The first big disruptive change that I remember was not directly associated with project management per se, but rather the advent of the personal computer in the early 1980s. This was followed immediately by Microsoft and other companies introducing project planning tools that anyone could use on a desktop PC. Microsoft recognized the growing importance of projects in many industries, created MS Project and integrated it with the MS Office suite of business applications. Whereas previously project planning, scheduling and cost control tasks were often performed by specialists, now anyone could use similar tools and manage (or at least try to manage) their own projects.

The second really disruptive change was the publication of the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge by the Project Management Institute (PMI), followed soon

thereafter by PMI's Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. These two PMI products began to drive growth in both PMI membership as well as industry recognition of project management. When I served on the PMI Board of Directors from 1995-1997, we began to see the rapid, almost exponential, growth in both certifications and membership. This growth has continued, with PMI membership now well over 400,000 worldwide. Combined with PMP certificate holders, PMI serves more than one million. PMI, APM in UK, AIPM in Australia, IPMA, AACE, CPM and other professional organizations added more standards and more certifications; the combination of these products and growing numbers of associations, members, chapters and stakeholders has resulted in widespread recognition of projects and project management in many organizations and countries.

The third change, a trend really, was the growth of PM professional organizations in many countries. By the time we held the first Global PM Forum in New Orleans in 1995, there were more than 30 professional PM societies worldwide. Now there are more than 80; if you count construction management associations, probably more than 200. Over the last 30 years, the PM profession has grown, expanded and matured. Combined with PM standards, tools, publications, education and training, these organizations have spurred widespread recognition of project and project management across nearly all industries and locations. Many of these organizations offer competing standards, qualifications, products and services, but together they represent a very significant trend (resulting in change). Project management is now well established in most industries and countries.

The 4th major change was the recognition that such soft skills as communication, teamwork, leadership, stakeholder engagement and similar issues were just as important, perhaps more so in many cases, than skills and knowledge about scope, schedules, costs, quality, procurement and other engineering or scientific-oriented aspects of PM. Whereas the largest PM professional associations all had standards and certifications by the year 2000, they all began to incorporate these soft skills into the professional products and messages. The field of human psychology rocked the PM landscape. Emotional Intelligence made its appearance in the PM field. With economic and industrial globalization came the need for more cultural awareness and knowledge, and Cultural Intelligence. Now we often see "project leadership" emphasized rather than project management, with the soft skills headlining.

The 5th big change (trend in some locations) is the increasing awareness by government leaders that professional project and program management can lead to very serious improvements in managing public programs, projects and organizations. The best example may be in the UK where the national government began issuing program and projects management standards in the late 1990s (PRINCE2, MSP, etc.), the creation of the current Major Projects Office and the recent Charter awarded to APM.

**Q2.** What's your biggest harvest after working in this field for so long? What is it that you are most proud of? Please share with us some unforgettable lessons learned in your career.

**Pells:** Of course, I am very proud to have received the PMI Fellow award in 1999, and to have been named an honorary Fellow of APM in the UK, PMA in India and SOVNET in Russia.

Recognition by one's peers must always rank at the top of anyone's career. I'm also proud of the work I did in the 1990s to bring various project management societies together to promote cooperation and collaboration. The lesson for me was the positive impact on myself personally and on my career from volunteering and "giving back" to the PM profession. I learned more about PM faster, gained leadership experience, gained recognition and made many friends around the world, many of whom I then had opportunities to visit in their home countries.

I would also rank my current work as editor and publisher of the PM World Journal, and the creation of the PM World Library, just as high. With the dual missions of promoting knowledge sharing and continuous learning related to program and project management, these two online resources offer authors and readers around the world opportunities to share their knowledge, get published (which provides recognition and advances careers), and to learn from others. It is fulfilling to provide a real service for others, to promote professional PM and to possibly even contribute to important projects.

For the last ten years, I have also acted as a program management advisor for several major US government programs. I am proud to have contributed my program and project management knowledge to the success of these programs. The point is that if we have an opportunity to work on projects that solve global problems or help our national homelands, those are the projects that can cap a career.

**Q3.** As you have said, there are signs of leapfrogging happening in the project management world especially in Asia countries. Have you paid attention to PM development in China? What impresses you most? What message would you like to say to project management professionals in China?

**Pells:** I am impressed with the increasing interest in project management in China. I don't follow developments there closely, as I can only read English. But I know that there are now many project management programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in Chinese universities. There are multiple PM professional organizations in China; both PMI and IPMA are active there as well. And I can tell you that Chinese readers rank seventh among all visitors to the *PM World Journal* website ([www.peworldjournal.net](http://www.peworldjournal.net)), behind only large English language countries (USA, UK, India, Canada, Australia and South Africa).

Another observation has been the impressive and globally visible number and range of big projects completed by Chinese organizations, both government and industrial. We have watched the rapid completion of such projects as new airports, rail lines, space launches, web-based businesses (and entire industries), manufacturing plants, buildings and even entire new cities. Projects around Asia and Africa by Chinese organizations have been equally impressive. It's hard to imagine so many projects being completed without effective project management, so well done!

Leapfrogging is really possible. My message to PM professionals in China is to find opportunities to leapfrog. Learn some history and proven methodologies, but study new research, consider current changing and future conditions, figure out what fits best for you and

your projects. Learn what's new, figure it out, and don't wait.

**Q4.** In one of your articles, you mention that project management is a national competence. Would you please elaborate a little more on the importance of project management?

**Pells:** This position is really just simple logic. In a global economy where organizations and solutions compete across borders, the organizations that can complete their programs and projects most efficiently and successfully are more successful, at home and abroad. Programs and projects financed with public (taxpayer) money should be performed as efficiently and effectively as possible. Since many project management methodologies were created to complete projects better, faster and cheaper, PM should be widely used. Some countries like Norway and the UK have recognized this; all developing countries should have a national PMO like in the UK to guide and monitor major projects.

**Q5.** You are the managing editor of PM World Journal (PMWJ). From your perspective as an editor, what's the significance and value of publishing project management magazines?

**Pells:** There are several answers to this question, depending on perspective. First, we play a crucial role in advancing the profession, by informing and educating working professionals. Publishing thus goes hand-in-hand with education in PM and in all professional fields.

For PMWJ, there was another motivation. It seemed to me that the authors of PM articles and papers do not receive enough visibility or recognition for their work. In some cases, new creative works are brilliant, offer new solutions, create new knowledge and advance the PM profession. Certainly the authors of such works deserve visible credit. So everything we publish in the PMWJ has an author profile at the end. We also showcase authors in the PM World Library (PMWL). This is very important to me.

**Q6.** You've listed cultural intelligence as one of the top soft skills of project managers. I think what you said makes great sense in the context of multi-cultural and virtual working teams.

**Pells:** Culture is important in project management, but it's not as simple as the word implies. What is culture? While the focus is often on ethnic, national or regional differences, every organization, family, location, school or other social group creates cultural influences or identities. I worked on a very large project in the early 1990s that brought people together from many different backgrounds, including academia, engineering organizations, scientific laboratories, defense and construction industries, and many different countries. The challenge became how to create a new culture of our own for our big project that could empower the most people. It was a challenge. You are right; this is a big issue on virtual projects where awareness and sensitivity are both more difficult and more important. It takes both experience and maturity.

Many people consider cultural differences as challenges or risks on project teams. While that may often be true, I see it differently. Cultural diversity on teams can provide opportunities to identify and explore new ideas and possible solutions. Diversity can thus contribute to

innovation and agility, in my opinion. I think the best leaders recognize the potential value of diversity, are open to differences and act accordingly.

**Q7.** Discussions and predictions about Artificial Intelligence (AI) are common nowadays. As far as you are concerned, how will technologies like AI influence project management world?

**Pells:** This is a fun topic, and highly related to the emergence of the “Internet of Things” (IOT). These technologies will have great influence on project management from two angles – more projects will include smart materials, components and systems that are digitally (often wirelessly) connected. Some industries will be influenced more quickly than others, but already include aerospace, construction, defense, energy, healthcare, manufacturing and transportation. Project managers will still need to be human for the foreseeable future, but project teams will soon include robots (think about drones, for instance) doing specific tasks, some smarter than others. So what are the challenges when your team includes both people and robots? How do they interact? Who’s in charge? How are they trained, directed, rewarded or cared for?

The other perspective is related to project information. Building information Modelling (BIM) technology is already revolutionizing PM in the “built environment” where various kinds of project data are created, integrated, communicated and managed in multiple, inter-connected databases and systems. This is affecting project teams, communication processes, contracting and procurement capabilities (including logistics and deliveries), change control, project reporting, stakeholder engagement, financing and nearly every traditional PM role and activity. It’s both unsettling and exciting.

**Q8.** As people have said, the only thing that never changes is change itself. You even noted that change management and project management are becoming synonymous. In the fast-changing world, how will companies embrace change management?

**Pells:** If projects are defined as unique endeavors, then every project creates change. So by definition, project managers are change managers. Dealing with rapid change has led to all of the attention on “agility” in my opinion. But there is another related and important aspect of this topic that better answers your question.

Change has often been correlated with risk, and considered from a negative perspective. Numerous or rapid changes are bad because they introduce more uncertainty, more risks of making mistakes (affecting scope, schedule, costs and other traditional performance objectives.) But if you embrace agility and the need to innovate, to find new creative solutions, then change can be embraced as opportunities to improve, adjust, achieve more positive outcomes and benefits (as mentioned previously). In the future, I expect the opportunity side of risk management to increase in importance and for PM to incorporate both agility and innovation as fundamental skills.

**Q9.** It's said that everyone is the project manager of his / her own life. Do you agree with that?

**Pells:** No and yes! Portfolio managers might be more accurate. The problem is this: the best PM normally takes experience, education, knowledge and maturity gained over many years. Young people, my younger self included, seldom have a good picture of their future life (or life cycle), don't know what projects they will (or want) to achieve, or how to plan (let alone manage) those goals. Some people focus on an industry or career quite early (accountant, engineer, builder, doctor, scientist, soldier, teacher, spy, etc.), but still don't have a clear understanding of the projects that they will attempt or achieve. So in retrospect, maybe we are all project managers, but mostly 'accidental project managers' with respect to our own lives.

**Q10.** How do you view women's role in or contribution to project management? What strengths do women have in this profession?

**Pells:** Thank you for these important questions. Let me answer the second question first. Generally speaking, women are equal to men in intelligence, capabilities and now very often in experience. Their capabilities and success in project management, as is the case with men, depend on their education, training, experience and motivation. These factors vary, of course, based on industry, location, age and opportunities. It is often argued that men and women have different natural tendencies, for example, that women are more socially adaptive with better communication skills. In many cases, this might be true, but I am not 100% convinced. In the project management field, soft skills must be tailored appropriately to be most affective; project management education and knowledge are critical. I firmly believe that women and men should be valued and treated equally in our profession.

That said, it is still true that there are far more men in project management than women, although that is rapidly changing. If you look at the history of modern project management, the status and trends related to women in project management seems rather normal. In the industries where early project management tools and processes were employed such as construction, defense, aerospace and heavy industries, there were far fewer women employed or involved with projects. Over the last twenty or thirty years, as project management has been embraced by software and information technology organizations, and as PM has grown in services industries where far more women are both employed and in leadership positions, far more women have entered the project management field. In such industries as health and education, I would guess that female project managers already outnumber men. In the United States, that's probably also true in banking, finance, IT and social services industries. This seems natural to me.

If women constitute 50% of the world's population and if projects and project management exist in all industries (as I believe they do or will), then women must play an equal role in the project management field. Project managers and project team members should generally be selected based on knowledge, experience and capabilities. There may be project or organization-specific reasons for exceptions, for example team gender composition, culture, politics or physical project conditions (there will probably always be fewer female project managers on construction sites or oil rigs). But every person and every professional, man or

woman, is capable of making a contribution, some better than others regardless of gender.

I would make one more observation on this topic. Gender equality is a significant social problem in many countries. Women and girls are treated very badly in some places, which seems self-destructive to me. Many projects are implemented without consideration for gender-related impacts; for example, projects that benefit male dominated governments or organizations, which then perpetrate gender inequality. As the project management profession matures, there will be a greater recognition of the importance of social value in project outcomes. In my opinion, women can greatly contribute to this needed maturing process. Women are stepping up now in the U.S. and U.K. (check out APM's Women in Project Management SIG for some dynamic examples). I hope the trend goes global.

To see the original PMR interview with Chinese introduction, [click here](#).