

## **Interview with Darren Dalcher Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI, SMIEEE, SFHEA**

Honorary Professor at the University of Kent

Founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management, UK (NCPM)

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***Interviewed by Ömer Berkay Dağılı***  
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Prof. Darren Dalcher is the founder and Director of National Centre for Project Management. He has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the area of practice-based education and reflection in project management and has worked with many major industrial, commercial and charitable organisations and government bodies. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King’s College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *the Journal of Software: Evolution and Process*. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of a companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, A Senior Member of the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), and the British Academy of Management. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Academic Member Advisory Group and of the APM Research Advisory Group and is currently involved in editing the next edition of the APM Body of Knowledge. Prof Dalcher is an academic editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*.

**Ömer Berkay Dağlı (Dağlı):** Dear Prof. Dalcher, first of all, thank you for this opportunity to have an interview with you. Could you please introduce yourself to PM World Journal readers?

**Prof. Darren Dalcher (Dalcher):** Thank you very much for arranging this interview. I suppose I could introduce myself as an author, teacher, researcher and editor who is passionate about projects and the wider impacts that they have on society. I have been working in this space for around 30 years sharing and co-creating knowledge with practitioners, challenging the existing boundaries and the bodies of knowledge and trying to find relevant and applicable insights in other disciplines and domains.

**Dağlı:** In one of your articles, you mentioned a quote from Marry Shelly, ‘Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change’ As an experienced project manager do you think this pain is the ultimate challenge for organizations too? Could you briefly tell us what project management means for you related to this thought?

**Dalcher:** Yes, of course. Over the years we have learned that change can engender strong feelings, resistance and protests when it is imposed on people. Words such as pain and anguish are used when people describe their responses to and feelings about change that is introduced, leading to attempts to fight, block and otherwise undermine the change initiatives. Even the choice of words would suggest a strong reaction that in turn leads to resistance. Organisations are made up of many individuals with their own agendas and that same pain, and the same attempts to block, or arrest change, operate at that level too. It was recently reported that one of leading reasons for CEOs losing their job is their inability to deliver intended change and this has primarily to do with the impact that the change has on individuals.

If I could change the terminology, ever so slightly, in answering your question about personal meaning; for me, the management of projects means an informed attempt to bring people on board, when devising new enterprises and endeavours and bringing in innovation. It is about identifying needs, getting participants involved, delivering assets and new capabilities in a fashion that will enable users to utilise them in beneficial ways. The beneficial use will then contribute to realising the value from the proposed change.

**Dağlı:** I know you have a lot of tasks on your plate. However, I want to ask you about National Centre of Project Management (NCPM). Could you tell us about this centre with an explanation of general structure and function?

**Dalcher:** The National Centre for Project Management was founded in 2003 and provides a unique space for focusing on the intersection of informed research and relevant practice in a transdisciplinary project context. The Centre emerged out of an interest in supporting practitioners and delivering knowledge, skills, insights and competences to organisations seeking to improve their capability in the areas of managing projects, programmes and change. We have been able to avoid the trap of positioning ourselves within any particular silo, and hence can offer ‘safe space’ that seeks to identify and share relevant skills and capabilities, regardless of the sector. Our workshops, books and other publications benefit from being able to facilitate discussion

and co-create knowledge and understanding across different areas. Many of the publications aim to look into other disciplines and identify perspectives and points of view that will support project practitioners. A key part of our mission is to work with organisations to identify their needs and deliver new ways of thinking and working around projects, programmes, megaprojects, portfolios and strategic change initiatives.

**Dağlı:** *You have both academic and professional experience in various areas and industries. Which of your experiences you can highlight more? Also, could you mention some unforgettable lessons learned in these experiences?*

**Dalcher:** I am quite proud of the ability to work across both the academic and professional domains. I started work as a practitioner and was faced by a number of questions I was unable to answer, primarily in relation to the success or failure of IT projects. It was those questions that brought me back to university and started a quest to make sense of success and failure. In the later part of my academic life, I was based in a Centre focused on developing Work-Based Learning partnerships with organisations. I observed that many of the learners and organisations were facing similar journeys in the project arena, and hence decided that it was time to create the NCPM as a space that could accommodate and support the common journeys of individuals and organisations struggling to balance rigour and relevance.

One of the most unforgettable lessons for me was when I took over the editorship of a software engineering journal around the year 2000. After I proudly accepted my first paper, I received a call from the publishers asking me where to position the paper. My initial response was to suggest that it should be published 'in the journal'. Apparently the question was whether the article should appear in either the research or the practice section of the journal. I tried arguing that the paper satisfied both criteria and therefore should just be published as it stands, but the publishers insisted that it had to fit in one of the two distinct areas. That experience shaped my thinking about the disconnect between research and practice and the need to develop neutral spaces that are informed by rigorous research but that are able to maintain practical relevance. It's been a kind of a mission ever since...

**Dağlı:** *Could you further describe the goals of innovation needs and delivering collaborative thinking in Project Management and what has the centre accomplished so far in these areas?*

**Dalcher:** There is a need for developing new ways of thinking about projects and for working in innovative, and even revolutionary different ways. The centre has played a part in hosting the dialogue about some of these changes and in helping to shape, curate and support the development of new knowledge and insights. The Centre works with individual clients to address specific needs, develop new capabilities, and create insights and approaches for tackling specific challenges. We have a series of experts' workshops that bring together leading practitioners and researchers to debate and explore new areas and perspectives and identify additional insights.

You are probably familiar with our book series published by Routledge that features advances in project management and offers new insights on some of the key developments within the discipline. In addition, we have a second book series focused

on the fundamentals of project management where we offer broad knowledge, written by leading experts about the core areas related to the management of projects. Both series offer useful resources for practitioners, academics and students. Both stretch beyond the topics that are normally included in the bodies of knowledge, emphasising alternative ways of thinking and practising. The range of topics we cover ranges from risk, governance and stakeholders to ethics, spiritual dimensions of effective teamwork, supply chains, leadership, and urgent and unexpected projects.

I am also a regular contributor to PMWJ and the monthly column is another part of our endeavour to open up new conversations and to re-visit, re-question and re-position some of our more established approaches for thinking about projects.

**Dağlı:** *From your perspective as an experienced Project Manager, how do you think today's project management practices face the need for innovation, and what are the productive practices rather than status quo approaches that the PM World should take on this issue?*

**Dalcher:** This is probably a good time to mention my collection of failures... As part of my effort to make sense of success and failure over 30 years ago, I started collecting stories of project failures. Well, that collection has continued to expand over the years and people seem determined to keep me in business collecting new disasters. While I understand the temptation to focus on the delivery of projects, I have been collecting failures for too long to forget that projects are created for a reason. We need to consider the purpose of the project and bearing in mind that success is often related to the usage that is made of the new capability or assets that we deliver; we need to look at what it would take to get stakeholders more involved and encourage using these assets and capabilities.

The interest in benefits realisation goes some way towards that objective, but we need to also remember that projects offer new opportunities for innovation and hence can play a part in creating new and improved situations. Interesting practices for me would revolve around benefits, adaptability, flexibility, and the capability to continue to innovate and grow.

**Dağlı:** *You have been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 for your effort of integrating academic knowledge with practice. Could you describe the key issues of integrating academic knowledge into the professional practices?*

**Dalcher:** The number one issue is to develop listening skills. Both communities have a lot to share but need the space and confidence to do so. Practitioners struggle to make sense of a lot of the academic content that appears in journals and conferences. Academics often do not listen to the needs of practice. It is very often about finding a balance that works between rigour and relevance.

**Dağlı:** *According to this achievement of yours, I want to emphasize a bit of your academic side. How could you compare academic and industrial areas of Project Management? What are the challenges together with eases?*

**Dalcher:** I have been lucky enough to develop four distinct flavour of Masters programmes and two doctorates focused on the management of projects; each has a distinct audience, and a matching pedagogy and approaches for dealing with the needs of the relevant learning community. Nonetheless, a key challenge is in the recognition of project management as an academic subject within universities. Whilst industry may know that they need projects and would like to become better at managing them and realising their benefits, there is some work to be done on the academic side. It is not made simpler by the fact that our journals are not highly ranked, for example in the Association of Business School Journal Ranking. This can lead to debates about the position of project management, especially within business school. On the plus side, I have always enjoyed working with industry and some of the professional courses, and the learners make teaching and participating in the exchange, creation and development of knowledge a real joy.

**Dağlı:** *Project management has been and continues to be the accidental profession through the literature and common knowledge. What do you think about this general sense and effects of this situation to the organizations?*

**Dalcher:** Television programs such as *The Apprentice* add to the feeling that you can magically and instantaneously become a project manager and somehow gain the key PM skills needed to deliver projects successfully. Such programs also present a skewed vision of projects and teams. What it means is that a lot of the upfront planning work is ignored and there is little consideration of the long-term impacts and even the purpose of the project. More generally, project management is not doing itself any favours by ignoring some of the conversations about strategic value, realisation of benefits and long-term impacts, and so other professions and disciplines ranging from business analysts and systems engineers to change managers and enterprise architects may need to fill the space and address the longer-term concerns and the holistic and strategic conversations that need to take place. We also need to think about what happens before and beyond delivery and acknowledge our wider role and the wider impacts that we can have.

**Dağlı:** *Indeed, formal education is more expensive and difficult than the other training models such as certification training from various bodies. However, do you think formal education is also more beneficial than the other trainings?*

**Dalcher:** Yes potentially, if it is the right kind of education. I have spent a long part of my career involved in the development of reflective practitioners and engaged scholars. Given the challenges that many organisations are facing, such skills can make a huge impact on the potential success of organisations. We realised some time ago that about 90% of our learners had gained a significant promotion or additional duties during their reflective courses, indicating that such education can make a difference, and that the additional skills displayed by many graduates and learners can actually transform and improve their organisations. It is encouraging to see that such development is recognised as being valuable to professionals within their own work context. We are of course looking beyond knowledge-centric approaches; indeed, the development of reflective, flexible and adaptive professionals capable of dealing with the underlying uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity and making informed and reasoned decisions puts them at a premium.

**Dağılı:** *About the difficulties you mentioned, in which parts do you think students have the most difficulties? What do you suggest for them to overcome these challenges?*

**Dalcher:** Professional students often struggle with the need to become more critical and reflective. Many have spent a long time away from learning and would therefore need to learn to learn again, and to identify their personal style and ways of engaging and becoming involved and interested. They also need to learn to appreciate insights from different areas and perspectives. Perhaps, the toughest lesson though is learning to cope with uncertainty, where there is no standard recipe, requiring alternative ways of approaching knowledge, skills and capabilities and drawing on lessons and insights. Operating in that space requires real guts.

**Dağılı:** *What do you think about the future evolution of project management?*

**Dalcher:** I would like to see project management engaging with the fuzzy front end and the early decisions and considering the long term implications, usage, impacts and benefits related to projects. I think we can offer a lot to organisations if we can take a more active role in some of the strategic conversations. Over time we will need to become better at dealing with uncertainty, decisions and strategy, and accept a more central role in organisations.

**Dağılı:** Finally, as stated by Project Management Institute (PMI), organizations will need 87.7 million PM oriented professionals by 2027. According to this, from your perspective *which project management key skills will gain more importance to meet this demand in terms of adaptation? Relatedly, what is your suggestion to future project managers?*

**Dalcher:** Perhaps we are moving towards an era when we will all become project managers. Failing that, the majority of us will no doubt be involved in projects and in teams and even temporary organisations set up in order to make things happen.

We do need to get people thinking about ‘projects’, earlier. Schools would be a natural place to begin, as project skills may well become essential to organising and developing anything of significance. With projects as a new way of life, we need to embed project ideas into a wider agenda for individuals, organisations and wider society also.

The key suggestions to future project manager is to become part of the early discussion, consider the long-term implications of projects, look at the potential users and address the strategic importance of projects in making exciting things happen.

**Dağılı:** *Thank you so much for your time and interest.*

**Dalcher:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to reflect and consider many of these aspects and for putting together a list of thoughtful questions. It has been a pleasure to be part of this interview. Thank you!

## About the Author



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Ömer Berkay Dağılı is currently a Masters Candidate at Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, based in UK for the academic year 2017-2018. Previously, he has served as an Officer on Watch for over 30 months on board chemical tankers, based in different routes around the world where he served as Third and Second Officer. He completed his graduation in Marine Transportation Management dual diploma with honours from both Istanbul Technical University, Turkey and State University of New York Maritime College, USA in 2014. His major fields of study are project management, logistics and inter-modal transportation. His research interests include global project management, leadership, uncertainty management, programme and portfolio management, strategic PM, PM governance, stakeholders, project control and PM in the transportation and logistics industries. Omer served as a [research intern for the PM World Library](#) during January 2018, completing the program in record time. He can be contacted at [omerberkaydagli@gmail.com](mailto:omerberkaydagli@gmail.com)