

# **Project Management Is a Way of Thinking**

## **Interview with Wang Xiaojin<sup>1,2</sup>**

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**Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan**  
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### **Journalist's notes**

How does it feel to stick to one thing with passion for 35 years?

"It is a pleasant pursuit journey of self-improvement by deepening and expanding around a single focus", replied Professor Wang Xiaojin, without hesitation.

Wang Xiaojin, Doctor of Philosophy, PMP, now works as a professor of Yunnan University in China, senior project management trainer and consultant. 2018 is his 35<sup>th</sup> year in project management profession.

For him, project management is not merely a career to make a living, but a way of life. His bond with project management has lasted so long that it seems to have penetrated into every corner of his life. Project management way of thinking enables him to form the habit of running and helps him in dealing with almost everything. There is no doubt that project management has turned into a capable magic stick in his hands.

As an active witness, participant and promoter of project management development in China,

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he has made considerable contributions. Since 1996, he has been doing research on *PMBOK Guide* in an effort to promote the application of *PMBOK Guide* in China. He has participated in the Chinese translation validation since the 3rd edition of *PMBOK Guide* and is a reviewer of the final exposure drafts of the 4th, 5th and 6th editions of *PMBOK Guide*. He is the Chair of the Chinese Translation Validation Committees (CTVC) of *PMBOK Guide* 4th and 5th edition.

He is also an accomplished expert academically. His Ph.D research paper *Dimensions and Current Status of Project Management Culture* won the 2001 PMI International Student Paper of the Year Award. He has written books such as *Project Management Methodology*, articles like *Project Management: From Traditional to Agile Approach*, and papers like *Cultural Barriers to the Use of Western Project Management in Chinese Enterprises*. Five of his academic papers have been published in *Project Management Journal* and *International Journal of Project Management*. Since publishing his first book at the age of 30 in 1992, he has published more than 20 books in China.

“To approach the sky-high ambition through standing on solid ground, and to create good luck through creating challenges” is the life motto of Professor Wang Xiaojin. In my view, his 35-year profession journey is a perfect interpretation of this motto.

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## Interview

### Part 1: 35 Years in, with and for Project Management

**Q1: 2018 is the 35th anniversary of your project management career. What are the key milestones in your 35-year journey in this profession?**

**Wang Xiaojin (Xiaojin):** During my 35-year project management career, I always reached an important milestone about every 5 or 6 years. Some of the milestones are: 1983, starting the career; 1989, my first paper (on construction management) published; 1992, my first book (on construction claims management) published; 1997, obtaining project management master degree; 2002, obtaining Ph.D degree in project management. For youths, it is very important to realize an important career milestone every 5 or 6 years.

It is in September 1983 that I started the career at the age of 20. When I firstly got involved in project management, I even didn't know the term “Project Management”. My first job is the administration of international construction contracts, which I did for about 6 years. After that, I worked on construction cost and finance management, and began to explore the much broader area of construction project management. This exploration directly led to an important decision: going to a foreign university to study Project Management Course. At that time, no university in China offered such a course.

In March 1996, I went to RMIT University, Australia, to study the master degree course of project management. During this period, I studied the draft of the *PMBOK Guide* and the first

edition of the *PMBOK Guide*. Approaching the completion of my study, I came to realize that project management can be applied in almost all industries, not just in the construction industry, and that project management is not just a set of technical tools but also a new way of thinking. Then, I decided to explore and do research on the project management way of thinking.

In late 1998, I started my Ph.D degree study at Victoria University, Australia, with the research topic of Project Management Culture. I believed that project management practitioners should have their own professional culture, including some important work-related values and beliefs. Through the survey of Australian project management professionals, I established the model of project management professional culture consisting of Professional Commitment, Project Team Integration, Work Flexibility, and Work Performance. Thanks to this research, I was very lucky to win the 2001 International Student Paper of the Year Award of PMI Educational Foundation, and became the first non-North-American winner of this award.

Having obtained my Ph.D degree, I immediately returned to China and joined Yunnan University to continue my project management career. Practicing, researching, teaching, and writing in the area of project management are my lifelong career pursuits.

**Q2: You were appointed to work in Lubuge Project Construction Management Bureau (LPCMB) after college graduation in 1983. What does that work experience mean to you?**

**Xiaojin:** Certainly, that work experience laid a very sound practical basis for my project management career. Without such an experience, my project management career would not exist.

LPCMB was specially established in 1983 for managing the construction of the Lubuge Hydroelectric Project. This project was partly financed by the World Bank, and was managed by LPCMB using internationally recognized good practices of construction contract administration and project management. In addition to domestic contractors and suppliers, there were international contractors and suppliers from other countries such as Japan and Germany. Management and technical consultants from Australia and Norway provided assistance to LPCMB. This project was a great success. My 10-year experience in LPCMB gave me first-hand information about how a large construction project proceeds from initiating to closing, and also offered me valuable opportunities to communicate with subject matter experts from different disciplines and countries.

During the second half of the period, I reflected more and more on the general project management methodology beyond my direct work involvement. I frequently discussed this topic with my work supervisors or partners, including those from LPCMB and Australian Consultant Group. In 1993, I made my decision to study the project management course in a foreign university, and to take project management as my lifelong career pursuit. Many thanks to my work supervisors and partners, especially the director of LPCMB Mr. Yang Kechang. Without their guidance and assistance, I could not have been so decisive in pursuing my project management career.

**Q3: From your social media, I saw that you have adopted project management methods to guide your running plans. Project management also has a deep-rooted impact on your life, right?**

**Xiaojin:** Yes, my way of thinking about and doing things has been deeply influenced by project management. Project management has become an internal part of my life. In my life, I set a number of objectives, large or small. To realize a large objective, I always divide it into several small and usually phase-based objectives, each of which can be realized through a project.

For example, to recover my health, in 2012, I decided to completely change my supper to eating only apples, which indeed was a huge challenge. To achieve the goal, I initiated three projects. The first one was a 7-month vegetarian diet, the second was no food for 24 hours, and the third was to establish a strong inner demand for good health. The three projects were completed within 16 months. Then, on October 25, 2013, I started my pure-apple supper. My pure-apple supper every day has lasted for nearly 5 years. I am not sure if the pure-apple supper is suitable for others, but it has been improving my health significantly.

Using the project management approach, I also successfully become a very keen runner after 52 years old. Previously, I didn't like physical exercises, such as running. I adopted the project management approach to change, from running 5 km to 10 km to 20 km. On April 28, 2018, I successfully challenged a 52 km walking in 11 hours and 10 minutes (including lunch time). This is certainly a project. I took the project management approach to initiate, plan, execute, control and close. For example, scope management, schedule management, risk management, and stakeholder management were all very essential to ensure the success.

If you want to realize a challenging objective, to make a significant change of your life, or to complete an important job, I suggest the project management approach should come to your great help.

**Q4: You have said, "Project management is not only technique but also a way of thinking." Would you please explain this view?**

**Xiaojin:** Actually, any technique is the reflection of a certain set of values and beliefs. It is the values and beliefs that determine which technique you use. Behind project management techniques is the project management way of thinking about and doing things, which consists of many values and beliefs. To study and apply the project management approach, we must go beyond to reach its value and belief level. You may not use every technique; however, the way of thinking would accompany you like the shadow and impact your behavior at all time.

In project management, there are some key values and beliefs that differentiate project management from traditional management. For example, project management is integration oriented, while traditional management is division-of-labor oriented; project management is team-based horizontal management, while traditional management is level-based hierarchical

management; and project management is change oriented, while traditional management is status quo oriented.

Traditional management is the result of industrialization. With the digitalization of our society, many practices in the traditional management need to be challenged and thus changed, and the project management way of thinking and doing would become increasingly popular. For example, organizational structure would be majorly project team based instead of functional department based.

## **Part 2: Observations on the *PMBOK Guide***

**Q5: You've published books to help practitioners prepare for the PMP exam. What's your viewpoint on certificate-based project management?**

**Xiaojin:** The *PMBOK Guide* issued by Project Management Institute (PMI) is a well-known global project management standard. It is also the most important (but not the only) document on which the PMP exam is based. Since 1996 when its first edition was published, I have been learning, studying and spreading the PMBOK-Guide-based project management approach for more than 20 years. Publishing books to help PMP candidates is just one of my efforts in spreading the PMBOK-Guide-based project management approach. Anyone who wants to pass the PMP exam must study and understand well the PMBOK-Guide-based project management approach. PMP candidates should focus on understanding the approach itself, and then passing the exam would be a natural result.

Project Management practitioners should obtain at least one internationally recognized professional certificate, say, PMP certificate. There are three main reasons. Firstly, the process of preparing for the PMP exam will help you better understand the project management approach. Secondly, you need the PMP certificate to show others what you have done and achieved. Thirdly, you need to join the global and local PMP communities in order to ensure your future career success.

**Q6: The 6th edition of *PMBOK Guide* has come out. As an expert, what changes or trends have you observed?**

**Xiaojin:** Compared to the fifth edition, the sixth edition's change is significant. Certainly, this new edition will lead the future 5-year development of global project management. Here are the top five significant changes in this new edition.

Firstly, the core characteristics of "project" are expanded from the traditional set of temporariness, uniqueness and progressive elaboration to including the new two dimensions: change oriented and business value oriented. To do a project, you must realize its scope, time, cost and quality objective, and go further to deliver the required benefits (organizational change and business value). For example, when it comes to my project of 52 km walking, the required benefits behind the scope, time, cost and quality objectives are increased self-confidence, improved self-reputation, and new life insights.

Secondly, in the “introduction” part of each Knowledge Area, there is a new part about how to apply the Knowledge Area in agile environments. I believe agile idea and method are applicable to some degree in almost all projects, far beyond the IT software development projects. In today’s rapidly changing world, we must actively pursue changes, and change with trend and breakthrough. The agile idea and method can be very helpful.

Thirdly, a whole chapter is used to describe the role of project managers, including its competency, management role, leadership role, and 14 types of power. This is the true reflection of today’s new requirements for the role of project managers. For example, traditionally, a project manager is mainly to direct others by using positional power. However, today’s new requirement is that a project manager should to a large extent inspire and guide others by using the relational power.

Fourthly, the role of Project Management Office (PMO) is further enhanced. It puts forward a new organizational structure type of PMO. So far as I see, this kind of organization is really PMO-centered. PMO is the most important department, and all other departments and even top management would operate around PMO. It can be expected that this kind of organizational structure will get more popular. It also states that the category of processes, policies and procedures of organizational process assets usually should be updated by PMO. In this way, PMO should play more important role in updating organizational process assets in order to produce knowledge and wisdom from information and data.

Fifthly, in the Knowledge Area of Project Risk Management, it requires management of both individual project risk and overall project risk. Overall project risk is the effect of all uncertainty sources on the project as a whole. We must firstly manage overall project risk and keep it at an appropriate level, then identify and manage each individual project risk. This is comparable to a person’s health management. You must firstly improve your overall health situation, then try to prevent or treat a certain kind of disease. If your overall health situation were poor, the means for preventing or treating a certain kind of disease would not be effective.

**Q7: Since the publication of the first edition of *PMBOK Guide* in 1996, the book has been leading the development of project management. As far as you are concerned, what do you think of the significance of the book? In what aspects do you think it should make improvements?**

**Xiaojin:** Its significant contribution to the project management profession includes but not limited to the following 3 aspects. Firstly, it transforms the unstructured, implicit and experience-based project management into the structured, explicit and research-based project management so that project management is more operational, teachable and developable. Secondly, it makes project management applicable in almost all industries by giving “project” both an inclusive and exclusive definition and summarizing the good project management practices suitable for most projects at most times. Thirdly, together with PMI’s program and portfolio management standards, it advances project management to be a strategic tool, not just a low-level tactical tool.

About the potential improvements, I suggest that close attention be paid to controlling the length of its main body. The page number of the main body of the first edition is 134, then 159, 297, 345, 415, and now the sixth edition is 537 (excluding 200-plus-page appendices). Behind the page number is my concern: what are project managers' core tasks? Certainly, project managers cannot do everything in the field of project management. What should project managers do by themselves? What should be authorized and appointed by project managers to others? What should be outside project managers' job? Researching about these questions can help to control the length of *PMBOK Guide*. I don't hope to see the future seventh edition will have more pages.

It's worth noting that some reviewers of the sixth edition exposure draft are from China. As we can see, project management has been developing quickly in China. We, the Chinese project management practitioners, should contribute much more to the global project management profession, including the future updating of the *PMBOK Guide*.

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## About the Interviewer



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