

Project Management Education Is a Life-long Quest

Interview with Harold Kerzner, PhD ^{1, 2}

Author, Professor, Director
International Institute for Learning



Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan

Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)

Introduction to the interviewee

Harold Kerzner, PhD, Professor, author, is now Executive Director for Project Management at the International Institute for Learning (IIL). Having worked in the field of Project Management for more than 5 decades, he is definitely a witness of PM development.

He has written many books with the 60th one, *Innovation Project Management*, to be published later this year; he also lectures across the globe. His tremendous achievements have won a lot of recognition. Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute in the United States gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. The Project Management Institute (International Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that has demonstrated excellence in project management. The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

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He gains satisfaction from what he has been doing. He keeps in contact with practitioners and insists on learning. As he said, expanding the latest PM thinking is where his passion lies.

Interview

Project Management Is Satisfying and Rewarding

Q1. How would you like to describe the profession of Project Management?

Harold Kerzner (Kerzner): There are very few professions in the world that provide workers with the satisfaction they can receive from project management. Most employees in a company, including project team members, may see and work on only a small component of the end result. They perform their job, perhaps in the earlier stages of a project, and may never see how their efforts contributed to the final result. The PM sees an idea drawn on a piece of paper being developed into a final product. The PM sees the entire picture and how everything must come together. Seeing the achievements of one's work and knowing that you may have been responsible for this, is highly rewarding.

Q2. What would you like to say to the newcomers in this profession?

Kerzner: Project management is probably one of the best career choices you can make. In my view, it provides life-long satisfaction. Take advantage of every educational opportunity in project management. You will never be sorry.

Project Management Is “Leadership without Authority”

Q3. What have you learned from early experience of working as a project manager? What's your advice for future PMs?

Kerzner: One of the first projects I managed had about 340 team members, of which I had some degree of control or authority over only about nine of them. Many of the team members were several pay grades higher than me, and yet I found myself in a position of having to provide them with some form of project leadership. What I learned very quickly was that project management is “leadership without authority.” PMs may have little or no direct authority over their team, may have no input into the team's wage and salary performance reviews, may have no control over whom the functional managers assign to the project, may not be able to remove team members that are performing poorly without the participation of their functional managers, and cannot force team members assigned to multiple projects to work on their project in a timely manner. PMs of the future must learn that they will not always have the authority they expect or the ability to control worker performance through the wage and salary performance review process.

Project Management Was My Deliberate Choice

Q4. You've been in this profession for more than 5 decades. Is project management an accidental or deliberate choice for you? What are the milestones in your career? In your eyes, what changes have happened in the field of project management?

Kerzner: Project management was a deliberate choice for me. While working at Thiokol, I discovered that project management was being used mainly in the aerospace, defense and construction industries. I became convinced that concepts of project management were applicable to all industries and that masters and doctorate programs in project management would soon be the norm worldwide.

I wanted to be part of the growth phase. I left Thiokol in 1976 and accepted a university teaching position hoping to teach project management coursework. At that time, my recollection was that there was only one textbook on project management written and it was a reference text not really suited for a university course. In 1977, I wrote my first book on project management. I sent out the manuscript to more than two dozen potential publishers. All but one returned my manuscript with wording that there is no future in project management, it is just a fad, and it may soon disappear. The book made it into print. As the concept of project management became better understood and more widely accepted, project management courses appeared in all engineering disciplines (other than only civil engineering), information systems and business administration. Now, some 40 years later, I will have my 60th book published by John Wiley and Sons this September entitled *Innovation Project Management*.

Q5. Congratulations on the new book! What is “Innovation Project Management” mainly about?

Kerzner: When we discuss project management, we usually define it as traditional or operational project management as opposed to strategic project management. We teach students that traditional or operational project management begins with a well-defined statement of work or scope statement where we have a reasonably clear understanding of what we wish to accomplish. Sometimes, we even go so far as to tell project managers NOT to begin the execution of the project until all of the requirements and scope have been identified.

Strategic project management is a relatively new concept. It requires a line of sight from the project team to the strategic objectives of the organization. These types of projects, which most often require innovation and R&D, cannot for the most part be managed using the same tools and techniques that we use in traditional/operational project management. We must use design thinking, brainstorming, alternative analyses, prototyping, etc... which mandates expertise in the tools used as part of VUCA. Therefore, the focus of my book on *Innovation Project Management* deals with these types of strategic projects that are based upon an idea or intuition rather than well-defined scope.

Q6. With so many books published, you are a productive expert in this field. What are the books that you are most proud of? And what are the motivating factors in writing so many books?

Kerzner: I maintain contact with companies around the world on what they are doing to improve project management performance in their firms. Most of the time they grant me permission to use their material in my books and even to use their corporate logo on the cover of the book. The material they provide to me is a learning experience for me. Even with more than five decades of work in project management, I am still learning new things. My passion is therefore to write project management books that expand state-of-the-art thinking in project management.

Project Management Education Is a Life-long Quest

Q7. What is your life motto? Among all your roles as professor, author, trainer, etc., which one do you enjoy most and why?

Kerzner: My life's motto is that project management is continuously evolving and that project management education is a life-long quest. I have been in the project management field for more than 50 years and am still learning project management from my colleagues and the companies I consult for and write about in my books.

I like being in the classroom teaching project management. I spend most of my time now lecturing to senior managers. I enjoy telling senior managers that, unless I can see changes for the better in project management in their companies, don't bother inviting me back again.

Acceptance Criteria Should Be Established

Q8. With the development of globalization, project team members scatter across the globe. In such a context, how should performance be measured and monitored?

Kerzner: For several decades, performance was measured and monitored using the earned value measurement system which focused on mainly time, cost and scope. Today, we realize that time, cost and scope are not the only criteria for project success. As such, at the start of each project, we must establish acceptance criteria on what will be measured and reported. The acceptance criteria can vary from project to project.

Projects Fail for Reasons

Q9. Based on your observation, what are the common causes for project failure?

Kerzner: If I had to prioritize the list, failure normally begins as a result of meddling from the people in the top floor of the building because (1) they believe that they need to be in total control, (2) they must be involved in any and all decisions, and (3) they may not support project management even though they understand it.

Most failures are a result of more than one cause. Some causes may directly or indirectly lead to other causes. For example, business case failure can lead to planning and execution failure. For

simplicity sake, project failures, for all types of projects rather than just innovation projects, can be broken down into the following categories:

- Planning/execution failures such as lack of a clear vision, inadequate or incomplete requirements, lack of resources, constantly changing resources, lack of replanning on a regular basis, wrong type of contract, insufficient organizational process assets.
- Governance/stakeholder failures such as end use stakeholders not involved throughout the project, minimal or no stakeholder backing; lack of ownership, stakeholders' incompatible organizational process assets.
- Political failures such as new elections resulting in a change of power.
- Technical failure can also be industry-specific such as IT failure or construction failure. Some failures can be corrected while other failures can lead to bankruptcy.

If we look at just innovation projects, the most common categories of failure are:

- Technical failure
- Market failure
- Performance failure
- Failure to finish on time
- Research failure
- Development failure
- Production failure
- Leadership failure

If we perform a root cause analysis in each of the innovation project failure categories, we could identify the following as common causes of innovation failure:

- Poor definition of goals
- Poor alignment to goals
- Poor monitoring of results
- Unexpected outcomes
- Inadequate know-how
- Poor team participation
- User acceptance failure (i.e. prototypes)
- Unforeseen events
- Insurmountable technical obstacles
- Having the wrong or unqualified resources

- Legal/liability/regulatory uncertainties
- Poor communication and access to needed information
- Critical decisions dictated from the top down

Regardless of how good an organization's innovation community might be, some failures are expected. Any organization that always makes the right decisions is not making enough decisions. Any organization where all their innovation projects are completed successfully probably is not taking enough risks.

Trust Is Key to Self-organization

Q10. What's your attitude towards self-organization in teams? Will self-organization pose some risks for project success?

Kerzner: I am a believer in the use of self-organization in teams. However, for this to work, the people that reside at the top floor of the building must visibly demonstrate and support the trust they have in the project teams. Trust is the key word.

The biggest risk with self-organized teams occurs when the line of sight from the project team to senior management is destroyed. Executives must continuously inform project teams about "enterprise environmental factors" that can impact the direction of the project. Some executives believe that information is power and intentionally sever the line of sight. Even with self-directed teams, executive involvement is mandatory.

PM trends

Q11. In VUCA era, what do you believe are the top qualities for project managers?

Kerzner: As project management has evolved, companies have demonstrated a willingness to work on more projects. In the VUCA era, risk management could very well become the most important skill.

Q12. Do you think project management work will be replaced by AI?

Kerzner: It is possible that AI may replace some components of project management work but certainly not all the components. I believe it is still too early to make any determination.

Q13. In times of gig economy, much project work tends to be outsourced to gig workers. What challenges will this trend pose to project staffing and project success?

Kerzner: With the high cost of labor (recruitment, training, benefits and permanent employment), companies are finding it beneficial to utilize the gig economy. Boeing outsources 70% of the components on the Boeing 787 aircraft. Other companies, such as the auto industry, would much rather focus on assembly than manufacturing components.

The biggest challenge in a gig economy is when a company tries to save money by allowing Tier 1 suppliers to provide supervision for Tier 2 & 3 suppliers. There can be a loss of quality control, poor decision-making, and decisions being made in favor of the highest ranking gig provider rather than the customer's company. Contractors in a gig environment may be using their own list of priorities and risks that are significantly different from their customers' needs and this can also affect decision-making.

Q14. What are your tips on how project managers should manage upward (getting the support of top management)?

Kerzner: Managing upward is extremely difficult if the people above you do not understand project management, do not see the benefits, or are fearful of a loss of power and authority. The starting point appears to be educating the people above you using outside trainers and consultants that do not have any hidden agendas that could influence executive level thinking.

Q15. You know, we are in PM 4.0 now. What are the opportunities and challenges in PM 4.0?

Kerzner: For decades, strategic (rather than operational) projects were managed by functional managers whom the executives trusted rather than traditional project managers. With PM 4.0, project managers are now being asked to manage these strategic projects and are given a "line of sight" to the top concerning strategic business objectives. This (PM 4.0) is one of the reasons I wrote the book *Innovation Project Management* because innovation activities are directly related to strategic planning efforts.

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About the Interviewer



Yu Yanjuan

Beijing, China



Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for Project Management Review Magazine and website. She has interviewed over forty top experts in the field of project management. In the past, she has worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in various training centers in Beijing. For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuanyu-76b280151/>.