

Project Management Has a Bright Future

Interview with Shankar Sankaran, PhD ^{1,2}

Professor of Organizational Project Management
University of Technology Sydney



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Introduction to the interviewee

Shankar Sankaran, PhD, is a Professor of Organizational Project Management at the School of the Built Environment, Faculty of Design Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), in Australia. He teaches advanced-level subjects in the UTS Master of Project Management Course including aspects of organizational project management (governance, portfolio and program management) and systems thinking, and supervises doctoral students.

Shankar's research focuses on organizational project management, megaprojects, project leadership, systems thinking and action research. He has received a number of research grants from various agencies to conduct research on project governance, megaprojects, project leadership, leadership in not-for-profit organizations, healthcare, action research, governance and ethics. The findings of his research have been published in more than 140 publications. He is a co-editor of the first book on research methods for project management, *Novel Approaches to Organizational Project Management Research: Translational and Transformational*, the first

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book on systems research, *Guide to Systems Research – Philosophy, Processes and Practice*; the first handbook on organizational project management, *Cambridge Handbook of Organizational Project Management*; and a co-author of *Organizational Project Management: Theory and Implementation*.

Shankar is a member of the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Project Management*, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* and *Project Management Research and Practice and Systems*. He is the current President of the International Society for the Systems Sciences and founder of its Action Research SIG. He has also been on the board of PMI's Global Accreditation Centre. He is its current vice-chair.

As a practitioner, researcher, professor, educator, author and speaker, Shankar has contributed to the development of project management in many ways. Let's now find out more about his PM story.

Interview

Journey from Industry to Academia

Q1. Why did you turn to academia after working for a long time in industry? Has the experience in practice served you well in academic research?

Shankar Sankaran (Sankaran): Actually, I entered academia by accident. I had completed a PhD implementing a large-scale change in the project management operations of a Japanese multinational company, Yokogawa, in Singapore, using action research as my research methodology. I was a Technical Director of this firm and we set up a global engineering center in Singapore which needed a different model of working in projects. I left Yokogawa in 1999 when I migrated to Australia to set up my own software outsourcing business. When I went to live in Australia with my family, I visited Southern Cross University (SCU) to meet my doctoral supervisor Professor Alan Davies who introduced me to the university's Vice Chancellor Professor Barry Conyngham. Barry asked me if I would like to teach in an MBA program as he wanted experienced operations managers from industry to teach SCU's MBA students. I thought this was an interesting move and agreed to try it out for six months. I liked the work and stayed on and I have now been an academic for nearly twenty years. Working in academia has been an exciting and rewarding journey and has satisfied my curiosity about how theory and practice can work together. I am lucky to have been promoted from a Senior Lecturer to full Professor within fifteen years. I never thought I would become a Professor as I did not start my career as an academic. I have also been fortunate to have worked for five research grants and started my sixth recently and this has been very inspiring. I teach postgraduate students who have many years of experience in industry. My industry-linked research and my interaction with students from industry has kept me abreast of what is happening in the field.

Q2. Do you have any life or work motto to share? What are the most fulfilling versus

challenging aspects of your career?

Sankaran: I believe in the philosophy of action research (<http://www.aral.com.au/resources/aandr.html>) and its dialectical approach of acting and critically reflecting on the consequences of the action before acting again. Over the years, I have become more conscious about reflecting before acting when applying the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle of action research.

I am very grateful to UTS for where I am in my career today as a Professor of Organizational Project Management. I think transitioning from the role of a maintenance engineer to working in projects, early in my career, was a good move that has enabled me to have a rich, if sometimes personally risky, international experience. Establishing the Asean Technical Centre for Yokogawa in Singapore with 150 engineers to carry out global engineering in the 1980s was one of the proudest moments of my career in industry. Forming a successful research alliance with Professor Ralf Müller at BI Norwegian Business School and Professor Nathalie Drouin at the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) in 2011 has resulted in several significant publications and project management awards, which is a highlight of my academic career. Working with Distinguished Professor of Management Stewart Clegg at UTS has helped to place my research at the junction of project management and organization studies, which is an interesting place to make a useful contribution from an organizing lens on project management. Successfully supervising more than 35 doctoral students has been very satisfying and a learning experience by engaging with mature students addressing problems of importance to practice. Becoming a professor of project management has enabled me to contribute to the project management field in many ways – as an educator, researcher, and to society through my membership of the board of PMI's Global Accreditation Centre. This role with PMI has recently brought me in contact with prominent academics from China, which has been a revelation about the mature state of project management education and research in China. Being elected the 64th President of the International Society for the Systems Sciences last year, is also a significant event as it gives me an opportunity to contribute towards sustainable development from a global perspective. I am also thankful to my family (wife, daughter and son) for supporting my postgraduate education after I started working, and extensive travelling during my career that has often infringed on the time that I should have spent with them. I would also like to thank my parents, who instilled good values and supported me until I graduated from university as an engineer.

Q3. As a professional from industry to academia, do you believe formal PM training or even PM credentials are a must for practitioners in the field?

Sankaran: I learnt project management by actually doing it. I started my working life as an engineer working in projects and, one day, I was asked to be a project manager. So, I learnt all my project management skills from other experienced engineers from India, UK, USA and Japan. When I joined SCU to teach in an MBA program, I was asked to revise a project management course. That was the first time that I read the Project Management Body of Knowledge. There were very few university courses that taught project management then. But times have changed, and it has become mandatory for project managers to be trained and certified these days. While training and certification can provide basic skills, education opens up your mind to new ideas and concepts that can help you to succeed in projects that are becoming more complex and be able to learn continuously. So, I think that both training and education are important for anyone who

wants to aspire to be a successful project manager.

Importance of Systems Thinking for PM

Q4. You've noted that we can manage VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) through integrative self-management. Would you please elaborate on it?

Sankaran: One of the subjects I teach is Systems Thinking. While I started learning about hard systems as an engineer, I became a fan of soft systems as I took on managerial roles. So I have been teaching more about Peter Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology to deal with what famous systems thinker Russell Ackoff calls 'messes' in projects and organizations. A VUCA world is messy and you need to learn to use *problem structuring tools* to learn more about the messy situation before you can act on it. I think systems thinking also allows you to look at both the trees and the forest, which is necessary for you to have a micro and macro perspective at the same time, which is useful to deal with VUCA. I have done some study linking spirituality and management, in particular, the necessity to be mindful. I have written about the life of a famous project manager, E. Sreedharan, dubbed the Metro Man of India, who found a way of completing metro projects in India successfully for the first time with Delhi Metro. His practices include the application of *karma yoga* or theory of action, which is important for the VUCA world. I believe that to deal with VUCA you need to step back and connect with your innermost thoughts and feelings.

Q5. What does systems thinking mean for managers?

Sankaran: Systems thinking is important for managers as it helps you to step back and look at interrelationships between parts of a system rather than focus only on one part ignoring the effects of other parts of the system on that part. You also have to understand the influence of the external environment on a system. In project management we often break down tasks to manage them well. This is a systematic process which is important. However, we also need a systemic view to understand how trying to solve issues in one part of a system can have unintended consequences for other parts of the system, often creating more issues than what you started with. For example, you cannot double productivity in a project by just adding more people (which creates communication issues) or asking people to work longer hours (causing fatigue and stress).

Project Success

Q6. In the VUCA era, what do you think are the criteria of project success?

Sankaran: The criteria for determining project success have expanded beyond time, cost, quality and scope. It also depends on how you measure success. Sydney Opera House was once considered a failed project but it is now one of the most beneficial projects for the city. Recently we have become more concerned with the benefits and value of projects. But this is difficult to achieve unless the project manager's responsibility is expanded and resources are provided to support benefit realization. Value is also a loaded term and means different things to different people. Recent articles in project management journals are questioning between which two points in a project life-cycle should you measure success. That will depend on both the project owners or sponsors and the beneficiaries. So a dialogue is needed between stakeholders to determine how

a project's success is evaluated so that it can be tracked and managed.

Q7. Why do you hold that PMOs are the enablers of project success?

Sankaran: The research of Brian Hobbs, Monique Aubry and Ralf Müller has shown that PMOs have an interesting history. They work effectively for a short time and then seem to disappear or are born again in a different form. But in our view of Organizational Project Management, we believe that an Organizational PMO at a strategic level will go a long way to ensure project success in a multi-project environment. At the project level, tactical PMOs can help project success if they are set up and work efficiently. Perhaps servant leadership might be a useful style at a tactical PMO level to provide value.

PM Qualities in the VUCA Era

Q8. What do you believe are the top qualities for PMs to stay competitive in the VUCA era?

Sankaran: I think we need a good balance of hard and soft skills. To manage the task hard skills are more effective while managing people requires softer skills. Stakeholder engagement is becoming more critical in complex projects. This is an area that requires persuasive and influencing skills. Project managers often think that political maneuvering is undesirable, but power and politics are a way of life and we need to learn to use them ethically to achieve our ends in a project. Project managers also need to work well with project owners and sponsors as some of the issues in projects are handled better by them. They need to learn how to get the sponsors to work with them. I refer to Stephen Covey's seven habits of highly effective people where he suggests that while there are things we can control within our circle of control and those we cannot control outside our circle of control, we do have another circle in between where we can try to influence areas over which we have no control. This is the circle where a project manager works with the project sponsor. So, influencing skills are very important in managing upwards. It takes time to do it well. One of our recent papers on reports on some of our findings about the application of influencing skills in projects. (Sankaran, Vaagasaar & Bekker 2019). Influencing skills in organizations include hard tactics such as request, legitimating and coalition, and soft tactics like rational persuasion, socializing, exchange, personal appeal, consultation and inspiration (Kipnis, Schmidt & Wilkinson 1980). The softer tactics are more useful in interpersonal influencing but not all of them may work in a project situation.

Organizational Project Management

Q9. As an expert in the field of organizational project management, what do you think is the significance of OPM? What are the developing trends in OPM?

Sankaran: Our concept of Organizational Project Management has moved beyond that of the peak bodies that focus on the 3Ps – Portfolio, Program and Project Management. In our seven-layer OPM model (philosophy, OPM approach, OPM governance, business integration, organizational integration, project governance and project management) developed from organizational theory (Müller et al 2019), we see integration within and across project boundaries as a key to success in OPM (Figure 1).

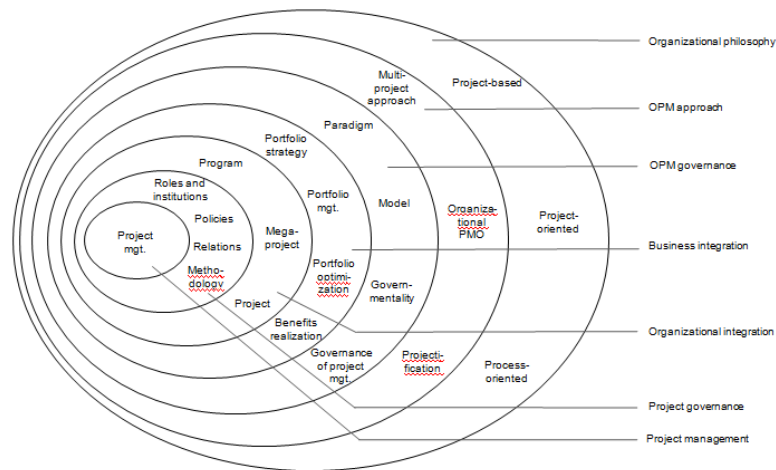


Figure 1-1: The onion model of OPM

In our model we have added a layer called organizational philosophy so that organizations can decide the level of importance they place on project-related activities. We have also emphasized the importance of governance, benefits realization, integrating the business part of an enterprise (e.g. deciding on which projects to deliver) to the implementation part of the projects (how to deliver projects effectively), the concepts of projectification (attitude of a firm towards projects) and governmentality.

Leadership and Management in PM 4.0

Q10. There are now many new leadership styles such as servant leadership and balanced leadership about which you’ve coauthored an article with Ralf Müller. Which kind of leadership styles do you recommend in PM 4.0?

Sankaran: Both vertical and horizontal leadership are important as they both contribute to a project’s success. However, the balance between the two is also critical as well as what we call the socio-cognitive space that exists between the vertical and horizontal leader. Coordinating all three can lead to success. Conventional waterfall-style projects lean towards authentic leadership while projects using agile methodologies prefer servant leadership.

Q11. Harold Kerzner believes that in PM 4.0 strategic project management will be essential to innovation project management. What’s your take on Strategic Project Management?

Sankaran: I agree with Kerzner that besides aligning a project with an organization’s strategy, project leaders/managers need to develop a project strategy at the front end as advocated by Peter Morris. While projects are a means to deliver strategies, it is also important to develop a vision and strategy for a project at the start so that this can be used to guide decisions when problems arise. Artto, Kujala, Dietrich and Martinsuo (2008) suggest that establishing a project strategy can also contribute to its success. The project strategy is specific to the temporary organization

carrying out the project in its environment. However, processes must be established to align it with the parent organization's strategy. For example, organizing the Olympic Games in a country may be focused on strategies to deliver the project on time while the country that is the parent organization of this project may want a spectacular event to promote the country on the international stage. So, the project strategy should manage to do both but with a specific focus on delivering the games on time. In our research on governance of innovation projects we also found ambidexterity (the ability to manage both exploitation and exploration) to be important for organizations to manage innovation.

Tips on Megaproject Management

Q12. Based on your observation, what are the common problems in megaproject management?

Sankaran: Some of the common complaints about megaprojects are that they are delayed, go over budget and fall short of benefits. This is certainly a problem if we use our traditional project management views to evaluate megaprojects. Prominent megaproject scholar Bent Flyvbjerg has advocated the use of reference class forecasting to improve the cost estimation of projects. This may be helpful to get a more realistic cost. I am more in line with the views of Roger Miller, Donald Lessard and Edward Morrow that megaprojects need to be shaped rather than using traditional models of planning and execution. Megaprojects are complex undertakings and it is often not clear how to execute them right at the start. In the extensive research on large engineering projects carried out by Miller and Lessard (2000), it was found that these projects cannot be defined clearly at the start and need progressive elaboration or shaping. This is because they cannot be planned precisely at the start due to uncertainties, and decision-making gets messy and chaotic, and requires flexibility and improvisation through the efforts of all the parties involved in these projects. For example, when a large transport infrastructure project is to be carried out in a busy city, it is difficult to plan the entire project in one go. It has to be delivered in stages including excavation, laying the road or railway line, or building bridges and ensuring that toll stations or railway stations are obstruction free. Each of these may require further elaboration as the first phase of the project is carried out when obstacles are encountered while excavating roads or building tunnels or bridges. From time to time stakeholders may have to be consulted to plan the next phase of the project and to shape the project.

Outlook of Project Management

Q13. What do you think of the future or outlook of overall project management?

Sankaran: Project management has a bright future and will only become more important for organizations and society in general. The term project economy is being used recently as the next trend in organizing. Project management skills are important for everyone, not just those who manage projects. We have just been writing a paper on Artificial Intelligence in project management and we believe that project managers should embrace technological disruption as it will help them manage projects better while at the same time getting to know the limits of technology. They need to learn how to manage people and intelligent agents together. They also need to understand the importance of data science to make better decisions.

Impression on Chinese PM

Q14. You also teach in Shanghai Jiao Tong University. What does project management in China look like to you?

Shankar: I think China is progressing rapidly to become very proficient in the theory and practice of project management. I met some experienced academics teaching and researching in project management in Shanghai, Beijing and Dalian during my sabbatical earlier this year and I was really impressed. As a director of the Global Accreditation Centre of the Project Management Institute (PMI), I am also impressed by the systematic manner in which the Chinese academic community is working to accredit project management programs in China. I work closely with Dr Yongjian Ke, who is originally from China, at UTS. He is an up-and-coming researcher in the field. I am also supervising three PhD students from China, who are doing some innovative research. At Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Antai International MBA Program I taught both Chinese and international students together. Despite not being native speakers of English, the Chinese students coped well in a course taught in English. I tried to use an OPM perspective to teach the students as they are mostly business managers. There are several roles in projects where business skills are required, and it is important that business managers learn about project management from an organizational perspective.

To see the original PMR interview with Chinese introduction, and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



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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/>.