

Interview with Tony Appleby¹

Chair, Board of Directors Project Management Institute



Interviewed by İpek Sahra Ozguler
International Correspondent
Istanbul, Turkey

Tony Appleby is the managing director of the Project Strategy Consulting Group, specializing in organizational maturity and the delivery of strategic transformation. He has led engagements on six continents, partnering with executive and country leadership teams to achieve business objectives through improved operational capabilities and strategic performance management. He is also focused on expanding organizational project management process excellence to government agencies and nongovernmental organizations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

He is a member of numerous professional organizations and holds a variety of specialized credentials across multiple disciplines, including governance, audit controls and organizational development. He served ten years on the board of directors for a manufacturing concern and is an active member of the U.S.-based National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) and a Chartered Director and Fellow of the U.K.-based Institute of Directors (IoD). He is an experienced public speaker and has given

¹ How to cite this interview: Ozguler, I.S. (2020); Interview with Tony Appleby, Chair, PMI Board of Directors; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue II, February.

presentations around the world on organizational project management and strategy execution best practices.

Prior to consulting, he spent over 20 years advancing his practical knowledge of project and change management across a variety of industries and disciplines. He has directly managed complex, global high-value projects in the healthcare, engineering, technology and research sectors. Mr. Appleby is also a long-time PMI volunteer, having served on the board and as president of the PMI San Francisco Bay Area Chapter. He has also supported several global PMI committees and task forces over the past decade, including serving as a member of the Ethics Member Advisory Group and as the Region Mentor for Southwest North America. During his board tenure with PMI, he has served as Chair of the Audit Committee, as Secretary/Treasurer, and as a member of the Strategy Oversight Committee.

Mr. Appleby is a former military officer and holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in international business. He is passionate about volunteerism and has been helping nonprofit and professional communities since his youth.

Ipek Sahra Ozguler (Ozguler): Tony Appleby, thank you for accepting the interview invitation of the PMWJ. Please tell us about yourself for PM World Journal readers to get to know you.

Tony Appleby (Appleby): Well, let's go back in time a little bit and explain how I came to be the Chair of the Board of Directors at the Project Management Institute (PMI).

I was lucky to learn about PMI very early in my career. Back in the early 1980s, as a newly minted project director for an engineering firm, my colleagues and I were struggling to achieve consistent success with our projects. And our vice president noticed. Being told "improve or you're out" can be a big motivator!

My team worked together to research techniques to improve, and that's when I first learned about PMI. We were able to get our hands on an early edition copy of the *PMBOK® Guide* – the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge. And it inspired me because there were so many things in there that we had not considered. So, I took it upon myself to own the project management methodology at the company and I truly enjoyed that experience.

Fast forward many years, my family relocated from the East Coast of the U.S. to the West Coast and I used the move as an opportunity to make a career shift – from engineering into project management – because I enjoyed taking ideas and turning them into a reality. My first employer was a healthcare company and I was tasked with an IT project. While I was eager, I soon realized I was in over my head.

Remembering PMI as a resource, I learned the local chapter had learning and sharing opportunities nearby. I soon connected with a community of project managers who provided me with the information and tools and templates that I needed to be successful with the project. Soon afterwards, I was offered a program management opportunity, which was exceptionally large and very complex, and with a lot of risks. This time, I knew when my boss asked me if I was up to the task that I could do it because I had the backing of my PMI community to assure my success. And I was successful. So, I began to give back and have been engaging and volunteering with my local PMI chapter for more than 20 years. PMI was – and is – at the heart of my success. It's been a primary driver and supporter of my career.

Ozguler: Your passions are organizational project management and helping organizations across the globe achieve their business objectives. You have been involved with project / program management and organizational change management engagements on six continents, working with the senior leadership and country executives of Fortune 500 / Global 2000 companies, international not-for-profit associations, and governmental entities. Could you give more information about them?

Appleby: As I have continued to advance in my career and have done more consulting, I have developed a deep passion for helping organizations achieve their business objectives.

Organizational project management provides entities with the opportunity to realize their goals and outcomes in a more efficient and effective way. And many groups need that kind of help. [PMI's own data](#) indicates that in recent years, organizations wasted almost 12 percent of their investment in project spend due to poor performance and that number has barely budged over the past five years. Worse, almost half of all strategic initiatives across the globe are considered unsuccessful. The [Pulse of the Profession®](#), a global survey conducted by PM), reveals that around \$1 million is wasted every 20 seconds collectively by organizations around the globe due to the ineffective implementation of business strategy through poor project management practices. This equates to roughly \$2 trillion dollars wasted a year!

Organizational project management is a mechanism by which we can evaluate the current state of an institution's practices and define discreet opportunities for them to improve so that they are more successful. High performing organizations waste 28 times less than poor performing organizations. It's pretty easy to convince senior leaders in organizations to invest in maturing their project capabilities because the return on that investment is both tangible and significant.

I'll give you an example: one of my favorite organizational project management efforts entailed helping a federal governmental entity in Africa align their balanced scorecard's strategic objectives with specific, measurable, structural changes that they could implement to ensure that that organization was able to achieve their desired outcomes

in half the time they originally thought it would take – under 18 months as opposed to the original 36 months they estimated.

Ozguler: One of your specialization areas is the delivery of strategic transformation. What are the key challenges faced during strategic transformation?

Appleby: In my opinion, the central challenge with strategic transformations is understanding and acknowledging that a transformation is not a simple matter of adjusting some elements of an organization. Transformation is a ground-up rebuild of how an organization thinks, acts, and operates. It is a significant cultural adjustment that does not happen overnight and requires the total commitment of the organization's senior executive leadership team.

The cultural aspect is significantly challenging. Critical to breaking through is the need to build internal support for the transformation effort, specifically buy-in and a deep understanding of why the change is occurring. So organizational change management plays a critical role in the success of any transformation effort.

As a matter of fact, PMI's Brightline initiative has conducted significant research in this area, publishing many resources made available to professionals for free on its website, www.brightline.org.

And, in my experience, as with most critical strategic initiatives, an agile approach tends not to work well with transformation efforts. Traditional methods, with considerable upfront planning, are better employed when performing a significant transformation.

Ozguler: You have established and redesigned numerous program management offices (PMOs). How do you achieve these?

Appleby: The key to either implementing or reengineering a truly functional project management office is not too dissimilar from a transformation initiative. A large part of what is required is to understand the goals and objectives of the organization that is instituting or reengineering the PMO.

Beyond the obvious planning for the implementation of the PMO, it's important to understand that this is a large program of work with a lot of moving parts that need to be coordinated, frequently in tandem with one another, and there are a lot of interdependencies. The implementation of an effective PMO is an iterative process. It does not occur overnight or in a "big bang" fashion.

A PMO implementation that is truly effectual examines and doesn't only build a project management methodology and the tools and templates and the staff support that is required to maintain projects; it also needs to look at how it interfaces with the organization's various functional or programmatic structures. It needs to examine the human resource aspects such as career, advancement, professional development, training, and practitioner support.

It should also entail portfolio management functions. Indeed, we are seeing a trend where PMOs are most effective when they are tied to the organization's strategy. An increasing number of project management offices around the world are recognizing this and have begun to reformulate the traditional project management office into a strategy management office. This is a seminal shift in how PMOs provide distinct benefits to the organization by ensuring linkages to corporate strategy and tracking towards successful outcomes.

Ozguler: You served ten years on the board of directors for a manufacturing concern. What did you gain from this experience?

Appleby: What I have learned in serving on the boards of directors of a number of different organizations is that good corporate governance is all about ensuring the long-term viability of the concern. It's not dissimilar to being a member of the senior executive leadership team, although instead of being operational in nature, one must take the strategic view. And, as a long-time project management practitioner, this is particularly challenging as I tend to like to examine the operational aspects.

So, it's a bit of a balancing act. The collective needs of the organization must always come before short term individual interests – be it the interests of the executive team or board members.

Ozguler: You are an active member of the U.S. –based National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) and a Chartered Director and Fellow of the U.K.-based Institute of Directors (IOD). Please provide detail information about these institutes.

Appleby: The National Association of Corporate Directors is the recognized authority on leading boardroom practices in the United States, serving over 21,000 members. It offers certification and professional development for corporate directors. The Institute of Directors, similarly, is the leading authority for boards in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries, offering robust training and qualifications for its more than 30,000 members. Both offer a wealth of resources to ensure that professional directors have the knowledge and support they require to ensure their organizations' success.

Ozguler: Throughout your career, what has been the greatest lesson learned? What have been some of your memorable moments?

Appleby: The most important lesson I've learned in my career is that it's all about the people. Actively engaged employees are the linchpin to the success of any undertaking, any project, any endeavor that any organization undertakes anywhere. Processes, structures, and strategies are meaningless unless there is buy-in and active support from the people who are ultimately responsible for execution.

All of my memorable moments entail the wonderful people that I have interacted with and engaged with in my career as a project leader and later as a consultant. I have been

exceptionally fortunate to have traveled extensively over the past several decades and everywhere I go, I remain amazed at the dedication and enthusiasm of our project management communities. We really are the engine that powers the Project Economy and I take home terrific memories of interactions with professionals from all over the world every time I return home.

On a personal note, I'm actively looking for ways to make a specific future memory. Something that is on my bucket list is to work on an assignment on the seventh continent, Antarctica. If any of your readers are looking for support on a project there, please reach out; I would even be willing to provide pro bono services for the right to say that I've worked on all seven continents!

Ozguler: You have been a volunteer for most of your life. Why is being a volunteer so important?

Appleby: One of the main reasons why people join professional associations is for the networking opportunities. Networking obviously provides the means by which people working in their industry can connect with their peers and learn from them. I find that when I attend professional development and networking activities that I get to meet a lot of great folks, of course, but my interactions with them are comparatively limited.

As a volunteer, however, I have a deeper and much richer experience because I get to truly “work” with new people, as opposed to “meet” them. This allows us to get to know one another in a more robust and meaningful way. As a result, I always get more out of volunteering than I put into it. That may seem a slightly well-worn phrase, but there is a tremendous amount of truth behind it. All of the volunteers that I know will say the exact same thing.

Ozguler: The world has been changing fastly. What will be project management trends in 2020? What new skills and capabilities do you believe project managers need to develop and enhance?

Appleby: The world is changing in many ways and, yes, quite quickly at that. As project management practitioners, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we are equipped for those changes. We are currently witnessing numerous subtle shifts in the way organizations and individuals approach project and product work.

For example, design thinking is playing a more crucial role in daily operational work, including project delivery management.

On the IT side of the house, DevOps is employing design thinking to help it be more robust and we're seeing the advent of DesOps as a result.

Artificial intelligence, big data, and other emerging technologies are providing significant business opportunities and projects can leverage these to be more powerful and impactful. Having a solid technology awareness will be critical for practitioners that they

can discern whether employing a new approach to their projects' activities might be beneficial.

Ozguler: **Do you have any closing comments?**

Appleby: Our profession has a rich and vibrant history. And when I look at all the research about what is on the horizon, I know that we've got a lot of opportunities still ahead of us. PMI has conducted a significant amount of research with leading partners, such as the Boston Consulting Group, Accenture, KPMG, the Economist Intelligent Unit and others to understand the future of the profession. And much of it is available in a rich online library available to anyone, for free.

One of our seminal thought leadership pieces is the Pulse of the Profession study which we perform annually. In fact, the latest edition of Pulse of the Profession is out soon and will be available at pmi.org.

And in conjunction with PMI's Global Executive Council and other inputs, we are able to sense both what is immediately on the horizon and what is likely to be the scenario in five, ten, 20 years or more down the road. Disruptive technologies and new ways of working will certainly impact us all, and some of our work will need to adjust in response. But the need for practitioners will not be going away in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the demand for project managers is increasing and will continue to do so for some time.

I encourage you to explore PMI's free thought leadership and gain your own insights and perspectives. The future of the project management profession is indeed a bright one.

About the Interviewer



Ipek Sahra Ozguler

Istanbul, Turkey



Ipek Sahra Ozguler graduated from the Istanbul University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Engineering and from Middle East Technical University with an MSc degree in Software Management. As a project manager, she has more than 10 years' experience in various areas such as portfolio management, program management, project management, software management, business analysis. She became a certified PMP in January, 2012 and a certified SCRUM Master in 2014.

She has managed a variety of projects across manufacturing, defence, FMCG (Cola Cola), insurance (Euler Hermes), audit (Deloitte), telecommunication, ICT and aviation sectors and gained broader insights. In addition, she has worked as international correspondent for the *PM World Journal* since 2014.

Ipek is based in Istanbul and can be contacted at ipeksahra@gmail.com. Her portfolio is published at the <http://ipeksahra.strikingly.com/>.