

Interview with Nathalie Drouin

An Academic Female Star in Project Management ^{1,2}

Executive Director, KHEOPS
Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal
Editor-in-Chief, IJPMiB



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Introduction to the interviewee

Nathalie Drouin, Ph.D., MBA, LLB, is Executive Director of KHEOPS, an International Research Consortium on the Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects, full Professor in Université du Québec à Montréal and Editor-in-chief of *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* (IJMPiB).

In 2003, she made a career shift to project management academia from being a lawyer. In 2015, she was nominated to PMI International's Academic Member Advisory Group.

Her research expertise in project management includes: Organizational Project

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Management (OPM), governance of large infrastructure projects, balanced leadership, distributed project teams, organizational capabilities, innovation, etc. Over 100 publications, communications and presentations have been made by her since the beginning of academic career in 2003.

Interview

Part I: Project Management Journey

Q1. I noticed that you turned to academic work in 2003. Why?

Nathalie Drouin (Drouin): I made a career shift to academia after having my two kids. Before joining the academic world, I worked as a corporate lawyer for an international law firm and for a consultancy firm where I had the chance to conduct mandates with private and public organizations to support them in defining and implementing their strategy. I was also involved in our family business mainly as the Board Secretary, as a strategic advisor and as the lawyer.

Q2. You are Editor-in-chief of *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*; how do you like the role? Among all these titles such as professor, author, editor, lawyer, etc., which ones do you enjoy most?

Drouin: I really enjoy my work as a researcher and as the Editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*. As a researcher that also includes my role as the Executive Director of KHEOPS, an International Research Consortium on the Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects, I have the opportunity to collaborate with great colleagues on research topics to support practitioners' decision-making. As the Editor-in-chief, it allows me to assist researchers to diffuse and publish innovative research work that I hope can contribute to the development and advancement of the project management field. My background in law and in strategy are skills that can help me in developing and conducting my research work as well as my administrative tasks.

Q3. What's your life motto? When you recall your career journey, what are the impressive/unforgettable things about PM?

Drouin: In Latin, we will say: *Mens sana in corpore sano*. It means a healthy mind in a healthy body. It was what the Ancient Greeks said in order to demonstrate that both mental and physical health are an integrated component of human health. As researchers, we work hard and often very long hours! Therefore, I believe it is important to balance your life between your family, your friends and your work. Thus, to be able to

reach this balance, you have to stay physically fit, even so especially as you get older! I am proud to say that at the age of 50, I got my blackbelt in karate Kyokushin-Kan. This sport and its philosophy help me achieve this state of “*Mens sana in corpore sano*”.

Recalling my career journey, the unforgettable things about PM are as follows. I have to say that working with my two research colleagues Professor Ralf Müller and Professor Shankar Sankaran with whom we have been developing research subjects for several years in respectful atmosphere is a real honor. Within this collaboration, we experienced new research topics and delivered research work to support decision-makers but we have also used and experienced best practices in project management to deliver our projects on time. It is very interesting to observe that we did not only carry out research in PM field but we also use this knowledge to deliver our own research projects.

Part II: Tips on Managing Virtual Teams

Q4. Virtual and distributed teams are getting increasingly common. What are your tips on effectively managing virtual and distributed teams?

Drouin: Because we are all working on virtual environment, we are no longer talking about virtual or distributed teams. We are constantly working in virtual environment! However, working with remote team members still bring some challenges. Some tips to work in such virtual environment are: to have suitable team members' profile that are autonomous; provide efficient mechanisms for sharing adequately the information between team members in respect with different country legislations; recognize that the decision-making process can be slower and finally, to have organizational support with managers who understand that it may take more time to deliver projects in various cultural settings with remote team members.

Q5. In one of your papers, you identified formalization and autonomy as determinants of projects of distributed teams. Would you please briefly explain it?

Drouin: The structuring of decision activities is recognized in the literature as one of the most important components of the decision-making process. In general, improved decision structuring will improve the quality of the decision outcome. Within distributed teams, a lack of proximity can lead to coordination difficulties. Distributed teams experience difficulties in sharing information caused by the loss of verbal signals. In such a context, project teams welcome a sense of coordination through formal processes since this improves how a team collaborates and communicates. The point with formalization is that project actors can make better decisions if they formalize and control the decision process.

Team autonomy is recognized as an important success factor. Distributed projects involve high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity, along with a crucial need to solve problems. If a team has a high degree of autonomy over project decisions, team members rely upon themselves for task decisions, which will likely increase the sharing of information and the coordination of task activities horizontally within the team. Team members who can influence the decisions that affect them are more likely to value the outcomes, which in turn reinforces satisfaction.

Part III: Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects

Q6. As the Executive Director of KHEOPS, an International Research Consortium on the Governance of Large Infrastructure Projects, would you please share your experience in the governance of large infrastructure projects?

Drouin: Large infrastructure projects are known for their high costs, but above all for their complexity. The complexity stems in particular from the great diversity of the actors involved and the spaces of controversy they create. Such diversity is understandable given the ambitious nature of these projects, particularly in terms of their impacts on society and the environment. The use of social resources by large infrastructure projects entails obligations to preserve society and the environment. Thus, it is an imperative that large infrastructure projects should make a positive contribution to the development of society and the environment to adopt a socially responsible governance perspective as a complement to the classic study of large projects and to weigh in our governance of these projects the importance of new social realities, trends and needs.

Q7. As you mentioned, large infrastructure projects are highly complex. In your opinion, how should we deal with the complexity? Any tips?

Drouin: I mentioned before that the complexity stems in particular from the diversity of stakeholders. Thus, limited attention that stakeholders receive in the implementation of major projects, especially secondary stakeholders like communities, poses the risk that an uninvolved stakeholder may disrupt the development of a project. Management practices that ignore the legitimacy of various stakeholders such as communities can lead an organization to neglect its obligation to consider parties affected by the project. Thus, proactive engagement of these stakeholders is increasing the chances to maximize project benefits that are aligned with the stakeholders' interests.

Part IV: Observations about OPM

Q8. As an expert on OPM, what do you believe are the frontiers of OPM research? What is the significance of OPM? What are the barriers in carrying out OPM?

Drouin: We define OPM as “the integration of all project related activities across the organizational hierarchy or network”. PM has traditionally focused on the management of single projects. With program management, the attention has shifted to management of several projects. Portfolio Management highlighted that organization has to make a selection of projects to achieve strategic intent with limited resources. Thus, PM goes beyond the management of single projects by establishing the relationships between individual projects and the organization through the management of multiple projects. However, there are still some needs to better understand PM’s relationship to organizations. With our research on OPM, we try to address some barriers between the organization and the management of all project management activities. For instance, key barriers could be highlighted as: a lack of understanding by top managers of the importance to link all project management activities to the organization strategy (and not only to focus on the portfolio management). Another barrier is a lack by some organizations to clearly define organizational policies and guidelines that require project teams to deal with organizational strategy during project execution. In sum, having project goals aligned with organizational strategy and hoping that this guarantee achieving the project’s strategic goals is not enough. A constant effort is necessary to improve organizational competitiveness and to strategically manage project management activities with top management support and to benefit from this relationship.

The relationship between PM and OPM tries to address these barriers and could be explained as follows: OPM is a process of combining PM activities throughout the organization. It is implemented by managers involved in project activities through organizational and managerial means and it is governed by the agency responsible for governing the organization.

Why is OPM important? It connects two worlds together: top managers who need to see the value of closely managing the strategic progress of projects and project teams who need to focus on the strategic and leadership aspects of the project rather than just its operational efficiency.

Finally, OPM is a new concept and further research is clearly needed to clarify it and better understand its potential impacts on developing organizational effectiveness.

Part V: Leadership

Q9. What are person-centric and team-centric leadership respectively? How to balance them?

Drouin: The view of project managers as leaders is what we call in our research the vertical leader. It is related to the person-centric perspective that addresses the particular leadership style as well as personal characteristics of the project manager. The horizontal leader (or team-centric perspective) complements the leadership of the vertical leader and looks at leadership that emerges from teams or individuals in a team.

Few studies have explored the interaction between vertical and horizontal leadership. Our research team has proposed the concept of balanced leadership which refers to the dynamics of a continuous back and forth of leadership authority between the formally appointed leader (such as the project manager) and the project team members (such as the specialists). In sum, balanced leadership is when the vertical leader temporarily enables and allows the horizontal leadership to happen in some situations; for example, a team member is appointed to take the lead in a problem on which he or she is an expert. Balanced leadership is advantageous for the project.

How to balance vertical and horizontal leadership? The transition between vertical and horizontal leadership takes place as recurring cycles made up of five events, namely nomination (when resources are nominated as project team members), identification (when potential horizontal leaders are identified by the project manager), selection (empowerment of a horizontal leader), horizontal leadership and its governance (describe the ways leadership are exercised by horizontal leader and project manager governs the horizontal leader during this assignment) and transition (termination of the horizontal leader assignment).

(More on this topic: <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/Home/article/detail/id/366.html>)

Part VI: PM and AI

Q10. Do you believe that PM may be replaced by AI robots and that project management discipline may disappear in the future? What are your viewpoints on the future of project management?

Drouin: I find this question interesting. Should we replace project managers with AI robots? I am not an expert on AI. Having said that, I think AI could be useful to support decision-making. It could facilitate the management of huge amount of data and information. However, I wish we would always need the judgment of humans to make final decisions. Will project management disappear because of AI robots? Well, we never know the future, but I deeply hope that humans will always have a role to play in

managing projects and to interact with real team members (not only robots) to successfully manage projects.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit
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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* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring will also serve as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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