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Interview with Alan Stretton
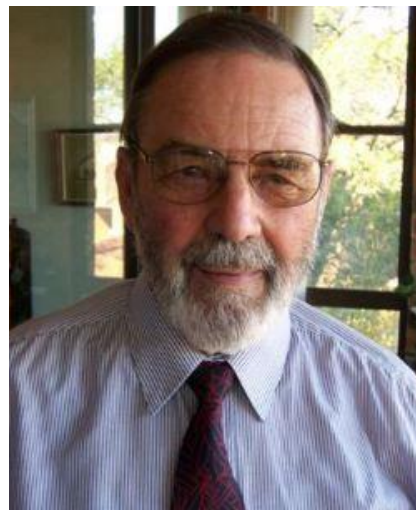by Yu Yanjuan, PMR
Interview

An Energetic "90s" in the Field of Project Management

Interview with Alan Stretton [1, 2]

Project Management Pioneer
Life Fellow, Australian Institute of Project Management
Sydney, Australia

Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan
Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)
International Correspondent, *PM World Journal*

Introduction to the interviewee

Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006, he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and

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[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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control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 200 professional articles and papers.

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Interview

Part I: Major changes of project management over 60 years

Q1.   As one of the pioneers of modern project management, you must have witnessed major changes of this discipline over these years. Would you please share the major changes you've experienced?

Alan Stretton (Stretton):   The discipline of project management has changed enormously in the past sixty years, and has grown and diversified to the point where I doubt if anyone can truly claim to have a comprehensive perspective of all its multiple dimensions. In my view, the growth and diversification have been evolutionary, and changes have arisen out of the cumulative contributions of countless numbers of project managers. So, I will respond to the above question by listing the many contributions and events which seem to me to have been most influential in facilitating so many changes over the past decades.

My own baseline is associated with my old employer, Civil & Civic (C&C), which developed its own approach to project management in the Australian building and construction industry in the 1950s and 60s.

At a more general level, I summarize my perceptions of the most significant changes in the project management world over the decades as follows.

- During the 1960s, the Australian construction industry was primarily concerned with using the CPM and PDM network planning techniques which were initially developed in the USA. (I introduced these into C&C in early 1962). However, in that decade few Australian companies followed the C&C route of undertaking undivided responsibility for managing project front-end phases as well as their execution.

- The 1970s appeared to me to be a decade in which project management consolidated in the construction and defence industries and began to be taken up

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by other industries. It also saw the formation of the Project Managers Forum in Australia, following the example of PMI in North America and IPMA's predecessor in Europe in the previous decade.

- The 1980s saw substantial developments in a variety of contexts. Project management representative bodies moved to credential project managers. The Major Projects Association (MPA) was formed in the UK. Personal computers and project-related software packages started to make an impact. Early editions of the *PMBOK* and *PRINCE* were published. University courses in project management started to be rolled out. Overall, this decade saw both a consolidation, and an emergent broadening of perspectives, on what was entailed in managing projects.

- These developments continued apace in the 1990s. There was a proliferation of knowledge standards, competency baselines and the like, and accompanying project management credentialing procedures. Further issues such as project design and testing, simultaneous/concurrent engineering received increasing attention, along with how to manage non-conventional projects with high levels of initial uncertainty.

- The 2000s saw further developments in dealing with non-conventional projects, including Agile and more advanced risk management techniques. Dealing with complexity received greater attention, and Bent Flyvbjerg in particular drew increasing attention to major problems with complex mega-projects. Heightened interest and developments in program management were reflected in the publication of two important standards.

- Further developments in the 2010s included the deployment of virtual and dispersed project teams, increased attention to project portfolio management, to project / program contributions to strategic outcomes and benefits, and to other context-related issues.

Part II: Wishes for future project management

Q2.   What do you wish project management would be like in the future? What do you want to say to newcomers in the field?

Stretton:

- At a project level, one of the first items on my wish-list would be to have up-to-date and comprehensive data on project successes and failures. There appears to be wide-spread agreement that far too many projects fail, but we have little reliable data on numbers, or how or why this happens. Without such data, we are poorly placed to learn from the experience of others and are therefore likely to repeat previous failures.

- Still at a project level, I would like to see better cooperation and understanding between those who see project management as primarily concerned with project execution / delivery, and those who also include the management of the "front-

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end" pre-execution project phases in their perception of the scope of project management. Both are important, but all too often there appears to be a lack of mutual recognition of this fact.

- At a more holistic level, I would like to see a small but highly significant shift in the way projects are seen to contribute to and relate to the organisations in which they are initiated. The basis of this shift is for project management to recognize that, first and foremost, projects are means to help achieve broader ends. Virtually all projects are initiated by, and within organizations, ultimately to help achieve those organizations' strategic objectives, and realize the planned benefits. Therefore, the most prominent perspective should be that of the organization itself, followed by the perspective of how projects can help the organization achieve its strategic objectives and benefits. Project management should strengthen its ability to respond to changes in this VUCA world, and particularly to recognize and seize new opportunities as they arise in this rapidly changing world.

- In a broader context, organizations and their projects operate in a wide variety of contexts. As most project management practitioners can attest, managing contextual matters related to a project is typically a demanding task, and often a critically important one. Now, most of our project management standard guidelines are in a non-contextual mode. Such guidelines are a good introduction to some basic project management techniques. However, I would like to see these supplemented by a range of context-specific guidelines, covering as many of our most prominent project management contexts as possible.

- My penultimate wish is to see project managers much more widely involved than they currently are in the processes of choosing which projects will be undertaken in the first place. All too often these choices are made by others, without the know-how that project management can bring to help choose the right projects. Along with this, I would like to see project management more heavily involved in hands-on mode in helping users ultimately realize the benefits to which their projects contribute, when this is practicable.

- Finally, I would like to see project management expand further into broader roles. An example could be in the domain of integrating the works of others. With ever-increasing specialization in so many domains, there are corresponding needs for a discipline which itself specializes in integrating the outputs from other specializations. Elsewhere, I have given such potentially expanded roles titles such as "integrator" and "synthesiser".

As to what I might want to say to newcomers in the field, I would suggest they keep their options open. Some might find it more convenient to stay with one of the many types of project management approaches that are currently practiced. However, I suspect that many of these may morph into rather different types of disciplines, and offer an extended range of opportunities for those with more flexible dispositions.

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Part III: Importance of managing the front end of projects

Q3. You have emphasized the importance of managing the front end of projects. Why do you hold this view?

Stretton: I have been actively aware of the importance of managing the front end of projects for over sixty years and have written about it quite extensively (as have many others). Here are some background notes on why I have this viewpoint.

• My early professional life was in the construction side of the building and construction industries, where you were immediately confronted with design deficiencies from the buildability aspect, and with ensuing frustration and often very substantial waste.

• By the time I joined C&C in the early 1960s, that company had long recognized this, and had developed a single responsibility design-and-construct service which integrated these two roles, and eliminated much of the waste of the more traditional design / tender system – thus adding value to both the client and the company.

• The effectiveness of this service was certainly enhanced by the governance arrangements which were increasingly put in place for each project. This took the form of what we called a Project Control Group (PCG), which included senior executives from both the client organisation and C&C, as well as the C&C project manager. The PCG had a governance role which was similar to the board of a public company, with similar regular meetings (typically monthly) and formal review agendas.

• These arrangements often led to an extension of the design management component into what we came to call Client Needs Determination (CND). This was actually a process of helping clients clarify their real (business) needs, which rather naturally evolved when we had clients who had not recently reviewed their strategies, and / or their current needs, in appropriate detail.

• In some cases, this "Project Management Service" (PMS) was extended even further back to help clients develop or re-develop their entire longer-term strategic objectives.

All this happened in the early 1960s, and provided the background for my recognizing the importance of managing the front end of projects, to provide added value for the client in particular (and to the providing organization via satisfied clients). Subsequent involvement in and knowledge of different contexts and different industries have only served to reinforce this viewpoint of the importance of actively managing the front end of projects – as is demonstrated by the Front End Loading (FEL) approach which has long been used in so many mining and other resource extraction projects, for example.

Part IV: Causes of project failure

Q4. You mentioned that far too many projects fail. Would you please identify some common causes of project failure from your perspective?

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Stretton: As noted earlier, I wish we had much better data on it. Based on the very sparse data I have been able to find, the following broad indicative failure patterns have emerged:

- Roughly 40% of all project failures appear to happen in the execution / delivery phase. Most of these are evidently attributable directly to deficiencies in project management. It is not at all clear why these continue to occur, particularly in view of the fact that the majority of project management standards and similar guidelines focus heavily on the execution / delivery phase of the project lifecycle.

- Another 40% of failures appear to be broadly associated with deficiencies in processes which precede project execution / delivery.

  o Roughly a half of these pre-execution causes of failure can be related to inadequacies in the front-end phases of defining / specifying project requirements and associated activities. It is not recorded which of these processes were being handled by project managers, and which by people from the strategic planning domain. Therefore, it is not possible to directly attribute responsibilities for such failures.

  o The other half of these pre-execution causes of failure are associated with inadequacies in the strategic planning domain. A few relate to inadequacies related to establishing the broader organizational strategic objectives. However, most relate to failures in developing and choosing the most appropriate strategic initiatives – and thence the most appropriate projects – to achieve the more immediate strategic objectives. Therefore, failure to choose the right" projects, which is generally done by non-project people, is a significant component of so-called project failures.

- Roughly 15% of causes of project failure were attributed to defects in organizational leadership, most along the lines of lack of or inadequacies in top management support. The other 5% of causes were unpredictable external events.

Overall, these very sparse data indicate that half of all so-called project failures are not due to poor project management per se, but to poor decisions and actions taken by other parties, particularly in relation to choosing the right projects in the first place.

Part V: Impact of COVID-19 on project management

Q5.   As far as you can see, what impact do you believe COVID-19 is having and will have on project management?

Stretton: One would need a crystal ball to respond adequately to this question. At the time of writing, we simply do not know how severe the Covid-19 will prove to be, how long it will continue to significantly impact us, and the form such impacts may take. But there do appear to be some relevant observations which arise from what has already happened.

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The first observation is that there have already been vast numbers of projects of many different types initiated in response to the pandemic. Some of the more immediate and direct ones have included new or expanded facilities to help deal with current problems, and corresponding supply chain initiatives to support them. Other consequential projects have included a variety of community support projects initiated by governments in social services and allied fields. There are also many well-publicised longer-term projects in hand to develop vaccines which may hopefully help secure a more stable future. And there are so many more examples.

However, what is not so clear is the extent to which formal project management practices have been involved in developing and executing these projects. Apart from projects for developing vaccines, which have highly regulated and formalised procedures, formal project management does not appear to have made an obviously conspicuous contribution to the above. Is this situation likely to continue? No one can answer this question with certainty, but it can certainly be claimed that project management has much to offer. For example, a colleague has suggested that, when quick decisions are needed and stakeholder involvement is vital, as so often applies in the rapidly changing Covid-19 environment, Agile project management techniques would often be highly appropriate.

So, the question is how decision-makers can be made aware of the potential for project management to contribute more in this context. It seems to me that the public still see project management as being only a project delivery discipline. Though our representative institutes and associations are best placed to change this perception, they do not appear to have made any significant moves in recent times to do so. Perhaps the advent of Covid-19 might prompt them to be a good deal more pro-active in educating the public about the wider contributions project management can make to help them during and after this pandemic.

Finally, I hope that we may have a cadre of innovative project managers who are motivated to develop broader ranges of services to help people and organisations with different kinds of needs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Part VI: The "life" project

Q6. You are well into your 90s, but you are still active in the PM community by writing lots of papers. Where does the enthusiasm come from?

Stretton: I'm not sure – it just seems to be the way I am. I'm probably not the best person to answer this question, but here are a few thoughts about possible sources of my continuing interest:

- This interest is probably partly due to my habitually enquiring mind, coupled with the fact that there are many topics in project management, particularly relating to the many contexts in which it is undertaken, which appear to me to invite further enquiry.

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- This may also be influenced by my having had an unusually wide range of experience, both within and outside project management, which sometimes leads to my thinking of a wider range of questions than some others may ask.

- Also, I have been very fortunate health-wise, which has given me a sense of both obligation and desire to continue contributing for as long as I am able to do so.

Q7. If we compare life to a project, how do you measure the success of the "life" project?

Stretton: We measure the success of a project by the contribution it makes to help organisations achieve their strategic goals and benefits. Similarly, we measure the success of the "life" project by the contribution one has been able to make to benefit the people and /or communities (including work communities) with which one has been engaged.

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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 also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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