

# People Deliver Projects and We Should Focus on People

## Interview with Elizabeth Harrin, FAPM <sup>1,2</sup>

Award-winning Author, Blogger, Speaker  
Creator of A Girl's Guide to Project Management  
United Kingdom



**Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan**  
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### Introduction to the interviewee

Elizabeth provides project management training and mentoring in-person and online, to individuals and companies. She is a Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) and was the youngest female Fellow at the time of her appointment.

Prior to becoming an independent practitioner, Elizabeth spent over 15 years in the corporate world, leading IT and business change projects across financial services and healthcare, including two based in Paris, France. She actively worked to engage

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stakeholders from across the business to ensure buy-in and support for change.

Elizabeth is an award-winning blogger and author of several books including *Handbook of People in Project Management*, *Shortcuts to Success Project Management in the Real World*, *Customer-Centric Project Management*, etc., several of which are now in subsequent editions. *Shortcuts to Success: Project Management in the Real World* was shortlisted for the Management Book of the Year Awards in 2014.

Besides mentoring, training and writing, Elizabeth speaks on the topics of stakeholder engagement, project management careers and productivity at events around the world – often via interactive online sessions but also in person. She has spoken for the APM and PMI, IPMA Young Crew and given guest lectures at universities in the UK, US and Belgium.

She also contributes to a variety of other initiatives including sitting on the advisory board for the RISE Being Lean and Seen programme at Liverpool John Moores University.

Read more and get in touch via Elizabeth's website: <https://www.girlsguidetopm.com/>

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## Interview

### Part I People deliver projects and we should focus on people

**Q1.** With COVID-19 spreading globally, virtual work is a trend. As an expert on people engagement, would you please offer some tips on engaging people in virtual teams?

**Elizabeth Harrin (Harrin):** I suggest putting a lot of effort into getting to know the team, understanding their work preferences and communication preferences, and tailoring. Personalization is a big deal now because it gets us better results when time is short and stakeholders are distracted, so think about how you can tailor project communication to the format and style that is going to get the best results from each stakeholder.

My project teams have been distributed for the past 13 years – perhaps even longer. We speak on the phone, we use software to communicate, and we collaborate remotely. I suppose what's different is the lack of informal opportunities to influence and network. You have to be more conscious about getting time with senior stakeholders: no more getting into the office early to catch a director before he / she gets sucked into a day of meetings.

**Q2.** You've written a book titled "Engaging Stakeholders on Projects", which is about harnessing people power to benefit projects. Would you please introduce the book?

**Harrin:** People power is all about engaging stakeholders effectively at all stages of the project so that there is alignment and buy-in for the change you are delivering.

But what does ‘engagement’ actually mean? What do I do to engage people? That’s what I wanted this book to help with. I wrote it for project managers, change managers and team leaders who know they ought to be working with other people to effect change and deliver projects in their businesses, but don’t know where to start.

The book steps through the process for thinking about who is going to be affected and how best to reach, engage and work with them. It talks about how to use people power to minimize resistance to change, leading to higher project success rates and better morale across teams.

I wanted this book to answer the questions: Why do I need to involve people in my projects? What does engagement look like? What tools have I got available to do so? How do I actually do it?

The simple guiding principle for the book is that people deliver projects and we should focus on those people.

**Q3.** In your practice as a project manager, how do you deal with those difficult stakeholders?

**Harrin:** There’s no such thing as a difficult stakeholder – only difficult situations that stakeholders happen to be in. Fix the situation, and the challenge goes away.

I’ve only just started to accept that this is the case, thanks to the research of Dr Christine Unterhitzberger. In general, people’s behaviour is a direct response to the situation they find themselves in and they create situations which are difficult for the project manager. For example, conflict with a senior executive outside the project, or internal politics you are not aware of. The structural environment and the sociopolitical networks within an organisation are two scenarios where a challenging project situation may occur. If you can understand why it’s happening, you can address the situation and respond more effectively – instead of simply labelling the stakeholder as “difficult”.

## Part II Flexibility is essential to deal with the challenges in VUCA era

**Q4.** What do you believe are the top qualities of project managers to deal with challenges in the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) era?

**Harrin:** I’d say that flexibility is essential to deal with the challenges in VUCA era and digital transformation. The way we run projects has been evolving since we started out formalizing how work gets done in a project setting, and that’s still going on.

As our environment gets more complex and uncertain, we’ll need more and more tools to help deliver projects in that kind of environment. For example, project managers need to respond to: stakeholders with shorter attention spans, stakeholders with competing demands on their time, complex and unknown technical situations, complex and unknown geopolitical and socio-political situations.

Project managers need options that will help them deliver, and the confidence to use those options flexibly to get the best results each time. That means being able to choose from predictive, iterative and hybrid ways of delivering the work and blending what works to get the best results. For example, the overall project plan may be predictive with progressive elaboration for scheduling while the technical work is managed by the Scrum team.

### **Part III PMs with high emotional intelligence are more likely to succeed**

**Q5.** You've founded a website to help girls in PM, right? Based on your observation, what are the strengths and disadvantages of females in the field of project management? How should we manage diversity (including gender, culture, beliefs, etc.) in project teams?

**Harrin:** The website is "A Girl's Guide to Project Management": I'm the "Girl" and it's my guide to project management. The blog is a way to tell my story of what it's like to be a working woman in the project management profession, and I do think it helps other women see that PM is a career option available to them and how to succeed in the role. I certainly get a lot of emails that speak to that.

In my personal experience, I've worked with male and female PMs – some are good while some are not (yet). The success of a project has nothing to do with gender. It's PMs with the greatest level of emotional intelligence that have been successful and seen as successful.

Diversity in project teams, like any teams, helps bring diverse perspectives. We get better project solutions, better problem solving and better outcomes when everyone's perspective is heard and considered.

### **Part IV Project management in the post-COVID-19 era**

**Q6.** What will the future of project management be like in the post-COVID-19 era? In other words, what are the impacts of COVID-19 on project management profession?

**Harrin:** I think it's sector dependent. The project managers I know have either been incredibly busy or made redundant, much as people in other jobs. There are going to be long-term implications for work that requires teams to come together with regards to health and safety of teams on construction sites etc., and of course we've seen a big uptake in tools like Zoom, which has required individuals who haven't worked remotely to start using collaboration tools.

In the post-COVID-19 era, project leaders need to be conscious of creating empowered teams that operate without command and control leadership styles and micromanagement.

Project managers need to develop digital skills to effectively be able to operate in a virtual work environment – but more than that, we need digital leadership skills to help others

navigate the new normal and provide ad hoc support as required to people on the team who don't have the same experience or exposure as we have had to virtual work.

Project management will play a role in the economic and social recovery from the pandemic, and in helping us navigate the continued need for caution until such time as the pandemic is under control. Project leadership is an in-demand skill, and we'll always need people who can get things done efficiently and in a coordinated way.

Personally, I haven't seen that much difference in my day job! Ultimately, the work is still the work. We just do it using different tools and we can't shake hands any more.

## **Part V Technology is one of the least likely reasons for project failure**

**Q7.** The triple constraint "time, cost and scope" is still relevant in project management, but not enough to measure the success of a project. Do you agree or not? In your opinion, what are the common causes of project failure?

**Harrin:** I agree. Time, cost and scope are project management measures but stakeholders rarely care about them in my experience. They simply want the end result to be as good as it can be and a fit for purpose solution that fixes their problem. I do use time, cost and scope as project performance measures, but I augment them with what stakeholders feel, which is important for each project. That's different each time: sometimes it's customer satisfaction; sometimes it's quality; sometimes it's something else. We shouldn't limit ourselves to one definition of what success looks like.

There is plenty of academic research into why projects fail, and the opposite: what makes projects a success. What is missing in the project management profession is a willingness for organizations to talk about why individual projects fail.

There are many factors that contribute to project failure. The UK Office of Government Commerce did a study that shows the main reasons why projects fail are: lack of clear executive leadership (the 'missing' Sponsor); poor processes for identifying and managing risks associated with the project; a gap between the project team often with technical expertise and the rest of the business who often don't understand the nitty gritty details; failure to take into account and manage the fact that humans naturally dislike change and the impact this has on business processes and people; project durations that stretch over a year, as the business environment evolves rapidly.

Technology is one of the least likely reasons for project failure. This shows us that the human implications of change are far more important than any IT system design.

**Q8.** Many experts say that a failed project failed at the beginning and that they should fail fast. Do you have some experience to share in this aspect?

**Harrin:** I think that's a good rule to live by. I put it into practice by using prototypes, small launches instead of big bang go lives, pilots and involving the customer at all stages so they know what it is they are getting and can test as we go.

## Part VI Put the customer at the heart of how we do projects

**Q9.** You've written about "Customer-Centric Project Management". What does "Customer-Centric Project Management" refer to? (Sometimes, customers don't know their own requirements clearly, so will customer-centric approach reliable?)

**Harrin:** Customer-centric project management is about continuously engaging stakeholders, and forgetting the post-implementation review process as the only way to review success. An immediate and simple feedback mechanism enables project teams to identify dissatisfaction in the project management process early and thus resolve it in time.

Putting the customer at the heart of how we do projects and using a process to tangibly record levels of engagement means that we can improve the chances of project success through continual and specifically relevant stakeholder dialogue.

Being customer-centric is a journey. Project managers don't suddenly change their entire outlook overnight, and talking about the customer is different from actually listening to them and acting in their best interests. Here are several tips for being more customer-centric.

- Keep satisfaction scoring criteria as simple as possible. I use a scale of 1 to 10.
- Use a simple process to record, measure and monitor satisfaction levels. I use a spreadsheet that allows me to capture the score and also any verbatim comments.
- Deliver on your promises. If you listen to feedback, make sure that you act on it too!
- Ensure that outsourcing partners and other third parties are fully included: they are also important for gaining customer satisfaction on projects as projects don't happen in a vacuum.
- A focus on specifics delivers the most value to customers. Find out what is causing people the most grief and fix it.
- If you want project team members to engage with stakeholders and take customer-centricity seriously, build it into the way you assess performance. Put it in their performance review as an objective and assess them on their scores for their projects at the end of the year.
- Satisfied customers make useful allies in difficult times. Stick with it, and your project customers will stick with you if (or when) the project takes a nose dive.
- A post-implementation review will not be adequate to give you some useful information.
- Using email only is not enough. I believe that you get a richer and more useful picture from oral conversations with project customers instead of through written transcripts. Carry out customer-satisfaction reviews in person or over the phone. Email is a last resort.



## Part VII Project management is a profession that plays to my natural strengths

**Q10.** Why did you choose project management as your career? In your eyes, which part of the profession attracts you most?

**Harrin:** I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left university so I joined a graduate training scheme that allowed me to test a number of different areas. I discovered a department called Business Re-engineering which is basically project management and process improvement. It felt like I had found something I could really enjoy. It was all about lists, making changes, organising people, getting things done. I had no idea prior to that that I could find a job that would play to my natural strengths.

I love the variety of the work and the fact that projects let you see different areas of the business so you really understand how the whole organization works.

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



## 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* (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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