

Good-quality Project Management Is Vital for Successfully Delivering Change

Interview with Andrew Wright, PhD ^{1,2}

Author, Educator, Innovator
Fellow, Association for Project Management
United Kingdom



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

Introduction to interviewee

Andrew Wright, PhD, ChPP, MloD, FAPM is a successful, innovative leader with proven experience in the effective delivery of sustained business change, with over 20 years project and programme management experience and expertise in applied AI.

He also teaches and mentors project managers at all stages of their careers. He has been a visiting lecturer at UCL, the University of Cumbria, and University of Manchester, teaching Project Management on their programmes. He has been actively involved in the Systems Thinking SIG of APM and currently Chair. His publications include *Project Success and Quality: Balancing the Iron Triangle*, *Managing Projects in the Health World*.

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/>

² How to cite this interview: PMR (2021). Good-quality Project Management Is Vital for Successfully Delivering Change: Interview with Andrew Wright; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue II, February.

Interview

Part I Project management in my eyes

Q1. Do you love project management or is it merely a job for you? How will you describe the profession of project management after working for over 25 years?

Andrew Wright: I must love it – I do so much pro bono work! PM is a young profession still finding its feet – there are many people with the “project manager” job title that are not trained or qualified, something that would be completely unacceptable in established professions, but we are progressing - we have a Chartered status. That will need to become mandatory for certain responsibilities.

Part II AI and project management

Q2. In your opinion, how will AI influence the profession of project management?

Wright: It depends on what you mean by AI. If you mean “big data” analysis, few organizations have access to large quantities of good-quality data relevant to projects; accurate data is only logged by people reluctantly – it is seen as an unnecessary chore e.g. accurate time-sheeting. It will need a major culture change and financial investment for any organization to decide what data to collect, implement the IT systems and manual processes to collect it and then use it intelligently to transform their performance. One client of mine was willing to do this and reversed their declining profitability, but it was at the insistence of their new US owners (or else!) Typical “AI” applications like Chatbots cannot replace PMs in dealing with stakeholders or managing risks, for instance.

Knowledge-based technologies offer a lot more potential because they can explain and justify their recommendations/actions. I’m currently working on a knowledge-based AI system to improve project success rates. Project success is heavily dependent on meeting the customer needs first and delivering more benefits than they expected. This demands good-quality management, yet many organizations suffer from a focus on project schedule and cost, to the detriment of quality so they don’t deliver the benefits. This software will make collecting the right data much quicker and easier, thus justifying greater focus on quality by forecasting the impact on the project and the business case/benefits.

Q3. How should an organization be prepared for digital transformation?

Wright: Avoid fixation on what technology is available (“shiny new toys”) and look instead at what process changes would make the business more effective. This requires “blue-skies” thinking and is best facilitated by an outsider to avoid constrained thinking. Then look at what digital technology can automate those new processes more efficiently. Adding point automation of existing processes simply locks the business into its current ways of working.

Once I was able to avoid a major disruption of a company's IT by recommending an alternative approach to buying an expensive AI system, and in the process solved half the problem too.

Part III Use of a hybrid methodology

Q4. To lead innovative projects, what qualities should project leaders have? For innovative projects, the customer requirements are not clear from the beginning, so how do you deal with this?

Wright: I've applied a hybrid methodology for most of my career. Use Agile to develop a concept demonstrator that captures and validates the requirements, then a technical demonstrator to prove the solution actually works, before using Waterfall to build the solution and deliver it quickly to meet the validated requirements.

Part IV How to gain engagement and support of stakeholders

Q5. Would you please share some tips on how to gain engagement and support of stakeholders?

Wright: Talk to them and listen to what they say! What makes the project a win for them (critical success criteria)? What are they afraid of (consequences of risks)? Why would they block the project (issues that have not been recognized)? Include them on the project risk management board so they know that everything is being done to prevent "the usual disaster".

Part V Managing virtual teams

Q6. Virtual (remote) project teams are common these days. What are your secrets of managing virtual teams?

Wright: Try to meet face-to-face at first if possible to build a personal relationship. Talk one-to-one as well as in wider forums to maintain that relationship. Understand them as people, not just resources – they are stakeholders too.

You need to set a good example; "walk the walk, not just talk the talk". Be disciplined in displaying the behaviours and applying the values that you want others to work by.

Implement a zero tolerance for cutting corners or other symptoms of doing things the wrong way. You need to clamp down immediately and be hard on these – not doing so encourages a culture of poor quality, and good quality delivers project success.

Part VI Systems Thinking is important to project success

Q7. Why is Systems Thinking important to project success? How can we use Systems Thinking in practice?

Wright: Systems Thinking is valuable as it is both a mindset and a toolset that enables project leaders to understand both the complete scope of the problem and its dynamics. It helps reveal early in the project the challenges the solution faces and helps avoid simply replacing one problem with another (often worse) one. If you identify the problem correctly, and solve it completely, your project will be a definite success, even if a little late (external deadlines excepted) or over budget.

Systems Thinking's primary ideal is to explore and understand the complete scope of the problem and how its elements interact with external factors (in particular, the dynamics of these interactions). This understanding ensures that when the solution is designed, it can address the complete scope of the problem and interact predictably with factors outside the scope. Failure to do this can lead to unintended and unexpected consequences, even the reversal of the desired outcome! The designers of London's Millennium Bridge ignored the users, and upon opening it swayed so badly that it took a further 18 months to bolt on ugly dampers, so they turned the "blade of light" (being opened on time and budget) into a clumsy embarrassment (being late and over budget).

System Thinking principles and tools don't require highly trained experts and large budgets to apply, but they do need us to "break our programming" to keep exploring and bounding the big picture rather than focus on the details and exclude factors without exploring their importance.

The tools are all straight-forward and quick to pick up and can be used at all stages of a project from concept to delivery. Using them at the concept stage of a project helps ensure that the problem is identified correctly, and that an effective solution is designed. Using it throughout the project for impact assessment is valuable too, especially in change control and risk management, where superficial impact assessment often leads to unintended consequences, some of which are tragic, e.g. the Hyatt Regency Hotel walkway collapse in Kansas City.

Systems Thinking SIG of the Association for Project Management (APM) has used the COVID-19 crisis to test ease of use by getting non-expert volunteers to create a causal loop diagram exploring that crisis using free software. We found that insights about the complexity emerged within hours.

In the West, we are trained in analytical thinking from an early age, and this becomes so deeply embedded that many people believe it to be natural. In other cultures, creative thinking holistically is fostered. Both are necessary to produce successful solutions to complex problems.

Part VII Balancing the Iron Triangle

Q8. You've written a book titled "Project Success and Quality: Balancing the Iron Triangle". What's the core message of the book?

Wright: There's no point in finishing on time and within budget if the solution doesn't deliver the expected benefits!

Almost invariably, stakeholders see projects as most successful after early investment is made in the project to ensure fitness for purpose and then quick delivery (through avoiding errors, rework and consequent delays).

If a project delivers on time and on budget, but doesn't meet the needs of the customer, will they be happy? Not usually. If the project is very late and over budget due to large-scale rework resulting from changes and quality failures, with key features descoped, will they be happy? Never.

The key to delighting customers is to meet their needs better than they expected, no later than the time they expected and for costs no more than they expected. This involves achieving all 4 of these key results:

- a) Be certain that the solution will meet the needs, and how you will accept/prove it (requirements validation)
- b) Be certain that you can deliver the solution working as intended (quality assurance)
- c) Be certain that your suppliers are delivering what they promised (quality control)
- d) Avoid things going wrong (pro-active risk management).

Q9. Talking about rework, what solutions would you offer to reduce rework rate in projects?

Wright: Rework results from two main causes – changes in requirements and poor-quality work (i.e. not meeting the customer's needs).

Minimizing changes needs up-front investment in thinking what is really needed, in order to reduce emerging requirements and solution changes along with their resulting rework.

Minimizing poor quality and its consequent rework requires up-front investment in getting your supply chain bought into good quality management through personal and contractual influences. It also needs clear planning for assuring and controlling quality during the project.

Team-building across organizational (and contractual) boundaries can be challenging but it is hugely beneficial in reducing both causes of rework. Integrated teams communicate well and support each other and the project's success because they have a common goal. They collaborate well in understanding the problem and designing the right solution, and are much more likely to be open and honest about possible causes of rework, allowing for its prevention. Such teamworking requires that there is a win-win outcome possible for all parties, so contractual terms must be designed carefully to allow for this.

Q10. According to your observations, what are the common causes of project failure?

Wright:

- 1) Inadequate understanding of the problem, so only part of the problem is solved by the project and the problem is pushed elsewhere. For example, centralizing electronic documents for an organization without putting in place the technology to filter, deduplicate and version control them, or failure to train the staff to work in a completely new way.
- 2) Picking the wrong solution – picking a “shiny new toy” instead of changing the approach. For example, a company selected a knowledge-based system when they had no knowledge base and no team capable of creating one, just because a competitor had it, resulting in the failure of the project to install and implement it.
- 3) Cost-cutting early in the project leading to quality failures that cause delays and cost over-runs. For example, a gas producer slashed the number of quality engineers to “save money”, but then suffered major delays due to quality failures later.

Part VIII COVID-19 impact on project management

Q11. What role do you believe project management will play in dealing with global crises such as COVID-19?

Wright: COVID-19 has had a huge impact, so we are facing more change in ways of working other than outbreak of war. At the same time, there is less money, as government cash is subsidizing those hit by the crisis. Good project management is vital for successfully delivering much more change for much less money since poor project management leads to rework, delays, late delivery, over-run budget, with fewer benefits and squandering precious resources.

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*.

For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuanyu-76b280151/>