

Interview with Sierra Hampton- Simmons ¹

Director and Portfolio Leader, Certification Products
Project Management Institute (PMI)



Interviewed by İpek Sahra Ozguler
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Introduction to interviewee

Sierra Hampton-Simmons has nearly two decades of experience as an expert in Certification Management with a track record for transforming and developing lucrative brands to include relevant performance-based testing and training. She joined PMI in 2013 and currently serves as *the Director & Portfolio Leader of Certification Products*. At PMI Sierra is responsible for the entire portfolio of Certification Products including the PMP credential-the gold standard in project management credentials. Immediately prior to joining PMI, she was the Manager, Certification Operations at Cisco Systems, Inc. where she directed daily operations for a global development team in creating leading IT certification programs including the world-class CCNA and CCNP. Prior to Cisco, Sierra had a 12-year career with Citrix Education where she managed a team in design and development of the most advanced curricula and certifications for their global programs. Sierra also served as the President of the Performance Testing Council for three years after being an active member of their Board of Directors. Sierra is a graduate of Georgetown University with a Bachelor of Science in Japanese and International Business.

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Ipek Sahra Ozguler (Ozguler): *Good morning Sierra. On January 2, 2021 PMI launched an updated version of the PMP® certification exam. What was the reason for this change?*

Sierra Hampton-Simmons (Simmons): Good morning, İpek. Thank you for giving me the opportunity of an interview.

Over the past five years, we have seen the project management profession experience a shift in demand from solely relying on and valuing technical skills to a greater emphasis on a much more diverse tool kit. Agile and hybrid approaches, for example, are becoming more widely utilized than ever. We've also seen continued emphasis on certain soft skills – which we call 'power' skills – including collaborative leadership, empathy, and more.

As a result, our Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification exam has been modernized to reflect these evolving needs in the profession. Like every iteration of the PMP® certification exam, this new exam was designed to help maintain the certification's relevancy in the current business environment by providing our members and certification holders with the most valuable skills to apply to the world we are living in.

Ozguler: *Can you provide more detail on what specific changes were made to the exam and how the new exam will benefit project managers?*

Simmons: The biggest update to the PMP® exam is that the content now focuses on three new domains: people, process, and business environment. The exam will include scenarios and themes, from regulation to sustainability, to bring these domains to life. We've also updated the exam to include more content on the many agile ways of working, including new agile frameworks, new technologies, and improved practices. As mentioned, modern ways of working are constantly changing extremely rapidly, and we had the opportunity to include content in the exam process covering ways of working that may not have worked five years ago.

Ozguler: *In present day, the workforce is rapidly evolving. Why is the PMP® such a vital certification to have as a project manager to help navigate this constant change?*

Simmons: The workforce has been rapidly evolving over the past few years, but the pandemic sped this process up to an unprecedented pace. This pace has resulted in increased demand for project managers across various industries and sectors. Individuals and enterprises have an opportunity to not only survive and adapt to this newfound pace, but to thrive in it. Individuals have the opportunity to advance their

careers by pursuing an agnostic certification such as the PMP® and businesses can drive productivity by encouraging their workforce to get certified.

Certified project managers can help enterprises better oversee projects and reduce the amount of time and resources wasted, and PMI-certified project professionals can spearhead tangible change. In fact, according to [PMI research](#), by 2027, there will be a need for 88 million project professionals working in organizations around the world.

Ozguler: *According to PMI research, 11.4% of all business investment is wasted due to poor project management practices. How important are certifications when it comes to becoming a successful project manager?*

Simmons: The PMP® certification is the gold standard of project management. It is recognized and demanded by organizations worldwide and helps professionals demonstrate that they have the capability to lead and direct projects and teams. It is no secret that organizations need to do a better job of managing their projects, and there is an opportunity for the project management community to minimize wasted investment.

Having a PMP® certification provides professionals with numerous advantages as they look to lead projects tackling today's [Megatrends](#). At face value, the PMP® gives professionals immediate recognized credibility. This makes the individual more attractive as an applicant, while simultaneously providing the hiring organization with the peace of mind that this individual has demonstrated proficiency in the field. In addition, our [research at PMI](#) has shown that those with a PMP® certification make more money, earning 20 percent higher pay in comparison to those without a certification, with a median salary of around \$100K.

Ozguler: *PMI recently released its 2021 Megatrends report, outlining the biggest challenges impacting our world. What role do PMP® holders and project managers play in tackling these challenges?*

Simmons: In our recent [Megatrends](#) report, we have identified six Megatrends that share a common thread: all are contributing to greater divergence, disruption, and discontent in our world. The project management community has the opportunity to start healing these rifts.

Driving systemic change depends on collaboration both within and outside the business—employees, partners, customers, and communities, at local, national, and international levels. It also relies on changemakers – including project managers – who can make ideas reality, whether through large-scale transformational change or through smaller vital projects. Project managers and changemakers are currently helping deploy

COVID-19 vaccines and leading organizational plans to become more sustainable, and we will see the project management community continue to help tackle the Megatrends impacting our world today as well as any that arise in the future.

Ozguler: *What advice would you give to young professionals who are at the very start of their careers in project management and how can certifications help them get their foot in the door?*

Simmons: The past year has prompted many to rethink their professional goals, regardless of age. Many people are looking for opportunities to further their careers, perhaps without the financial commitment tied to going back to school. For young professionals looking at project management as a career path – and for anyone looking to make a switch in their career – there are ways to improve your resume that may not be as time consuming or expensive as you may think.

The PMP® certification, for example, offers a convenient and affordable way to advance your career and increase your earning potential. Having a 4-year degree and 3 years of experience or 5 years of experience without a 4-year degree leading and directing projects – in any field – can qualify professionals to pursue a PMP® certification, which opens the door to higher salary opportunities without making a large investment.

For those new to the profession, PMI has other offerings that can help professionals get their foot in the door. Our [Certified Associate in Project Management](#) (CAPM)® certification is great for this, as anyone can qualify to take the exam with just 23 hours of education. It is a certification that can jumpstart a project management career quickly and effectively.

Additionally, we also realize that some professionals – especially in the current workplace – are constantly being thrust into leading projects for the first time, and they may not have the time to pursue a certification. One of our newest products, [Kickoff](#), is a free, 45-minute course and tool kit that quickly teaches the basics of project management to ensure everyone is ready to lead their team from day one. The course also provides downloadable templates for common documents – such as project charters – so new project managers can seamlessly align their team to common goals and start off on the right foot.

Ozguler: *For existing PMP® holders, what skills are most important to have to thrive in the current workplace?*

Simmons: As previously mentioned, PMI encourages the project management and changemaker community to develop power skills – including greater communication and more emotional intelligence and empathy, among others.

One of the most important power skills is collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership is especially important in today's world as it allows you to engage more deeply and more empathetically with your team, resulting in higher trust. In fact, in a recent PMI survey, [Tomorrow's Teams Today](#), collaborative leadership was cited as the top skill for building effective teams.

Another skill, which can be for an individual or for an entire enterprise, moves beyond simply just being agile or nimble. Professionals and their organizations need to be almost gymnastic to adapt and thrive amidst the constant change impacting our workplace. According to our latest [Pulse of the Profession](#) report, gymnastic enterprises – those which utilize all possible methods for solving problems rather than tried-and-tested ways – were more likely to have adapted faster to the pandemic, leading to increased productivity and better project outcomes last year.

Ozguler: *What resources are available to help these professionals build these skills?*

Simmons: PMI has a number of resources to help professionals build different power skills and understand how teams and businesses should operate. Two recent offerings that help professionals understand business transformations and agile ways of working, respectively, are our Organizational Transformation: Foundation and Basics of Disciplined Agile online courses.

[Organizational Transformation: Foundation](#) is the first of an upcoming series of online courses dedicated to large-scale transformation, teaching project managers and changemakers what it takes to cultivate significant change within an organization, including best practices on managing the people and strategy involved in business-wide change.

[Basics of Disciplined Agile](#) is another online course that is designed to provide a foundational overview of the many agile ways of working available to professionals, including lean, Kanban, and more. The course allows learners to see how teams utilize agile in a variety of situations, enabling them to customize their way of working based on the specific project they are involved in.

Ozguler: *How do you expect the workforce to continue to evolve in 2021 and beyond? How will PMI continue to keep its certifications relevant?*

Simmons: Continuous evolution should be expected in the workforce. In the near future, as leaders make final decisions whether to return to their offices full time, we could see remote and hybrid teams become permanent for some industries and organizations. In the longer-term future, new technology and the continued infiltration of AI in the workplace will present new challenges and opportunities for project managers and changemakers.

Similar to when the PMP® certification exam originally launched more than 30 years ago, PMI has continued to make the concerted effort to ensure that candidates are provided with the resources and tools to build skills that are most needed in the workplace. This revised exam is the outcome of several years spent monitoring and tracking the profession through many forms of research. The PMP® certification exam is written by project professionals for project professionals – even designed by project professionals, which makes it truly a collaborative effort. This trend will continue, and we will always be tracking how the project management profession evolves to tackle the biggest challenges our world faces.

Ozguler: Thank you for giving detail information.

About the Interviewer



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Ipek Sahra Ozguler graduated from the Istanbul University, Turkey with a Bachelor of Science degree in Computer Engineering and from Middle East Technical University, Turkey with an MSc degree in Software Management. As a project manager, she has more than 13 years of experience in various areas such as portfolio management, program management, project management, software management, business analysis. She became a certified PMP in 2012 and a certified SCRUM Master in 2014.

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

Ipek is the creator and editor of the highly acclaimed book, [The Perspective of Women Project Management Professionals](#), interviews with leading female PM experts and professionals around the world. The book was published in March 2020 and is available [here](#).

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