*PM World Journal* (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. X, Issue IV – April 2021
https://pmworldjournal.com/

*Interview with Gary Nelson*
by Yu Yanjuan, PMR
Interview

# You Are Never Too Young to Be a Project Manager

# Interview with Gary Nelson  [1,2]

Author, Game Designer, Project Manager
Vancouver, BC, Canada

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

## Introduction to the interviewee

Gary Nelson is an author, project manager, speaker and game designer. He is passionate about sharing knowledge and making project management concepts more accessible, particularly to new and aspiring project managers (of all ages). In other words, he likes to tell stories to help convey complex concepts in a way that helps the concepts "stick" to make learning fun.

As a project and programme manager, Gary has worked in the Telecom, Student Information Systems, Local Government and Healthcare sectors since graduating from Simon Fraser University (BC, Canada) in 1989. His international experience includes projects in New Zealand, China, the USA and Canada.

Gary is the author of seven project management books including *Gazza's Guide to*

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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/

[2] How to cite this interview: PMR (2021). You Are Never Too Young to be a Project Manager: Interview with Gary Nelson; *Project Management Review*; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. X, Issue IV, April.

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*Practical Project Management* and *Project Kids Adventures* (PKA) series; he has served as a Board member for the PMI West Coast B.C. Chapter and for the PMI New Zealand Chapter.

## Interview

## Part Ⅰ - Story with project management

**Q1.** Please share with us your story with project management. How did you step into this profession?

**Gary Nelson (Nelson):** You could say that I started my project management journey "accidentally", but I was "tricked" into learning project management by my first manager. In the late 1980's, project management was still a developing area and there were no university courses in Project Management. I had started out in a Quality Assurance role in a technology firm, but I got to try my hand at a few different things over the first few years of my career. When my manager needed me to help update schedules for a project, I learned how to do it, using Microsoft Project. It was interesting and challenging, and he gradually involved me more and more in making project schedules and supporting projects. Today you would probably call it a project coordinator role, but they didn't call it that then. In 2000, my manager encouraged me to formalize my experience and learn by taking a course to prepare for my PMP certification. I had been managing projects from end to end for a few years before that, but preparing for the PMP exam and studying the PMBoK was an eye-opener. I learned a lot more about what I needed to know as a project manager, so in a sense, that was my real start as an "eyes wide open" project manager.

## Part Ⅱ - Top qualities of a project manager

**Q2.** As a project manager, what do you believe are the top qualities of a project manager in VUCA era?

**Nelson:** In this VUCA world, I would say that the top qualities of a project manager should include resilience and adaptability. Yes, you need the technical skills, and an understanding of the frameworks and methods for consistent project delivery, but change is the only constant, so we need to be flexible. No project ends up the way we thought it would by the time it is done, and sometimes that is just because the pace of change in our environment is so fast. So I would add another top quality to the list – having a basic grounding in Change Management, which is a beneficial skill for any project manager, and will help them in working with a wide range of stakeholders experiencing change as a result of projects (be it a planned change as part of the project, or in response to external factors impacting your project).

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## Part Ⅲ - Birth of project management story-books for children

**Q3.** What are the reasons why you wrote books to teach children how to manage projects?

**Nelson:** I didn't actually start out planning to write children's books, let alone ones on project management. I had always wanted to write and publish a book since I was a teen, but back then I didn't have that much experience to write about. In 2011, I started a project management blog called "Gazza's Corner", with an associated podcast, and the articles were about project management concepts, but told in the context of stories and anecdotes. In 2012, I decided to try and write my first book – again, not for children – that wasn't even an idea back then. The book "Gazza's Guide to Practical Project Management" was targeted at university students and people starting out their project management career. But it was a different kind of book – like the blog, it covered the essentials of project management through short stories, with the PM concepts simplified so that someone new to the field could get a more intuitive grasp of what project management is all about.

In September 2012, with my freshly self-published book in hand, I ended up talking to Dianne Fromm from the PMI Educational Foundation at a PMI leadership conference in Vancouver. She found the story concept of my book interesting, but she told me their non-profit organization worked primarily with schools and children. She then cheekily suggested that my next project management book be one for children, specifically in the 9-12 age range. They had resources at the high school level, and one book at the Kindergarten/first year of school level, but nothing in the middle. I was quite nervous about attempting something like that, but my two youngest boys were 9 & 10 at the time, so they were the perfect audience and critics to try out my ideas on.

The worst thing that could happen was that I would spend a lot of quality time with my children as I worked on this strange idea of project management story-books for children. I decided that was a good enough reason to give it a go, and hopefully the books would work out and somebody would find them useful. Thus, the idea behind the "Project Kids Adventures" series was born. My children were my chief critics and editors, as the "story time" at night was reading and feedback time with my children, reading a new chapter or two (and rewrites) each night. There's something quite powerful about children being able to tell their father that he needed to fix things to make the story better.

The "Ultimate Tree House Project" was published in 2013, followed by "The Scariest Haunted House Project – Ever!" in 2014, then "The Amazing Science Fair Project" in 2015, "The Valentine's Day Project Disaster" in 2016, and "The Easter Bully Transformation Project" in 2017. I took a several-year break before completing "The Great Creek Rescue Project" in 2021, which completes the six-book series that I had envisaged back in 2012.

Eight years and many translations later, I am delighted that the books are "working" and making a difference in the lives of children around the world.

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**Q4.**     What are your books *Project Kids Adventures* mainly about? What feedbacks have you received after publication?

**Nelson:**     First and foremost, the books in the series are stories about the types of things that kids in the middle school age range have to deal with, and a few not-so-common experiences (like helping a girl get a new liver by raising awareness about liver disease), but they are certainly all possible events. No super-powers, no aliens, no magic, nothing like that.

As a series, the six books span a period that starts just before summer holidays, goes through a full school year of projects, activities and experiences, then leads into the following summer.

As a learning progression, the "Project Kids" in the books learn a few very, very basic concepts about doing activities as projects (little things like PLAN before you DO, and a few others), which make all the difference when the girls are competing against the boys. In each subsequent book there is a review of what they had used and learned previously (so you won't get lost if you start with Book 2, 3 or 4), but the books build upon each other, and the children take on more and more complex challenges as the series progress.

"The Ultimate Tree House Project" is about something most kids want to do when they are growing up, which is to build a tree house. The book quickly turns into a "boy vs girls" competition, with shared resources, brother/sister dynamics, and the girls get ahead by using some project management "secrets" on how to do it better, faster and smarter.

"The Scariest Haunted House Project" builds on the basic project planning concepts, but children face constraints of time and resources, as there is a deadline for the Halloween Display contest. They learn to make some hard decisions, and are exposed to the concept of "critical path".

"The Amazing Science Fair Project" is the first book to have two projects – one for the boys, one for the girls, and the boys also end up being test subjects for their school Science Fair project.

"The Valentine's Day Project" is all about communication, peer pressure, dealing with rumours and stakeholder management, etc.

"The Easter Bully Transformation Project" is the first book to introduce a programme of related projects, trying to figure out how to un-bully a bully, and children end up doing a great social good project.

"The Great Creek Rescue Project" builds upon the previous books, but also introduces the concept of "risk", while they embark on an environmental improvement project in their neighbourhood.

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Overall, the stories themselves are relatable, believable, and have kids talking and behaving like kids do – which is why I think the stories resonate so well with children (and adults too).

The feedback that I have received has been overwhelmingly positive, and ranges from things like "now I understand what my parent does" to "my child didn't like to read, but after they read your book, they have become active readers". I'm more than glad to know that the books have made a visible, positive difference in the lives of youth.

## Part Ⅳ - Benefits of children learning project management skills

**Q5.** You've said, "You are never too young to be a project manager." Would you please explain it? In other words, what's the importance of learning project management from a young age?

**Nelson:** I tell people "you're never too young to be a project manager" – and I believe this to be true. There is a practical limit on the youngest ages, of course, but most children of school age can benefit from some basic project management skills. As they get a bit older, they can handle more concepts and complexity. The reason why I say that children should learn and can manage projects is that project management is not something reserved for adults, and that it isn't particularly mysterious or complicated. Project management is actually a collection of essential life skills that can be learned at almost any age.

Sure, you need a lot of structure and controls around a project when you are building a bridge, a rocket, or a new software programme, but the *principles* of project management that underly all of that are actually very simple concepts. Adults just have a tendency to make things more complicated than they need to be sometimes.

**Q6.** What are your suggestions/tips on teaching PM to children?

**Nelson:** Project management concepts are actually not that hard to understand, but you do need to consider the language you use when teaching children. In the first book "The Ultimate Tree House Project", the father tries to explain what projects are and some basic concepts, but he uses adult terms which quickly become confusing, and even alarming. ("*Project Execution*, what's that? You don't *kill* people on your projects, do you, Dad?") So he adapts and simplifies the terms he uses, and that makes the project management concepts easier for the children to work with and understand.

I think the best way to communicate concepts is to tell a story, and this rule applies whether your audience is young or old. We all love stories, and we remember the lessons in stories because they are memorable. Sometimes the stories are fun or funny, or even scary, but stories tend to make things "stick" in your head much more than reading a textbook.

Project-based learning is another great way to maximise learning in a classroom environment, as it involves quite a number of skills and provides the additional benefit of

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working in small teams from a young age.

**Q7.** What benefits do you believe children PM education will bring to children?

**Nelson:** Project management is a collection of essential life skills, so even if they never end up managing projects for work, these same skills can help them in their daily lives as they grow into adulthood.

Simple things, such as planning, basic budgeting, breaking big tasks down into smaller ones so they are not so daunting or scary, are useful for just about everyone. Learning how to work with others (communication, teamwork, leadership) is another commonly needed group of skills for doing well in life, no matter what your vocation is. Even risk management has a role in everyday life, as long as you don't overdo it and go into "risk paralysis", of course. Kids still need to skin their knees and climb trees, after all.

## Part V - Future of project management

**Q8.** What's your opinion about the future of project management?

**Nelson:** Project management has come a long way since the establishment of the Project Management Institute (PMI) in 1969, but more has changed in the last twenty years, at least in terms of wide-spread recognition of the importance of the role of project management. There are now project management courses in most universities, and there are even project management degrees. The current PMP eligibility requirement includes formal tertiary study in project management – a course of study that simply didn't exist in any country when I started out. Project management is something that employers see strategic value in, and many look for some type of project management certification in applicants for job roles – be it PRINCE2, a PMI certification like CAPM, PMP, PGMP, or other project management association recognition or certification. We have also seen rapid growth in schools adopting "project-based learning", which recognizes the comprehensive learning opportunities that are available when using a project as a platform for learning.

I think we are going to see continued growth in the recognition and relevance of project management as a profession, as a way of helping to ensure that stakeholders get better value from investments and recognize benefits.

Oh, wait, that's all adult-talk. Project management will continue to grow and prosper in schools and in the workplace because, in the end, it's about getting things done, helping others, and having some fun along the way.

You're never too young (or too old) to be a project manager, or, at the very least, you will benefit from the many simple and essential life skills that make up this profession we call "Project Management".

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## 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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