

Interview with Brantlee Underhill ¹

Managing Director, North America
Project Management Institute (PMI)



Interviewed by Ipek Sahra Ozguler

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Introduction to interviewee

Brantlee Underhill serves as Managing Director, North America at Project Management Institute (PMI), the world's leading professional association for the global community of project professionals and changemakers. In her more than 20 years at PMI, Brantlee has led chapter and volunteer leadership development, creating greater value and engagement opportunities for PMI members around the globe. In her current role, Brantlee is responsible for the North American business plan and performance. Brantlee holds a bachelor's degree in German, Russian and political science from West Chester University, and she is a Certified Association Executive (CAE) through the American Society of Association Executives.

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Interview

Ipek Sahra Ozguler (Ozguler): *First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. To get us started, can you tell us a bit about why education is important to you?*

Brantlee Underhill (Underhill): Thank you for having me. I'm motivated by education in a few ways. That includes being curious to learn, to find connections, and to achieve some type of outcome. I discovered this in my teenage years when I had the opportunity to learn a foreign language in junior high school, and I was so delighted to learn German. My grandfather was of German descent, so that made me feel more connected to my heritage. And we got pen pals and got to take a school trip to Germany (hence the outcome or reward!). I continued to study language throughout college and eventually paired language with political science, thinking I would work in Washington D.C. after graduation. Instead, I found an opportunity with a global not-for-profit membership organization where I interact with people from all around the world to advocate for their profession. I know that every step of my education and my choices led me to where I am today.

Also, my son is currently in elementary school, so I have a vested interest in education and his experience within the education system — in addition to those who are now growing up in his generation. And during these pandemic times, it certainly is interesting, disruptive, frightening, and exciting all at once.

Ozguler: *What are the biggest challenges students face in a virtual learning environment, and how can project management skills help them overcome those challenges?*

Underhill: One of the biggest challenges students face in a virtual learning environment is difficulty with managing their time. Some distractions can easily impede a student's ability to focus on schoolwork at home, including family, pets, cell phones, and other devices and distractions. Additionally, some students may lack a designated quiet area to work in, resulting in difficulty getting into a routine and following a structured plan without a teacher in the room to guide them. These factors result in students struggling to manage their time and work seamlessly in an environment that was so drastically different from what they were used to when they were physically in the classroom with their teacher and peers.

Ozguler: *What new skills have students taken away from learning in a virtual environment, and how can they be applied when students return to in-person learning?*

Underhill: Humans' ability to respond and adapt to a changing environment is truly remarkable. Some new skills that students have taken away from a virtual environment include extending empathy to others, communicating in new ways, and thinking critically about their assignments — all of which we deem to be power skills and technology quotient (TQ) abilities that easily transfer to project management. Teachers have guided students on how to show grace to each other and themselves through all the technical difficulties and pain points of online learning, showcasing how empathy plays a significant role in individual and group success. Similarly, students had to communicate more effectively than ever before, whether via email or during live lessons, to ensure their questions and concerns were answered and they had all the information they needed, which is comparable to how professionals must communicate in different ways in their careers. I mean, I've worked alongside my young son while virtually schooling, learning from him. Likewise, he was curious about what I was doing and what I've been managing. Finally, critical thinking played an even bigger role in the virtual classroom than it had previously simply because of their learning environment — from troubleshooting technical difficulties to learning how to interact with teachers in this new format.

Students returning to the classroom should still be able to use agile learning practices, all of which they have refined while adapting to online learning. These skills will continue to benefit them as they grow throughout their studies. This is an important idea to grasp; while we have all been through such change and disruption, children are more resilient than we may give them credit for, and these disruptions can be viewed positively in our children's learning and development.

Ozguler: *At PMI, you talk about the importance of power skills. How can these power skills seamlessly translate to students' education?*

Underhill: Power skills — empathy, communication, innovative mindset, and collaborative leadership — can be applied in and outside the classroom. Power skills aid in virtual learning because they promote problem-solving, decision-making, communication, self-management, and collaboration. Students can have more control over their success and personal growth and development by refining these power skills, which can directly result in more empathetic, communicative, and well-rounded professionals as they grow into their careers, whatever their path may be. Add in a for-purpose attitude and watch the magic kids create from their imaginations and bring those ideas to reality.

Ozguler: *What are some long-term benefits of youth learning project management skills at an early age?*

Underhill: There are numerous positive results of students learning project management skills early, including navigating their studies as their workload increases throughout their schooling and preparation for life beyond the classroom. The earlier youth acquire project management skills, the better they will be able to apply those skills to the various facets of their lives that benefit from proper project management within their personal and professional lives. It will help them streamline processes in time management, routines, and even navigating through social situations.

Ozguler: *How can school leaders and educators intentionally incorporate project management skills into their curriculum?*

Underhill: A simple measure to intentionally incorporate project management skills is to design lessons, activities, and assignments that activate these power skills in students — both at the individual level and in group settings. Teachers can adopt new and innovative ways to allow students to use problem-solving skills that prepare them for real-life situations, including group projects in which students must work toward a common goal or individual assignments that require planning from start to finish to experience the entirety of the project management journey.

Ozguler: *What is the Project Management Institute Educational Foundation (PMIEF)? What is its purpose?*

Underhill: PMIEF offers comprehensive services to youth-serving nonprofits to maximize their ability to transfer project management knowledge, skills, and competencies to the youth they serve. The goal is to help create partnerships with the nonprofit organizations that support and prepare young people for success by offering project management expertise, resources, and volunteers to aid them in their missions. PMIEF believes that when we teach the world's youth to apply project management skills in their lives, we unlock their potential and open doors to key life skills, including collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and more.

Ozguler: *What resources does PMIEF provide to teachers and those who work with and mentor young people?*

Underhill: PMIEF provides teachers with the tools to teach their students the necessary project management and power skills for success in and outside of the classroom. PMIEF provides no-cost project management learning resources to help students build 21st-century skills that they can carry in their studies and beyond. Specifically, Project Management Skills for Life® is a guide that introduces the basics of project management and tools and techniques to help develop skills to become a project manager who leads successful projects. The program shows the project manager and team how to create a

plan to identify the tasks needed to accomplish the scope of work, manage time efficiently, and communicate with other team members effectively.

Additionally, teachers, administrators, parents, and anyone who works with students can check out the [Project Management Toolkit for Teachers](#), a free, user-friendly resource that can help prepare students aged 12-18 to be college- and career-ready.

Ozguler: *How can project managers get involved as volunteers?*

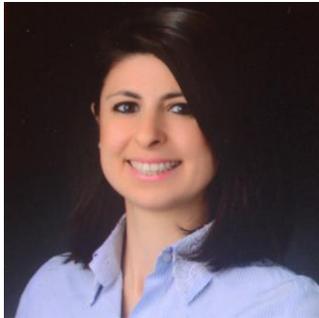
Underhill: Project managers can go to the PMIEF website under the quick links for [Project Managers](#) to find more information. There, you will view the liaison directory and contact your local PMIEF/PMI chapter to learn more about local activities and volunteer opportunities. There are also helpful resources to help you get started and support your volunteering efforts.

Ozguler: *Where can our readers visit to learn more about PMIEF?*

Underhill: You can learn more by visiting the [PMIEF website](#). You can also find our new [philanthropy page](#) to find inspirational stories that showcase the use of Project Management for Social Good®. There are quick links for youth-serving nonprofits, project managers, and PMI chapters, and liaisons to get involved.

Ozguler: Thank you for giving such useful information.

About the Interviewer



Ipek Sahra Ozguler

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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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