

Lessons from an Award-winning Enterprise PMO During a Global Pandemic

Interview with Heba Al Shehhi¹

Head of PMO
Dubai Municipality
Dubai, United Arab Emirates



Interviewed by Obi Omoregie

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Introduction to the interviewee

Heba Al Shehhi, Head of PMO at Dubai Municipality, is a highly committed leader with an extensive experience in the Government and Technology Sectors, and has proven abilities in PMO, portfolio and project management, business development, and strategy execution. Al Shehhi holds a Master's degree in Project Management from The British University - UAE, and is CAL, PMP, ACP, TOGAF, ITIL, and Business Agility Assessor Certified from TIBAI.

Heba began her career with Dubai Municipality in 2005 as a technical member in multiple major projects in the Systems Development Section and a member of the PMO at the IT

¹ How to cite this interview: Omoregie. (2021). Lessons from an Award-winning Enterprise PMO During a Global Pandemic: Interview with Heba Al Shehhi; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.

department. She served over 16 years in several professional and leadership roles ranging from heading the PMO Unit at the IT Department in 2009, Head of Application Design and Development Unit in 2011, Head of Application Development Section in 2016, Head of User Support Section in 2017 where she recorded a number of ground-breaking changes in the organization over the years through her mastery in enterprise architecture, IT service management, software development lifecycle and project management, user experience and design.

Throughout her professional career, Al Shehhi has received multiple awards in recognition of her successful leadership such as being member of the team that enabled DM to win the best Innovative entity in 2014, and 2nd Best Government Employee of the Year in the Technical Category in 2018 as part of Dubai Government Excellence Program.

In 2018, Heba lead the establishment of the Enterprise PMO at Dubai Municipality which was tailored for their wide and varied portfolio of businesses and in line with the best portfolio management practices where she managed to raise the organizational maturity significantly within a short period of time.

On the personal level, Heba lives a busy life as a wife, mother and entrepreneur. She volunteers at the Higher College of Technology in Dubai that reviews the curriculum every year to ensure it is in line with business demand, she is a certified personal development coach and guides many students in high school to choose the right major to study. Her hobbies are growing indoor plants and creating pieces of art.

Heba is also the recipient of the 2021 PMO of the Year award, awarded by PMO Global Alliance.

Interview

Q1. Tell us about the transition from a technical role which you played in, to a leadership role in projects, leading an enterprise PMO. How was that transition like?

Heba Al Shehhi: I think if I can go back in time, it would be about the wisdom of the people who selected me to be in a technical role and at the same time heading a PMO. I was lucky to have had head of departments who appreciated the work I did, who wanted me to go for a technical role and a managerial role, to have this balance of technical and leadership knowledge.

I started in 2005; from the second day I worked at Dubai municipality I was involved in major projects, as a team member learning in the design technical side of things. I was purely learning how project managers were working and then more projects were added and within a few months, a new PMO was established in the Systems Development

section, and I joined that team. After a few years an IT PMO was established, for which I was a member of the establishment team, and eventually I headed that PMO.

After that a new head of department suggested we have more senior management roles and I was the head of unit at that time, with major projects executed under my unit, the Application Design and Development unit.

Q2. On staying with DM (Dubai Municipality)?

Heba Al Shehhi: I have realized that it's not about salary, or status or anything; it's about finding your passion, the thing that you are very happy to work for every day. That is the only thing that mattered to me.... And of course working with and building my team (more about that later on).

Q3. Your PMO journey is one characterized by a structured mentorship program with challenging assignments and roles along the way which you thrived at. In the world of accidental Project and PMO leaders, what would you consider a pathway to a PMO Career?

Heba Al Shehhi: To start with, you have to be humble in the roles that you take on in Projects. You don't come into the world of project management as a beginner thinking I want to head this project; be humble, join the team, learn from everyone else, and then you can find your passion.

Your passion may not be in a project leadership role; it might stay in a technical side, you never know. The more you learn from one project to the other, the more you will be guided into PMO leadership. Because there are different kinds of PMO's, different complexities of projects, different project management styles, so you have to be willing to learn from this broad spectrum of experiences. You cannot do it without learning from others first.

Q4. When it Comes to Mentoring?

Heba Al Shehhi: In DM we have a learning culture through which mentorship and tutoring are provided to young graduates and new employees. This is something I have the patience for and I am willing to personally conduct. If we don't do it, how will they learn?

Q5. How was the DM PMO Setup?

Heba Al Shehhi: Our PMO was created from scratch; there wasn't an existing PMO with team members which I was assigned to lead. I had the advantage of selecting the

individual team members. The ability to hand pick my team reduced the resistance and enabled us to effectively manage change and work as one strong team.

Q6. Can you tell us about the PMO Model?

Heba Al Shehhi: Our PMO is an Enterprise PMO reporting to the Director General that follows the controlling model which fulfills the role as an enabler to support Portfolio, Program and Project management to deliver our PMO mandate. We focus on Project governance and control, Provide visibility on all Projects through centralized reporting to DM Leadership, Support strategic alignment of Projects, Facilitate decision making by Senior Leadership, and Standardize PM practice in the organization.

Q7. Tell me about your Team at the PMO. What is special about your team?

Heba Al Shehhi: I have 11 highly skilled team members in the PMO. They are autonomous, creative, highly performing, empathetic, empowered and professionally certified. From day one, I ensured every member understood that we worked as a team. I was not the leader, I was part of the team.

We govern a diverse portfolio of projects across DM, from IT, research, infrastructure, engineering as such; my team is Diverse in technical skillsets matching industry and enterprise requirements.

Q8. You talk about the Autonomy of your team. Tell me More?

Heba Al Shehhi: I don't like the limitation of ideas. I like to be creative, the ability to generate ideas and let people run with it. The same goes with my team; I do not like to limit them into specific boxes. Once you give them that freedom, they can be really innovative

The PMO must be adaptive and this comes by having business acumen and organizational awareness to tie work with business context and creating value.

Our team members are all certified project professionals, we have PMP®s, PgMP and a majority of the team CAL (Certified Agile Leadership) certified.

Q9. What were some of the challenges facing the PMO based on the Pandemic?

Heba Al Shehhi: With the COVID-19 outbreak, the strategic priorities shifted with a revised nation-wide government focus and new financial constraints. The PMO had to provide visibility on all Projects and Programs progress, achievements and challenges and facilitate proactive

decision making for Senior Leadership to reprioritize. Some projects were stopped, some paused, some adapted and some accelerated.

And the Winner is...



Q10. So why did DM enter in for the 2021 PMO of the Year Award? In 2020, Dubai Customs won the PMO Of the Year Award; was this like a challenge between Dubai Ministries to see who was the best?

Heba Al Shehhi: If you think about it, in Dubai, we believe in excellence. We want to be number 1 at all times. In the words of his highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, he said; “we have come a long way in our quest for excellence and the world has acknowledged that”. Our participation in the PMO Global Awards was driven by the fact that we wanted to acknowledge more and more our excellence in Dubai and our major achievements. You would notice that the ongoing Expo 2020 is a vivid example of this excellence we talk about.

Q11. What was the application Journey Like, Putting together the submission for this Contest?

Heba Al Shehhi: It was a beautiful journey. This wasn't just a PMO application, we collaborated with several departments in Dubai Municipality to make this a reality; we collaborated with knowledge and innovation department, with corporate and excellence department, with business leaders in different sectors and of course project managers.

Note: You can watch glimpse of the application by DM (Dubai Municipality), by clicking on the link below and forwarding to timestamp 17mins, 51 seconds.

<https://www.pmoga.world/awards>

Q12. And the Winner is, what was the reaction like?

Heba Al Shehhi: I was really excited! I couldn't believe it! We are grateful and honored for being the recipients for the 2021 World PMO of the year award at PMO Global Awards. We realize it is a collective and compounded effort from the PMO team and all delivery units in Dubai Municipality.

I can still see people on LinkedIn contact me about this win, and I'm very proud that the name of Dubai Municipality and Dubai is recognized on the global scene as Number 1. We currently have organizations contacting us to share best practices implemented here in DM, and they are amazed by the work we have done.

Q13. What about significant Changes?

Heba Al Shehhi: When I think back to the why we won, I consider the significant achievement we accomplished within 2 years; from nothing to a very mature enterprise PMO. This I believe is a major factor. Our PMO had a collective experience of over 60 years. Aside from that, we had a training program which ensured we increased the expertise of professionals through workshops, trainings that totaled over 400 in number.

We succeeded in creating an active community of PM practice to continuously learn and network, it includes 250 project managers and more than 200 project management practitioners, in collaboration with more than 40 external stakeholders. And we have significantly raised the overall organizational maturity in a short period of time.

Q14. If you could pinpoint one area of the PMO's work that you think is a best practice for adoption by other PMO's, what would it be?

Heba Al Shehhi: In DM we changed our focus from methodology-driven project execution to value-driven business outcomes and results, all while exercising transparency and applying adaptive governance framework. We also brought sustainable value to the organization through a set of practices:

1. Helping the Organization Identify the Right Long-Term Growth Opportunities
2. Enabling Internal Talent to Succeed
3. Continue to find New Opportunities to Tailor, Automate and Optimize the PPM Processes
4. Build a resilient PM community and raise the organizational maturity index.

Q15. So what is next for your PMO?

Heba Al Shehhi: So we have a major update, a new strategic plan for Dubai Municipality. We are participating in designing the new strategy of DM and we have a major update on our strategic KPI's, goals and portfolios. Once the strategic objectives change, there will be a strategic remapping of our portfolios.

In addition to this, we have plans to adopt next generation technologies; we want to implement more AI (Artificial Intelligence) aspects into our existing tools in order to make life easier for project participants. It can also enable us to deliver smart ways of working for our partners, project managers and team members.

We also have established a knowledge and innovation ecosystem that provides a standardized approach across the organization, in addition to building partnerships and collaboration with peer project teams in other government entities, international institutes and the private sectors.

Q16. Could you share an example of such partnerships?

Heba Al Shehhi: We have multiple partnerships coming up, for example we have already signed an agreement with the PMI UAE Chapter and we are looking forward to a fruitful collaboration with them.

Q17. Tell us about Other Future PMO impact within the Enterprise?

Heba Al Shehhi: Now that we have established the agile methods and published these to the Project managers in the technical teams, we are now focusing on agility at the Enterprise Level. I have found that many aspects of enterprise agility are related to the PMO and project management methods. As a PMO we will be getting involved in 2022 on major business agility aspects in Dubai municipality as a whole.

Q18. How does your PMO plan to enable enterprise adoption to these changes?

Heba Al Shehhi: It starts with leadership. By active engagement with the PM community and DM leadership (top-bottom and bottom-up approaches) being a servant leader is something everyone should embrace, once you start from leadership then it is easy for other employees to adjust their day-to-day practices. Despite enterprise constraints, there are methods through which you can increase flexibility in operations, enabling autonomy of decision making to be implemented.

Q19. Talking about Leadership and Autonomy, can you tell us about the system you have in place to ensure Project Leaders are Skilled to make the right decisions?

Heba Al Shehhi: We have a yearly training plan, assessment plan, and we have a communication plan. These kickoff with an assessment of everyone involved in projects to determine their skill level in a specific area. These surveys combined with the day-to-day interactions with Project managers (Many of which are accidental project managers) enable us determine skill gaps and then customize content to implement appropriate trainings.

Q20. On the Support provided by PMO members to Competency Development?

Heba Al Shehhi: The 11 team members in the PMO are distributed across functions in the 34 departments in Dubai Municipality to observe how ongoing projects are implemented by keeping in touch with the project managers and teams. Our partnership with PMI also enables us provide PDU's to trained employees, as well as assign employees to PMP® certification courses.

Q21. How do you engage your project stakeholders and the general community of Practice at Dubai Municipality?

Heba Al Shehhi: We perform this through our change management strategy. We have change champions who are positioned in every department handling projects. Through this network we have a system to test and receive prompt feedback on new developments before rolling out to the rest of the organization. We take their opinion on methodologies, publications (like the project management handbook), and other changes.

We also perform team building exercises with these change champions as well as enable them to provide their feedback on PMO concepts i.e. our project priority criteria.

Q22. What advantages have you seen from adopting Change Champions?

Heba Al Shehhi: Our strategy in engaging employees outside the PMO has increased buy in and support from stakeholders across the enterprise. We now have these champions as an “arm”, an extension of the PMO.

Q23. What is your Value Proposition?

Heba Al Shehhi: Today we are supporting DM in driving results on the Execution, Resource, Organization and Strategic layers, for example: we achieved 8.3% increase

in the strategic performance, 3% increase in projects/programs cost reduction, 3% increase in Investment Growth ratio, 95% In Customer Satisfaction index.

We shifted our focus from methodology-driven project execution to value-driven business results.

Q24. What is the most significant Value Add of your PMO?

Heba Al Shehhi: A major value add is in the adoption of an end-to-end project and portfolio management tool. Previously this was managed in excel and word documents, but now all approvals are on a single tool making it easy for us to link projects to strategic objectives and even operational KPIs.

Q25. What value add is associated with bridging the strategy execution gap?

Heba Al Shehhi: An additional value add is having a seamless alignment between strategy and projects. Everything is visible and the entire benefit realization cycle is easily implemented through the PMIS where projects get reviewed by the corporate excellence department, the business users and the implementing departments. Additionally, we have access to reporting capabilities on project performance and the delivery of benefits. This is a huge value add for Dubai Municipality.

Q26. Is there any other Value Add you want to share?

Heba Al Shehhi: The PMO provides an even more important value add, which lies in unifying the organization. We unified the way benefits are planned and measured, how employees manage projects, and the tools and methodologies used across the organization regardless of the department. This has resulted in an increased maturity level across Dubai Municipality.

Heba can be contacted on LinkedIn at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/hebaalshehhi/>

About the Interviewer



Obi Omoregie

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates



Obi Omoregie, MSc, PgMP®, PMP®, ACP®, IPMO-E, is an experienced PMO Leader and Program Manager, with more than a decade leading solution delivery in a diverse portfolio of organizations including the Nuclear Industry, Finance, Software and Manpower Services.

Graduating with a computer science degree from the prestigious Covenant University, Nigeria, he kicked off his career at Nigeria's Leading software house SystemSpecs before exploring opportunities within the UAE. Despite being accredited with multiple PMI® certifications such as certified Program Management Professional PgMP®, Project Management Professional® and an Agile certified Practitioner certificate ACP®, Obi maintains the need for individuals to develop and [pursue competence over earning certifications](#).

Obi currently Heads Project Management Competency development at the Middle-East's First Nuclear Power Plant, Nawah Energy Company, where he leads a multi-national team of certified project professionals in delivering competency-based project management development packages (trainings, mentoring, assessment, governance) that enable a culture of effective project and program delivery enterprise wide.

Obi is an active voice in providing thought leadership through his writings and public speaking sessions within the Project Management Community of Practice in the UAE and across the African continent where he leads a self-initiated coaching program in partnership with PMI® chapters.

When he is not engulfed in projects, you will find Obi in an outdoor physical activity as he frequently engages in hiking, cycling and snowboarding. He recently completed an 11hr, 309km endurance cycling ride across all 7 states in the UAE in a campaign to spread the message of physical fitness.

Obi Omoregie can be contacted at obiomoregie@gmail.com or via his website www.obiomoregie.com