

More than Juggling! Some Personal Insights on Managing Multiple Projects

Interview with Elizabeth Harrin, FAPM

Award-winning Author, Blogger, Speaker
Creator of *A Rebel's Guide to Project Management*
United Kingdom



Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

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Introduction to the interviewee

Elizabeth Harrin provides project management training and mentoring in-person and online, to individuals and companies. She is a Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) and was the youngest female Fellow at the time of her appointment.

Prior to becoming an independent practitioner, Elizabeth spent over 15 years in the corporate world, leading IT and business change projects across financial services and healthcare, including two based in Paris, France. She actively worked to engage stakeholders from across the business to ensure buy-in and support for change.

Elizabeth is an award-winning blogger and author of several books including *Managing Multiple Projects*, *Engaging Stakeholders on Projects*, *Shortcuts to Success: Project Management in the Real World*, *Customer-Centric Project Management* and others.

Besides mentoring, training and writing, Elizabeth speaks on the topics of stakeholder engagement, project management careers and productivity at events around the world

– often via interactive online sessions but also in person. She has spoken for the APM and PMI, and IPMA Young Crew and given guest lectures at universities in the UK, US and Belgium.

She also contributes to a variety of other initiatives including sitting on the advisory board for the RISE Being Lean and Seen programme at Liverpool John Moores University.

Read more and get in touch via Elizabeth's website: <https://rebelsguidetopm.com/>

Interview

Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. Your latest book is *Managing Multiple Projects*. Why have you written this book now? What is different now in managing multiple projects?

Elizabeth Harrin (Harrin): My lived experience and research shows that more people manage multiple projects than single projects. Yet, if you read project management books or attend a course, you'll learn about the end-to-end approaches for managing a single piece of work. That's good. We need that. But we also need a practical approach for layering project upon project. That's what I wanted to do with this book.

In 2019 I ran a six-month training and mentoring programme for project managers leading multiple projects that attracted 50 students from around the world. In 2021 I launched an online *Mastering Multiple Projects* course which had a first cohort of 81 students, and people continue to join.

This book has dropped out of my interest in this topic over the past few years, and is deepened by my understanding of the real-life situations project managers find themselves in. I wrote it for the people who have to juggle so many different initiatives that sometimes the workload feels overwhelming and who end up working evenings and weekends just to stay afloat. Because there is a better way.

Q2: What are the differences in managing multiple projects before Covid and in the post Covid era?

Harrin: The work is still the work. We are just doing it using different tools and we can't shake hands anymore. My project teams have been distributed for at least the past 13 years. We speak on the phone, we use software to communicate, we collaborate remotely.

What's different is the lack of informal opportunities to influence and network. You have to be more conscious about getting time with senior stakeholders; no more getting into

the office early to catch a director before she gets sucked into a day of meetings. That can make it harder to move some of the smaller items on your To Do list on, so it's even more important to be organised and have your personal work portfolio structured so you can make the most of people's time when you do get to talk to them.

I think the biggest challenge is building relationships with people. I put a lot of effort into getting to know the team, understanding their work preferences and communication preferences, and tailoring.

Being able to treat people as individuals is important because it gets us better results when time is short and stakeholders are distracted.

Another tip is to get comfortable on camera. Get a headset and a decent lighting system for your office. Switch off at night and find a way to transition from work to home because remote work can be all-consuming without the physical cues of the commute home.

Q3: What are the main challenges of managing multiple projects?

Harrin: In my corporate career, I went from managing one big project to managing several small (but according to my sponsors, equally important) projects as a result of returning to work part-time after maternity leave. I had to quickly learn skills to juggle competing priorities and manage expectations from board level down. It required a whole new way of thinking about my workload and engaging with the people around me to keep everything moving forward – because even after I had prioritised my work, I was still expected to show some kind of progress on all my projects, even the ones at the bottom of the list.

The main challenges of managing multiple projects are juggling stakeholder expectations (because they all expect their projects to be the most important), managing your own time, making sure project work doesn't get overlooked, understanding and managing dependencies between your projects and other projects, and switching to using portfolio management principles to streamline the way you work on projects to save time, minimise stakeholder overwhelm and just get more things done.

Q4: What are the key competencies of a project manager to be able to manage multiple projects? Can they be learned?

Harrin: There's no magic wand to being able to manage multiple projects, objectives and deadlines. First, you need solid project management skills so you can do the job of a project manager with ease. In other words, you understand the basics of project management and can apply them efficiently. You don't want to have to keep looking up how to create a Gantt chart or wondering what process or form to use for the next part of your work. Being comfortable at the basics of managing a project is a pre-requisite.

I would say one of the main competencies is stakeholder engagement, or stakeholder enablement as I've heard it called recently and that's a term I'm going to adopt myself. Projects are done through people. You need people to support you on your projects, and if you've got more than one on the go at any time, there is normally a point where you have to make trade-offs. Trade-offs, unforeseeable issues and problems are easier to manage if you have good relationships with your colleagues, project sponsors and leaders.

If they trust you to get the job done, and they trust you when you say there's an issue, the whole juggling act of keeping all your balls in the air becomes easier. They still might give you a hard time, but underneath it all, they know you're approaching the challenges with good faith and that you aren't being deliberately difficult to cover something up. Transparency matters!

If you've got good stakeholder engagement and positive relationships at work, you end up with more input to projects and, ultimately, better quality results. You get more commitment to the deliverables. You get people paying more attention to your projects and you get people doing what they need to do, which helps everything keep moving so projects don't get stuck.

More engagement means more people follow through on their tasks and they also commit to the process. It's one thing to say 'we really want this project'. It's another thing to say 'we really want this project and we'll support in delivering it through project management best practice processes.'

There are other competencies, but I'd start with that one. And yes, they can be learned!

Q5: You wrote many books about project management. I'm going to ask you a provocative question; With the development of courses, blogs, social media, are books about project management needed? In what ways?

Harrin: I think books are still valuable, although I have noticed that books go out of date. My *Collaboration Tools* book, for example, isn't tool-specific but the concepts discussed in there could do with a pandemic update.

However, the good thing about books is that you can bring a lot more detail and explanation to a topic. It's a joy to have 60,000 words to be able to fully flesh out a concept, with the theory, practical tips, case studies, tools and everything the reader needs in order to be able to do something different at work the next day. You don't get that with an 800-word article or a webinar.

Q6: You studied English literature at university and now you are a recognised world wide project manager. How does it happen?

Harrin: I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left university so I joined a graduate training scheme that allowed me to test a number of different areas. I discovered a department called Business Re-engineering which is basically project management and

process improvement. It felt like I had found something I could really enjoy. It was all about lists, making changes, organising people, getting things done. I had no idea prior to that that I could find a job that would play to my natural strengths.

I love the variety of the work and the fact that projects let you see different areas of the business so you really understand how the whole organization works.

In terms of being 'recognised', that's only because I've been blogging for over 15 years. Writing my first book prompted me to start blogging, and from there I got invited to do book reviews, speak at conferences and report on events, all of which helped me build a network of project professionals around the world. I've met some amazing project leaders.

Q7: What are your recommendations to shift to a project management career?

Harrin: I think most jobs these days have aspects of project management. For example, leading teams, getting involved in corporate initiatives, scheduling, time and task management, resource planning, managing a budget... they are all good project management skills. That makes the shift to project management relatively straightforward for many professionals. Depending on your past experience, you might be able to bring more project work into your current role before stepping into a formal project management role.

Many of the project managers I speak to have drifted into a project role by being the only person in the team who wants to do it and who has shown an aptitude for doing it. You've got the option to work within your current role to bring more project management into it, or to apply for another role with your current skills.

I believe that a lot of what we do – in and out of work – is project-based, so look for examples where you can evidence that you have used the key skills that project managers use and talk about those with hiring managers.

Q8: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Harrin: Confidence is key to being able to manage your career and your workload, but in a profession that largely expects you to be proactive and get on with things, many of the project managers I mentor worry that they aren't doing the work 'right'. Forget about doing it 'right' and focus on the outcomes and deliverables. Is work getting done? Are your projects closer to delivering successfully? That can help you feel more confident.

I think bringing confidence to the job is a mindset challenge. It's easy to wake up and say 'today, I'm going to be really confident'. Then you go into work and you're actually not more confident than usual! The real world kicks in, someone says something, and you are back to your old working patterns.

In my experience, it helps to look at the things that make you feel more confident. These will support you in actually *being* more confident. It might be something small like dressing professionally, or doing vocal exercises before work. It might be having a deep knowledge of the statistics you are presenting so no one can ask you a question you can't answer. Of course, confidence develops with time and experience, but it's also a product of lots of small things.

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France



Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange S.A.](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in [projectmanagement.com](#) as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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