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# Advancing Project Management in Rebuilding American Infrastructure

## Interview with Gary Scharf <sup>1</sup>

Leader, North America Client Engagement  
Project Management Institute (PMI)



## Interviewed by Ipek Sahra Ozguler

International Correspondent, PM World Journal  
Istanbul, Turkey

### Introduction to the interviewee

**Gary Scharf** serves as Leader, North American Client Engagement at the Project Management Institute (PMI). In this role, Gary is responsible for leading the Client Engagement team, growing PMI's impact in the North American region through organizational relationships, education, and sales.

Prior to this role, Gary has served as a Client Engagement Leader for the North America region since joining PMI in April 2021. Prior to joining PMI, Gary served in various business development and sales leadership positions at IT services firms, including Eliassen Group, where he launched and helped build an agile transformation practice.

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## Interview

**Ipek Sahra Ozguler (Ozguler):** *Thank you for accepting the interview invitation of PMWJ. Please introduce yourself to the PMWJ readers.*

**Gary Scharf (Scharf):** I lead the North American Client Engagement Team at Project Management Institute (PMI). My team connects with various corporate and governmental organizations to identify how PMI's offerings and community can support their individual growth journey. We develop deep relationships with each organization, absorb their unique needs, and offer valuable solutions to help drive success. Prior to joining PMI in 2021, I served in several senior business development and sales leadership roles in the IT services sector.

**Ozguler:** *The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was signed into law by President Joe Biden on November 15, 2021. What is the purpose of this law?*

**Scharf:** The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was signed into law as a large-scale investment to improve our country's infrastructure — everything from bridges and roads to transportation. IIJA, or sometimes referred to as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, introduces \$550 billion of new funding to advance various infrastructure projects across the nation. Projects that may have been believed impossible to execute due to lack of funding or inter-state coordination are now possible because of IIJA. And that's where PMI comes in — while we may not be an expert in everything infrastructure, we are the expert in projects and getting things done. I see us playing a crucial role in ensuring organizations have the skilled talent needed to carry out these projects.

**Ozguler:** *Why did the Project Management Institute (PMI) conduct an online survey about IIJA? What are the key findings from the survey?*

**Scharf:** To further explore the opportunity provided by the IIJA investment, PMI launched a survey at the end of 2022 to understand how the state of the U.S. infrastructure affects Americans' everyday lives, and their level of optimism about the success of these imminent infrastructure projects. The survey results provide interesting findings, offering insights for professionals involved with, or interested in, infrastructure projects.

One callout from the survey findings was that younger generations of Americans tend to express greater confidence in infrastructure improvements in their communities, and they value soft infrastructure — like internet access and school systems — more so than older generations.

Keeping a pulse on the next generation and their priorities is crucial. Our survey confirmed that the IIJA investment is not only delivering much needed updates to our infrastructure systems, but also building the cities and systems in which subsequent

generations will live and work, an exciting proposition and critically important work. More than half of the younger demographics surveyed reported the quality of infrastructure systems play a factor in their decision on where to live, meaning project managers involved in infrastructure projects will have a major impact on the future of American cities and regions.

Professionals who find these projects and the potential impact exciting can affect change themselves by beginning their own project management journey. And fortunately, there are a variety of opportunities to get started, from taking PMI's free, 45-minute introductory [Kickoff](#) course to earning a [Certified Associate in Project Management \(CAPM\)®](#)—a widely regarded certification for new project managers. I would also encourage interested professionals to seek out relevant associations or [memberships](#) where you can find ways to make an impact.

**Ozguler:** *Roads and bridges top the list of Americans' infrastructure concern. Could you please give us more information?*

**Scharf:** While the findings showed generational differences on infrastructure priorities, hard infrastructure, including roads and bridges, is top-of-mind for all Americans when it comes to systems requiring improvement, across generations.

And this makes sense—the investment in our country's transportation systems is long overdue. There just have not been many infrastructure improvement projects in the U.S. in the last 40 to 50 years. So, the surge of these projects, and ensuring we have available, trained, and certified talent to steward these public projects safely, economically, and sustainably, is crucial—and Americans across the board recognize it, as shown by our survey.

For the professionals and organizations responsible for these projects, finding the necessary talent, including certified project managers holding a [Project Management Professional \(PMP\)® certification](#) to be at the helm, is essential. Organizations like PMI can help those in the public and private sectors develop the skilled labor required to successfully complete these projects.

For example, the [Construction Professional in Built Environment Projects \(PMI-CP\)™](#) was created to help sharpen and develop project skills for a built environment. When project management principles are combined with the built industry's best practices and ways of working, professionals tasked with delivering infrastructure improvements are best equipped to safeguard the taxpayer's investment and deliver safe and sustainable project results.

**Ozguler:** *As it is stated in the survey, climate change protection is coming in second at 52%. Please elaborate on this.*

**Scharf:** Research conducted by my organization shows only one-third of projects deliver improvements to the environment, and two in five organizations report major barriers to improving social impact. With the rapid acceleration of climate change, it is critical that any infrastructure project is both sustainable and improves current systems to protect against effects of climate change. Our survey shows Americans agree, listing climate change protections only second to hard infrastructure.

Project professionals are in a unique position to integrate sustainability practices into infrastructure projects, like building resource and emissions management into ways of working to mitigate the environmental impact of projects.

Infrastructure improvements, especially climate change protections, are long-term investment objectives. Project professionals, well-versed in stakeholder and resource management, are best equipped to help leaders translate commitments into action and implement critical climate change protections to protect our infrastructure systems and communities.

**Ozguler:** *Based on the survey, who is responsible for infrastructure improvements?*

**Scharf:** The majority of Americans view state and local governments as responsible for infrastructure improvements, but only 37% of adults are confident in the government's abilities to perform infrastructure improvements in their community.

We know from the 2016 Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act (PMIAA) that the federal government recognizes the value of project professionals in enhancing outcomes and reducing wasteful spending. PMIAA requires federal agencies to adopt project and program management standards and strengthen the federal project management workforce. However, it's important to note, while U.S. law requires federal agencies to use best practices in project and program management, those requirements do not apply to many federally funded projects undertaken by contractors, state agencies, local governments, and others on behalf of the federal government.

To ensure taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely and these vital projects are delivered on time and within budget, state-level project and program managers engaged in new infrastructure initiatives should also be certified under an ANSI-accredited standard like the PMP®.

**Ozguler:** *Thank you for sharing such valuable information with us.*

## About the Interviewer



### **Ipek Sahra Ozguler**

Istanbul, Turkey



**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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