

*Healthcare and Project Management*¹

Healthcare Projects in a Global Perspective (Part I)²

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Abstract

The core need of project and program management is creating and delivering value for its customers. With the rapid growth of information technology and access to the global networks of resources, organizations rapidly moved towards a decentralized model of working with dispersed teams. The acceleration lent varied advantages to the organizations in the form of the availability of skilled resources from various geographical regions, 24*7 availability, and lower costs to maintain a competitive advantage. However, the acceleration also created challenges working across varied locations, time zones, and socio-economic ecosystems. The healthcare industry has followed this trajectory, from primary health set up at a rural level to global operations of a multi-national healthcare corporation.

A few examples of global healthcare management include operations of international governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and disease management operations (e.g., a global polio eradication program, a global tuberculosis program, etc.), a more recently executed program on Covid-19 vaccination, and similar. These programs are conceived, planned, managed, and monitored on a global scale with numerous stakeholders involved. Projects such as mergers & acquisitions, healthcare outsourcing, healthcare disaster relief management, information technology enablement, knowledge management (KM), program and portfolio management, and more have helped scale up operations globally.

This article, the first of the two parts, discusses a few key concepts of global project management in healthcare.

Key terms: Global project management; project management framework; PMO, mergers & acquisitions; healthcare outsourcing; volunteering

¹ Editor's note: This series of articles about project management in healthcare is by Dr. Deepa Bhide, a practicing pediatrician with additional experience in information technology and project management. She has recently experienced healthcare from a patient's perspective while recovering from a broken ankle. In this series, Dr. Bhide reflects on programs, projects and project management in all aspects of healthcare from industry, provider and human patient perspectives. Learn more about Dr. Bhide in her author profile at the end of this article.

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Author: Hello, Mary. How are you today? How is your job going on?

Mary*: I am good. Thank you! I am enjoying my work. I am excited to see the direct application of learnings from our discussions and especially the last one on project management approaches. The discussion on the topic has helped me better understand the principle of tailoring a project methodology to suit the project's needs.

Author: That is good to know. Didn't we want to discuss global project management in today's session?

Mary: Yes, that is on my mind. Recently, in our team meeting, we had an exciting discussion on how project management plays a pivotal role in the successful execution of some of the world's most significant, most complex, and long-term projects, such as building large dams and airports and even projects related to the space program headed by National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Healthcare has a broad spectrum of operations, from a singular physician-patient interaction to managing international projects related to the environment, health, food, shelter, human rights, education, etc. I was wondering how project management supports global healthcare. I am sure the trajectory from a project in a localized environment to a project around global healthcare is not straightforward.

Author: As we discuss global project management, I request you to recall our discussions on our earlier conversations around nuances of healthcare as an industry¹, the universe of projects², understanding and managing shortages in healthcare³, ethical considerations in healthcare⁴, patient care as a project⁵, and the different project management (PM) approaches⁶. This will help you connect the various dots in this puzzle.

In simple terms, global project or program management is the application of a project management framework for international projects where project teams are scattered worldwide, creating and delivering value. These projects are global, concerted, and integrated efforts towards a single goal involving stakeholders (people and organizations) from various disciplines, geographies, and cultures. The execution of global healthcare goals is an example of a global healthcare project. For example, 191 UN Member States agreed to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which comprised 17 goals with about 169 targets. SDG:3, Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being, is dedicated to health with 13 targets. More details on SDGs are available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>.

Other examples of global healthcare projects are developing and manufacturing Covid-19 vaccines, Global Health Initiatives (GHIs) for AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, immunizations, maternal and child health, emerging diseases, research partnerships for drug manufacturing (the pharmaceutical industry), international humanitarian aid initiatives such as Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with worldwide operations, etc.

Mary: Global project management has been around for a while now. What are the benefits and challenges of such global projects in the healthcare industry?

Author: Global projects are a type of novel organizational structure. Boosting productivity and efficiency, promoting innovation, facilitating research and development, expanding operations and portfolio, fostering learning and development, entering new markets, and gaining cost savings are benefits of global projects. In addition, these projects spur collaboration to forge partnerships.

Mary: What are the different attributes of the global healthcare ecosystem?

Author: I like to view the global healthcare ecosystem with a patient in the center surrounded by these components.

1. Timely, equitable access to high-quality, culturally appropriate, and affordable healthcare (ambulant and remote) to the patient's required level.
2. Robust public health infrastructure to deal with healthcare emergencies and disasters. Efficient management of issues such as migrant or refugee health.
3. Seamless supply chains to prevent any shortages of human or non-human healthcare resources.
4. Sound practical knowledge of ethics in healthcare and good ethical handling of patient care situations
5. A team culture of approachability, innovation, collaboration, and communication. Leverage individual as well as collective expertise.
6. A well-rounded, globally recognized/accredited, and structured professional school (e.g., medical and nursing schools, etc.) curriculum tailored to meet the needs of regional challenges. Evidence-based medicine to promote knowledge sharing/learning culture within healthcare teams and all settings.
7. Integration of global health IT as a communication and data management backbone. A platform to make the latest updates in medical science timely and easily accessible to the healthcare fraternity. Accurate, aggregated, quantified, and analyzed data to draw appropriate actionable conclusions for healthcare performance.
8. Partnerships with global initiatives such as World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as not-for-profit organizations, to foster a healthy community with preventive, curative, palliative, rehabilitative, and health promotion services. Productive value-based partnerships between the pharmaceutical industry, medical device industry, and healthcare to build a better future together.

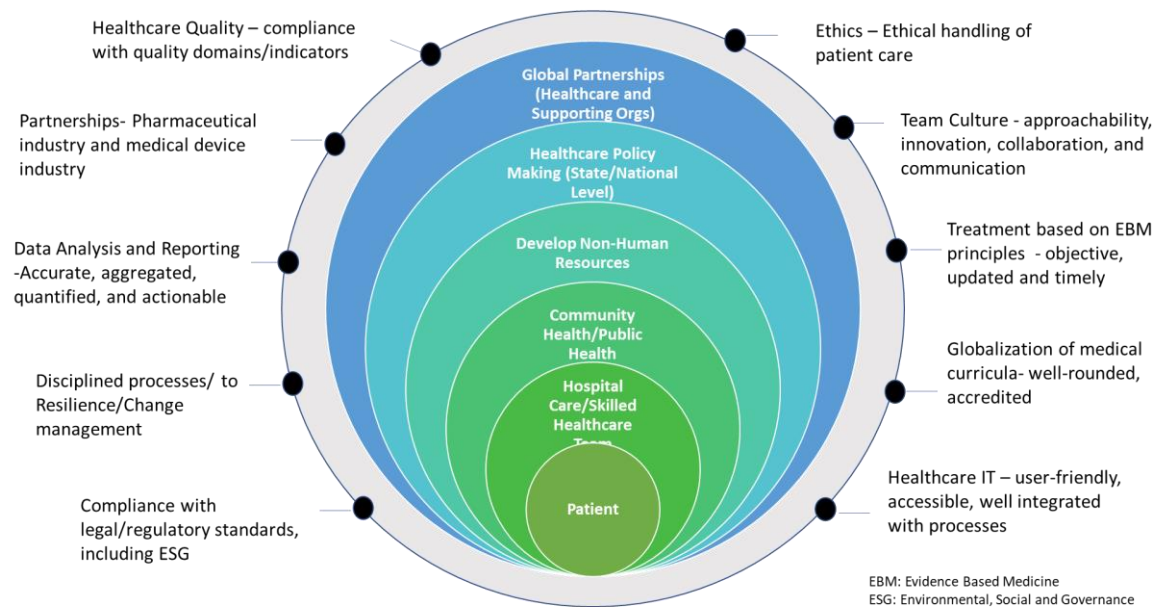


Fig 1: A conceptual representation of a global healthcare PMO ecosystem

Mary: Does global healthcare project management deal with all these attributes? What are the challenges in managing global healthcare projects?

Author: Global PM considers all these attributes to plan, execute, and manage projects. The weightage of each can vary around changing economic, geographic, legal, societal, and cultural components. Global projects have their share of challenges too. For example, increased complexity due to varied locations, time zones, cultures, communication preferences, and so on, risks related to regulatory and legal compliances, working across socio-economic influences, information security issues with huge liabilities about data privacy and confidentiality breaches, maintaining quality standards, etc., are some challenges related to global projects. Continued motivation, team engagement, and concerted decision-making are challenges of virtual/dispersed teams.

From a healthcare standpoint, I see ethical considerations, communication, collaboration, regulatory challenges related to procurement, deglobalization impacting the supply chain of essential medical supplies, cost implications, patient data privacy, and confidentiality challenges critical to focus on.

Mary: That is quite a long list. I would like to know how these challenges are addressed.

Author: Most certainly. In some parts, we have discussed the relevance of these challenges in healthcare projects. What makes these challenges “global” is their expanse and the impact they can potentially have on healthcare projects. For example, during drug shortages faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, deglobalization proved to be an impediment, and healthcare had to make quick and timely changes to ensure the supply chain of essential commodities was maintained.

Mary: These challenges are such discrete pieces. How can we view Project Management Office (PMO) in such situations?

Author: A 2013 PMI's Pulse of the Profession report⁷ talks about the different PMO frameworks to formalize the roles and responsibilities of PMOs and leverage them to achieve business success. The frameworks mentioned in the report are as follows.

1. Organizational Unit PMO/Business Unit PMO/Divisional PMO/Departmental PMO
2. Project-Specific PMO/Project Office/Program Office
3. Project Support/Services/Controls Office or PMO
4. Enterprise/Organization-wide/Strategic/Corporate/Portfolio/Global PMO
5. Center of Excellence/Center of Competency

While discussing the details of each of these frameworks is out of the scope of this discussion, I would consider #4 (Global PMO) appropriate from a global project management perspective. This is the highest-level PMO that works towards strategy alignment and benefits realization of the organization. Organizations continually focus on organizing themselves in novel ways to deliver real value to their clients. When the traditional and existing frameworks do not support the changing needs of project delivery, new delivery models, concepts, and working methods need to evolve.

An essential assumption for ideal healthcare is a perfect society in which the system would operate. That is critical to address as a pre-requisite. With the perpetual changes in the system, we may never get to the aspirational state and need to accept reality.

Using a program management framework, I see the role of global organizations working directly or indirectly for healthcare needs, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), United Nation Development Program (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and similar. I also see the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private voluntary organizations (PVOs), such as Project Hope, Oxfam, etc., as well as Healthcare financing organizations, such as the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), etc. A consortium of these global bodies can be tasked to evaluate the existing state of global healthcare and the need for changes in policies at an international and national level. Collaboration between these agencies can help create a stable fabric of a global healthcare system that is resilient, concerned, and nimble, with quick response times to changes and address challenges. With increasing cross-border movements, one should also consider the varied patient ecosystems, such as the premises, cultures, health literacy, economic disparities, etc. With emerging and re-emerging infections amongst migrant populations, the infectious disease landscape of the world has transformed dramatically. Medical tourism and growing patient empowerment have also created a healthcare consumerism movement.

Mary: It is a “world in motion,” right? From what I note, the consortium of these organizations needs to have the proper governance. How does the UN or other organizations help with the specific healthcare challenges we discussed earlier?

Author: In the face of growing demands, limited budgets, an uncertain disease landscape (the recent Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted the healthcare system across the globe and highlighted the need for a resilient healthcare system with assured critical care and dependable supply chain), and flux, there is a growing need for addressing inefficiencies and quality issues in healthcare delivery.

United Nations and other global organizations are essential in forming a consortium and ensuring encouraging and supporting actions within healthcare facilities. One of the ways to do this is by creating standards for the healthcare industry. The development of standards can serve multiple purposes. They help establish a minimum level of performance, consistency, and uniformity in care delivery across healthcare entities and set the right expectations of various stakeholders in the patient care process. Healthcare standards organizations (private-sector or government) hold healthcare organizations accountable for delivering quality-driven patient care. The authorities mandate the standards with strict penalties in cases of violation of the guidelines. A few regulatory standards are as follows.

- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the safe use of drugs and medical devices
- Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) of 1970 for healthful employment in places of employment
- Joint Commission International (JCI), along with the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) for quality standards endorsing healthcare quality and safety
- Healthcare Financing Administration (HCFA) standards for payment policies and conditions of participation and contracting for the healthcare bodies.

In the case of the United States, a few regulatory standards are as follows. Each country has its standards. For example, in India, the National Accreditation Body for Hospitals (NABH) is an authority for hospital accreditation.

- American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) for professional and educational standards for the evaluation and certification of physician specialists
- American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) for nursing care standards
- American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) as the accrediting body for pharmacy residency and technician training programs

As you would have noted, these (and more) bodies that span varied stakeholder groups help set and monitor minimum necessary standards of care at all levels (e.g., individual, community, national, global, etc.).

Mary: That is an impressive list. We talked about the global consortium and its responsibilities. What is the role of mergers and acquisitions?

Author: Mergers and acquisitions involve developing a solid strategic vision, setting explicit financial and non-financial goals, aligning executive and functional leadership, integrating cultures and the new entity into the organization, and leveraging project management and integration best practices—they increase the potential for every transaction to have valuable outcomes. US-based Intermountain Healthcare⁹ signed a deal to merge with SCL Health in Colorado to form a new unified health system with a chain of hospitals and clinics. Apollo Health¹⁰ and Lifestyle Ltd. acquired Nova Specialty Hospitals in India to solidify its offerings and expand in new cities. From a PM perspective, change management, governance, and risk management are critical in any M&A. M&As at a global level support management of global healthcare challenges.

Mary: I am sure M&A will continue to evolve to achieve a win-win situation for all.

Author: Healthcare outsourcing is another one to discuss. When I started my professional career, I was unaware that healthcare services could be outsourced. I thought, being a patient-centric industry, what could be outsourced? But as the outsourcing industry made strides, I saw the benefits of outsourcing. Support functions such as patient scheduling, revenue cycle management (includes the cash cow: billing and coding services), healthcare IT development/maintenance, legal services, compliance, and regulatory support services (e.g., Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)) continue to be the favorite of the outsourcing industry. I also see the benefits of outsourcing knowledge services such as market analysis, clinical documentation, etc. Over the last two decades, these services have attained market maturity. Maintaining focus on core patient care with improved patient experience, access to a skilled workforce, thereby improving efficiencies, expanded portfolio of services and offerings, and reduced infrastructure, workforce, and training (education, software) costs; reduced administrative overheads, etc. are a few additional benefits over and above the generic benefits of the outsourcing industry.

Mary: To reap the benefits of outsourcing, one must be careful about what can be outsourced. But given the uniqueness of the healthcare industry, are there any specific points to be aware of?

Author: Working with the healthcare professional collaboratively is essential for this engine to work well. Physicians and their teams can assist in the complex thinking processes, adding their learnings to the knowledge base.

Mary: Yes, I agree. For the global PM to work, collaboration must be solid and seamless among stakeholders, units, and processes. Can you throw some light on what exactly collaboration means to healthcare project management?

Author: That is a good question. Good collaboration needs commitment and engagement, not just process or compliance to a checklist item. For example, the focus of a topic such as the efficacy and efficiency of vaccination programs may vary from global (high-level vision) to national levels (providing services to the population). Another example is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) we discussed earlier. While the United Nations has a high-level mission, for the successful execution of these goals, the objective needs to be percolated at the national, state, and community levels and aligned with their agenda. This requires multiple, diverse, inter- and cross-cultural teams with different viewpoints. Project managers are central to creating cultural fluency among groups with diverse perspectives. Effective communication, empathy, and respect for others are vital for global collaborating teams. Leveraging digital communication tools and means of knowledge transfer, synchronous vs. asynchronous communications, is a must-have for global collaboration. Knowledge sharing, cultural fluency, and gaining new skills form another vital dimension of collaboration.

Mary: I agree. For project management on a global scale, different perspectives add value. However, too many varied perspectives can lead to too many options and create confusion. Decision-making at a global scale is even more complex and even more so if they impact the health and well-being of yourself, those around you, and your community. How does one approach such decision-making?

Author: I agree with you. Decision-making in healthcare is complex but also needs to be quick. I see factors such as engagement-centeredness, ethical backing, AI-based decision models, knowledge management, existing micro- and macro-influencers of decision-making, and so on that influence decisions. But most importantly, a composite vision focusing on patient outcomes should form the fulcrum of any decision-making.

Mary: I can see your viewpoint. Decisions at any scale of projects can be difficult. But as project managers, we need to decide for sure! Regarding healthcare emergencies, what is the role of volunteers in global healthcare? Is it limited only to disaster relief management, such as in the recent earthquake, or times of strife, such as terrorist attacks or war? The recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria has devastated the region and shaken the world. This emergency needs urgent healthcare response at all levels, from a single individual to a consortium of global organizations to support the ongoing disaster relief efforts.

Author: You bring up a good point. Volunteering in healthcare starts at a patient level, where those around them volunteer to assist the patient in delivering appropriate treatment. Volunteering can help build a sustainable healthcare community at a local, national, or global level as well as scale up the capacity of the local healthcare system. Training and education, IT enablement, and provision of food, medications, and essential

life-support form the focus of their service provision. The volunteers generally work for reputed national or international not-for-profit agencies (e.g., Global Health Volunteers, Volunteer Global Health, United Planet, International Healthcare Volunteers¹¹, and more) and partner with local organizations and grassroots programs. The volunteering opportunity could be a temporary/short-term stint or a long-term/permanent (for example, medical rehabilitation for people with disabilities or those with chronic diseases).

Mary: Wow! This is so exciting. For a travel buff like me, along with volunteering, it would also allow me to explore the region. Working on global projects is viewed as a matter of prestige as it creates a chance to impact a global scale positively. What would be a step-wise approach for those project managers aspiring to work on international healthcare projects?

Author: That is true. For a project manager to ascend to a global role, they need to assess his existing skill set and plan to add new relevant and required skills. Other than the knowledge of the PM framework, the project managers of international/global projects must possess knowledge of global ways of working, people management, project and program management, approach to risk management, managing costs, knowledge of regulatory and compliance standards, communications, etc. Some requirements include core clinical knowledge to have a big-picture vision, people management and soft skills, cultural fluency, and the ability to leverage IT. The ability to think out of the box, take risks, and display collaborative leadership with complex and critical-thinking skills are also important.

Mary: That is good to know. Global project management is a vast topic, and I am sure more entities fit into this. I would like to learn more about these entities.

Author: Absolutely. Technology enablement of healthcare, knowledge management, healthcare emergencies and disaster relief management, and medical education are related concepts. Let us continue with this global project management story next week. But before we part for today, I wanted to ensure you understood the expanse of global healthcare projects and some of its attributes.

Mary: Oh, sure! This has been helpful so far, and I look forward to our conversation next week. Thank you so much!

Conclusion

Global healthcare is a portfolio with component projects, programs, and activities. It envisages the realization of clinical, psychological, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial health. There needs to be tight coordination between multiple entities that directly or indirectly impact these health types. Changes in consumer preference, digital health, including the rapidly growing AI-enabled technologies, integration of life sciences and healthcare, globalization policies related to healthcare, public health, availability of healthcare workforce and their training, healthcare delivery models including public health, and clinical leadership are well poised to shape the future of healthcare.

To ensure alignment with the core vision and agenda for reforming healthcare globally, the projects and programs must be managed consistently and with discipline, taking care of the complex inter-dependencies. There is a need to be agile and future-ready to address yet unknown healthcare challenges with more significant and smoother coordination at all levels of patient care. Change management will be vital in leading the next generation of healthcare organizations.

Project managers aspiring for global project management must acquire new and relevant skills for such projects to drive success and learn from these situations.

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11. PMBOK® Guide – Seventh Edition

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Glossary

ABMS: American Board of Medical Specialties

AI: Artificial Intelligence

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ANCC: American Nurses Credentialing Center

ASHP: American Society of Health-System Pharmacists

CDC: Centers for Disease Control

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

EPMO: Enterprise Project Management Office

FDA: Food and Drug Administration

GHI: Global Health Initiatives

HCFA: Healthcare Financing Administration

HIPAA: Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act

IHCV: International Healthcare Volunteers

IMF: International Monetary Fund

IOM: Institute of Medicine

IT: Information Technology

JCI: Joint Commission International

KM: Knowledge Management

M&A: Mergers and Acquisitions

NASA: National Aeronautics and Space Administration

NCQA: National Committee for Quality Assurance

NGO: Non-governmental Organizations

OSHA: Occupational Safety and Health Act

PHI: Protected Health Information

PM: Project Management

PMBOK®: Project Management Body of Knowledge

PMI: Project Management Institute

PVO: Private Voluntary Organizations

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UN: United Nations

UNDP: United Nations Development Program

WB: World Bank

WHO: World Health Organization

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About the Author



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Dr. Deepa Bhide, MBBS, DCH, PMP, has over 20 years of professional experience where she has blended medical practice and research with IT and Project Management. She juggles consulting, training, and operations and is proficient in clinical medicine, project management, and healthcare information technology. Starting her career as a medical practitioner, she has worked with varied organizations before her current stint as director and clinical expert for Inventurus Knowledge Solutions.

Deepa's growing interest and work in these areas, born from her day-to-day patient interactions, helped her view Project Management as a backbone of progressive healthcare. Her paper on "Patient Care - A Project Management Perspective" has received global recognition and acclaim. With a physician background as a solid foundation to leverage IT/PM skills and knowledge, Deepa has blended her broad-based experience and learnings to present a unified, holistic, and wholesome view of Project Management and Healthcare, a cross-domain confluence. Through various webinars, events, talks, and writings across platforms, Deepa has been an evangelist in championing global project management during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Gold medalist from Osmania University for standing First in the MBBS course, she pursued her DCH in Pediatrics and Child health. Deepa has served various roles in local and global Project Management Institute (PMI) regions. She remains actively engaged with PMI and has been a participant and speaker for various national and global meetings and online events.

Deepa lives in Hyderabad, India, and loves traveling, singing, and experimenting with global cuisine. She can be contacted at deepa.bhide@gmail.com.