

Project managers should learn and creatively use various ways of managing over a project life cycle

Interview with Professor Shankar Sankaran, PhD

Fellow of Engineers Australia
Professor of Organisational Project Management
School of the Built Environment
University of Technology Sydney
Sydney, Australia



Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Paris, France

Introduction to the interviewee

Shankar Sankaran – PhD MEng PMP CEng, Fellow Engineers Australia (FIEAust), Life Senior Member Institution of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). Shankar is a Professor of Organisational Project Management at the School of the Built Environment in the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). He joined academia after several years working in industry as a project manager and technical director.

Shankar's research spans organisational project management, systems thinking, sociotechnical systems, project leadership and governance, and participatory research. He has supervised 50 doctoral students to completion and is supervising seven more.

Shankar has won awards in project management with Ralf Müller and Nathalie Drouin, including PMI's Research Achievement Award in 2022; the International

Project Management Association Research Award in 2021; the PMI David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award in 2021; and Walter Lipke Award in 2019.

He has been involved in editing/writing 15 books, 47 book chapters, and 115 refereed articles in journals, has presented 90 conference papers, published nine reports and worked on 13 guest editorials in peer-reviewed journals. His Google Scholar profile can be found at

<https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=UZSbLncAAAAJ&hl=en>.

With an h-index of 42 and over 9,400 citations, he is ranked 37th among project management scholars worldwide over the past five years by ScholarGPS®.

He is an Associate Editor of the *Project Management Journal* and is on the editorial boards of *International Journal of Project Management*, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *Project Leadership and Society (Strategic Board)* and *PM World Journal (Hon Academic Advisor)*.

Shankar was a member of the Global Accreditation Centre of the Project Management Institute's board (2018-2024) and its Chair in 2021-22. He still volunteers for PMI On-site Visit Teams for GAC accreditation. He is a Past President of the International Society for the Systems Sciences (2019-2020) and a member of the College of Leadership and Management at Engineers Australia - Sydney Division since 2021, leading an initiative on project governance. He was elected as a Fellow of Engineers Australia in 2024. He is also a Life Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers and a Fellow of the Action Learning and Action Research Association.

Shankar is a member of the Sydney Rotary Club where his classification is Project Management. He was recognized as a Paul Harris Fellow for his contribution to Rotary's humanitarian and education programs. He has been nominated for the 2025 PMI Fellow Award.

Contacts:

Email: shankar.sankaran@uts.edu.au

Profile: <https://profiles.uts.edu.au/Shankar.Sankaran>

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/shankar-sankaran-260320a/?originalSubdomain=a> u

Interview

Q1: First, thank you for agreeing to an interview for the PMWJ. I think you are one of the busiest people in the entire project management world; it's hard to know where to start. But can you please first inform our readers about your role as a professor and teacher of project management at UTS Sydney? How long have you been there and what courses do you teach?

Prof Shankar Sankaran (Sankaran): Thank you. I do keep busy, but I am sure there are busier people than me in the project management world. I joined UTS in 2006 as a Senior Lecturer and became a Full Professor in 2014. Currently, I teach advanced level subjects in our Master of Project Management Course. They are Organisational Project Management (covering Governance, Portfolio and Program Management and PMOs), Systems Thinking for Managers, Leading Projects in Organisations, and a new one starting in 2026 on Digital Transformation in Projects. For six years I was Program Director of the course. I worked as a project manager in industry before I joined academia in 1999. I started my academic career in Southern Cross University in Australia and taught project management to MBA students in Australia and overseas before joining UTS in 2006.

At UTS we teach project management subjects in four-day blocks and try to emulate a real-life project environment where students work in teams on assignments. We teach our subjects along with practitioners from industry. So, I do not teach all the content by myself but work with others who are experts in the content. I try to help students understand the theories behind the topics we teach, while the practitioners bring their practical knowledge of actual project problems. Our students benefit from the way our course is structured due to the mix of theory and practice, which helps them to understand and use both as project managers.

Q2: In addition to your position as a professor of project management, you are also an associate member of the Robotics Institute at the UTS faculty of engineering. This seems like a very interesting subject. Can you explain what that institute does and your involvement?

Sankaran: The UTS Robotics Institute develops solutions to help maximise productivity while improving quality and safety for our commercial, government and not-for-profit partners. Robots developed by UTS are used successfully in maintenance activities in the Sydney Harbour Bridge, testing pipelines for Sydney Water and construction at the Murdoch University Library in Perth, Western Australia. More information on the work of UTS Robotics Institute can be found at

<https://www.uts.edu.au/research/centres/robotics-institute>

with videos of robots that we have developed.

Q3: As if those are not enough, you are also a member of the Industry Transformation Research stream at UTS and Chief Investigator for the Australian Research Council Industry Transformation Research Hub for Human-Robot Teaming for Sustainable and Resilient Construction. Whew! What does all that entail, and how is it related to projects or project management?

Sankaran: At the School of the Built Environment, we have four research clusters to promote our research to industries related to the courses we teach. I am a member of

the Industry Transformation Research Stream and support the others. You can find more information at this website

<https://www.uts.edu.au/about/faculties/design-architecture-and-building/built-environment/research/construction-industry-transformation>

Our university received an A\$12 million Australian Research Council Industry Transformation Grant to establish a research hub to develop Human Robot Solutions to over the next five years to help contribute to a sustainable and resilient construction sector. We have six university partners and 15 industry partners. We think the hub will help Australia become a leader in the development of robotics solutions to improve productivity and well-being.

The hub is located at the UTS Robotics Institute, and I am one of its Chief Investigators conducting research on the application of sociotechnical systems principles to be used in the projects delivered. In a way, I have come full circle as I started life as an automation engineer, moved to management and academia, and am now back to automation.

Q4: One of the most popular and arguably important topics in the field of project management is artificial intelligence. What aspects of AI have you investigated or supervised student research work on? It seems the potential uses are endless.

Sankaran: I have been involved in the supervision of more than 50 doctoral students. Most of them are practitioners who conducted research in management or project management. Several of my recent doctoral students are conducting research in the application of digital technologies. Examples are: Managing data science initiatives as exploratory projects; Data driven decision making and its effectiveness on capital projects; Developing a blockchain framework for payments of construction projects; Optimisation of construction claim preparation process utilising machine learning techniques; and How can applied AI and emerging technologies effectively support an ageing population within the urban environment.

As part of my work at the Research Hub I am developing sociotechnical principles along with others to guide research into human robot teaming with intelligent robots equipped with AI. This requires a new set of sociotechnical principles where humans and robots can learn from each other contributing to collaborative intelligence.

I now use AI in my teaching where students use Generative AI for assignments while ensuring that they use it responsibly and ethically, following academic regulations. AI can result in designing creative assignments and students get deeply engaged in learning. I have also started publishing on the implementation of AI in project management education and work collaboratively with academics in Europe and US on using AI to enhance education at universities.

Q5: Your most recent book was the Handbook on Public-Private Partnerships in Infrastructure Development: A Critical Perspective, co-authored and edited by

professors Clegg, Ke, Mangioni and Devkar (2024). Is this a new topic of personal interest and research? How did your involvement in that textbook come about?

Sankaran: I have been doing research on megaprojects with Distinguished Professor Stewart Clegg since 2010. Stories from 16 megaproject leaders from ten different countries were collected by 18 academics from around the world to deliver a book that we think will be useful to practitioners as well as scholars. The book, [*Megaproject Leaders*](#), was co-edited with Professor Nathalie Drouin at UQAM in Canada, Professor Alfons van Marrewijk at Delft University of Technology and Professor Ralf Müller from BI Norwegian Business School.

Megaprojects are often delivered as Public Private Partnerships, and we started studying them as well. Professor Clegg and I won a grant from the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia to work on the use of PPPs in infrastructure investments in the aftermath of COVID-19. This resulted in a book of case studies from 15 countries in Europe, North America, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

Q7: In partnership with Professors Ralf Müller (Norway) and Nathalie Drouin (Canada), you have won research achievement awards from both PMI (2022) and IPMA (2021). You have won PMI's David Cleland Literati Award in 2021 and Walter Lipke Award in 2019. Congratulations on such prestigious success! What was your secret? How does working with such renowned colleagues help in your research?

Sankaran: During a sabbatical in 2011, I decided to visit Ralf Müller when he was a Professor at Umeå Business School in Sweden as we were working on a research project together. Professor Nathalie Drouin from UQAM was also there for the oral examination of Ralf's PhD student. The three of us met for coffee and decided to work together as we had common interests. This led to a long and productive collaboration, and we have published several books in project management.

We also collaborated on a PMI-sponsored research program on balanced leadership and have published many papers together. The global research award from IPMA was for our work on balanced leadership, while the David Cleland Award was for our book on organisational project management and the PMI Research Award was for our decade-long collaboration to advance project management research. The Walter Lipke award was for a paper I presented at the Project Governance and Controls Symposium in Canberra based on our book on *Organizational Project Management*. We continue to work together to contribute to project management research. We often have long meetings at unearthly hours as we live in three corners of the world.

Q8: We see that you also hold PMI's project management professional (PMP) certification? Why did you sit for the PMP exam, and what value does such a credential hold for an academic, a professor? Would you suggest other PM researchers and teachers get their PMPs?

Sankaran: This was a very important turning point in my life. I used to work as a project manager in a Japanese multinational company in Singapore where we used Japanese project management methods. At that time, I was quite unaware of PMI's Guide to Project Management Knowledge.

When I became an academic in 1999, I was asked to teach project management at the business school as I had worked as a project manager. That is when I started looking at Project Management Standards and wrote course materials based on PMBOK. This led me to become a member of PMI and, when I moved to Sydney in 2006 to teach at UTS, I became involved with PMI's Sydney Chapter and came to appreciate the value of accreditation.

The Master of Project Management Course at UTS also used PMBOK. While teaching this course I started looking at the questions used in the PMP Certification Examination to develop quizzes for the class. I then decided to take the PMP examination myself as the PMI Sydney Chapter ran classes for practising project managers. What helped me most was attending Rita Mulcahy's online course.

I took the PMP examination almost 25 years after I started working on projects and 10 years after I started teaching project management! I believe that PMP certification is very useful to get the basic knowledge, but you also require experience to be a good project manager. While it is not a must for academics to be PMP certified in Australia, I have found the knowledge and experience helpful for managing research projects at my university.

I also think that we should use of elements of the PMI Talent Triangle – Ways of Working, Power Skills and Business Acumen to better educate and train project managers. I feel that the renaming of the skills to power skills and business acumen are appropriate as we want project management to be considered important at the board level of organisations.

Q10: You have been a PMI member and active in the Sydney chapter of PMI for several years. Are you also a member of or involved in the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) or other professional organizations? How can volunteering help project leaders become better leaders?

Sankaran: As I answer this question, the PMI Sydney Chapter is bringing together people who have been members for over twenty years, and I am looking forward to meeting all of them. I served on the PMI Sydney Chapter Board for a year and continue to attend their events from time to time. I have also held workshops at the Chapter. The course director of our program at UTS, Dr Leila Moslemi Naeni, has organised several joint activities with PMI Sydney Chapter at our university that were well attended. I have been on a panel on one of those events.

I am also a member of AIPM and attended their conferences and spoke at one of them. They have a strong presence in construction and defence while PMI has been prominent in other sectors but is becoming more involved in construction.

I have been a volunteer of PMI for over 20 years and served on the board of the Global Accreditation Centre for six years and one year as Chair. I have been involved in GAC's on-site visit teams since 2007 and am still involved in that work even after my term at the GAC Board finished in 2024.

Now I am an Associate Editor of *Project Management Journal* and continue to contribute to the project management community.

I have also been volunteering for other professional bodies and the Rotary for over thirty years. Australia is known for its strong volunteering culture, and I get to meet people from other walks of life and learn a lot from these interactions. I think volunteering is important for personal growth and giving back to the society.

Q11: You are an Associate Editor of the Project Management Journal, one of the oldest and best-known academic journals serving project management researchers around the world. You also serve on the editorial boards on the International Journal of Project Management, International Journal of Managing Projects in Business, Project Leadership and Society and the PM World Journal. That looks like all the major PM publications. How do you find time to support those publications?

Sankaran: Setting aside time to do these activities is not easy but the rewards are plenty. Through the activities of the *Project Management Journal*, we are trying to advance project management knowledge and mentor younger academics to become prominent researchers.

The PMJ College is a great initiative from PMI to develop the next generation of project management academics and researchers. I serve as a strategic editor for *Project Leadership and Society*, which has become an important outlet for publications and is creating an impact linking theory and practice.

The *International Journal of Project Management* is a publication in which many project management researchers aspire to publish as it is considered the leading journal in the field, and I am involved in some special issues in it.

International Journal of Managing Projects in Business is also rapidly increasing its impact factor and caters to researchers who are interested in the business side of project management.

I think as an experienced researcher in the field I should support all the project management journals to achieve more prominence. Although I review papers for journals in other fields, reviewing papers for project management journals is my priority.

Q12: It seems you have had a long and successful academic career, but you started out actually working on and managing some big projects in both India and Singapore. When and how did you start learning about project management, and how and when did you transition into research and teaching?

Sankaran: I think I have partially responded to this earlier. I knew about project management when I started working as an instrument engineer in construction projects in the '70s in India, but at that time I was only a project team member and a specialist. My knowledge of project management increased when I worked for McDermott Engineering in their Singapore office where I was involved in offshore oil and gas projects. I was still a subject matter expert but came to know more about how projects were managed in the US.

When I joined Yokogawa in Singapore and became a General Manager of their Engineering Operations, I started learning about the Japanese way of managing projects which was different from the American way.

I then went to work in Yokogawa's Australian office and there I learnt about Australian way of managing projects which is similar to that of the UK.

At that time, I enrolled in a Master's Course in Systems Engineering at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and learnt how Systems Engineering based on INCOSE standards as used in US defence projects. We were taught one subject on project management by a member of AIPM. This is the first time I was probably exposed to all the project management processes and competencies.

After I moved to UTS I also learnt about agile project management and design thinking when we developed a course to teach different methodologies to students so that they could choose what worked best in their work contexts.

I also learnt about how program logic and lean management are used in development projects when I visited India to teach a course with academics from IIT Madras.

A paper in which I traced the history of project management as an innovation, I described when each of these project management methods became prominent:

Sankaran, S., Jacobsson, M., & Blomquist, T. (2021). The history and future of projects as a transition innovation: Towards a sustainable project management framework. *Systems research and behavioral science*, 38(5), 696-714.

I think project managers should learn the various ways of managing projects and creatively combine aspects that are useful from each method during a project life cycle. Project Management Offices can also become a source of various methods.

Q13: You have been nominated this year for the 2025 PMI Fellow Award, PMI's highest individual honor. Congratulations! What are your thoughts about being nominated for such recognition?

Sankaran: I really feel humbled when I see the names of Fellows on PMI's website (past and present) and feel honoured to even be considered for such an award. It makes me more motivated to contribute to PMI as a volunteer to advance both education and research.

Q14: With all your roles and writings, how do you manage your time?

Sankaran: It is not easy. I often overcommit myself and struggle to keep up. That is not good for work-life balance. When I was working as a senior management in industry one book that really transformed how I managed my time better was Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, which taught me to balance my time between what was urgent and what was important and plan weekly not daily.

Nowadays, there are many convenient tools available to manage your time better. I like Noteplan which has some aspects of the seven habits built into it. I have also learnt to meditate using an app to manage stress better. I meditate even when I am travelling on a bus to work. A recent book I read titled *Four Thousand Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman advocates that instead of managing time to complete to-do lists, we should make the best use of the four thousand weeks, on average, that we live on this planet. Burkeman asks an important question that we should ask ourselves – What if I stopped trying to do everything? If you do this, you can learn to prioritise the important things in life.

Q15: Do you have a last message?

Sankaran: I think that if I had an opportunity to live my life again, I would not do anything differently as I have enjoyed living and working during both good and challenging times.

When I worked as an expert in projects, I used to get irritated with project managers who would come and hurry you up not realising that thinking takes time. Later, when I became a project manager, I used to get impatient with experts who seemed not to worry about time or cost. You need to see both viewpoints to survive. I am learning about standpoints as one of my doctoral students is investigating project complexity as a standpoint and it depends on who perceives it.

I do enjoy working in projects as they have an end in sight despite being stressful as you are trying to implement them. There is nothing like the sense of satisfaction when you

have completed a project, as you have delivered a product or service or built a facility that someone will use to create value.

However, I think a project manager's life is becoming more complex as more is expected of us and we are asked to deliver outcomes as well as outputs, and to do this in a sustainable and responsible manner. We are also facing disruption in our work due to the use of AI, but we need to learn how to use AI to be more productive while using it ethically and responsibly. This will be our challenge for the future.

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 SA](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with significant 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.

Yasmina can be contacted at <https://yasminakhelifi.com/> or LinkedIn:
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/yasminakhelifi-pmp-telecom/>

Visit her correspondent profile at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/yasmina-khelifi/>