Project Business Management [1,2]

Never Waste a Trip

– Finding Tomorrow's Business in Today's Project –

Oliver F. Lehmann

"Blos koin Weg verschwenda." – Never Waste a Trip.
– Swabian saying



Summary

In contractor-side Project Business, business development is commonly treated as a phase that ends when the contract is signed and the work is "thrown over the fence" to the project team. This article argues the opposite: the running project is the contractor's best source of new business, because the people performing it have access to the customer that no salesperson can match. It introduces Continuous Business Development as the fourth goal of contractor-side Project Business, examines why project managers so rarely pursue it, and sets out what contractor organizations must change so that the trip to the customer is never made with empty hands.

[1] This is an article in a series by Oliver Lehmann, author of the book "Project Business Management" (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis. See full author profile at the end of this article. A list of the other articles in PM World Journal can be found at https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann.

[2] How to cite this article: Lehmann, O.F. (2026). *Don't Waste a Trip – Finding Tomorrow's Business in Today's Project*, PM World Journal, Vol. XV, Issue XI (November).

A lesson from Stuttgart

Many years ago, I was a student in Stuttgart, the city where I was born. Like many students, I had to earn my own income alongside my studies, and the job that paid my rent for a while was waiting tables in a restaurant. The owner was an old-school Swabian: friendly to guests, demanding with staff, and with a sharp eye for anything that looked like waste.

One evening, I was walking back to the kitchen with two used plates in my hands when he stopped me. On the table I had just left stood five more plates, plus bowls and tea cups. He looked at my two plates and said, in broad Swabian dialect: “Blos koin Weg verschwenda.” Never Waste a Trip.

It sounds like a basic rule of waiting tables. It is more than that – it is a command in disguise. The message was not about this trip; it was about every trip I would make from then on. If you are going to the kitchen anyway, carry as much as you can. Anything less is waste.

Later, while I was still studying, I earned income by doing courier work. And again: while I took important materials from graphic artists to advertising agencies and then on to the print shops, I often had a second or third urgent transport I could take with me to increase the trip's business value.

The trip to the kitchen or to the printers is a fixed cost. It takes the same time and the same steps whether I carry two plates or ten, one piece of artwork or many. The only variable is the load. A good waiter does not make more trips; a good waiter makes better use of each one. And so does the courier driver.

I have carried this rule with me for decades, and it has turned out to be as valid in Project Business as it was between the dining room and the kitchen. A contractor who performs a project for a customer is already making the trip. The question is how much the contractor brings back.

Two phases and a fence

When projects go cross-corporate and involve two or more organizations under contract, often hundreds of them, each party brings its own business interests to the table. The project customer wants results it cannot accomplish alone – a solution, a building, a transformation. The project contractor needs profit margins and cash flow to pay its people and keep its business going. Both interests are legitimate. Neither party is doing anything wrong by having them.

And yet, these interests are forgotten with remarkable regularity. Once the work begins, people on both sides narrow their view to their own side of the contract. The customer’s team sees a contractor that should simply deliver what was promised and stops thinking about whether the contractor can still afford to. The contractor’s team sees a scope to be completed and stops asking what the customer actually needs to succeed. This is a very human instinct: we see our own problems clearly and other people’s problems hardly at all.

Or – on the contractor side – people make the customer's problems their own, forgetting to treat them as business opportunities. In Project Business, it is an instinct that damages both businesses. A project that serves only one party's interests will not serve the other's for long – and then it serves nobody's. And a project that disregards upcoming needs ceases to be worthwhile in a fast-changing and often chaotic world.

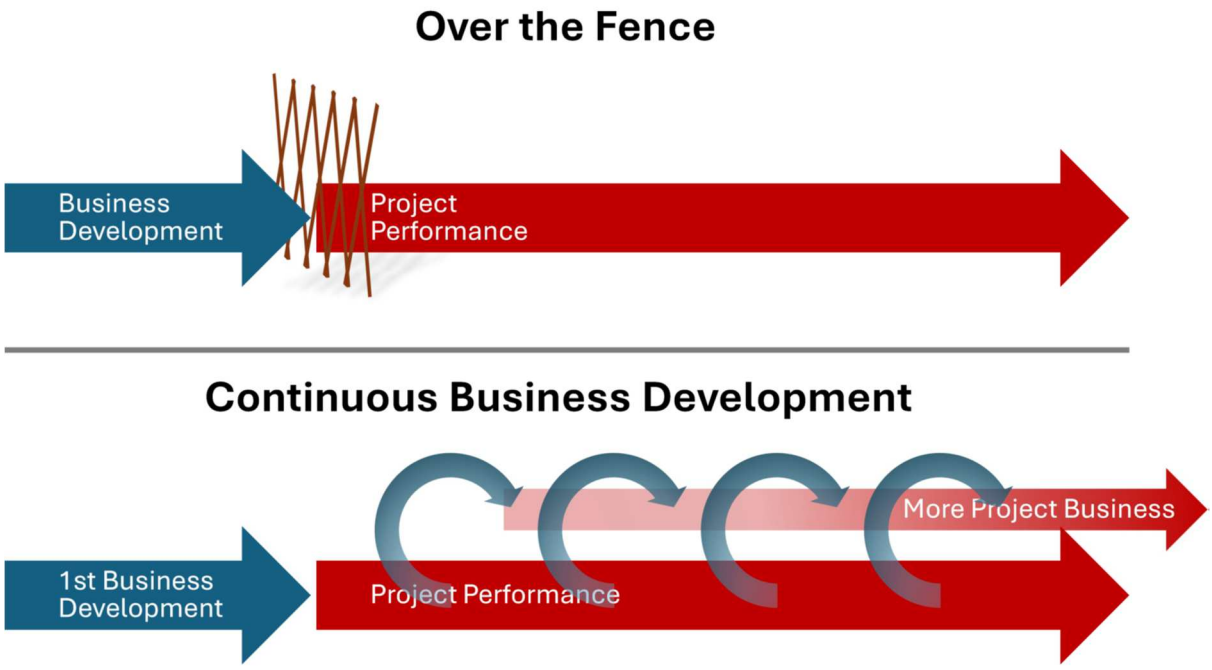


Figure 1: Over the fence, business development stops at the handover. In Continuous Business Development, every loop through project performance feeds the next business development – the project becomes the source of more Project Business.

The view of the contractor

This article focuses on the contractor side. An article looking at Project Business from the side of the customer will follow.

Here, the common view of Project Business divides this into two phases, performed by two different groups of people:

1. Business development, done by salespeople: finding the opportunity, building the relationship, negotiating the contract, and concluding it.
2. Project performance, done by the project manager and the team: planning, executing, and controlling the work under that contract until the results are delivered.

Sometimes, this approach is called "over-the-fence".[3] Sales throws the signed contract over the fence to the project side and walks away to the next bid or proposal. The project side

[3] (Kerzner, 2017, p. 39)

catches it, often without having seen it before, and starts to work. From that moment, the contract is treated as the fixed frame of a technical undertaking. Business is what happened before; now comes the work.

The model has a logic. Salespeople are skilled at opening doors; project managers are skilled at getting things done. Separating the two keeps each group focused. But it also builds a fence through the middle of the one thing that holds a customer project together: the relationship between paying customer and performing contractor.

The weakness becomes visible at the end of the project. The relationship that was built during the sales phase has gone cold, because the salespeople moved on. The project team, which spent months or years at the customer's site, knows the customer's people, processes and problems intimately – and is now dissolved and reassigned. Whatever the team learned leaves with it. The next opportunity at this customer is pursued, if at all, by a salesperson starting again from the outside.[4]

Business development and performance are better understood as functions than as phases.[5] A function runs as long as it is needed. Calling them phases is itself an over-the-fence decision: it declares business development finished at the exact moment when the contractor has the best access it will ever have.

From the trip to the journey

In business language, a project is not a trip but a journey, and customer and contractor make it together. The Swabian rule translates easily: if we are on the journey anyway, let's carry as much as we can.

This is the core of what I call Continuous Business Development. The contractor uses the current project – and the access, trust and knowledge that come with it – to develop the next business, while the project is still running. Business development does not end with the signature; it continues through performance, carried by the people who are already there.

Seen this way, Continuous Business Development adds a fourth goal to the three that contractor-side Project Business has always had:[6]

1. **Protect your cash flow** – when you run out of liquid money, all your professionalism and experience do not help. You cannot afford to go on.
2. **Make the project profitable** – Project Business is high-risk business, and to survive, the contractor must cover indirect costs and build reserves.
3. **Make the customer happy** – so that they come back for more and bring friends with them.[7]

[4] (Hadjikhani, 1996)
[5] (Cova & Salle, 2005)
[6] (Lehmann, 2017)
[7] (Reichheld, 2003)

4. **Find new opportunities while you are there** – the insights gained from the project protect and expand your future business.

The first two goals secure the business today. The third and fourth secure what comes after it.

While most project managers are well-trained in technical matters, the first three goals above often become a problem, as they are commercial and legal. The problem has two causes: a narrow mindset and insufficient education.

Even less pursued is the fourth goal. A contractor that pursues only the first three goals may finish the current project in good shape but still find itself with an empty order book.

Both parties gain from a change in mindset and education. The customer has a contractor at its site who knows it well, including its wants and needs, its strengths and weaknesses, who sees its challenges first-hand and has the competence to help meet them. Why would the customer go out and search for another one, start another procurement, and go through another learning curve? The contractor who is already there is the cheapest and fastest route to a solution – provided the contractor notices the problem and offers help.

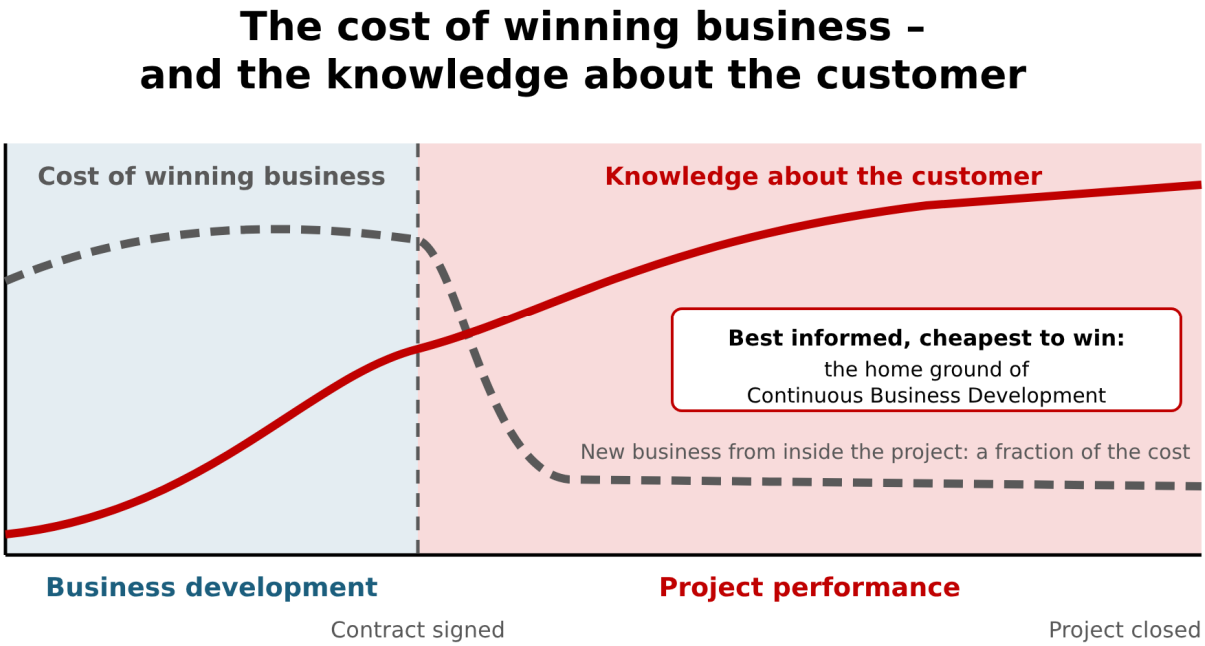


Figure 2: The cost of winning business collapses at the signature; knowledge about the customer keeps climbing. Over the fence, business development stops exactly where it has become cheap and well informed.

The contractor gains the business it would otherwise have to hunt from the outside, at a fraction of the cost of acquisition. More than that: the contractor gains a customer who calls again because it wants to, not because a contract forces it to.

Continuous Business Development builds on Benefit Engineering,[8] the practice of spotting chances to create additional benefit for the customer that generates additional business for

[8] (Lehmann, 2017)

the contractor. Benefit Engineering is an opportunity-driven, often situational activity – a way to rescue a project that drifts into loss or to win back a customer after a missed deadline. Continuous Business Development makes it enduring and systematic. It is not a rescue technique but a way of running the project from the first day.

The first weeks of a project are the most valuable part of the journey, and they are already paid for. This is when the contractor's people and the customer's people develop familiarity with each other, learn how the other side thinks, and build the understanding that later prevents costly misunderstandings. A contractor who treats this time only as mobilization wastes it. A contractor who treats it as the beginning of a long relationship invests it.

From then on, the contractor's people are in a position no salesperson can reach. They see where the customer's processes break, where information gets lost, where a cheap upstream decision creates expensive downstream problems, where safety is at risk, or where the customer is quietly out of compliance with a rule it may not even be aware of. Each of these is a liability for the customer. Each is an opportunity for a contractor whose assets can resolve it. That exchange – the contractor's assets resolving the customer's liabilities, and money flowing the other way – is Project Business in its purest form.

Why project managers don't do it

If the opportunity is so obvious, why do so few project managers in customer projects act on it? In my classes, I meet project managers from contractor organizations every month, and the pattern is consistent. The reasons are rarely personal. They are built into how contractors set up their projects and into how project managers have been taught to see their role.

They did not write the contract, and often have not read it. The contract was negotiated by sales and legal, sometimes long before the project manager was assigned. It arrives as a given. Many project managers never study it; some are not even handed a copy. A person who does not know the commercial frame of the project cannot see where it could be extended, and will not notice when the customer asks for something that lies outside it. The over-the-fence model creates an authority gap: the project manager inherits obligations without ever having had a say in them.

They see themselves as technical managers, not as business managers. Project managers are selected and promoted for getting things done. Most were engineers, IT specialists or consultants before they managed projects, and they carry that identity with them. Business is what the company does; their job is the project. When the question of margin or follow-up business comes up, the typical response is: "That is not my responsibility." But in a customer project, the project is the business, and the project manager is the manager of a temporary profit center – whether the job description says so or not.

They run the project as a cost center. The organizational logic of many contractors reinforces this. Budgets are allocated, hours are booked, deviations are explained. Nobody asks the project manager about revenue, contribution margin or cash flow, because those

numbers belong to controlling and to sales. A project manager who is measured only on spending will think only about spending. The upside of the project – more business, a better customer, a longer relationship – has no place in that worldview.

Their KPIs point the other way. On time, on budget, in scope: these are the metrics most project managers are judged on. A new opportunity discovered at the customer is, by these measures, a disturbance. It brings change, needs negotiation, may delay the current milestone and will certainly consume attention. The rational response to such incentives is to keep one's head down and finish what one was asked to finish. People do what they are rewarded for.

The customer belongs to sales. In many contractors, the account is the territory of the key account manager, and project managers are told, explicitly or implicitly, not to "talk business" with the customer. A project manager who raises an opportunity may be seen as stepping on somebody's turf, or as having made a promise that sales now has to fulfill. Many have learned that lesson once and do not try a second time.

They confuse business development with hard-selling. Project managers do not want to be perceived as pushy. They have a working relationship with the customer's people, built on trust, and they fear that a sales pitch would damage it. This is a misunderstanding of what Continuous Business Development is. It does not mean selling the customer things it does not need. It means noticing the problems the customer has, naming them honestly, and offering to help. Customers rarely resent that. What they resent is a contractor who saw the problem and said nothing.

They side with the customer against their own employer. This is a subtle one, and it is frequent. Project managers spend their days with the customer's people, not with their own management. Over time, the customer's view becomes their view. When a conflict arises over scope, payment or responsibility, they find themselves defending the customer's position in front of their own company. A project manager who has mentally changed sides will not develop business for the contractor; they will protect the customer from it.

Nobody taught them. Project management training, including most certification programs, is written from the perspective of a project that supports a business, not a project that is the business. Contracts appear as a procurement topic, something the project buys, not something the project lives under. Business development does not appear at all. Project managers in contractor organizations are left to work it out for themselves, and most do not.

They are busy. The last reason is the most honest one. Customer projects are typically understaffed and under time pressure. The project manager fights fires. Looking up from the fire to see where the next business could come from needs headroom that the project does not provide. Here, the Swabian rule has its answer: the trip is being made anyway. Continuous Business Development is not an additional trip; it is carrying more on the one already underway. But that needs people who know what to look for.

What it takes to make it work

The reasons above also describe the prerequisites. Continuous Business Development does not happen because a project manager decides one morning to be more commercial. It happens when the contractor organization removes the obstacles it has built, and when the people on the project know what to look for and are allowed and encouraged to act on it.

The mindset change comes from the top. Executives and business owners must decide that project managers in customer projects are managers of profit centers and treat them accordingly. That decision is only real when it shows up in KPIs and OKRs, in incentives, and in what gets recognized and rewarded. As long as on-time-on-budget is the only thing measured, on-time-on-budget is the only thing that will happen.

Project managers must know their contract. Not in the sense of being able to cite clauses, but in the sense of knowing what has been promised, what has been excluded, what the customer is paying for, and what would need a change order. They must understand the obligations of each side, because these are the entitlements of the other one. The contract is the boundary of the current business; one cannot extend a boundary one cannot see. It is also the danger zone, and invisible dangers are not managed. Involving the future project manager in the negotiation, where the timing allows it, closes the authority gap before it opens.

The contractor must know itself. Before it can offer help, the contractor must honestly know what it can do, and especially what it does very well – better, perhaps, than anyone else. This self-assessment is uncomfortable and is therefore often skipped. Without it, the contractor will offer help where it has no competitive edge and overlook the places where it does. The good-faith rule is to help the customer wherever possible, but the business focus belongs on the areas where the contractor can really make business.

The contractor must know the customer better than the customer knows itself. Organizational distance is a privilege. An outsider sees the weak spots that insiders have stopped noticing – the inefficient workaround that became a tedious process, the handover that always loses information, the decision made upstream that the downstream team pays for, the employee or vendor who benefits from avoidable rework. The reverse case is a red flag: a customer who knows the contractor better than the contractor knows itself will use that knowledge, for example by playing the contractor's people against each other.

The customer's freedom must be understood. Customers do not act in a vacuum. Law, regulation, internal rules, market conditions and corporate politics limit what they can change. A problem the customer cannot act on is not an opportunity, however real the problem is. Part of knowing the customer is knowing its guardrails – and the time horizon of its managers. A manager on a two-year contract is looking for a quick win to leave with; a manager who expects to stay is looking for lasting value. The contractor should offer accordingly.

Social capital with the customer is the basis, not an appendix. A customer that is unhappy with the current project will not buy the next one. Customer happiness is often treated as a

cost – something nice to have once the deliverables are in. In Continuous Business Development it is the foundation. Without trust, there is no access; without access, there is nothing to see; without seeing, there is nothing to offer.

Commercial firmness must go with it. Customer happiness is not the same as giving things away. Every unpaid benefit the customer receives must be clearly communicated as such. There should be no gifts to which the customer cannot say thank you. This keeps the unpaid benefit the exception rather than the expectation, and it makes the paid benefit – the actual business – the normal case. The better both sides know each other, the easier this balance becomes.

Never rationalize, never excuse. The contractor that explains why the last milestone slipped is not developing business; it is defending itself. There are two honest options: sell your performance, or fix it. A contractor that does neither has no credibility left for the conversation about the next opportunity.

The interface to sales must be clear. Continuous Business Development does not replace salespeople; it feeds them.[9] The project side identifies the opportunity and keeps the relationship warm; sales turns it into a contract. The fence does not need to disappear, but it needs a gate that opens from both sides, and a shared understanding of who speaks to whom about what.

People need to be taught. Project managers and team members cannot watch for what they have never been shown. Knowing the contract, reading a customer's value streams, spotting liabilities that the contractor's assets can resolve, holding the line between generosity and firmness – these are skills, and they can be learned. Most project managers in contractor organizations have never had the chance.

Carry as much as you can

The restaurant owner in Stuttgart did not want me to walk faster or to make more trips. He wanted me to stop wasting the ones I was making. That is all Continuous Business Development asks of a contractor's staff: the journey to the customer is being made anyway, the people are there anyway, the trust is being built anyway. Use it.

For the customer, this means a partner who sees problems before they become expensive and who can solve them without a new procurement cycle. For the contractor, it means business that is cheaper to win, more profitable to perform, and more likely to be followed by the next one. For the project managers in between, it means taking ownership of what they already are: managers of a profit center on which their own jobs, their colleagues' jobs, and sometimes the existence of their employer depend.

If we are on the project journey together anyway, let's carry as much as we can.

[9] (Hornby, 2017)

Appendix: What Is Project Business?

Many of today's projects are no longer internal endeavors. In a world shaped by global supply chains, outsourcing, and cross-border collaboration, projects are increasingly delivered by networks of companies. These projects are not just technical undertakings – they are commercial ventures.

Project Business arises when two or more companies team up to perform a project under contract.[10] It operates at the boundaries between organizations and often involves diverse legal systems, cultures, and moral compasses. Some project networks are simple; others are complex and fragile ecosystems with dozens, sometimes hundreds of organizations involved.

Though long overlooked, Project Business contributes an estimated 20% to 30% of global GDP and employs more project managers than internal projects. It deserves far more attention – not only for its scale but for the unique challenges it poses.

Traditional project management handbooks typically address internal projects within organizations. By contrast, project business takes place across corporate boundaries, introducing commercial, legal, and relational complexities that such works only partly cover. Project business (cross-corporate, customer-contractor) has different challenges and rules – success depends here not only on planning and execution, but on commercial acumen, legal awareness, and a deeply cooperative mindset. Trust must be built among parties with differing interests and asymmetric power to enable collaboration toward shared success.

The risks in Project Business go beyond deadlines and deliverables – they include cash flow instability, legal exposure, reputational damage, and contractual disputes. Where information is asymmetrical and objectives diverge, the project manager must act as negotiator, strategist, and builder of partnerships.

[10] (Lehmann, 2018)

References

Cova, B. & Salle, R. (2005) 'Six key points to merge project marketing into project management', International Journal of Project Management, 23 (5), pp. 354-359.

Kerzner, H. (2017) *Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling*, 12th edition, Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons.

Hadjikhani, A. (1996) 'Project marketing and the management of discontinuity', *International Business Review*, 5 (3), pp. 319-336.

Hornby, R. (2017) *Commercial Project Management: A Guide for Selling and Delivering Professional Services*, 1st edition, London, UK: Routledge.

Lehmann, O.F. (2017) 'Crisis in Your Customer Project? Try Benefit Engineering', *PM World Journal*, VI (10), October [Online]. Available from: https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/pmwj63-Oct2017-Lehmann-resolving-crises-in-customer-project-with-benefits-engineering2.pdf (Accessed: 25 October 2026).

Lehmann, O.F. (2018) *Project Business Management*, Boca Raton, FL, USA: Auerbach / Taylor & Francis.

Reichheld, F.F. (2003) 'The one number you need to grow', *Harvard Business Review*, 81 (12), pp. 46-54.

Text, Images – Copyright Note

Text & images: Oliver F. Lehmann

About The Author

Oliver F. Lehmann
Munich, Germany



Oliver F. Lehmann, MSc, ACE, PMP, is a project management educator, author, consultant, and speaker. In addition, he is the founder of the Project Business Foundation (project-business.org), an independent not-for-profit think tank for professionals and organizations involved in cross-corporate Project Business.

He studied Linguistics, Literature, and History at the University of Stuttgart and Project Management at the University of Liverpool, UK, where he holds a Master of Science Degree (with Merit). Oliver has trained thousands of project managers across Europe, the USA, and Asia in methodological project management, with a focus on certification preparation. In addition, he is a visiting lecturer at the Technical University of Munich.

He has been a member and volunteer at PMI, the Project Management Institute, since 1998 and served as the President of the PMI Southern Germany Chapter from 2013 to 2018. Between 2004 and 2006, he contributed to PMI's *PM Network* magazine, for which he provided a monthly editorial on page 1 called "Launch," analyzing troubled projects around the world.

Oliver believes in three driving forces for personal improvement in project management: formal learning, experience, and observations. He resides in Munich, Bavaria, Germany, and can be contacted at oliver@oliverlehmann.com.

Oliver Lehmann is the author of the books:

- "Situational Project Management: The Dynamics of Success and Failure" (ISBN 9781498722612), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in 2016
- "Project Business Management" (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis in 2018.

His previous articles and papers for PM World Journal can be found here:

- https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann