Part 3 – Questions on Project Management Practice
This paper is a slightly updated version of a Feature Interview published on line
by PMWorld Today in October and November 2007.

Introduction

David Pells, Managing Editor of **PM World Today** conducted the following interview over several
months in the fall of 2007. The questions and answers are divided into three parts: Part 1 *Probed Max's
Background*; Part 2 discussed his *Activities with the Project Management Institute*; and in this final
Part 3 he answers *Questions on Project Management Practice*.

In this Part 3, PMWT's questions cover:
- Project Management Development
- Most Important PM Skills
- Max's Major PM Mentors
- Project Management in the Future, and
- Advice to new PM Entrants

Project Management Development

PMWT: In your opinion, what are the two or three most important developments in the world of project
management over the last twenty years?

Max: "The last 20 years" takes us back to 1987 or thereabouts and I take it that "most important"
implies a higher frequency of success. If that is so, I find it difficult to pin point "important
developments" since then because I am not convinced that there have been any unique developments in
project management that would qualify. The 1980s was a decade of significant documentation of
management that was uniquely devoted to the management of projects. That in itself could be described
as an important development although the content that was document in various versions of "Bodies of
Knowledge", or BoKs, was hardly unique. Most of the content was established decades, if not centuries,
earlier.

Since then there have been various attempts to produce versions of the BoKs that are "new and
improved". However, in my opinion these have simply led to more complex explanations of a
management system that, while multi-faceted, should in fact be quite simple and straightforward. Much
of this added complexity seems to stem from two causes: First, a failure to understand that managing the
project, i.e. project management, and managing the technology of the project's deliverable, i.e.
technology management, are two quite different things and must be documented and handled differently.

By the same token, it must also be recognized that project success, i.e. successful project management,
and product success, i.e. the successful generation of benefits from the product, are also two quite
different things. Still, both "managements" must proceed in lockstep for a project to be successful
overall. Nevertheless, of the two successes, product success is by far the most important because the
success of the **project** is transitory, while **product** success endures for the whole life of the product.

Second, there are the various attempts to appropriate and redraft standard people management practices
into some sort of project management terminology-laden techniques. In this connection, the rapid spread
of project management to the development of "new" technologies is indeed an important development. I

am thinking here of the information technology area of project management application as one example in particular. This arena is generally fraught with a much higher level of complexity (e.g. more stakeholders to be satisfied) and is the result of more brain work (rather than brawn work). Also, the logical progression of the work is less evident. Finally, brainworkers respond better to a different style of management and hence the interest in "new" approaches to project people management.

One could point to project portfolio management as an important development in the world of project management. But this can be misleading since project management is a subset of project portfolio management and not the other way round. That is, project portfolio management takes place, or should take place, at a higher level in the management hierarchy. Indeed, project portfolio management is really a different discipline, responding to different criteria, and conducted for a different purpose. That purpose is to optimize the resulting benefits to the organization rather than the narrower project management objective of producing a deliverable on time and within budget.

The bottom line is that, in my view, it is difficult to identify any development in project management in the last twenty years that has shown a significant improvement in the achievement of success in projects.

Most Important PM Skills

PMWT: What are the three most important traits or skills for project managers today?

Max: The three or four most important traits or skills for project managers today is an interesting question. We could look to the various project management associations for guidance. The Project Management Institute, for example, identifies thirty-nine project management processes in its current 2004 Body of Knowledge. Each of these processes obviously requires specific skills on the part of the project manager to conduct successfully. So, although there is no doubt some overlap, that's thirty-nine to choose from. A year earlier, Professor Crawford's Project Manager Role Model identified forty seven units to be managed, while the USA's National Competence Baseline, promulgated by asapm, encompasses fifty one elements in five competence areas. So, paring any of those down to just three or four is something of a challenge.

But perhaps it is not as challenging as it looks. The fundamental philosophy underpinning project management and justifying its existence is simply "Plan before doing". So the ability to plan successfully is obviously the first important skill. However, to get something done, you need people to do the "doing" and for that you need the skill to persuade people to do just that. And that, I think requires the third and ultimate skill, the ability to communicate effectively.

In short, without communication no one knows what to do, without motivated people there is no one to do anything, and without planning, no one gets anything done. So there you have it, the three most important project manager skills: Planning, Persuading and Promulgating (communication). Of course there are a lot of other desirable skills, but mostly they fall into subsets of these three.

Max's Major PM Mentors

PMWT: Who were your mentors? Which individuals have had the most influence on you and your professional career over the years? Perhaps just mention a few.

Max: Ah, yes, mentioning names is a dangerous exercise, because there will be those that are offended

because they are not mentioned as well as those who are offended because they are! Further, I have had more than one career, so I presume that we are talking here of my project management career. Thus I think I'll play it safe by confining my remarks to those whom I hope to meet in the next world.

First and foremost, I think of (the late) Dr. **Linn Stuckenbruck** because he was the editor of the first book to be published by the Project Management Institute by various well-known authors (including himself): "The Implementation of Project Management". Then there was (the late) Dr. **Dean Martin** who I thought had, from his experience as a contracting officer, a sound practical grasp of what it takes to run a project and get to where you had to get. Both contributed a lot of sound ideas that contributed to my understanding of project management.

(The late) Matt Parry was unique in that he laid the foundation for PMI's reason-to-be through his landmark ESA report. This report, titled "Ethics, Standards and Accreditation" included the first elements of project management knowledge that I was later given responsibility for developing further into the original PMBOK document.

Next up would be (the late) **David Curling** who established the original PMForum web site disseminating independent news and thoughts about project management around the world. For many years he twisted my arm to write essays for publication and we edited each other's work. (The late) **Dick Balfour**, another colleague, had very abstract and sometimes abstruse ideas, but nonetheless thought-provoking. He was passionate about seeing Canada represented on the world stage by its own project management organization, a vision that has not yet come to pass.

(The late) Doug Egan and (the late) **Brian Fletcher** were both close friends with very strong opinions, not only about project management, but also about how an organization like PMI should be run. We used to fight over the details, but it was all good-natured.

Project Management in the Future

PMWT: Now the big question, where is project management headed? What does the future of project management hold in store? Where will it be in 5, 10 or 20 years?

Max: Surprisingly, in the short term I don't think that is such a difficult question to answer. In the long term it is more problematical. No matter how much I polish my crystal ball, it's pretty fuzzy around the back. Maybe I need a crystal ball upgrade?

In the shorter term, that question was answered in a very perceptive presentation by David Cleland about ten years ago at a PMI Seminar/Symposium (to the neophytes, that is a "PMI Congress"!) David observed that every preference, fashion or technology goes through a life span that takes the form of the classic S-curve. It starts off slowly, gradually gathering momentum, travels at its highest speed for a while and finally slows down, withers and dies – as some new, new idea takes its place, following exactly the same pattern.

We've seen this in the stone age, followed by the bronze age, the iron age and now the plastics age and so on. Exactly the same can be said of strategic concepts like management and project management. Right now, project management is clearly on a roll. About twenty years ago, when the membership of PMI was around 6,000, I publicly predicted, based on some mathematical projections, that the potential membership peak would be around 450,000. Today, PMI is only half way there, so obviously PMI still

has someway to go.

But it is time to see something new emerging. And in fact, I think we do. We see the rise of project portfolio management. Try as hard as some might, to see project portfolio management as an extension of project management is impossible when in fact it is the other way round. Project portfolio management will subsume project management – at least in the burgeoning field of information technology projects. Anyone who disputes that should first read my recent paper on the subject of project portfolio management and examine the project portfolio management life cycle (and, yes, I do mean "cycle!) You can read it here: http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/ten_step/intro.htm

So, I don't think we'll ever see project management as a legally and publicly recognized "profession", though people engaged in project management will undoubtedly be expected to act professionally. But as Dr. Paul Giammalvo has so clearly demonstrated, project management is simply a craft, a discipline. That news will be bad tidings for some, but let's not kid ourselves.

My trusted crystal ball is also displaying a lot of other things, but they are only indirectly related to the topic of project management. Rather they are pointing to significant things like changes in political power, changes in population numbers and even changes in how we apply our economic concepts, to say nothing of religious attitudes. These will create a very different world from the one we live in today. There will be great shortages, particularly of land and fresh water and, as a consequence, even greater strife in the world. Conditions that cannot be realistically solved by technology, let alone project management.

And in the mean time, project management will simply become one of our important life skills for about 60% of the population. The other 40% will continue to muddle along as usual.

Advice to new PM Entrants

PMWT: Max, you are widely considered one of the world's true project management experts. Your reputation is well deserved. You've experienced many projects, from various perspectives. You've studied project management for decades, made many important contributions, participated in numerous professional meetings, etc. Now, after all that, what would you say to a young person just getting started who is interested in making project management his or her career path?

Max: That's very nice of you to say so, but let's not get carried away, here. Interestingly, I frequently get asked for my advice about getting into project management, such as "How do I get started?", "Where can I find out more about it?", and so on. And that's not necessarily from "young" persons; I get the questions from all ages – especially from people considering a career switch. I would say that before getting into project management, you do need to answer an important question: "Are you suited to project management in the first place?"

So, for those in, or entertaining the idea of getting into, project management, it is very important to establish whether you are really cut out for it. By my reckoning, some 30% of the working population is not suited to project work of any kind and those people should seek careers elsewhere. For the rest, the work is exciting, satisfying, and full of opportunities.

But people must recognize that project management is stressful and the stress level varies throughout the project life span and as you move from one project to the next. You cannot always expect to have a

steady stream of projects to keep you busy and handed to you on a plate and, equally important, you cannot expect projects to come to you. The world economy and its projects are simply not like that. Most often **you** have to go **to** the projects so that means you must be prepared for a flexible life style. It also means you have to take charge of your own career, a good idea anyway, and be quite clear on where you want to go. As in any project, it will not always work out the way you had hoped for, but having a good plan is a big help.

Getting into project management is not so easy either. Of course, you can take all kinds of project management courses, but that doesn't necessarily get you a job because most project manager jobs understandably require previous experience – so you're in a catch twenty-two situation. If you are serious about getting into project management, the first step is to get yourself into an organization where the probability of becoming associated with a project as a team member is quite high. If you are already employed in such an organization, then let management know that you want to progress in that direction. Management always likes to see enthusiasm amongst its employees.

If you are not in that fortunate situation and would therefore need to make a switch in employment, then before you do so, I suggest that you seek out some voluntary organization where you can get some experience on a project team and hopefully soon get experience in actually managing a project. If you are in an area where there is a local chapter of a project management organization, then you are in luck. Join it and roll up your sleeves, you will not only get a chance to "do projects" but also network with others with similar interests who can tell you what's going on in the market place.

Never mind whether or not you get paid for the project work, the experience becomes one of your permanent valuable assets. It resolves two issues: the first is whether or not you are cut out for project management, and the second, something positive to put on your resume. And so I would close by saying: If you are comfortable with all of that, then go for it. As I said, the work is exciting, satisfying, and full of opportunities!