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Give Back to Your Profession – Volunteer!
The Return on Investment May Surprise You

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Introduction

I must admit that I am old school. I believe in hard work and working hard, and that one's life is eventually best defined by the work accomplished. That is, it's what we do in life that must make a difference – for ourselves and for others (including family, peers and society).

After 30+ years of working on projects and in project management, I fully appreciate the natural cycle of a professional career. That is, after college one usually "gets a job", with that position more than likely now to involve project work. Over the next five to ten years, one is normally concerned most with learning, promotions and income. If one is working in a professional field or environment that is enjoyable or fulfilling, then after some years a career begins to emerge, with a focus on opportunities for further advancement in that career field. Generally for the first 10 – 15 years, one is focused on income, family and job security.

After 10 years or so, however, many people begin to explore "professional" networks; that is, seeking to learn more about what those in other organizations with similar roles and responsibilities are doing, what are latest trends and developments within the profession, what professional organizations serve the field. For the first 10-15 years or so of a professional career, however, the emphasis should be and normally is on learning – learning how to do a good job, how to maximize performance, how to increase value, and how to adapt new concepts.

After 10 - 15 years of working and learning, most professionals have some useful experience or knowledge about his or her organization, projects, industry or field of expertise. Many then choose to share that knowledge, both within an employer organization and with others in the industry or profession. This sharing process can be beneficial to the individual, the sponsoring organization, and to the profession or industry at large.

After 15 or 20 years of professional work, however, where one has learned, grown and benefited, often with significant personal financial rewards, there comes a time when some thought should be on "giving back to the profession!"

For me that came approximately 10 years after starting project management work on a major US government program in Idaho. It was partially by happenstance; only after some effective coaching in later years by some professional mentors could I actually put this in proper perspective. I have since met professional leaders who feel strongly about this subject, suggesting that true professionalism dictates that one must give back to the profession from which one has benefited. In my case, I found profound benefits resulting from volunteer service to the project management profession. Those benefits have included accelerated learning, increased visibility and reputation, large professional network, personal career advancement, and lasting friendships around the world.

This editorial is to share my personal story, highlight some of the benefits that I have realized, and suggest that the return on investment of time and energy can be significant – and surprising. I highly recommend that everyone involved in project management consider volunteering at a branch of your national PM association or at your local PMI chapter. The results will be highly rewarding.

A Personal Professional Journey

My professional career began in 1976 with a position as a project cost analyst on the Loss of Fluid Test (LOFT) program at the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) in Eastern Idaho, USA. The LOFT program included the design and construction of a test reactor on the Idaho nuclear reservation, development of loss of coolant accident software and analytical systems, then running a series of simulated and actual loss of coolant accidents (or “tests”). The latter culminated in loss of coolant accident testing with live nuclear fuel. The total program, then one of the largest funded by the Energy Research and Development Agency (ERDA – the predecessor of the US Department of Energy (DOE)) provided an opportunity for intensive learning about project cost control and schedule management, including hands-on work package planning and scheduling, earned value measurement and reporting, project change control, and project management in general.

After four years of continuous learning and advancing, I moved to California to a position as program control analyst for GTE Sylvania Systems Group. There I worked in a serious cost and schedule control systems criteria (C/SCSC) environment on first a major defense program, then on a team to develop company-wide earned value (EV) management and reporting capabilities. That “black box” environment was not for me, however.

After 15 months, I grew dissatisfied and began to look for a new opportunity. Visiting GTE’s technical library, I found the Encyclopedia of Associations; I looked for a professional society related to what I was doing for a living – helping manage programs and projects. I found the Project Management Institute (PMI) in late 1980, which had about 5,000 members and a chapter based in San Francisco. I began to attend Northern California PMI chapter meetings in 1981, then joined PMI.

Through the PMI chapter, I found a career opportunity with Kaiser Engineers, a global engineering and construction management firm, at their corporate headquarters in Oakland, where I went to work at a cost engineer in 1981. For the next three years, I worked on a series of large, interesting, industrial projects that included the design and construction of cement and aluminum plants, rail transport systems, and coal gasification projects. I learned about planning and managing big and complex engineering and construction projects, also attending several in-house project management training courses and learning from project managers and construction industry executives with decades of experience. It was exhilarating!

During that period of the early 1980s, I attended PMI and AACE (Association for the Advancement of Cost Engineering) chapter meetings in San Francisco and began to learn about project management as a professional field. I began to understand my position, and my series of "jobs" as a career; my professional learning was accelerating as I could see the value of professional roles and opportunities ahead.



In mid-1984, it became too expensive to live in the San Francisco area so my wife and I made the decision to return to the small town environment of eastern Idaho. I received an offer from my previous employer there, EG&G Idaho (the prime contractor for the DOE at the INL), which I accepted. On relocating back to Idaho, however, I was determined to continue advancing my career. I had begun pursuit of a Masters Degree in Business Administration (MBA) at the University of Santa Clara in 1990; upon returning to Idaho I immediately enrolled in the MBA program at Idaho State University (based in Pocatello, Idaho), which served government employees in Idaho Falls, completing the program in 1986.

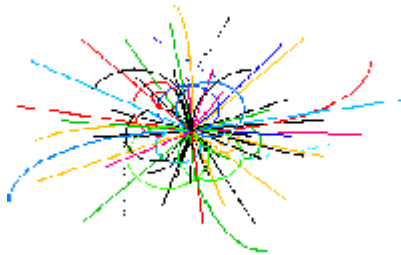
In 1986, I also sent a letter to PMI to sponsor a potential PMI chapter in Eastern Idaho, wanting to recreate the professional connections and opportunities that I had experienced in San Francisco. We identified enough PMI members working for the government in eastern Idaho, launched a PMI chapter and received an official charter at PMI'87 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For three years I was a volunteer leader for PMI in Eastern Idaho, as chapter founder, president and board member. In 1988 I also joined Elvin Isgrig's PMI Education Committee, working on some early PMBOK and standards development teams.



During that period, I was promoted to junior project manager, then head of a company-wide initiative to improve project planning across the entire INL (several hundred projects, 10,000 employees). That effort became known as the Project

Management Upgrade Program at EG&G and resulted in a standard methodology for creating project management plans, generally consistent with PMI's PMBOK standard, and including a series of PM classes that all managers in the company had to attend. It seemed that my advancement at work and volunteer leadership for PMI went hand-in-hand. In retrospect, it was clearly true. At the time, however, I was still on a very steep learning curve related to professional project management. I recognized how much I still had to learn, and was hungry for more PM knowledge, challenges and opportunities. (I remember reading everything I could find about project management at the time, including articles and books.)

I began to reach out again. I attended the PMI'87 Annual Seminars/Symposium in Milwaukee and a regional conference in Seattle sponsored by the PMI Puget Sound Chapter in 1988. I attended the PMI'88 Symposium in San Francisco where I passed the PMP exam (PMP #231). I made a presentation at another regional conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in June, 1989 and at the PMI'89 Annual Symposium in Atlanta, Georgia in October.



In early 1989, I had the opportunity to relocate to Texas as a member of the mobilization team for the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) Project. At the time, EG&G was part of a three-organization team that won a contract with the US DOE to design and build the world's largest proton-proton collider, a high energy physics laboratory to include a 50-mile underground ring for accelerating particles, entirely

encircling the town of Waxahachie, Texas, south of Dallas. EG&G was tasked with developing project management and other administrative and scientific systems for the new SSC Laboratory; I was tapped to develop an earned value-based project management and reporting system. This was a tremendous career opportunity; at the time the SSC was expected to cost US\$8 billion and take at least seven years to build. I started working in Dallas in March 1989, transferring my PMI chapter membership to the PMI Dallas Fort Worth Chapter in 1990.

After working in the Dallas area for about six months, I contacted the leaders of the PMI DFW chapter to learn about local activities; I was invited to lunch by then president **A Matt Piazza** and former president **Dick Walz**. There I was informed that Matt was being transferred to Australia by his employer, and that new leadership was needed in the chapter. I was invited to step in as interim chapter president, which I accepted, recognizing it as a great opportunity to meet local professional and business leaders. In addition, there was somewhat of a crisis situation in the DFW chapter - PMI's annual Seminar/Symposium was scheduled to be held in Dallas in 1991 and there was a splinter group of PMI members in Plano (north of Dallas) who were trying to spin off a new chapter there. (That story is local history and must wait for another time).

Over the next three years, I had the opportunity to lead the DFW chapter of PMI; host the PMI'91 Seminar/Symposia; spin off a PMI chapter for Fort Worth (40 miles to the west); support the formation of new PMI chapters in Austin and San Antonio, Texas; represent the PMI Dallas Chapter at PMI'90 in Calgary, PMI'91 in Dallas and PMI'92 in Pittsburgh; and lead numerous local activities and meetings. During those years, I think my volunteer time averaged around 20 hours per week or more, with some weeks more intensive than others (about 1,000 hours/year). It represented a tremendous investment of time, energy and (in some cases) personal resources.

In 1990, I participated in the two largest PM conferences outside of North America for the first time. In June, I presented a paper about our work at the SSC at the INTERNET'90 World Congress on Project Management in Vienna, Austria. This was an extremely exciting experience for me, as I learned that there was a big network of project management professional organizations in Europe, and I got a flavor for how international the PM field actually was.



The INTERNET'90 congress was also exhilarating for me because I learned about entirely new concepts and ideas, and met professionals in other countries. (As a result of that trip, I joined the Association for Project Management – APM – in the UK (member # 4001), although I could not maintain the membership for financial reasons for more than two years). I also met **Alan Harpham**, **Paul Dinsmore**, **Bob Youker** and **Prof Roland Gareis**, among others, at that event.

In October 1990, I attended the PMI'90 Seminars/Symposium in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, another big, exciting and stimulating PM conference. As the PMI Dallas Chapter president, I participated in the PMI Council of Chapter Presidents' meeting, where I met **Bruce Rodrigues** from South Africa, **Helen Cooke** from Chicago, **Mike Katagiri** from Seattle and many other PMI leaders from around the world. Following **Dr. Frank Church's** dynamic keynote address entitled "Project Earth", a group of PMI leaders held an impromptu meeting and committed to actually responding to Dr. Church's challenge to do something in response to the growing problems affecting the earth. (This led to the founding of PMI's first SIG – the Project Earth SIG, of which I was founder and first chair – my primary volunteer role after leaving the PMI Dallas Chapter presidency at the end of 1992.)

In 1991, I left the SSC Laboratory for some consulting opportunities. (The SSC project was cancelled by the US congress in 1993 when the price tag jumped to

\$10 billion +). During 1992, I began to travel in Russia and became PMI's liaison representative to the Russian Project Management Association SOVNET. During 1991 – 1992 I was the PMI Dallas Chapter President, and an advisor to the newly formed PMI Fort Worth chapter. During 1992-1994, I was chair of the Project Earth SIG. During 1993-1995, I was PMI liaison to SOVNET and then UKRNET (Ukrainian PM Association). I was a workshop leader and paper presenter at PMI'92 in Pittsburgh, PMI'93 in San Diego, and PMI'94 in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

During that period I also presented papers at INTERNET'92 in Florence, Italy; presented three papers and led a workshop at the SOVNET'93 conference in Moscow, Russia; led a workshop and presented a paper at INTERNET'94 in Oslo, Norway; and made a presentation at the SOVNET'95 conference in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 1994, I was elected to the PMI Board of Directors as a Vice President for Public Relations, serving on the PMI Board for three years (1995-1997). During 1995-1997, I participated in 10-12 board meetings in various cities around North America, as well as various board committees and activities between and during annual conferences.

In 1995, I proposed and led an initiative named the Global PM Forum (GPMF), at which PM professional leaders from various countries were invited to meet together to discuss global cooperation, international standards and other topics of common interest. The first GPMF was held at the World Trade Center in New Orleans, in conjunction with the PMI'95 Seminars/Symposium. It was highly successful with around 20 countries represented, and led to a continuation of the GPMF movement (series of meetings) until the last one in New Delhi, India in 2005 (at which I also participated). From 1995 through 1999, I acted as Chair of the GPMF Steering Committee.

During 1996-1998, on behalf of PMI, I helped launch a series of meetings in Washington, DC, labeled the "American Project Management Forum", to which we invited the PM focal points at various US government agencies. **Wayne Abba** at the Department of Defense (DoD) was instrumental at bringing DoD and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) into that process, along with Dr. **Ed Hoffman** at NASA, **Peter Devlin** at the US DOE and others.



In addition, I continued to support PMI at the local level, on several international committees and by presenting papers at PMI'98 in Long Beach and PMI'99 in Philadelphia.

After 2000, I became less active in PMI and in the PM profession. I served on the PMI board of directors again in 2002 (filling a vacant seat on request from the board) and attended various Global Congresses in the USA and in Scotland (2005).

In 1997 I began some program management consulting in the US transit industry, on a large billion \$ light rail “build out” program in Dallas and the multi-billion \$ multi-modal “Sound Move” Program in Seattle. During 2000 – 2003, I worked as a director for a system-on-chip semiconductor firm; during 2004 – 2006 I worked for a small public acquisitions firm; since 2006 I have been focused on PMForum and *PM World Today*, also doing some consulting on the side for the National Nuclear Security Administration within the US DOE.

That is a summary of my professional career. During the period 1985 – 2000, I was volunteer leader for PMI as chapter leader, SIG leader, board member, committee member, liaison representative and global champion. My personal investment of time was in the thousands of hours; in some cases personal funds were invested for travel and other expenses. Professional opportunities and advances went hand-in-hand with my volunteer activities. In my opinion, the benefits were numerous and unequivocal. Here is what I gained, and you can as well, from volunteering.

Sharing Knowledge and advancing the Profession

The best way to “give back to the profession” is to author articles and presentations, or to tell stories, in order to share your experiences and lessons learned with others and younger professionals in the field. This is especially true if you have a solution to a problem or common issue that you can offer to others.

There is constant pressure to advance the field of project management. This can occur in various application areas, but also in specific industries – for example, in such industries as healthcare, hospitality or manufacturing where PM may be just emerging. (Not long ago, new fields of application included many more industries.) Many PM associations and PMI chapters have opportunities to speak or contribute to newsletters, journals or other publications. (PMForum offers this service through the *PM World Today* eJournal.)

This process also helps advance your career, as publications that are authored can and should appear on your resumé or CV. Publication and sharing knowledge are logical steps in a professional career, but also represent an important aspect of professionalism itself.

Accelerated Learning

Serving in a volunteer role in a professional association can be a tremendous learning opportunity. Where one assumes a leadership role, that responsibility

forces you to become more knowledgeable about a wide range of topics. I found that serving as a PMI leader provided a tremendous opportunity to learn more about project management. This was perhaps the most surprising aspect of volunteering. I learned more about project management through volunteering with PMI than I did actually working – about PM concepts, standards, publications, software solutions, activities and events, leaders and experts, professional associations around the world, certifications and qualifications, status in various industries and organizations, case studies and lessons learned elsewhere, and other aspects.

When you volunteer in a PM organization, you will almost immediately meet someone who knows more about project management than you do, who is more experienced, and who has a lot to share about lessons learned, experiences, risks, nuances and personal stories.

If you volunteer to teach or co-teach a course, seminar or other learning session, you will be forced to learn the subject material completely. If it is related to some aspect of PMI's PMBOK Guide, for example, you will rapidly become an expert on that aspect of the standard. If it is on some more advanced or specialized topic, you can become both an expert and a focal point for that knowledge in the organization.

If you are interested in pursuing an advanced degree related to project management, you can learn the options and issues related to graduate studies in PM through your local professional society. The leaders of local PM associations will have first hand knowledge about local universities that offer PM courses and programs, often knowing personally the directors and teachers of those courses. Experienced PM leaders will often know about other graduate programs in project management in the country or even worldwide; that information is also available from such organizations as AIPM, APM, IPMA and PMI.

Gaining Visibility

As a volunteer, you will be recognized and acknowledged by the other professional leaders with whom you work. At the Dallas PMI Chapter, for example, volunteers are recognized at every monthly meeting, with committee members and leaders asked to stand to be recognized. Names, positions and contact information is often posted on websites. High level leadership positions, for example, presidents and vice presidents of local branches and chapters, are always highly visible locally and on websites.

Leaders of local branches and chapters are also often highly visible on the national, and sometimes international, stage. PMI Chapter leaders, for example, are also invited to attend regional leadership meetings, can win leadership awards in recognition for local achievements, and can become very visible. APM branch

leaders in UK often gather for both informal and formal exchanges. Leaders of national PM associations – IPMA member associations – gather periodically in “Council of Delegates” meetings to discuss common issues, to elect IPMA leaders, to exchange information and to network. In IPMA, leaders of national associations are highly visible.

Volunteering in local branches and chapters of professional PM associations can also lead to useful opportunities at the national or international levels. If you have interest in national or global professional matters, standards, concepts or activities, volunteering at the local level can be a first step towards visibility and involvement on committees and in leadership positions at higher and broader levels.

Networking, Relationships and Lasting Friendships

Networking is often held up as the most obvious benefit from volunteering, and is quite real and significant. Some local branches and chapters of PM associations are quite large. It is not unusual for volunteers to immediately meet dozens of other volunteers, who may come from many different organizations, locations and backgrounds. This process can be good for career development and very educational.

I can also remember numerous cases where I learned of solutions adopted at other organizations that I could take back to my employer to solve a problem. Networking can have some great personal benefits, ranging from a network of PM experts, to peers with similar issues, to mentors and lasting friendships.

Some of my best and most lasting friendships are with professional colleagues with whom I served in volunteer roles early in my career. Now I can say that I have friends throughout North America and around the world resulting from my volunteer activities for PMI, IPMA, SOVENT, PMA, PMAJ and other organizations.

In particular, I want to mention the late **Brian Fletcher**, PMI Fellow and past president/chair of the PMI Board of Directors. I first met Brian at PMI'87 in Milwaukee, my first PMI conference. Brian soon became a friend and a professional mentor, taking me (and many others around the world) under his wing, advising me on practical issues, PMI politics and professional advancement. He provided guidance on how to move proposals forward within PMI, how to muster support among other PMI chapters, how to win support from board members, and how to interact with PM leaders in other countries. He introduced me to SOVNET leaders in Russia in 1991. (He also provided a resource when I needed an instructor for a PM course in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1994.) He provided moral and political support when we launched the GPMF initiative in 1995. We became close personal friends and I miss him a lot.

Networking and opportunities to meet other PM leaders who can influence your career and life can begin immediately when you volunteer. When I first helped found the PMI chapter in 1986/1987 in Idaho, our potential chapter became the responsibility of PMI's Vice President for Region III, **Jenny Strbiak** (based in Denver). Jenny came to Idaho Falls to support us, became a personal friend, went on to become a PMI Fellow, and, many years later, led the my nomination for the PMI Fellow award.

At my first international event, the PMI'87 Seminars/Symposium in Milwaukee, I knew very few people, other than Jenny Strbiak. However, I had been reading a lot of project management books and the one person that I was hoping to meet one day was Professor **David Cleland**, already the author of a number of prominent PM textbooks. At dinner on the first evening in Milwaukee, who should be seated across the table from me by Dr. Cleland. We got to know one another, have met many times over the years, and have been friends since that chance meeting in Wisconsin. At the same meeting, I also met future PMI Fellows **Ken Hartley, Mary Devon O'Brian, Richard Balfour, Ron Waller, Fran Webster, Elvin Isgrig, Eric Jenett, Hank Padgham** and **Jim Snyder**.

Some other colleagues that I work with today and who I have known for many years, I first met through volunteer leadership roles with PMI – **Max Wideman** and **Chris Quaife** in Vancouver, BC (1989), **Dick Walz** in Fort Worth (1990), **Frank Walker** in New Jersey, formerly in Seattle (1991), **Wayne Abba** (1995) and **Ed Hoffman** (1996) in Washington, DC, **Marcio Prieto** in Sao Paulo (1992), **Fred Arnold** in Pittsburgh (1991), **Larry Suda** in New York (1996?), **Marc Zocher** (1986), the late **Saralee Newell** (1990), **Gary Humphreys** in California (1980), **Prof Peter Morris** in London (1993), **Prof Sergey Bushuyev** in Kiev (1992), **Prof Vladimir Voropajev** in Moscow (1992), **Klaus Pannenbacher** in Munich (1992), **Paul Dinsmore** in Rio de Janeiro (1990), **Russ Archibald** (1990), and many friends around the world from events and activities during the 1990s.

I have many other examples of great relationships and friendships directly resulting from my volunteer activities. This benefit alone makes the volunteering process well worthwhile. (I know of two PMI volunteer leaders who met and married, by the way.)

Career Advancement

Of course, all of the above can help advance your career – sharing knowledge, accelerated learning about PM, greater visibility, networking and relationships. Perhaps this does not need too much elaboration, but rather emphasis and perspective. Whether you want to advance your career within your current employer, pursue a graduate degree in project management, identify new or better opportunities in other organizations or industries, or just beef up your CV,

volunteering can have dramatic and positive results. And we all know how important a personal network can be to finding opportunities and solutions.

Caveat – leave your business at home!

Volunteering SHOULD NOT be used to promote yourself or your business. It is a widely recognized Conflict of Interest. This is not such an easy issue, actually, since many volunteers work for consultancies, software suppliers or even larger project-oriented organizations that provide PM services for industry and government. In addition, some volunteers may be unemployed or seeking new personal opportunities for career advancement.

Be that as it may, volunteers should always act professionally, and in the best interest of the profession and the local branch or chapter. This is a line that can be easily crossed; it should also be an issue discussed among professional leaders from time to time in order to reinforce professionalism. Generally, however, selfish actions and self-promotion are obvious to others and can be minimized with effective peer pressure.

Conclusion

Volunteering has been a major aspect of my career, and has led to tremendous professional and personal opportunities and benefits. I have met hundreds of PM authors, experts, mentors, teachers and professional leaders. I have a broad knowledge of the project management field, industry and profession. I know a lot about various professional organizations around the world, their leadership, activities and events.

Volunteering has had an extremely positive and lasting impact on my professional career and on my personal life. I have learned more about project management, and as a result about many different organizations, industries, cultures, issues and solutions than I ever imagined when my career began 30 years ago.

And I have a personal network of friends and colleagues around the world that I would not trade for anything. You can do the same. Volunteer at the local branch or chapter of a PM professional society today.

Good luck with your projects!

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David L. Pells is the Managing Editor of *PM World Today* and of www.pmforum.org, one of the world's leading online sources of project management news and information. David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management, with over thirty years' experience in project management. His professional experience includes a wide variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, transit, defense and high technology, and project sizes ranging from several thousand to ten billion dollars. He served on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice, and was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of Project Management Associates (PMA), the national PM society of India, and of the Russian Project Management Association SOVNET. David has published widely, speaks at PM conferences and events worldwide, and can be contacted at editor@pmforum.org