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Interview with Paul C. Dinsmore

Part I – The Early Years of a Project Life:
How Projects & Project Management led me to Brazil

Paul C. Dinsmore, is President and principal consultant for Dinsmore Associates, an international project management and organizational change consultancy with global offices based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Paul is a globally recognized author, expert and authority on the subject of modern project management. A long time member of the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Paul has been honored with PMI's Distinguished Contributions Award as well as the prestigious Fellow Award. He is one of the early PMPs -- Project Management Professionals (PMP number 129) certified by the Institute. Paul participated as a member of the PMI Standards (PMBOK) and Research Committees, is a former director of PMI's Educational Foundation, and is founder and counselor of PMI Chapters in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil. Paul Dinsmore works as consultant and keynote speaker in South America, North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. He is a graduate in engineering from Texas Tech University and completed the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School and Postgraduate in Management by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo. He is the author of 17 books published in the United States, Japan, Brazil and Korea. Among them: How to Become a Project Management Professional; Winning in Business with Enterprise Project Management; Creating The Project Office – A Manager's Guide to Leading Organizational Change, and the AMA Handbook of Project Management.

Editor's Note: Paul Dinsmore is one of the world's most entertaining and popular authors and speakers on the subject of modern project management. A Fellow of the Project Management Institute (PMI®), he is also a Global Advisor to PMForum, a PM Ambassador™ and an Advisor to major corporations and government organizations in North and South America. This interview was conducted in February 2009. Part II of the Interview with Paul Dinsmore will be entitled "The Light of Project Management: Consulting, Writing and Teaching the World about PM", with Paul's responses to questions about his founding of Dinsmore Associates, a few more of his career assignments, books he

*has written, courses taught and experiences over the last 30 years. We expect to publish Part II in the April 2009 edition of **PM World Today**.*

PM World Today (PMWT): I think that you are one of the world's best known project management authors and authorities. But I don't think so many people know about your interesting life and experiences. So I thought we could begin our interview with some history. Where are you from originally? What is your nationality?

Paul Dinsmore: San Diego California is my birthplace, and I was raised in Fort Worth, Texas. I maintain US citizenship.

PMWT: Where did you attend university and what was your field of study?

Dinsmore: Electrical Engineering was my choice of study and I graduated from Texas Tech University in 1964. I completed the graduate course in Business Administration at Getulio Vargas Foundation in Sao Paulo in 1969. And finished the Advanced Management Program for executives at Harvard Business School in 1984.

PMWT: Did you find yourself in a project-related organization or position right out of college. What was your first professional position, with which company, and when was that?

Dinsmore: Overseas adventure beckoned me as college graduation neared, so I signed up for a two-year Peace Corps stint. After a crash course in Portuguese at New York University, I was whisked off to Brazil where my engineering training was put to test in a rural electrification project in the State of Sao Paulo. The rural electric cooperative had already been formed by a state agency that had assigned a delightful and competent technician, Mario Pagliarini, to the project. Mario and I were tasked with taking power to 100 farmers surrounding Sao Joao de Boa vista, a town of 60,000 people, situated a four-hour bus-ride east of the bustling State Capital of Sao Paulo. The distribution posts were beginning to be planted by the line crews into the red-clay-yet-fertile soil that predominates the hilly countryside around the town. I helped with the overall planning, surveying the right of ways and supervising the crews as they put in the wooden eucalyptus poles and strung the aluminum lines through the hills and valleys. To my delight, the project was finished before my time was up, and was crowned with a glorious night-time inauguration at the coop's president's farm, under the lights powered by the new rural electric system

Contrary to exotic images associated with Brazil, I wasn't faced with fighting off giant boa constrictors, tropical panthers or restless natives. Far from the Amazon, I was located in a tranquil, agricultural-based town with a simple yet above-average living level by national standards. The Southern half of Brazil, where Sao Joao da Boa Vista is located, looms far superior to the still-struggling rain-forest dominated Northern part. Even then, roads were generally paved, except for those meandering into the rural areas, and there was a thriving commerce in the town. But further development in the lush surrounding countryside was held back by lack of power and light. That's where I had the privilege of helping the members of the electric coop upgrade their farms and boost both their productivity and living standards.

PMWT: What do you remember best from that Peace Corps project, and what did you learn?

Dinsmore: "Grass roots" best describes my Peace Corps project experience in Sao Joao da Boa Vista. It was a weaning experience from academics into a real project. Although very basic, the elements of managing projects were there. In essence I was handed a great start-up kit in project management, where I had to deal with planning, procurement, logistics, quality and cost control. Although my role was advisor, in practice I performed hands-on project manager duties jointly with my sidekick Mario.



What did I learn from this basic project? Since engineering education at the time gave no clue about how to manage a project, I learned that instinct and common sense are handy to have in any project setting. I also perceived, the hard way, that planning is fundamental to avoid errors and re-work. And I got my first glimpse of dealing with stakeholders and the human side of project management as I experienced the political subtleties of decision-making in the cooperative. All this gave me valuable insight to prepare me for greater challenges to come on future projects.

PMWT: After that first project, where did you go next?

Dinsmore: Happenstance plays a big part in life, and such a casual encounter defined the next turn in my career. Through friends in Sao Paulo, I met Bill Huseby, a top executive in the Canadian-owned Light and Power Company that had the electric energy concession for the City of Sao Paulo. Shortly before winding down my Peace Corps tour, Bill offered me an expatriate contract to join the company, initially as a substation engineer and then to take over a procurement function. This contract went on for three years and firmed up my technical knowledge as I supported a multimillion dollar expansion project, designed to double the number of substations in the region. It also introduced me to the exciting and challenging world of procurement, as I coordinated importation of major equipment needed for generation, transmission, distribution and operations for the expansion program. This baptism in procurement proved to be superb preparation for my next assignment that took me to Rio de Janeiro.

PMWT: How was your experience in learning Portuguese? How long did it take you to become fluent in the language?

Dinsmore: The three-month Peace Corps language training at NYU provided a head start, but it was full immersion in Brazil that sparked a quantum leap in speaking Portuguese. During the first 90 days in Sao Joao da Boa Vista, I spoke sparingly and struggled to understand the melodic sounds of spoken Portuguese. I was reluctant to speak as I knew I would make mistakes. Finally I concluded that making mistakes is part of learning and began to put together primitive phrases that got across what I wanted to say. In six months I was feeling comfortable in basic verbal communications.

After two years when I started work for the Light and Power company in Sao Paulo, I had to upgrade my vocabulary from communicating with semi-illiterate laborers to carrying out discussions with engineers and other educated people. When I enrolled in night school at the prestigious Getulio Vargas School of Business Administration, I was obliged me to become proficient in written Portuguese as well. Working towards my Masters Degree rounded out my abilities to be fully functional in the Portuguese language. Years later, when I began giving seminars and doing public speaking, I was able to draw from my solid experiences in spoken and written Portuguese from the Peace Corps and Business School.

PMWT: What do you remember from those days about how it felt as an American working in Brazil? What were some of the cultural differences that you noticed or remember?

Dinsmore: Acceptance. Openness. Hospitality. These words spring to mind when I think of the Brazilian people. So I have always felt welcome. There are indeed cultural differences, however, that took time for me to perceive and understand. Paradoxically, many things seem the same. For instance, people dress in similar fashion, vehicles and buildings are like those found elsewhere in the Western world and the people have that melting-pot look about them not so different from some parts of the States. Unlike more exotic settings like inner Africa or the Far East, where a glance shouts out "things are very different", in Brazil, basic assumptions may be misleading.

Here are some of the subtleties: 1) in giving directions, Brazilians on the street generally want to please, and will try to give the right answer even if they are not sure (rarely will you hear "I don't know.") Solution: keep asking until you feel conviction. 2) Brazilians are spontaneous and prone to spur-of-the-moment happenings. But, "let's do something together next Friday: doesn't mean a solid engagement, unless it's firmed up closer to the date. 3) For handyman type of chores at your house, don't be surprised if nobody shows up when they say they would, so find someone you can really trust. 4) Concept of time has the classic Latin flexibility. A 9 a.m. meeting time doesn't necessarily start at 9 am. Note that these laid-back traits don't necessarily apply in the Brazilian business world where international levels of productivity are common.

PMWT: How did you happen to move into project management? How did you learn about project management, per se, and why did it draw your interest?

Dinsmore: People in the profession joked in the early days that project management was the accidental profession, since no one really aspired at the upstart to become a project manager. People drifted into project work by chance. That was my story as well. The Peace Corps experience had me managing the electrification project jointly with Mario. I perceived the role of procurement management as an integral part of project management in my assignments at the Light and Power Company and later at TAMS Engineering. But it was when I worked with Boise-Idaho-based Morrison Knudsen Company in Rio de Janeiro that the lights turned on about project management. That prompted me to read up on the topic and sign up for international symposia. I perceived that project management could well blossom into a growing profession yielding benefits far beyond the classic defense industry and construction fields.

PMWT: Let's say, over the first 10 or 15 years of your career, what was the most interesting project that you worked on? Why was it so interesting?

Dinsmore: An iron ore pelletizing plant at Ponta Ubu in the State of Espirito Santo just north of Rio de Janeiro gave me great project management experience. I was project manager for the vast infrastructure that supported the plant. The project was managed, engineered and built by a joint venture between Morrison Knudsen and Dravo Corporation with the engineering and project office based in Rio. It was a green field project, starting from scratch. It included a port for exportation, the pelletizing plant itself and a wide variety of ancillary facilities. The project has since been expanded to three pelletizing plants and processes annually 14 million metric tons of iron ore pellets. The Ponta Ubu project receives the raw iron ore through a slurry pipeline from neighboring state Minas Gerais, and then transforms that ore into high grade pellets for exporting to steel mills in 15 countries around the world. Managing the infrastructure support facilities and the port construction gave me a complete baptism into project management.

PMWT: How was it that you moved to Rio de Janeiro, when Sao Paulo seems to be the industrial capital of the country?

Dinsmore: My procurement background at the Light and Power company in Sao Paulo, prepped me for a procurement manager post for a Hydroelectric project under design in Rio de Janeiro, where I worked for the New-York-based TAMS Engineering. The project called for damming up the Doce River also in the State of Espirito Santo. That project prompted my move to Rio, where I established roots. As responsible for procuring the equipment, components and materials for the project, I became immersed in the field of procurement management. During that period, along with other material management professionals, I organized a national organization called ABAM Associacao Brasileira de Administracao de Materiais (Brazilian Association of Materials Management).

PMWT: Have you lived in Brazil continuously since you first went there, or have you lived in the USA or other countries?

Dinsmore: Brazil is my professional base since late 1964, although I spend periods in the States for studies and research, and I travel there several times a year for conferences and business. For the first years in Brazil, I felt I was living far away from international centers of knowledge and development. Yet for the last couple of decades, because of a world shrunken by communications technologies and rapid transport, I conclude that place of residence makes no difference in terms of professional connectivity. All the information and networking contacts in the world are instantaneously available via the web, and planes leave daily to everywhere. So for those reasons, Brazil remains my base until today.

PMWT: Have you worked in other countries around the world? If so, where, for what types of work?

Dinsmore: Project management has been a magic carpet taking me to colorful spots around the globe. Europe was the scenario for speaking engagements and symposiums in Scotland, England, Germany, Austria and Portugal. Other seminars and speaking

engagements took place in Egypt, Japan, South Africa, Australia and China. The stays varied from a week to four weeks and included training programs and consulting assignments, aside from the speaking engagements.

PMWT: What would you say was the most interesting project that you have ever worked on or consulted for? Why was that?



Dinsmore: Two mega-projects spring to mind, each considered the biggest of its kind in the world. Itaipu Binational Hydroelectric project spans the raging Parana river that separates Brazil from Paraguay. Still purported to be the largest of all hydroelectric projects, Itaipu (generating capacity of 14 thousand kilowatts), was completed in 1987 at a total cost of US\$16 billion. My role was project sponsor for a contract for expediting equipment from manufacturing plants. Since the project was under a strict schedule, the giant turbines, generators, gates and associated materials and equipment were clearly on the project's critical path. Special expediting teams were assembled and sent into the field to make sure the equipment (much of which was being manufactured in Brazil for the first time) was delivered to the construction site on time and to specifications.

The Carajas Mining Project, situated in the Amazon region is the richest mine site in the world -- it includes high grade iron ore, gold, bauxite, manganese, nickel and copper. The mine holds an estimated 500 years of iron ore reserves. I acted as sponsor for the engineering company responsible for managing the construction the 892 kilometer Carajas Railroad, connecting the Coastal city of Sao Luis to the mine at Carajas. The railroad carries the largest trains in the world, with three locomotives pulling up to 330 ore loaded cars. The intriguing part of the railroad project was that the means of transport and logistics was the project itself. Since there were no roads or other accesses through the forests and jungles, the construction-adapted trains hauled materials and manpower to the ever-advancing railroad right of way.

PMWT: Who were some of your mentors, perhaps a project manager or leader that you might like to remember now? Who were some of the project management experts and leaders who influenced your early career?

Dinsmore: Russell Archibald, a founding member of PMI, who was featured in 2008 PM World Today interviews, influenced my career as a project management trainer. I joined him and three other consultants in the 1980s to lead project management seminars in spots around the world for IBM. Russ also invited me to carry out multiple seminars for ENI, the Italian Oil conglomerate in Rome, based on my new book at the time Human Factors in Project Management. I have long admired Russ's vast experience, his ability to market himself as a consultant, as well as his easy-going way.

Professor David I. Cleland, now retired from the University of Pittsburgh, has long been an icon in project management and PMI. His prolific production of papers and books inspired me to follow in his footsteps. He has been kind enough to provide Forewords to some of my

books, which I wrote following his sage advice. I emulated his self-proclaimed secret to successful writing. I overheard that secret when he responded to an admiring fan at a PMI Symposium in Atlanta. He said, "I just put one word after the other." Very sound advice, and I find it works!

Jack Christensen, a veteran of Morrison Knudsen was brought in from the States to be overall Project Director for the Samarco iron ore pelletizing plant managed by the MK-Dravo joint venture in Rio de Janeiro. He was incredibly pro-active and ably stimulated the team to use all the classic project management techniques including planning, scheduling, cost control, work breakdown structure and war room meetings. He excelled at dealing with internal and client politics, conflict management, negotiations and communications. As Infrastructure project manager working under Jack, I learned from his good example.

PMWT: What was the single most important lesson that you learned as a project manager?

Dinsmore: Projects are done by people. The right people motivated along the same course and objectives, make success highly probable. At least 60% of project success depends on managing the human factor. The other 40% hinges on techniques like scope management, planning, best practices and supportive software.

That's why they call it Project Management and not Project Techniques, as management takes in the human factor as well.

PMWT: I realize that you have had many experiences as a project management advisor, author, consultant, teacher and writer over the last twenty years, which we plan to address in Part II of this interview. But can you tell me, what was the first book that you had published? Was it in English only or also in Portuguese? What year was it published, and is it still available?

Dinsmore: Administracao de Projetos (project administration) was released in Rio de Janeiro in 1980. It was co-authored with Professor Zigmundo Cukierman, based on articles and papers that each of us had published in Brazil. It's now out of print, but much of the content is incorporated in subsequent books. My first English-language book was Human Factors in Project Management, published by AMA the American Management Association in 1984 and subsequently released in a revised edition in 1990.



PMWT: I have also been to Brazil and loved the experience. But what about you? What do you like most about the country?

Dinsmore: I know you were warmly received by the Brazilians when you spoke at PMI conferences in Sao Paulo. That's one of the striking characteristics about Brazil, the warmth. Brazilians are friendly, fun-loving and very hospitable. Their life-style is flexible, more go-with-the-flow and less rigid than north American and European ways of life.

Other shining qualities of Brazil include tropical beauty, lack of natural disasters (no tornadoes, hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes or snowstorms) and year-round beach weather! It's not paradise of course as all cultures have their dark side. The country faces challenges in social development, education, rising crime, and gaps between the haves and the have-nots . Yet Brazil is democratic and politically stable, has a growing middle class and a sound and resilient economy. So overall, I find it a vibrant, challenging and enjoyable place to live.



Editor's note: *We want to thank Paul Dinsmore for taking the time to answer these questions, and to shed some light on his personal life and stories from the world of project management. Paul Dinsmore is also a PM Ambassador™ and available for speaking engagements worldwide. For information, contact editor@pmforum.org.*