

PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – OCTOBER 2008

THE CHALLENGE OF PM ASSOCIATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

By Ana María Rodríguez, MSE, PMP

Latin American interest and awareness of Project Management is constantly increasing. Demand for training on the topic is overwhelming, and most companies are looking for methods to improve their projects performance. But there are few professional associations on Project Management in the region, and few Latin American professionals are members of a PM association. Many new PMI communities are being established in the region, and are looking for volunteers, members and sponsors. Is Latin America ready for more PM associations? Will PMs in the region become more involved in the new and already existing associations? Why are they not participating yet? This viewpoint article intends to contribute to the awareness of the need for developing Project Management Professional Associations in the region.

First, I would like to analyze the actual picture of professional associations in Latin America and the Caribbean. There are 25 chapters of the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the region, 13 of them located in Brazil, 4 in Mexico, and one per country in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica, Panama and Venezuela. New Branches of the Buenos Aires and Santiago Chapters are being established. A new PMI chapter in Ecuador is being established. 10,700 members of PMI live in Latin America, most of them in Brazil. Not all members of PMI have joined local chapters. In average, PMI chapters outside Brazil count with 200-300 members. Brazilian chapters are larger.

Besides PMI Chapters, there are not many professional associations for PM in the region. The Brazilian Association for Project Management is only known member of the International Project Management Association (IPMA).

In synthesis, with 580 million habitants in Latin America, it is quite surprising to find that only a few more than 11,000 are members of a professional association in Project Management.

During the first semester of this year I led an effort to establish a Branch of the Buenos Aires PMI Chapter in Rosario, Argentina. During several months a group of volunteers gathered frequently and analyzed PMI's Branch model and also the needs of the PM in our city. The group of volunteers decided not to follow PMI's path at the moment and instead to establish an independent association as a means to obtain enough experience and strengths to fulfil PMI's requirements. I did not share this idea, but decided to support any local development in the profession.

At this point the group is not gathering, and the objective of having a PM association in the city seems to be postponed. This experience made me think about some reasons

that establishing a PM association and making it grow is quite challenging in Latin America, from a broader perspective and not only from the experience in Rosario. This analysis does not reflect the situation in Brazil since that country has shown a superior development in the matter, in comparison to its neighbours on the South American continent.

One reason would be the lack of awareness of Project Management as a profession. Most Project Managers in the region have come to this position as a consequence of the Halo Effect: they are technically effective, therefore they become Project Managers. And many of them are not aware that Project Management is a discipline with particular knowledge. They manage projects based on experience and not frequently using Project Management tools and methodologies.

So here comes an issue as difficult as the egg and the chicken. What comes first? Could local Project Management Associations effectively increase the awareness about the profession? Or do Project Management associations have a difficult way to grow due to the lack of awareness of the profession? I think both points are valid. Project Management Associations should have an active role in promoting the profession, but if government agencies and large organizations do not include Project Management in their policies the profession will not grow in the region. Each day more organizations are becoming aware of this need, and a few government agencies are using project management tools and methods. But actual trends are leading to a more common use of them.

Another reason for the low level of involvement is a general lack of knowledge of PM associations and the benefits of being a member. Although the methodologies included in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) are commonly known, many Project Managers do not know about PMI's activities as a professional association. For instance, some weeks ago I was lecturing at a seminar for Project Managers in Colombia, and I was surprised to find that even though most of them hold the PMP credential or are preparing to take the PMP test, none of them was a member of PMI or was aware of PMI's events in the region.

Some of my colleagues think PMI's only mission is offering certifications, many think that being a PMP is a requirement to join PMI as a member, which is not true. Others think it is highly expensive although its actual annual fee according to actual currency exchange rates is in generally affordable by professionals in Latin America. But few are aware of the benefits that a member receives from PMI: Receiving printed quality publications by regular mail, access to its online library with thousands of books on Project Management, networking possibilities, and more. Local Chapters of PMI should convince PMs in their regions to join PMI in a first place, and learn to get its benefits. Most of the local members join PMI as a means to be part of the local community and do not take advantage of the international resources.

IPMA is mostly unknown in Latin America. Some Project Managers have learned about IPMA by the material distributed by its association in Spain (Asociación Española de Ingeniería de Proyectos). But IPMA certification or standards are mostly unknown, although IPMA's material is available for free at its website.

The truth is that material coming from both PMI or IPMA is available mostly in English, and just some professionals in Latin America are able to read a specialized article in English. So the main entrance barrier is the language. Some colleagues have been very enthusiastic about joining PMI but when going to its website have been unable to find out how to join it just because of language.

I consider another reason for not being part of professional associations is cultural. Latin Americans in all professions are not commonly involved in professional associations. There is a lack of trust in associations, maybe due to a general immaturity in their democracy: many leaders stay at their positions for years, and take personal advantage of it. And Latin Americans are not used to volunteerism, maybe because when local economies are not stable one must work harder to advance, leaving less time for non paid activities. And maybe it is also because companies do not recognize any value from having volunteers on their team and therefore do not cooperate in any way with these additional activities.

The reasons I have mentioned above are just an explanation of the situation and should not be seen as a motive for not joining a Professional Association. I do think all Project Managers should join when possible an association as a clear way to say we believe in the profession. Also, we should support the growth of Project Management as a discipline with specific knowledge, skills, and tools, based mostly on best practices that we could share. And even though we do not have time to be a volunteer, or to study the whole magazine that is sent every month, being closer to the advancements of the profession is also a requirement for being updated and ready to tackle any opportunity to implement new tools in our projects. And last but not least, being a member of Professional Associations is not only a great way to meet colleagues but also to get new friends after sharing experiences.

And, in case now you want to join one but do not know how...

Visit PMI at www.pmi.org

And IPMA's association in Brazil <http://www.abgp.org.br/>

Or IPMA's association in Spain www.aeipro.com

Finally, I should mention that www.pmforum.org contains many resources and information for project management professionals, and the monthly PM World Today (www.pmworldtoday.net) contains professional news and articles, with some in Spanish each month. My role as a PMForum correspondent in Argentina has provided me with opportunities to meet other PM professionals and leaders, both personally and

electronically. We are now also in discussions about creating a Spanish version of PM World Today in order to provide more PM information for professionals in Latin American where there is so much demand and so few resources.

If you are a project management professional in Latin America, and especially in Argentina, and want more information about the benefits or joining a PM professional association, please feel free to contact me by email.

About the Author



Ana Maria Rodriguez

International Correspondent – Argentina



Ms. Ana Maria Rodriguez is founder and manager of ERA Project Management, offering consulting services to the Engineering and Construction Industry in Rosario, Argentina, and an adjunct professor of project management at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Colombian by birth, Ms. Rodriguez graduated with a Civil Engineering Degree from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogota and from the University of Texas at Austin, USA with a Masters Degree in Construction Engineering and Project Management (MSE). Ms. Rodriguez has implemented Project Management best practices and managed projects both in the government sector and in the engineering and construction private sector. Ms. Rodriguez is also an active member of PMI and an international correspondent for PMForum and PM World Today in Argentina. Additional information about Ms. Rodriguez can be found at www.pmforum.org/pm_forum_team Ms. Rodriguez welcomes contact at arodriguezdev@gmail.com also at www.erapm.com.ar