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pm-global.co.uk

Issue 13



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From Consultant to Guru: Mike Clayton on the Evolution of Project Management

Dr Mike Clayton is a name synonymous with project management in the UK. A pioneer of the project and programme management long before its explosion as an industry in the early 2000s, his career spans traditional project delivery, consultancy, training, mentoring and coaching.

With over 100,000 social media followers eager to soak up his wisdom, via his popular YouTube Channel and regular virtual webinars, Mike's influence in the field is undeniable.

But what drives him? What has shaped his journey from a novice consultant finding his feet within the 'Big Four' to a revered thought leader? And how has he so successfully re-invented his career multiple times, to capitalize on the waves opportunity presented by the project industry? I recently had the chance to sit down with Mike, and the conversation was as enlightening as it was engaging.

Our previous encounter was at a bustling Project Management conference. Mike was effortlessly balancing engaging with his enthusiastic fan-base, whilst discussing the latest trends in AI with me. Despite the constant requests for selfies, he remained unflustered, managing to flash a smile for the camera without missing a beat in our conversation. I was clear that I was in the presence of bonafide social media influencer. Not bad for a man who has been at the forefront of the industry for some thirty years.

This time, our meeting was more intimate—albeit virtual—over Teams. And as we commence the interview Mike, ever the gentleman, raises a slight eyebrow at the lengthy list of questions I have sent him in advance. I assure him that we have more than enough time to cover everything. Smiling, Mike responded 'that's if you don't get me talking!'

"I Never Set Out to Be a Project Manager"

Looking back at the start of his career, Mike admits that project management wasn't his original calling. "Like many, I hadn't intended to be a project professional," he confides. "I studied Theoretical Physics and later went on to do a PhD". Mike explained that he was also involved in events management, landing a role as an Events Officer for the Guild Of Students, creating and managing events for students as well as helping them organize their own events. "This" Mike reflected "probably wasn't as far away from the demands of project management as one might expect."



Mike's first role was at consultancy firm Deloitte. Or more precisely at a niche public sector consultancy, later acquired by Touche Ross, which became Deloitte in the UK. This fortuitous series of events would unknowingly place Mike in just the right position and steer him towards his future career in project management. "Back in the early nineties, project management wasn't really a recognized profession," Mike recalls. "I certainly wasn't aware of it, but Deloitte at the time was one of the early industry leaders"

At Deloitte, Mike's initial responsibilities involved managing project finances. But as the project management discipline began to gain traction within the company, he found himself drawn to it. And it wasn't long before Mike was heading some of the leading commissions being managed by the firm. "I attended a three-day PM course, which looking back was transformative for me," he recalls. "It was the first time I realized I could fully specialize as a project manager."

But it wasn't just the work that captivated Mike; I also had the opportunity to teach others. "It was a requirement for all Deloitte leaders at the time to take on training responsibilities," he explains. "I ended up leading the delivery of the Advanced Project Management and Programme Management Courses, opening the door to a whole new skill set and a new chapter in my career."

"Project Management Was on the Verge of Something Big"

When I asked Mike what made him believe that project management was poised for such significant growth, in those early days, his answer was grounded in practicality. "There were two significant trends at the time — the need for more infrastructure in the UK and the requirement for more staffing resources to deliver it," he concludes.

"Most of the expertise in the profession came from military logistics or limited to specialists working on complex, major projects. So there was huge scope for expansion once you could foresee the wide range of 'other' types of projects rapidly coming up and demanding resources"

Mike points out that the big consultancies like Deloitte were instrumental in driving the industry forward. "They were working with government, scoping the requirements, creating formal methodologies and implementation programs," he notes.

"The cyclical nature of business meant there would always be something pushing for major change. Some big infrastructure program being approved. The Y2K phenomenon was one such driver, but developments in rail transport infrastructure, energy and highways all played a role in the massive industry demands."

Seeing the potential, Mike eventually launched his own training and development business, positioning himself not just as a project manager, but as an educator and communicator in the field. ▶

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► **What Makes a Great Project Professional?**

Curious about his views on what it takes to excel in project management, I was encouraged by Mike’s response. “You don’t need to be a technical expert in the areas you’re managing,” he argues. “You need to understand how to manage projects.” It is a view that I have always subscribed to and whole-heartedly believe.

His perspective on the future of the industry is equally compelling. “We’re going to see ongoing professionalization within the industry,” Mike predicts. “More project professionals will progress to the C-suite as their unique combination of skills in transformation, innovation, and execution are recognized and valued.”

“There’s No One Right Way to Manage Projects”

Mike is well-known for his thought-provoking articles on various project management topics. When I asked him about the big news stories impacting the profession, he defers from the usual cries of the impact of AI and technology on the industry and instead wants to highlight the changes to the ways that the profession is being taught to a new generation of professionals. He explains an approach called ShuHaRi, which intriguingly links the teaching of project management to his passion for martial arts.

“ShuHaRi is about mastering any complex subject, specifically through three steps,” Mike explains. “‘Shu’ involves learning in a structured, methodical way by following the rules. ‘Ha’ is applying that learning within the framework. And ‘Ri’ is using your combined knowledge to break down the original and create something new. It is a form of apprenticeship, charting the route of the student transitioning to a master.” I am deeply intrigued, by the concept of embracing this old and noble form of learning, providing the industry with a new perspective on the effective transfer of past knowledge and yet encourage those within to experiment and innovate.

Mike emphasizes that while there’s no single correct way to manage projects, the right mindset and a commitment to learning the craft are essential.

On the Difference Between Change and Transformation

A common question Mike is often asked to clarify is the distinction between change management and transformation. His response is succinct yet insightful. “They’re part of the same spectrum,” he continues, “Project management practitioners need to manage across this spectrum and have the tools to deliver on both.” Project management, at its heart is change and transformation skillfully captured within frameworks of control and embodied by a common language and practice amongst its professionals.

When it comes to hybrid project management—blending methodologies like Agile and Waterfall—Mike’s view is nuanced. “It’s all project management,” he says, “whether it’s adaptive, predictive, responsive, or a combination it is all about managing change and more importantly people.”



Keeping Up with a Rapidly Changing Landscape

Staying current in a fast-evolving industry is no small feat. Mike’s approach is a blend of traditional and modern methods. “It’s about scanning the press for what’s new, engaging with the project community, following the research and regularly attending industry conferences and events,” he says.

I asked him what he believes the industry should focus on in the near future. Mike points to the need for new methodologies and processes that can elevate project delivery. “Agile has had a massive impact on the profession over the last 20 years,” he reflects. “But we haven’t seen anything developed recently that’s had the same total impact. The industry needs to be more flexible and adaptable to the challenges we face.” It is time for a revolution in project management, aside from its ongoing evolution that we have all become accustomed to.

“Project Managers Are Not Born”

Mike is firm in his belief that there’s no single template for the perfect project manager. “There’s a range of personalities, styles, and approaches,” he says. “What I’ve seen are some common traits—like the ability to create order out of chaos and not be overwhelmed in times of uncertainty or high stress.”

He adds, “While it’s important to know and understand the fundamentals of project delivery, it’s more important to possess skills around managing people, being resilient in times of crisis, and having the ability to communicate effectively.” ►

“You don’t need to be a technical expert in the areas you’re managing. You need to understand how to manage projects.”

► On the Challenges the Industry Faces

When I asked Mike where he sees gaps in the industry requiring improvement, his response was candid. “The number of project failures is still unacceptably high, particularly in the public sector,” his view is that much of this is due to under-resourcing and ineffective planning.

Mike believes project managers need to speak up more when they see a project heading for trouble. “Too often, they don’t challenge their superiors when they know from experience that a project won’t succeed within the parameters set,” he admits.

Mike emphasized that this is more often than not, because of political pressures rather than poor project leadership from senior project professionals. “This isn’t just a capability issue—the industry as whole needs greater professionalization and recognition for project managers as a vital hub of knowledge and expertise, so that the advice and guidance of PMs carry more weight. Mike continued “Project professionals need to become more adept at speaking truth to power.”



The Future of Project Management

Looking ahead, Mike is confident that project managers will remain essential, despite advancements in technology and AI.

“There are massive opportunities for growth around decarbonization plans,” he notes. “Governments and Administrations will continue to change, transitions of power inevitably lead to new aspirations, for projects and programs to deliver upon.”

For young people entering the profession, Mike’s advice is simple. “Take a long-term approach to developing your skills,” he cautions, “Great careers take time to build. Project Management isn’t a career to choose if you want to reach a senior level quickly.”

Instead, he advocates for patience and perseverance. “Most of the hard work in developing your career is just showing up and putting in the effort,” he advises.

“Be prepared to do anything and go anywhere at the outset of your career. Opportunities often come when you least expect them, so be ready to shine when they do.”

Mike’s final piece of advice? “Leverage the support and unity of the project community around you”.

As our conversation concludes I am left feeling incredibly uplifted for the future of the profession. No wonder Mike has such an incredible following especially with a new generation of project managers wanting to make their mark.

For those already within the profession, the message is loud and clear, to continue to elevate your skills and to fearlessly position yourself for the coming tidal wave of growth and prosperity.

As project management enters this exciting new and uncharted phase of innovation, make sure, dear friends you are ready!

Mike Clayton’s journey from an accidental project manager to a leading voice in the industry is a testament to the power of adaptability, foresight, reinvention and passion. As the project management landscape continues to evolve and reshape, his insights offer valuable guidance for both experienced professionals and those just starting their careers. 🌐

Find out more about Mike’s Online courses available now through the PMG Academy, which features a whole host of online courses designed by Mike. PMG also has PMP courses in conjunction with PM Training, which you can find here.

Mike is a prolific writer, speaker, and trainer, and is author of 14 books – including five about Project Management.

In 2016, he founded OnlinePMCourses, and his Project Management YouTube channel – youtube.com/@onlinepmcourses – has over 550 videos covering all aspects of Project Management.

Connect with Mike on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/mikeclayton or join his community at bit.ly/Join-OPMC-Community.

LinkedIn linkedin.com/in/mikeclayton

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