A PM career interview with Ian Mitchel

Frank Turley (FT), Director of Professional Development at PMI Belgium Chapter interviewed Ian Mitchell (IM), an Experienced Project Manager/Programme Manager

FT: **Ian, how did you get into project management and how you have been improving your skills over the years. So, where did it all begin and what did you do in college?**

IM: I actually left school at the age of 16 with 4 O levels and joined Barclays Bank. Within Barclays Bank, I was working in their registration department, checking the spelling on shares that had some filing. I've got mild dyslexia, that was quite a challenge.

Whilst at Barclays, I went over to Hartford College and I studied for an ONC[1] and an HNC[2] in business studies.

FT: **Why did you choose a business studies course?**

IM: I didn't really know what I wanted for a career and business studies was general and it left my options open. Later I undertook the financial studies diploma and became a qualified banker at the age of 23.

FT: **How many years was this business studies course?**

IM: It was basically 4 years **part-time**. I then undertook the final examinations to become a qualified banker at the ACIB and I achieved that at the age of 23. At the same time I was working at Barclays. I started as a cashier (bottom), the loans officer and electronic banking department which was just being set up and that's where I began to understand IT.

FT: **So when did you realize you were first involved in a project then?**

IM: It was about 10 years over from there. I actually went to a project management training course and then I realized what I'd been doing for the last 10 years, which is managing small teams, automating what went on within the banking industry, centralizing processes, and basically taking I would say senior management labor out of the previous processes when we're doing it.

FT: **What exactly were the projects which you were doing at the very beginning?**

IM: At Barclays when I first started, I used to do the equivalent of building a car at every branch. So we began to put that into regions and centralize it within the actual region.

I could save up to one-third of the workforce that were working on it. What I used to do is build the centralization teams, bring them together, get them established and you can then afford to actually put information technology in their system as well, so I set up 5 centralization pilots which were successful. They proved what we expected them to prove and then obviously from putting it into a region, you get that actually centralized within the UK.

FT: **What was biggest project you managed?**

IM: The largest project I had was working within HMRC (Gov. Tax Dept) . HMRC were migrating their banking business from the Bank of England into 2 commercial banks, RBS and Citibank, and that had over 200 releases as we had to migrate the various payments being made to HMRC and their payments out, the benefits payments, to the general public.

As I said, they had over 200 releases and had about 80 odd full-time staff working within the, I wouldn't say it was a program. It was multiple projects to achieve the migration.

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[1] ONC - 'Ordinary National Certificate' is a further education qualification in the UK
[2] HNC - 'Higher National Certificate' is higher education in the UK

FT: **What was your worst project and why?**

IM: This took a long time to think about, but I actually worked for Barclays for 30 years. I reckon the worst project which I didn't enjoy was the worst project that I did outside.

IM: My daughter was working in the same organization. I had a lot to learn about the political side of project management and the company I moved to, I'd rather not mention or name, moved even slower than the changes within Barclays Bank and I found it extremely frustrating.

My objective on a project is to deliver. I like actually delivering the end objectives. I don't have to clear contracts. I didn't achieve the end objective I set out to do.

FT: **What do you think are top 5 skills that you think a project manager should have?**

IM: A PM needs to be a team player, a visionary, set objectives and know what they want to achieve in the project and ideally they should align with what the company sees as the objectives of the project. And last a PM needs good negotiation skills.

FT: **Did you ever refuse to start a project because you couldn't get the proper people?**

IM: I used to, within Barclays, basically say if you can't change the following team members, I won't take on the challenge you're asking me to do. You do need to make sure the team you're building is of the right people.

FT: **What about facilitation: How important do you think that is?**

IM: Facilitation I put with negotiation. You're going to find yourself in meetings with junior people, your team members, and also with the very senior members within the company. So you've got to have good facilitation skills, especially when you're working with your stakeholders to actually get from them what the main objectives are that they're looking for you to achieve. Very often, they will be conflicting and your facilitation skills will come into play, negotiating who gets what and which particular objectives are going to be the priority.

FT: **How did you review your project(s)?**

IM: Every week and at the beginning of the week. So I do keep a long list of lists, which basically has the main tasks I expected to achieve this week. At the end of the week, what I did achieve is normally more on the list, unless you're at the end of the project, than there is at the start of the list at the start of the week.

FT: **What about a course in Agile or Scrum?**

IM: I worked in Barclays where they've utilized Agile and in fact in Barclays, I took over online banking which was originally developed on an Agile basis. You can do some early developments within the Agile environment and then I'm going to recommend you go back to work to full methodologies where you clearly understand the requirements, you test the requirements for actually delivering what's required.

I will say I will adopt Agile methods when you're hitting a major problem on the project and everybody believes that can't be overcome. Just get the team in the room, undertake a brainstorm with all of your team of what the problem is, understand what the problem is and then ask them for ideas and how it can be overcome.

FT: **As a program manager then, how did you monitor the work that was being done?**

IM: Each of the individual projects used a weekly progress report. On it, as I said, they actually have details of what they wanted to achieve during that week. They would actually report when they'd achieved it and any exceptions where they're actually running behind. So basically from the 200 individual releases, I used to receive a weekly report, that used to go into the PMO and he used to have a monthly meeting against those reports. We just focused on the areas that we'd missed and how we were going to recover.

FT: **That's sounds good. And did you…what about reporting on budgets and reporting on long-term deliverables? Was this in an Excel file or what did you use for this?**

IM: Initially, the whole program was planned on brown paper Post-Its. We used to have a wall within the treasury building with the whole program and all releases over a 3-year period. Basically, a release was a Post-It on the wall. The project managers could move their releases around and actually change the date they were targeting by moving the Post-It actually on the wall and making sure the new release date had no other release going on. So initially it was very Heath Robinson, but visual.

IM: We would put that, for reporting purposes, into an Excel spreadsheet and we then monitored each of the major releases within the Excel environment.

FT: **What advice do you have for a young project manager today?**

IM: Learn as much as you can and find an experienced mentor. Project management is all about learning and make sure you focus on your work, gaining experience by doing and get certified.

FT: **That's very good advice, Ian. So, I would like to thank you for your time**

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