

Interview with Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez

Chair-Elect, Board of Directors
Project Management Institute



*Interviewed by [Ipek Sahra Özgüler](#), PMP
International Correspondent for PM World Journal*

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, MBA, PMP is currently a Director and Vice Chair of the 2015 PMI Board of Directors. He is also the Director of Program Management Office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he worked as Head of Transversal Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis, where he developed and implemented of a company-wide project selection and prioritization process for a portfolio of 150. He was also responsible of monitoring the execution of the roadmap providing quarterly updates to the bank's executive committee.

Prior to that, Mr. Nieto-Rodriguez was the head of Post-Merger Integration at Fortis Bank, leading what was the largest takeover in the financial service history: the acquisition of ABN AMRO. He also worked for 10 years at PricewaterhouseCoopers as a senior manager, becoming the global lead practitioner for project management.

Mr. Nieto-Rodriguez is a professor at the prestigious executive education school Duke CE, and other leading business schools such as Instituto de Empresa, Solvay and Vlerick. He has delivered executive programs to leaders of more than 30 multinationals on how to improve their strategy execution and project management capabilities. He is also a regular keynote speaker at international events, where he speaks on the strategic value of project management. Recently he participated in the leading Strategy Conference in the Middle East together with Bob Kaplan, founder of the Balanced Scorecard. He recently achieved one of his dreams of speaking at a TEDx talk.

The author of the book *The Focused Organization*, Mr. Nieto-Rodriguez has been featured in several magazines, including *Strategy Business Review*, *Singapore Management Institute*, *Project Management Journal*®, *PM Network*® and *The Economist*. He is also the author of the white paper "Boosting Business Performance through Programme and Project Management", which was written after he conducted

one of the first global project management maturity surveys. Mr. Nieto-Rodriguez is the founder of one of the largest LinkedIn group on Strategy Execution (StrateXecution), which has more than 5,000 experts worldwide.

Born in Madrid, Spain, he undertook undergraduate studies in Germany, Mexico, Italy and the United States. He has a university degree in economics from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and an MBA from London Business School. He is currently studying to obtain his PhD in strategy implementation. He is fluent in Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Italian and German.

Ipek Sahra Özgüler (Özgüler): What are some of the biggest risks and challenges facing program managers?

Nieto-Rodriguez: The major challenge is to overcome the lack of understanding about the value of program management by the top executive team. As a program manager or head of a PMO, it is important to quickly show the added value of our work – that we are in control, understand the priorities of the organization, and are ready to take a leading role. The other obstacle with which I'm often confronted is that some CEOs consider project management as a competency that every executive should develop on top of their functional competencies. That would mean that the value we add as program managers professionals is diluted with the perception that everyone could play that role. The last challenge I would like to highlight is the fact that with the current economic environment, we are being asked to deliver more with less resources and shrinking budgets. In addition, I noticed that after at least five years of non-stop change, people are getting tired of it, which creates even bigger resistance to the changes we try to introduce with the projects we lead.

Özgüler: How do you think new global trends will affect the project management profession?

Nieto-Rodriguez: According to the International Monetary Fund, by 2050 only three of the top world economies will be in the West – the U.S., Germany, and the U.K. This means that western organizations will need to partner with each other, and with companies in other regions, particularly Asia.

Collaboration between global teams made up of different national, organizational, and professional cultures is already a reality today, but most probably it will intensify in the future. In addition, the Internet, social media, and mobile connectivity will keep disrupting our current notions of the 'workplace' and the 'organization'. Networked organizations, virtual and transversal teams are becoming the new norm. Thus, "collaboration" and "networking" will become even more important skills than they are today.

The good news is that we, project management professionals, understand and have acquired those skills as part of our day-to-day project management challenges. As PMI's Talent Triangle illustrates, project managers will also need to develop business

expertise and leadership skills. To keep being relevant, it is critical to invest in yourself; keep learning and building knowledge on top of your project management skill set.

Özgüler: How can project and program managers more effectively influence and communicate with their executive teams?

Nieto-Rodriguez: It's important to identify and cultivate solid working relationships with executive sponsors in the C-suite and elsewhere. In fact, PMI's *Pulse of the Profession®* research indicates that having actively engaged executive sponsors is the top driver of project success. Share your vision about your project and how it will address some of the key priorities of the organization. Understand their personal interests and goals, and communicate how your project links to them. Last, talk to them in their own language, not in project management terms. For example, if you are talking to the Sales director about your project, use terms like market share, product pipeline, product features, sales trends, competition, growth,.... I guarantee you will have his or her attention.



Özgüler: Having managed programs in such diverse sectors as finance and pharma, have you observed any trends or practices that are common to all industries?

Nieto-Rodriguez: Finance and pharma, like any other highly regulated industry, dedicate a very large amount of their project portfolio to compliance and risk management initiatives, leaving little resources for innovation and growth projects. Therefore, one of the key common practices in these industries is to establish a company-wide project selection and prioritization process endorsed and sponsored by the entire executive team. If well done, this process will provide clarity and the right balance between compliance and growth.

Özgüler: What are the most important factors to consider when creating a PMO?

Nieto-Rodriguez: The first priority is to get executive buy-in and make the PMO a partner in strategy. Next, it's essential to find the right people. If possible, hire internally and recruit from multiple departments like sales, marketing operations and IT to broaden the team skill set. When implementing new processes, look for internal best practices and allow for some local flexibility. The PMO's role should be more consultative than administrative or regulatory, adapting practices from *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Fifth Edition* to individual initiatives within an organization's process and culture. By capitalizing on the major contributors to project success and avoiding the leading causes of project failure, project success should be a predictable and repeatable event, instead of a hit-and-miss occurrence.

PMI's *Pulse of the Profession®* research identifies a number of key factors affecting project outcomes. For example, 47% of unsuccessful projects fail to meet goals due to poor requirements management. To address this, it's critical for PMOs to implement standardized requirements management processes in collaboration with stakeholders.

Özgüler: What additional skills are most necessary for project professionals seeking to transition to program management?

Nieto-Rodriguez: Program managers need to have a good business sense and contextual understanding of the projects, so they're able to visualize and understand how those projects collectively contribute to the achievement of the organization's strategic priorities. It's also essential to have good communication and interpersonal skills to build rapport with project teams, executives and other key stakeholders.

Özgüler: What has been your most fulfilling experience as a project and program manager?

Nieto-Rodriguez: I found it very rewarding to be able to change industries in mid-career based on the merits of my project portfolio, PMO and project management skills. Although I had minimal experience in the pharmaceutical field, I was chosen to establish and lead the Global Project Management Office at GSK Vaccines out of a pool of 200 candidates. I believe this is an example for all project and program managers, which I know sometimes have doubts whether they made the right career decision. It validates how our skill set has become a core competency for any organization.