



# The Challenges of Managing Projects in International Development

**Peter Marlow** discusses the unique challenges of managing projects in the international development sector and how a recent training and certification scheme for project managers has made a big difference. He also describes a new voluntary e-Mentoring scheme to help project managers working on development projects, and explains how you can help.

“If we don’t do project management right, nothing else is possible.”

**Craig Redmond**, Senior Vice President of Programs, Mercy Corps

## The Problem

International Development is big. For example, in 2015 the UK government spent £12.2bn of public money on foreign aid and has now committed to a target of 0.7% of GDP being spent on aid. The European Union is the world’s largest humanitarian donor and this is just part of a bigger picture of public and private donations being spent on trying to improve the lives of people living in the developing world.

Much of this investment ends up in projects – and being managed by international, national or local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities. They have project managers and project teams and manage many of the same challenges that you do: delivering on time, on scope and within budget. The context, however, is

very different. They may be managing food distribution in a refugee camp, helping farmers to access markets, helping populations trapped by conflict or improving the lives of people living in slums. The communities they serve trust the projects to deliver often life-changing benefit.

Given these challenges, development organisations tend to focus on the technical areas of their projects and recruit specialists with an appropriate in-depth technical knowledge such as health or water and sanitation. They are then required to manage projects and lead project teams – although they sometimes lack experience and skills in project management. As a consequence, the quality of project management can be variable with

success dependent more on luck than judgment. Wheels are constantly being reinvented. There is no culture of improvement to embed good practice. Managers are understandably reluctant to admit mistakes as this can lead to the loss of donor funding. So learning opportunities are missed.

## The Solution

The problem was recognised and, in early 2007, a number of NGOs - including Save the Children, Oxfam, Care, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, CRS, Plan International and Mercy Corps - asked LINGOs, an NGO focused on building skills and capacity, to develop appropriate project management learning portfolio for the NGO sector.

Thanks to a grant from the Project Management Institute (PMI), LINGOs set up a working group of NGO specialists and, after consulting widely, concluded that current ways of working across the sector were inadequate. The group tested ideas and approaches, identified learning objectives and developed an outline curriculum for a new project management course. This would set standards and a common language for project management in the NGO sector around the world. It would build on established methodologies to provide practical guidance for running development projects.

In 2010, Project Management in Development for Professionals (PMD Pro) was launched with free online

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learning tools and resources. A new independent NGO – PM4NGOs - was established to own the certification and APMG agreed to administer the exams online. The Guide is available in seven languages. To date there are over 13,000 certified PMD Pro professionals in 144 countries. This remarkable achievement is due to a highly successful train-the-trainer programme by LINGOs.

## Giving Back

There aren't many opportunities to give back in our profession, yet we as project professionals have skills and expertise to offer that can change the world!

LINGOs receives a constant stream of enquiries from Project Managers in all sectors about how they could help with development projects. So, in 2015, in partnership with LINGOs we set up Project Managers Against Poverty (PMAP), as a not-for-profit organisation, to look at ways of giving back, and in particular to research the idea of setting up a voluntary mentoring programme. This

The screenshot shows the LINGOs website interface. At the top left is the LINGOs logo. The top navigation bar includes Home, Help, Messages, News, and Mentor User. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with tabs for SEARCH, MENTORS, PROFILE, MATCHES, EXPENSES, ACTIVITY LOG, DOCUMENTS/PHOTOS, and QUESTIONNAIRE. The main content area displays the profile for David Mentor, including a profile picture, name, and bio. Below the bio is a 'User Profile' table with the following data:

Name of Employer	My Marketing Company	Job Title	Marketing Director
Industry Sector	Publishing	Age Band	26-30
No of years in Employment	5-10 years	Gender	Male
Ethnic Origin	White		

Below the table is a 'Mentoring Profile' section with text input fields for:

- Please describe why you wish to take part in the mentoring scheme? (Text: I benefited from being part of the mentoring scheme when I was a student and would now like to give other people the same opportunity.)
- Please provide a brief summary of your career path (Text: I left University 5 years ago and have risen up the ranks of Corporate Marketing since. I am now Marketing Director.)
- Any experiences which you consider useful for a potential mentoring relationship (e.g. involvement in pupillage recruitment or careers)

## Mentors and mentees were from countries all over the world with no discernable pattern.

could provide on-going support for those who had taken the PMD Pro exam or were in the process of training. It would also benefit PMs working in small organisations without the depth of project management expertise.

### Mentoring

Mentoring is a great way to share expertise and knowledge. Many of us, I'm sure, have benefited from in-house schemes at work.

Mentoring can be defined as a confidential one-to-one relationship in which an individual (mentee) uses a more experienced person (mentor) outside of their management chain as a sounding board and for guidance. It is a non-judgmental relationship, which facilitates a wide range of learning, experimentation and development. Each mentoring scheme has its own particular emphasis, but they all share a common purpose in seeking to encourage the mentee to take charge of their own development, to increase their professional competence, independence, self-confidence and desire to improve.

There is considerable debate about the use of the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching' - some people do not distinguish between coaching and mentoring<sup>1</sup>. However, it is generally agreed that a mentor is a critical friend, or guide who is responsible for overseeing the career and development of another person outside the normal manager/subordinate relationship. A coach is someone who plans an intervention "designed to improve the performance of an individual in a specific task"<sup>2</sup>.

For a new project manager, being mentored can have huge benefits. It can prevent basic mistakes and avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. Mentoring takes time and patience but it can be rewarding for both the mentee and the mentor. For the mentor it is a great way of giving back to the profession and a real learning experience.

### e-Mentoring

In a traditional mentor-mentee relationship, meetings between the mentor and mentee would be face-to-face. However, with development projects scattered all over the world this would seldom be possible. In recent years a new and effective form of mentoring-at-a-distance has developed, called e-Mentoring, and has been utilised by many different types of business mentoring schemes. There are several software packages now available to operate these schemes, for example MentorNet.

Skype and FaceTime allow easy visual communication but, perhaps surprisingly, email or messaging have proved to be the best medium for e-Mentoring, with

Skype for an initial meeting only. Written communication allows more time for mentors to think about the advice that they give and also allows the mentee more time to consider their responses and frame questions. It also avoids fixed times for meetings which might be difficult to achieve with different time zones and busy schedules.

We started the PMAP scheme as small pilot to test the idea and promoted it through LinkedIn and PM4NGOs. What surprised us was the location of our users. We expected the mentors to be European or US-based and the mentees to be in developing countries. However, mentors and mentees were from countries all over the world with no discernable pattern. The pilot scheme also taught us some useful lessons and the importance of establishing clear processes that the mentors and mentees could follow to help with their progress. It also showed us the need to emphasise to mentees that the relationship had to be driven by them and not the mentor.

A recent mentee said: "I would highly recommend this mentoring program to anyone doing management in development. It's a great support system for sharing best practices, lessons learned and most importantly, perspectives."

One of our mentors said of his mentee: "It was really nice sharing with her my experience and helping her grow and find her own way. I had people on my way who helped me grow and become what I am today and it's only payback".

We are now scaling up our operation. We have partnered with LINGOs and have a high-quality on-line e-Mentoring platform from MentorNet initially for 100 users. The platform enables mentors and mentees to register and manage their profiles, and to establish mentoring relationships. It has a familiar feel and a secure-messaging area that allows mentors and mentees to have confidential conversations with each other and share documents. The service continues to be provided at no cost to users.

Prospective mentors and mentees can sign up through the PMAP website by following the step-by-step instructions. Ideally, we would expect mentors to be a member of a project management professional organisation such as the PMI or the APM, and have an awareness of the PMD Pro (there is a short guide on our website). Mentees should be currently involved in development projects, and it is desirable for them to have successfully completed the PMD Pro Level 1. The average length of relationship would be three or more months, meeting virtually perhaps every one to two weeks. It is important to emphasise that the relationship is mentee-driven and it is time-bound. We have developed a Code of Conduct to ensure that participants are aware of the dos and don'ts of mentoring and being mentored, although it's mostly common sense.

<sup>1</sup> From "The Good Mentoring Guide" by Zulfi Hussain at [www.versa.uk.com/apprenticeship/mentor\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.versa.uk.com/apprenticeship/mentor_handbook.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Clutterbuck and Sweeney (1997)

# PROJECT MANAGERS AGAINST POVERTY

## How it Works

The PMAP e-Mentoring scheme operates through the website and follows a fairly conventional path.

- Mentors register and create a profile including the skills and expertise that they have to offer and setting the maximum number of mentees they can work with at any one time (one to four).
- Mentees register and create a profile showing the skills and expertise they need to be mentored in. Once registered they are able to choose and request a mentor based on their needs. If approved by the PMAP administrator, the mentee contacts their mentor to arrange an initial meeting.
- The initial meeting is arranged by the mentee and would normally be held face-to-face through Skype. The objectives of the Initial Meeting are to introduce each other, review experience and understand the purpose of the partnership, the expectations and desired outcomes. They should then decide whether or not to go ahead with the mentoring relationship – if the mentee and mentor don't "gel" at this point it is better not to proceed, otherwise a lot of time could be wasted.

- If they do decide to go ahead they should make an agreement to cover the What? Why? How Long? for the mentoring partnership.
- It's good practice that the mentee and the mentor start activity logs straight away to keep a record of their meetings
- The mentee and mentor should meet regularly by Skype or messaging to discuss issues and try to resolve them.
- When finished, the relationship should be concluded formally. They should review how things went and (hopefully) celebrate success!

We hope that the PMAP mentoring scheme will help many more aspiring project managers in the future. If you think you would like to become a mentor or be mentored, please take a look at our website at [pmapmentoring.org](http://pmapmentoring.org) or get in touch with me [peter@pmap.email](mailto:peter@pmap.email).

## Find out More:

Visit [www.projectmanagersagainstopoverty.org](http://www.projectmanagersagainstopoverty.org) or [www.pmapmentoring.org](http://www.pmapmentoring.org) for more information about the mentoring scheme for project managers in international development

For information about MentorNet visit [www.sfgmentornet.com](http://www.sfgmentornet.com)

Visit [www.pm4ngos.com](http://www.pm4ngos.com) and [pmdproforward.org](http://pmdproforward.org) for more information about PMD Pro

LINGOs can be found at [lingos.org](http://lingos.org)

