77. Virtual PM: 2020 and Beyond

with Ben Aston, Arianna Harrison & Galen Low

Kendall Lott: Since the great pandemic became a stark reality in the United States just five months ago, the way we interact with each other, the way we do business, the places we go and the activities we engage in have altered irrevocably. We will never look at the world in the way we did before 2020, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. An outlook of gloom and doom is not the only option. The change is forcing us not only to do things differently, but to reflect on why we did them in the old way to begin with.

To a PM, this all gets back to underlying requirements. The tools, but more, the methods, helped us get things done. But it's always about the focus on really getting work done with others that provides value. To dig into this, I gathered, virtually, a team of experts on digital project management in a broad discussion covering topics such as "beyond Zoom meetings," democratization of leadership, the impact of AI, risk, and the role of clarity in communications for outcomes and process. We hear what they're seeing in action now and what possibilities they envision in our rapidly arriving future.

Announcer: From the Washington DC chapter of the Project Management Institute, this is PM Point of View®, the podcast that looks at project management from all the angles. Here's your host, Kendall Lott.

Kendall Lott: Last summer, I drove up to Philadelphia to conduct a round table with a group of digital project managers for a PM Point of View® episode about PMs in a digital world. That was Episode 63. Now, a mere 14 months later, such a gathering is unthinkable. The three panelists you're about to hear dialed in from far flung locations in North America. Ben Aston was on the road in the Canadian Rockies in a vintage RV. Galen Low in Toronto. And Arianna Harrison chimed in from San Francisco, while I sat in an empty office a block from the White House in Washington DC. While that in and of itself isn't cutting edge, the fact that the digital world is now the only place that we can meet forces us to rethink our methods and our reasons for interacting the way we do. This group had a lot of fascinating insights and predictions about project management and where it's going in the new reality. I'll let them start by introducing themselves.

Ben Aston (02:16): So my name is Ben Aston. I'm a digital project manager, and I am founder of The Digital Project Manager website, which is a community for digital project managers. So I've been working in the digital world for... well, actually, I started making websites than 20 years ago. But I am now an online entrepreneur, together with the digital project manager, and yeah, I've been working in digital agencies, delivering digital projects for a couple of decades now.

Galen Low: My name's Galen Low. I am a client services professional. I have just over 10 years of experience in digital. I've held a lot of different roles, I've been a project manager, I've been in business development, I've been in leadership roles, inside of boutique digital agencies, and more recently, inside of a much larger consultancy. My schtick, if I can call it schtick, I guess, is delivering human-centered business solutions for clients in sectors like government, healthcare,

transit, transportation, and retail. I am based in Toronto, Ontario, and really happy to be here today.

Arianna Harrison: So I'm Arianna Harrison. I'm currently Director of Technical Operations at Firewood Marketing, but for the past 15 years, I've been a technical project manager, and I started in healthcare, but it was a technical company, so it was super interesting – heavy database and technical analytics. So it was my first foray into technical project management, and also into technology in general, I knew nothing. I've also done digital projects in almost any industry you can possibly think of – e-commerce, websites, and all kinds of other software development.

Kendall Lott (04:01): When I did an earlier podcaster around this space, I knew what I thought I was getting into. And what I got into was, it was really more about doing projects that are inherently digital, the projects themselves. In other words, it was, in my mind, I immediately translated it as software because that's the area I've come out of, the older school management around software, the software industry generally, as it was working with the federal government in the United States.

And as we talked, I realized a lot more of it was really focused, what I got out of it was, on work with agency, agency work. So it became in my world, stuff about customer service and how you work with clients on digital products, essentially software, right?

That's what we ended up... What I thought we were talking about was how to manage projects in a digital context as much as anything else, and I think that's where the uniqueness of 2020 takes us.

KL (04:56): Digital Project Management, what does it mean to you? Ready, Set, Go. Arianna.

Arianna Harrison: The way I look at anything in project management, whether you're an internal project manager or you're in an agency, it's all client services. Especially in the technical side of things, in a department, I think anyone in your organization is always your client, and thinking about it that way, I think, will make you a more successful project manager. I think digital project management encompasses a very broad spectrum of things, so from my world, it's more technical project management, but there's also the creative aspect of that. To me, I think that overall digital project management is everything that you experienced in the digital world and how those experiences get to you. So the platforms they arrive on as well as the things you are experiencing.

KL: Yeah, I think we have to come back to this, this issue of the creative side. I think that is where a lot of this focus has been, probably, traditionally. But I'm not sure. Ben, talk to me about the people you put together in your association. What is the idea that you want to play with, this framing of digital project management going forward?

BA: When I think about digital project management, I think fundamentally, I'm in agreement with you, because I think it's all about making stuff happen in a digital world. So unpacking that digital world, that is the world of megabytes and pixels, the internet. So we've got data involved, we've got interfaces. So we're making stuff happen, but how are we making those things happen?

Well, I think if we think about it, it involves a particular tool set that we use, there's a skill set and also a mindset. So there's kind of three components of it. So how we make stuff happen, there are things, there are ways, there are some commonalities between us. So I think digital project management, I'd say, was birthed out of the agency world, and originally when our community was formed, it was all about agency people. It was about people who were delivering projects for

clients, and they were digital projects. They were website, they were apps, they were things like that.

But what I've seen over the past five years or so is actually how our community has grown to encompass actually a much broader spectrum of people. So we have people from large organizations who are in an IT department or a marketing department at somewhere like Siemens or RBC or Microsoft, even. So these are people who are delivering digital projects in the digital world, and they've got this... They've got a skill set that may be more orientated around soft skills. They've got a mindset, maybe that's more agile, and they've got a tool set that's maybe a bit more cutting edge in terms of the digital tooling that we use in order to enable us to deliver better, more successful projects.

KL: We hear a lot about project management around the soft skills, is one of the things you just mentioned there, but I'm just grabbing that one real fast, and I'm struck by how being virtual now, that has shifted and is now probably something we have to focus on differently. Because just even as we get people to be more interested in knowing they need to communicate, knowing that they need to have empathy, knowing how to read other people, knowing how to engage with other people, knowing how to build networks, networking relationships... Just as we're getting PMs to really engage in that world, we suddenly took away the ability to do that face-to-face, or in the same common ways we're doing it, so that strikes me as not an easy throwaway line anymore about, "You need soft skills." Like... Yeah, how do I do that?

KL (08:41): So Galen, where do you sit in Digital Project Management, playing out of concepts of service, making it happen in this triangle of delivery of tools, skills and mindset. How do you position it into work you've done? How do you see it?

Galen Low: Yeah, I'm going to take a bit of an arc to get there, but I agree with Ben, I mean, we…at least Ben and I, we're working in a career where you actually needed to prepend "digital" to project manager to clarify that you're in an agency that's now moving into digital things. It was also the birth of digital agencies, and as we progressed, it was also inherently more of a global mentality, not to say that large agencies, ad agencies, consultancies, weren't already global. That was already happening – operations in a bunch of different countries. What started to happen is that when you deal in software and you're dealing with applications, your teams don't need to be in the same place.

So the way I came up, my soft skills almost always had to be digital, because we had teams in different cities, because we had teams in different time zones, we had to build relationships over Skype, over Teams, over Slack, and there was a lot of figuring out, I guess.

I was working for a small agency, we acquired a business in Athens, Greece; we also acquired another business in Bogota, Colombia. So suddenly we had this global organization. Our business scaled from, what, 15 people to 150 people, basically overnight, and we needed to figure it out. And coming back to that thing you said about getting things done, what I'm finding these days is every organization needs to get things done. And that's probably always been the case, but coming back to what Arianna said, this whole client services project manager, that art of soft skills and managing the triple constraints for a client is arguably a different art. And it's an art that is now getting adopted into organizations internally.

So Ben, you mentioned folks in the community of DPM who are in IT departments, and they're

being asked to be project managers, maybe their title isn't even Project Manager, and they need to use digital tools and they need to get things done. But it's the art of having those soft skills to manage sponsors and manage internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, and then you combine that or multiply that, if you will, by what's happened in 2020. Now you've got everyone doing a lot of virtual remote work, and it is heightening how you apply those soft skills. Obviously no more high fives and handshakes. How do you do that digitally? How do you build that trust digitally? How do you have patience with one another as you learn these tools, so that you can get things done together? And ultimately now, for me, I would say, I would argue that many projects, not all projects, but many projects are now digital projects. Even though I would not have said that five, six years ago.

KL: Yeah, I was struck by your opening comment around the word "prepending." I shouldn't have even asked the question that way, which is, why "digital" at all? This idea of words that we create to define things in the past that weren't used then, meaning, for example, "landline" back in the day, well a couple of you are probably not old enough to remember them but, back in the day, we didn't call it a landline, it was just called the telephone. But now we have to be clear when we say "phone," we mean landline. We're like, "Oh, do you mean you want me to get on a landline?" Right? So maybe there's a world where digital project management becomes project management, and we have to start saying things like "synchronous, geopresent project management," was that thing we used to do. Now, we have a word for it. Because we don't need to defend what it's become, but rather why it wasn't like that to begin with.

Which takes me to the content you said about high-fiving and all. You said we need to come up with new ways. I think we're going to have to. I think it's not a choice. That's how we exist now.

KL (12:45): So what lessons did we learn coming out of pre-Covid digitalization of the management of things? Virtual management. What lessons have we got that are helping us come forward? Clearly, we're working remotely, we're managing remotely. But what have we got that's helpful to us as we move into this age of the pandemic.

BA: Yeah, I think when I'm thinking about managing remotely, I think there's some things that we have really held quite dear that have become more important than ever. And I think, that always starts with a really clear brief. And I think when we are briefing our teams remotely, maybe we're briefing teams in a different time zone, like asynchronously, maybe we're briefing them and it's their second language. So clear briefing and super clear expectations, particularly on outputs and deliverables, becomes super, super important. So I think clarity in communication and the way that we communicate is super important. And if we can start things off in the right direction, there's a much better chance that they'll end up in the right place.

So I'd say, yeah, that kind of mindset of, "Hey, I'm speaking to someone in a different language, I'm not going to get the opportunity to actually say this to them. So how can I communicate this clearly?" Will a diagram help. Will a video help? How can I make this crystal clear and not so much idiot-proof, but not open to interpretation? So clear briefs, expectations, these things become more important than ever when we're thinking about managing remotely.

KL: And we've had that in the past. I mean, I like the line you drew there, that's what you had to learn, I think, Galen, as you were talking about, working with different cultures around the world. That's a lesson that was more and more clear then. But we've taken for granted we don't need to in

our geopresent project management, right? (That you heard it here first.) The idea that we really have to be that much clearer. We all know we're supposed to be clear on scope and output and expectations from people, but I think that is very likely a real decision that the environment of the digital age, before Covid said you had to do it, and now we have to do it everywhere here now.

KL (15:16): Other lessons that we had learned from the years of having an internet that we now need to make sure we're using for the many people that weren't engaged that way beyond their shopping?

AH: I think I'd like to touch on one thing that Ben mentioned, that's around communication, and we have all these tools at our disposal that we've always used, but I think it becomes more important now to identify how we use these tools. So you have Slack, you have email, you have video calls. But when are certain things appropriate versus others are more important now. Whereas, when we were in an office, you can walk over to someone's desk and ask them something really quickly. Is that now translated into a Slack ping, or is that, actually, maybe we should have been emailing all the time to document it? Not sure.

But now everything is a meeting if you have to talk to that person. And people need time to do work too, so I think having that balance about how we use the tools and defining that up front is going to become important.

KL: Our information management process, architecture systems, how we use those tools, is so different now, and I know I'm wrestling that with people who are saying, "Wait, we're using Teams and we have this and OneNote and all that..." And it's like, I get badges from everywhere, and I wanted to tell them, "Well, do you remember how you used to get lots of email in the same way?" So it's really not that much difference, is this integrated same platform. Or is it? Yeah, which ones go where? What level of informality is where? Someone was loving texting recently with me, and I was like, "I like these conversations to be on Teams," because text for me is family, personal or something broke, like I need you to go read your email.

KL (17:04): So, Galen, what are you picking up on that you're experienced that they haven't already covered?

GL: Yeah, you know, I think I can send it down for myself into just really understanding what flexibility is. And I think a lot of folks think flexibility is something you look for in an employer. You're like, "Oh yeah, I want to be able to do this, and have work-life balance." It goes both ways, I think.

So yes, to Ben's point, brief really, really well. It may be asynchronous might not be in their first language. You may not ever get to speak with them. And there's going to be some times when you have to get on a call at 10 PM because somebody on the other side of the world is just waking up and wants to have that conversation with you to make sure that they understand what to do, because sometimes just receiving a brief isn't enough to build that shared understanding that they are set up for success. And so flexibility cuts both ways.

Pre-pandemic it was, "Okay, well, listen, we've got teams all around the world, they might need support." You know, you have that proximity, how can we replicate that globally? And the answer was, "You know what? Sometimes you're going to have to put in some time that's not during regular

business hours."

And maybe I'll get a nod from Arianna and Ben as well, but as a project manager, I never worked regular business hours, not even when it was geopresent, synchronous project management. Maybe that's just a me thing. But I think it helps project managers in general sort of get into that, the sort of...I'm not going to say downside of flexibility, but it is a bit of give and take, so that take side of flexibility. And it primed us for that. And what I'm seeing now, to Arianna's point, everything is either a meeting, 15 minutes of which is talking about, "Hey, how are you doing in lockdown?" And then 15 minutes of which is probably maybe getting something done. You still fill that half-hour block. You still need to have those conversations.

How do I tie this back to what I was saying before? I guess I would say that we now know that flexibility is necessary for us to get things done, and as project managers we're wired to get things done. You know, even working East Coast to Pacific time zone changes, it's lunch time in the East Coast, when it's morning in the West Coast, and everyone would be like, "Oh, stop booking lunch meetings. Why do you do standups at lunch?" And I'm like, "Yeah, because if I don't, nobody knows what to do for an hour out West." And vice versa, right? The 6am calls. Arianna, I'm sure you've been on some.

AH: Being on the West Coast, we get hit the hardest when we've got everyone else starting or ending their day and we're just waking up, not even had coffee yet.

KL (19:42): There's some data that's been recently published on LinkedIn around how people's work days have shifted, I've seen a number of things. But you just gave me a thought on that, Galen, the way you said it. I believe from a project management point of view, now we have a management culture and toolkit, combined, that actually matches the kind of workload we had all along. Because the fact is people are more hours, more minutes, they're showing at work, but you also can take a nap in the afternoon. So there are some downsides and not everybody gets to work in that space, I grant you that, particularly in pandemic, in recognition of the many service line workers. But for those that are in the digital space, I think we've just finally got the management and the tools to agree to what they were expecting of us anyway. What do you think about that? Answer that question, Ben.

BA: I think it's hard to differentiate the impact of Covid versus how people's roles or work is changing, and I think obviously the pandemic has had a massive impact on people's work, so people have lost their jobs, people have... Projects have been canceled, projects have been put on pause. But fundamentally, for the people who are still doing their jobs, yeah, I think it's business as usual for many people, which I think is interesting. For my company, everyone wasn't working in the office anyway all the time, and so it's just, Hey, well, this is business as usual. Nothing's really changed.

I think what I am seeing as interesting is actually people thinking more perhaps about defining process more clearly, filling in the gaps where there are gaps to be filled. There are some... I talked about digital project management and part of that being a tool set, there are some interesting tools coming on the market to help fill in some of these gaps. So one of the tools, for example, is something called Nelly, it's an AI tool. And the idea is that we all have lessons learned from projects, we all have project failure, but are we actually using that data in a useful way? Can we look at the data from our projects from our project management tools and draw insights to identify

risks early on in the project?

So I think tools like that, which, coming to the fore, tools like Unita, which are tying together different tools. Arianna was talking about the importance of process, and I guess identifying the communication plan, like who's communicating how, when, with what frequency? Typically, we clarify that in a communication plan, which I think is super important, but I think also what we're also seeing is the recognition that not everyone wants to work in Jira, not everyone wants to work in Asana or Slack or Microsoft Teams, and you might not want to be texted, but maybe the person in the cubicle next to does. And so tools like Unita enable different ways of working and a more flexible approach to how we execute the work by tying these tools together and using APIs to do that in a more intelligent way.

So I think the nature of work is becoming… We're smoothing out perhaps the way that we execute work and, as project managers, the beauty of this is that we don't need to be quite so dictatorial in the way that we say, "You must do this." But actually we can leverage tools to enable a way of working that actually suits people's preferences better.

KL: The underlying theme I heard there was around clarity, though. You guys have now mentioned that we need to be clear on our outputs and expectations around outputs and what constitutes an output, and then you just mentioned process, even the process itself. And so perhaps it goes to the communication around those key elements for project managers. That clarity actually allows people to then execute on their own. We get that flexibility as the whole organization or the whole team, because the individuals are that much more enabled.

KL (24:05): In the end, project management is about risk, I would say. Once you've got your tools down, what we're doing is we're managing. We don't know the future, but we have to bring the future home and talk about client service, they expect something, and we're on the edge of not making it always. So, how has risk changed as we see the broader use of digital tools and more projects really being essentially digital products?

AH: I think they're... As new technologies come into play, we're faced with new types of risk, so things that we haven't seen before. I haven't had the pleasure of working with some AI projects or things that are more cutting edge, but when I think about what could be high risk in those types of projects, I think back to some other experiences that I had around data. So when you have things like that that are unpredictable and you don't know how they're going to play a role into your project, you have this sense of this unknown risk. So I think it's always thinking about risk, and I used to say to some PMs that I manage that if you can't identify risks, you're not looking hard enough, because they're everywhere. And really doing that upfront thinking around what are my risks, or what are my unknowns, and doing your best to plan for them and always keeping them in mind and having that mindset as a project manager to get ahead of it.

KL: Has it gotten any worse though, with the fact that in this Covid-related era, has the risk profile changed for us fundamentally?

AH: I think so, also because I think that the human factor is really important here. We're all dealing with something that's very, very different, that we've never dealt with before, so where maybe resources were super reliable at one point, maybe they're not as reliable, because they've got family obligations that they're attending to. So that element, the human element, is probably the riskiest

part in projects sometimes, as well, and especially in this environment, where we can't seem to predict what's going to happen and how it's going to impact people.

KL (26:20): How are you feeling about risk, Galen? Is it relevantly different?

GL: I mean, yes and no. Is risk ever different? I agree with what Arianna said. I think that the technology risk is so important now, and what I notice is that on our projects, it kind of flips the tables a little bit. And maybe that's not fair to say, because risk kind of goes both ways, but I found that we were educating our clients about what the risks are on *their* side, especially in the weeks leading up to lockdown, because we saw it coming. Lockdown was later here. So we're like, "This could happen. Tomorrow, we could be all working from home, what are we going to do?" And a lot of the risks were, "Can we use Teams on our client organization systems?" You know? Are they authorized to use tool X? MURAL? Can they sign up for MURAL? Who's going to pay for it?

There was a lot of things that came up, and we were like, listen, here's a risk, but here's what we need to do about it. And we became advisors on how to digitize and how to manage pandemic-related risks, because we were already thinking about it. We were making our checklist, we were already trying to get things ready so that we didn't add risk in the event of a lockdown. And then what we ended up doing is also educating our clients in the process, because we didn't want that risk to happen. We don't want them to bear that risk. And a lot of client organizations were probably mid-stride, migrating to Office 365. There's some organizations that I won't name, that are still straddling Teams and Skype; you can still go to Skype and you can still use... And some people Skype, and some of people are on Teams, blah, blah, blah. It really forced the question. It was like, "Listen, we're going to do user research in person, or we're going to have to do it on Teams, while running another piece of software via screen-share. Is your organization ready?" And it really lit a fire.

So I think the mitigation of risk also is accelerated with greater urgency, which may still persist after the fact, to knowing that we are relying on these digital tools a little bit more. And yeah, again, just that advisor role of just like, not just, "Hey, here's some scary risk that's kind of on us. Maybe we won't have the right resources or that timeline is pretty aggressive." Now it's kind of like, "OK listen, are you, the client, or you, the project sponsor, ready for this risk?" And in so doing, we're preparing the broader organizations to handle those same risks on a much larger scale. So I would say there's some risks that we don't know. I think in one of the PMP textbooks, there's the example of, okay, installing a data center during hurricane season, that's a risk. Now we have, okay, well a second wave could happen in winter. There could be a mutation of the virus. There could be just some other pandemic. Now we need to put pandemic down because it could impact us. So now we know. So now we know other risks, some of which we learned the hard way.

KL: Yeah, there's a great little strategic design trick or whatever that people use, which is, what if your business model was disallowed tomorrow, right? What if what you do became illegal tomorrow, or what if what you do, Google decided that they wanted to buy and take over and absorb you? A big player suddenly. And everyone was like, Yeah, that's interesting. That opens your mind to doing some brainstorming before you do strategic planning. Well, what happens when 35% of your economy has shut down in one afternoon? Right? Like, no, that really can happen.

KL (29:47): Let's talk about new products. And not so much the products of doing work, but new ways we have to do work. One of the things that we face is that there's some level of team

engagement that we feel has to be face-to-face. And that's what I've been wrestling with our Zoom calls and our Teams calls and our Citrix calls and our Uber conference calls, I've got to get all the products in there so nobody feels…[laughter] Whatever their video collaborative software is. But what about conferences? What about, I'm thinking about the business development. My own company, I've kind of just taken over one of the lead roles on the business development side, and I haven't been in it for a couple of years now, and I'm like, Oh my God, I have to go to all these conferences. And then it was like, Oh my God, I don't have any conferences to go to. What am I going to do? How will people get to meet me and be charmed? So, how do we see this moving forward now? What does the forward process look like for engaging with people to be successful at those things that require collaborative mental space and sharing?

GL: So events. Yeah, they got hit really hard. Everybody kind of saw the simple digitization, the easy things. Okay, so the keynote speech now it's... We'll stream it. Okay, so yeah, we find that wedding... Now it's a Zoom wedding. Okay, everyone just sits there. We'll unmute everybody and they can speak now or forever hold their peace... It'll be fine, right?

We started replicating some of the things that we thought we had analogues for in digital, that's a weird statement, but you know what I mean? Things that we had that we could probably just replicate digitally. And what we sort of forgot about, and something that my team did a lot of thinking about was, Okay, what are the nuances? So first of all, why did we have to get everyone together in the first place? So yeah, networking. Talking to one another. Yes, seeing these speakers. Yes, hands-on, touching the products that are new and getting a sense of it, and being social human beings. And I think that's a fair thing. And there's also some things that we love about conferences that isn't really on the sort of list. You know, the unpredictability, running into people, that person who spilled their drink. Or, remember that time when the booth fell over or whatever? There's this sort of like spontaneity that you wouldn't get if you just kind of put the key note up and people just watch it on their own. You know, grab a bag of popcorn, it's not quite the same thing.

So really... and I don't have the answers here, and if I did, I wouldn't share them with everybody. But what does a conference look like in the future? Maybe it's not trying to copy all the things that we were doing and throw them through the digitizer. Maybe it's about thinking about what it means to humans to be at this conference, and whether it needs to be to geopresent, and whether it needs to be synchronous at all, and whether or not engagement can be measured based on how many people bought a ticket, how many drinks people had and how much fun was had. You know, there's another way to do it? And do we need conferences? Or is it just a momentary community?

So I think there's a lot of experiential things that we can do to the experience that is different than what we've done before, by really looking at what humans actually seek and need and get from these events. And I think the folks who are thinking about that really hard are the folks who are going to come out on top. Because as much as I would love to sit at home alone and watch a keynote speech or watch a video about a product that I can't touch, there might be a better way for me to actually get engaged with them.

KL: So this massive shift doesn't save us; the digital space doesn't save us. It actually challenges us. We actually have to ask the key questions.

KL (33:19): The history of economics is absolutely replete with examples of the new technology starting by mimicking what the old one looked like, which is cool, and gets your adopters, but then

also it ultimately becomes tragically binding.

BA: Yeah, I think this is an interesting, yeah, like paradigm shifts, where we see, it's like Stage One being people trying to replicate the real, in real life, online. And so we see virtual summits all over the place, and typically, these online conferences and summits just incredibly poorly executed so that, you know, people are doing it for the first time. People don't really know what they're doing, but people are trying to replicate the thing, the keynote speech, the workshop online.

And I think the opportunity area lies in digital itself. It's, hey, actually, this, the fact that we now can do this online, we can do this virtually, opens up a whole lot of new possibilities, and we need to explore what some of those are. I remember actually, this was probably like 15, 20 years ago, when I was working for the Ministry of Defense in the UK, and actually we had just acquired some really expensive software and a bunch of laptops. And it was some knowledge management tool, and the idea was that it was a facilitated session where we had a bunch of laptops in the room, had a facilitator, and it was a meeting in which everyone sat there on their laptop, and the facilitator asked questions, and everyone just sat there and typed away. And the idea was democratizing the conversation and anonymizing it, and giving people a voice. And I think there's a lot of value that we can draw from actual virtual asynchronous working and community that maybe we're not leveraging enough.

And I think obviously things like in real life favors and gives an advantage to people who are outgoing, gregarious, people who have a lot to say. But I think there's real value that we can draw from giving a voice and democratizing the conversation with some of these tools that enable people to contribute who wouldn't normally feel confident to do that.

An example of one of those tools is Miro, and I think that's kind of heading in the right direction, so it's a kind of collaborative white boarding tool. So giving people the opportunity to collaborate and sharing that voice, I think it's a super important.

KL: The world of business has an implicit bias to the extrovert.

BA: Yeah.

KL: And we forgot that and it's not fair. And we've always had to reach back and try and get the introverts involved, and try and recognize it, but it's always viewed as like the world works this way and I need to get you to be involved, and also get some of the extroverts to calm down. And in fact, sales is often driven that way. But I think there's underlying things about human relationships is what we're really hitting on, right? So clearly people who are extroverted or inverted can still have very strong relationships, which are patterns for doing teamwork and for doing sales, and for completing jobs and getting it done. And so what I have been struck with, as much as I see my extroverted friends suffering from the lack of ability to give a hug and have a drink and then sign the deal, I'm kind of like, yeah, about time. The other 90% of us would like to not have to do that in order to do work, right.

But I think this shift of our entire environment, along with these tools, may have allowed us to begin to act how we wanted to act and Galen, then what you just said about, well, what is it we really needed to be doing anyway?

KL (37:12): Arianna, in the space that you've worked with, how do you see it playing out that the engagement with others is either going to be enabled, or not enabled, by these tools? And where does it go from here in your mind?

AH: I think it's interesting to see the people who...and I'm just going to bring it back to projects and managing projects, but everybody who had never had a Zoom meeting before, for the first two or three weeks of lockdown, everybody was all excited about Zoom meetings. And then I think everybody very quickly got fatigued with, "Wait a minute, all of my interactions are this way, and this is just how it is." And it just wasn't interesting anymore.

One of the trends that I am seeing, or it's come up in a few different places, is using other types of tools, like games, for meetings. So rather than having a normal conference call, people are meeting in games and interacting in these games, so it's kind of like a virtual reality type environment, but actually having your meetings, and adding a little bit of element of not just talking about the project, but doing other things, and interacting in this more interesting way, and adding another element that maybe you would get at a conference, right? Where you've got lots of people walking around, you've got that energy and excitement going on, and it's just another way of maybe trying to replicate the things you get from the outside environment that you wouldn't get from just a face-to-face conference through a computer.

KL: I'm hearing a suite of apps that need to be built into these platforms, like Zoom and Teams, is like, "OK, everyone, before we start the meeting, everyone click over here and raise to the best Tic Tac Toe or whatever."

AH: So I've heard of meetings happening over Fortnite now. There's a few articles out there about about teams doing that because they're just so bored with normal conference calls.

KL (39:13): How much of what we're facing is fundamentally transformational, as you guys know, having been in digital project management, working in the agency space with this, understanding how to work with teams that have been virtual, Zoom is not a new thing for you, but as we look forward, it seems to me, like we're seeing how we interact is fundamentally different. And if so, how much is that tool-driven and how much of that will be managerial-driven in terms of how we decide how people should interact or what? Is this going to be a different kind of call for managers?

BA: Yeah, I think, going back to what I was talking about, in terms of tools out there which are beginning to tie tools together better. For years, APIs have been around, which connect data between different things. But I think the friction points between different tools becomes less and less as these APIs become more robust, as they can integrate with one another better. And so I think what we're going to see is this shift from the start of digital tools, which is, Hey, well, every project management or communication tool has a philosophy, has an underlying idea about how things should work, about how communication should work, about how projects should be run or managed, that's intrinsic to the interface of the tool. And I think what we will see is the ability as we… as tools become better integrated to allow people to use whatever tools they want. And maybe you can be playing or running a meeting on Fortnite, and someone else is on Zoom. That is totally, totally possible.

And we're actually seeing some of these integrations happen. It's like Teams has finally decided to become friends with Slack, or Slack's decided to become friends with Teams, that kind of

integration where we see actually the tools aren't really what's important, and trying to dictate a particular way of working on people working through a particular tool, I think is going to become redundant. You can just use whatever, whatever you want. And I think we've seen that. Even with the hardware, we've seen that people bring their own devices is happening, where you get a budget, you go and buy whatever machine you want, use whatever software you want. And I think we'll see that increasingly with tooling as well, as I integrate into this conversation, into this workflow in whatever way you want, the tools will do that work for you to make sure that the communication is happening.

GL (41:54): And you mentioned transformation, and it means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, as does innovation. And I start thinking about... What I loved about working at a small boutique digital agency or the startups is that you can kind of like, you're nimble enough, your small enough, you can try different things. Coming back to what Ben said about, Is digital project management a mindset as well as a tool set? Well, that mindset of just being nimble and being iterative and testing things, I think is the way we're going to come across these new ways of things, new ways of working that will scale.

And I think what we will see less of, but I hope we see a bit of, is some courageous and brazen individuals in larger organizations willing to take that step. And I think here's, tangentially, here's where I still see the value and relevance of an agency or consultancy. You know, how can you pilot this? How can you bring the innovation in and do the sort of, whatever methodology you're using, bring in design thinking, get a feel for how people work within your organization and what pilots you might be able to design, and test these things out, rather than necessarily, probably what we saw, at least what I saw for the past decade, was these slower industries and transformation for these slower industries became just catching up. Just like the Zoom call, it wasn't like, you know, we're doing something innovative and transformational. We needed to transform to catch up.

And I hope that a lot of larger organizations are willing to say, "Okay, you know what? We saw it work for startup culture. It was start-up culture with beanbag chairs and ping-pong tables, and then Google did it. And Google is not small, and it worked, and now people are coming to us asking, 'Is there a ping pong table at office X?' And there's not... And we're falling behind." I hope that some of the leadership in some of these larger organizations, and the influencers, will say, "Listen, let's start these changes now," rather than wait a decade for someone else to figure it out on a smaller scale, and then go, "Oh wait. We need to catch up." I think it's an opportunity for larger organizations to be a little bit more creative, to be a bit more innovative, to listen to what people want and figure out solutions that they can implement and then scale rather than waiting.

KL: Be ready to pilot. Be ready to make the connections. Don't wait and go. So in the project management role, we see the soft skills, the communication, the integration, the management of risk, the understanding what others are doing, who are SMES, for example, subject matter experts, beyond you even, right? This whole mass of engagement, that is the project manager. How do we see this role of piloting and trying? What should a project manager be trying to tackle in there, Arianna?

AH: I think empathy really. This is where that kind of starts to shine in the Project Manager role, because you have to really – especially in a distributed team – you really have to make that outreach to your team members and where they are and understand what really makes them tick and what's going to be important to them, and how you're going to be able to engage with them where they are.

And you may have to do that differently, like Ben said, with different tools, but also just differently for different team members. Just really reaching out to them and understanding exactly what they need to succeed. Maybe having individual meetings with your team members to talk about them on a more personal level, maybe not project-related, and building that relationship. Because that also builds trust. They realize that you are interested in them and not just wanting to race to that timeline and get that deliverable out. I think ultimately you'll be a better and stronger team if you understand each other and trust each other and can meet wherever you are and whatever your needs are.

KL (45:40): So I'm hearing underlying this, the tools and the mindset tie into a lot of what we've already said project managers really need to do. Again, the empathy, the trust and soft skills. So where are PMs going to learn this now? Again, as digital project managers, you've already been living in this world, but now the rest of the world has been shocked into acting in this way.

AH: I think it's really important to have – in a lot of different areas, not just project management – but having your community. And the community that Ben runs really is at the forefront of providing a place and a safe space for PMs to talk about some of these issues and learn from each other. I think that we're all figuring a lot of this stuff out on the ground, this is not a course you're probably going to go take that's going to give you the exact structure of how to do this. It's nuance because again, we're dealing with people, but having that community of other PMs to talk about experiences and be in a safe space where it's okay to talk about your failures and learn from them and have other people learn from them is really important.

KL: Talk community for me, Ben. So thedigitalproject manager.com, it's got tools, templates, oddly enough a podcast. Tell me about the community. How does that play out now, because we've all had professional associations before, we're all engaged. How's this different? How do you see it changing and how do you see that being part of the education people need to be able to get?

BA: Yeah, I see this community as something that's…again, that with more democratic than an institution path, maybe like the PMI, which rolls out a PMBOK® Guide, and that becomes the Bible. And I think the great thing about the community that we are building is that it's more of an evolving playbook that we're co-creating together. This community isn't about me. This community is about the people who are delivering projects in a digital world, learning from one another, getting connected, and through that connection, becoming more skilled, becoming more confident, having the confidence to try new things, having the confidence to try new tools, new ways of working, new engagement models. It comes through being inspired by one another, and I think it's this bottom-up grass roots approach, where that comes from the community, that doesn't come from a top-down institutional, "Hey, this is the way that you should do things." Because the way that you should do things should be...should be changing all the time. There's always a better way.

We should be building stuff, we should be building process, we should be testing it, we should be learning from it and iterating from it. And I think the beauty of giving that role to the community, and hearing stories of how things are working for other people, hearing stories of how things are failing for other people, I think is the way that this play book gets written. And this collective knowledge becomes the playbook that people can follow and evolve together over time.

KL (48:50): How much does AI change this for us? How much are we waiting for that to just suddenly blow all this apart into a different way? Or do we care? Is that too futuristic? Or has it already arrived?

GL: So here's the funny thing about AI, at least from my perspective. I think at some level, I was either waiting for Skynet or J.A.R.V.I.S. to appear, some magical…you know, do-everything-for-me, assistant/genius mind that would accompany me for everything I do and allow me to take over the world. Great, but it's not going be that way. And we've already learned that because there's so much AI already in place. I think, Ben, you may have turned me on to this, but there is this AI bot that takes notes and sends out meeting minutes. And that's like mini-J.A.R.V.I.S. for me. If I was Iron Man and on a smaller scale, that's what my J.A.R.V.I.S. would be. It would take notes. But here it is present in our lives, doing things in the forefront, but also in the background. I would say it's already here, it's already happening, and actually, the sooner we stop calling it AI, maybe the better. I mean, it is AI. It's going to be AI. But just like digital project management has become project management has become getting things done, maybe also AI is just I, is just doing stuff.

So how can we embed that, how can we make sure that we're amplifying human potential and not creating a world where we expect to just be able to sit on our butts and do nothing? I think always there will be this drive for humans to do things, get things done, innovate, change the way their working and evolve, and it's not about letting someone else take the reins on that, vis-à-vis AI. I think it's about, how can we use our accomplishments thus far in technology to help us get further faster? And if you look at the arc of technology and where we're trending, it just in some ways means buckle up, we're going to be moving faster.

So I would say, I would almost adopt one of the things that Ben had said, is that these are tools. And it doesn't mean we have to put away our own intelligence. It means that we have to embrace better ways of working to get things done faster, better, more ethically, and also together. And how can we help it not isolate us, but actually use it to accommodate, democratize, how we all behave and what we all need as humans?

KL (51:13): Well, how about this next step, then, Arianna? I think you had a background around some of this, the virtual reality? New cool tool? Because I'm sitting here looking at you guys in the end, it's still just a flat screen. Cool, meaning, is that it now interacts with me, right? The TV was the same film over and over again. Now I've got this interaction. But what happens when I'm operating in ways I can't even think about now, and will that matter? And how do you see that playing out? Is it meaningful or just cool science fiction?

AH: I think maybe we don't know yet, but I think when it comes to adding back maybe that social element that we've been missing, it may become important, because maybe I can still feel like I'm at this conference and get what I was getting from attending in this virtual way. I know there's a lot going on in terms of figuring out sporting events and how to create that excitement that happens there using virtual reality and things like that. So I think that can definitely play into how we manage projects and teams.

I think that in terms of AI, the way that I see that playing in is freeing up our minds from the more mundane tactical things that we have to do as PMs to think more strategically or higher level. So if I'm not having to figure out, is my budget on track, if my resources are going to start burning hot, and like running all these algorithms around, is my project okay? And will it be okay if all of these other things happen? If the AI can take care of that, then maybe I can start thinking more strategically about, "Okay, well, what am I going to do to impact that?"

BA: Yeah, and I think the great thing about AI is how it enables us as project managers to focus back on fundamentally delivering value. And where we have... Where we're supported by data, we're making more intelligent decisions, we can take that step up, be more strategic and think, Okay, we're on this path, we're trying to get from A to B, we're trying to deliver value along the way, how can we maximize that value delivery? How can we optimize the value delivery so that we're delivering value in shorter cycles and more efficiently? And so some of the AI tools out there that look at the data, not only from our projects, but also aggregating data from other projects out there, which I think is where it starts getting really interesting, we're using and leveraging the power of data to analyze, okay, what's going on in the project? What's the risk profile looking like? Where have projects like this failed before? These tools are out there already on the market, and you've just got to plug your project management tools into them, and you can get these rich insights, which then, yeah, shifts our focus from, "Okay, what are my resources doing? Who do I need to resource on the project? Where are we at with the project?" to, "Okay, what are we doing here? Why we're doing it? How are we doing it, and how can we optimize and change that approach? How can we pivot as we go to make sure we're maximizing the value to delivery from this project?" And as project managers, that's what's interesting to me. It's about maximizing value delivery. It's not about, "Did I…" You know, "Is my iron triangle ship shape?" It's like actually, the whole point of this is because there was a business reason to do this in the first place. So how can I maximize that? And then that is the strategic part, the leadership part of project management that I think is most interesting.

KL: And I think you just hit it because so much we forget about the point about getting back to the business investment of projects in the end. And that's going to be the threat to a lot of project managers that have learned the techniques, who will be not needed in these techniques. This is no longer about getting rid of the horse and buggy, it is getting rid of the Gantt chart as you understand it.

KL (55:07): Where do we screw this up? Where do PMs fail in making this move? What I just heard from Ben could be argued, they don't get the richness of data and they need to step up and learn how to get hold of the richness of data. I heard earlier, failure to pilot. Agility is written into this a lot, you guys had talked about that some. But where are our risks? As PMs, what do we need to remember?

GL: I think the theme that we've been talking about and around throughout this session today is about a bit of a pivot or it's about pivoting. But what I'm realizing as we're talking about this is that the pivot for PMs is actually potentially a bit away from some of the technical skills, and leaning a lot more heavily into the soft skills and the leadership aspect of getting work done. And what we're saying, especially we mentioned the DPM community, I'm seeing a lot more conversations in our forum about soft skills, situational, "What do I do if this happens?" and a lot less, "What's the best Gannt-making software?"

The other thing I'm seeing in this pivot is that our community isn't just project managers anymore. And I think it comes back to this mindset of a digital project manager, of being soft skill-oriented and process-oriented, being organized, but still human, working with new tools and not being afraid of risk, and not being afraid of innovation. And actually it is a mindset that I think would do well to lead the rest of the world along into a digital future, which is grandiose, and I'm not saying that we're just like "Digital PMs, heroes, saving the world."

But I do think it's a unique mixture of things, and the pivot is going to be things that Arianna and Ben had said: Let's focus on being strategic. Let's focus on being leaders of how we work together. Let's figure out how to democratize team work and get things done better. And in so doing, yes, let's manage a budget, let's manage risk, let's manage a timeline, let's manage scope. But maybe that's not the secret ingredient of the role in this pivot. I think the secret ingredient of the role in this pivot is going to be, how can we find that right balance of soft skills and process and humanity and getting things done that can apply to this next episteme of how we get things done, period.

AH: I think, as I look at project managers in general, I always think about how whenever we're starting a project where everything is unknown, and you have to not be afraid of that ambiguity and what's unknown there, and I think taking that concept to this situation as well is kind of diving into it head first, using your teammates to help you along the way, and forging that collaboration to make an environment where people can contribute to how are we going to make this work together as a team? And really using teamwork and being that person that's the glue that keeps the team together. And bringing everybody forward together with all of their ideas that they may think might contribute to being more successful. It's uncharted territory for everyone, so I think we're are all kind of in it together, and figuring it out together.

KL (58:28): Ben Aston, Galen Low, Arianna Harrison: Digital project managers, and it sounds like what we're really talking about is just Project Managers, but the right kind we need, PMs in a digital age.

For more information about what's happening in the world of digital project management, go to thedigitalproject manager.com.
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