

Proposals to Accelerate Advancement from Project Manager to Senior Executive¹

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Abstract

This paper presents a brief summary of the results of a research project titled “Project Managers as Senior Executives” and more detailed conclusions and proposals that focus on the actual and potential progression of project managers to senior executive positions.

Sponsorship and Conduct of the Research Project on which this Paper is Based

This research project was co-sponsored by the Project Management Institute (PMI), the ESC-Lille (France) Graduate School of Management, Fonds Régional de Garantie Nord-Pas-de Calais, and CEL.LAB Université du Littoral. The full research results are based on analysis of the pertinent literature, extensive interviews with 25 senior executives and 20 project managers from 6 countries, and 557 responses from 20 countries to a questionnaire in English and French consisting of 77 questions. The full report was published in two volumes by PMI in May 2011 and is available for downloading by PMI members at no cost at <http://www.pmi.org/Knowledge-Center/Research-Completed-Research.aspx>. On-line access to the resulting data banks is available to authorized researchers through PMI.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this Research Project was to provide documented answers based on published and empirical evidence to these fundamental questions: Are project managers becoming and can project managers become senior executives? If not, what can be done to allow them to climb the ladder? What are the odds? How can a project

¹ *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. This paper was originally presented and published at the 3rd International PMI Mexico PMTOUR 2011 Project Management Conference in June 2011. It was also republished in the January 2012 edition of PM World Today. It is republished here with permission of Russ Archibald.*

manager better design her/his career development to take advantage of these opportunities?"

The issues that were studied include:

- The progression of project managers into upper management: reality or myth?
- Project manager evolution: tacticians versus strategists (technical, managerial, leadership).
- What project management competencies are essential for effective enterprise management in organizations?
- Define career paths in project management (project manager to program manager, vice-president/general manager, CEO, other senior executive.)
- What skills, competencies and experience should a project manager develop to be considered for these positions? Examples of areas to be considered are: tacticians versus strategists; business communication, MBA and other degrees.
- What, if any, are "best practices" in developing and promoting project managers to become corporate leaders?

The research intentions were to differentiate the data in meaningful ways, and to identify and make recommendations by major industries and types of organizations, such as project-driven versus project-dependent organizations.

Research Approach

In order to progress with these fundamental questions we divided our investigations into the following three fundamental hypotheses and nine related research questions:

1. Program and project managers face greater difficulties in reaching top executive positions compared to more traditional, well-established, functional positions.
2. Those project management positions that usually report more closely to top executive levels, such as Director of Project Management, Senior Project Sponsors, and Program Managers, are more likely to lead to top executive positions compared to the lower level project management positions.
3. Successful experience as a project or program manager is excellent preparation to become a successful senior executive.

The Methods Used

Literature Analysis: First we extensively and intensively explored the literature on:

- Senior executives,
- Program and project managers' managerial, behavioral and emotional characteristics, and
- Research studies in Human Resources Management.

Interviews: Then we conducted face-to-face interviews with 25 senior executives and 20 project managers from 6 countries: USA, Canada, Brazil, France, UK, and Ukraine.

On-Line Survey: We then designed, tested, modified, and launched the on-line Web questionnaire: one in English for an international population, with 50% of the respondents being American; the second one in French for a population that was in the majority French. The questionnaires consisted of 77 questions, of which 20 were “Required”, meaning that the questionnaire could not be completed unless each “Required” question was answered in the proper sequence. We received 445 usable responses to the English questionnaire and 112 responses to the French questionnaire from residents of 20 countries.

Analysis, Compilation, and Publication of the Results: Finally we compiled, correlated, and analyzed the results of the literature exploration, the face-to-face interviews, and the on-line questionnaires to produce the detailed final report (14 chapters in 2 volumes, 502 pages, plus 19 appendices.)

Summary of Overall Findings

From our face-to-face-interviews we learned that, for "project-driven"² companies, the job of project manager is an essential experience to become a CEO. In some companies, whether they are "project-driven" or "project-dependent", to reach a CEO position it is important that the project manager first goes through at least some of the various operational functions within the organization. Here is a typical CEO quote: "Managing projects requires rigor, a compulsory method. But this is not enough. It takes personality, charisma, an ability to evolve. We must focus on people who have aggressiveness and willingness to succeed."

Analyses of the responses to our on-line questionnaires included:

- Progressions of program and project managers to higher positions: answers of the respondents.

² "Project-driven" organizations are those that derive most of their revenue or benefits from delivering projects (engineering/construction, defense/aerospace contractors, NASA, consultants, and other organizations for whom projects are their life-blood); "project-dependent" organizations includes all others that depend on projects for new projects and services, and major strategic changes including most governmental organizations, with some exceptions like NASA.

- Characteristics of the respondents and of project management within their organizations.
- Career paths observed by the respondents and their feelings about advancement.

A large majority of respondents (88%) stated that project management experience prepares them for a senior executive position, even if it also constitutes a pro domo pleading.

The following question was asked: “How does experience as a program/project manager prepare you to become an effective senior executive?” For the results shown in Table 1 we put in parallel the responses of program and project managers on project management experience to prepare them first to reach the senior executive positions and second to work efficiently in the senior executive positions.

Table 1

Responses of Project/Program Managers Regarding the Factors That Prepare Them to Reach Senior Executive Positions and the Factors That Permit Them to Work Efficiently in Senior Executive Positions

Factors That Prepare One For Senior Executive (SE) Positions		Factors That Prepare to Reach a SE Position % of the respondents	Factors That Permit to Work Efficiently in a SE Position % of the respondents
1	PM does not prepare	5.5	0.7
2	PM methodology prepares	7.5	4.8
3	Experience and skills prepare	73.6	94.5
4	Experience prepares	63.5	35.4
5	Soft skills prepare	25.8	59.8
6	Among the experiences (relating to item 4):		
	– Variety and complexity	23.7	10.9
	– Management	23.3	52.7
	– People management	22.2	17.4
	– Vision and big picture	16.5	18.4
	– Power and network	3.7	8.6
7	Among the skills (relating to item 5)		
	– Decision making	16.7	12.5
	– Leadership	19.5	9.0
	– Communication	24.1	19.6
	– Negotiation	5.6	5.1

Project managers believe that skills coming from experience, and therefore related to the tasks, are more important for getting to a senior executive function, than for exercising it, when soft skills more related to the individual prevail.

Obviously, they also mention the differences (importance of management, role of power and networks, and scope of responsibilities). However, they are often stamped with the positivist paradigm: being successful in program/project management will lead to a senior executive position.

In addition, project managers' answers provide a confirmation and an internal validation to the research question 1, "Does experience as a successful program and project manager prepare a person for Top level executive positions?" We already had an external validation of this with the CEOs' answers in the face-to-face interviews (see Chapter 7 of the final report).

A general model for advancement of program and project managers was developed with the overall percentages of responses reported by our respondents as to their preferred paths to advancement (Figure 1.) These percentages are also shown for various demographic characteristics of the responders in the final report.

Answers to the three research hypotheses and answers to the nine research questions were developed from the evidence.

Proposals for further actions based on the research results are presented at three levels: individual development, company/organization, and professional bodies that are concerned with program, project, and general management practices and professions, including PMI. These are presented in more detail in the following section of this present paper.

General conclusions and proposals for follow-on research are presented in the final report. Confirmation of our research hypotheses and research questions is strongly verified. In project-driven companies, the project manager is favored in his/her progression towards the senior executive position. In project-dependent companies, progression is generally harder, but seems normal as long as progression is up to the medium level of the hierarchy: 12 to 15% of project and program managers reach the upper hierarchical level as we found in our research using Markov chains.

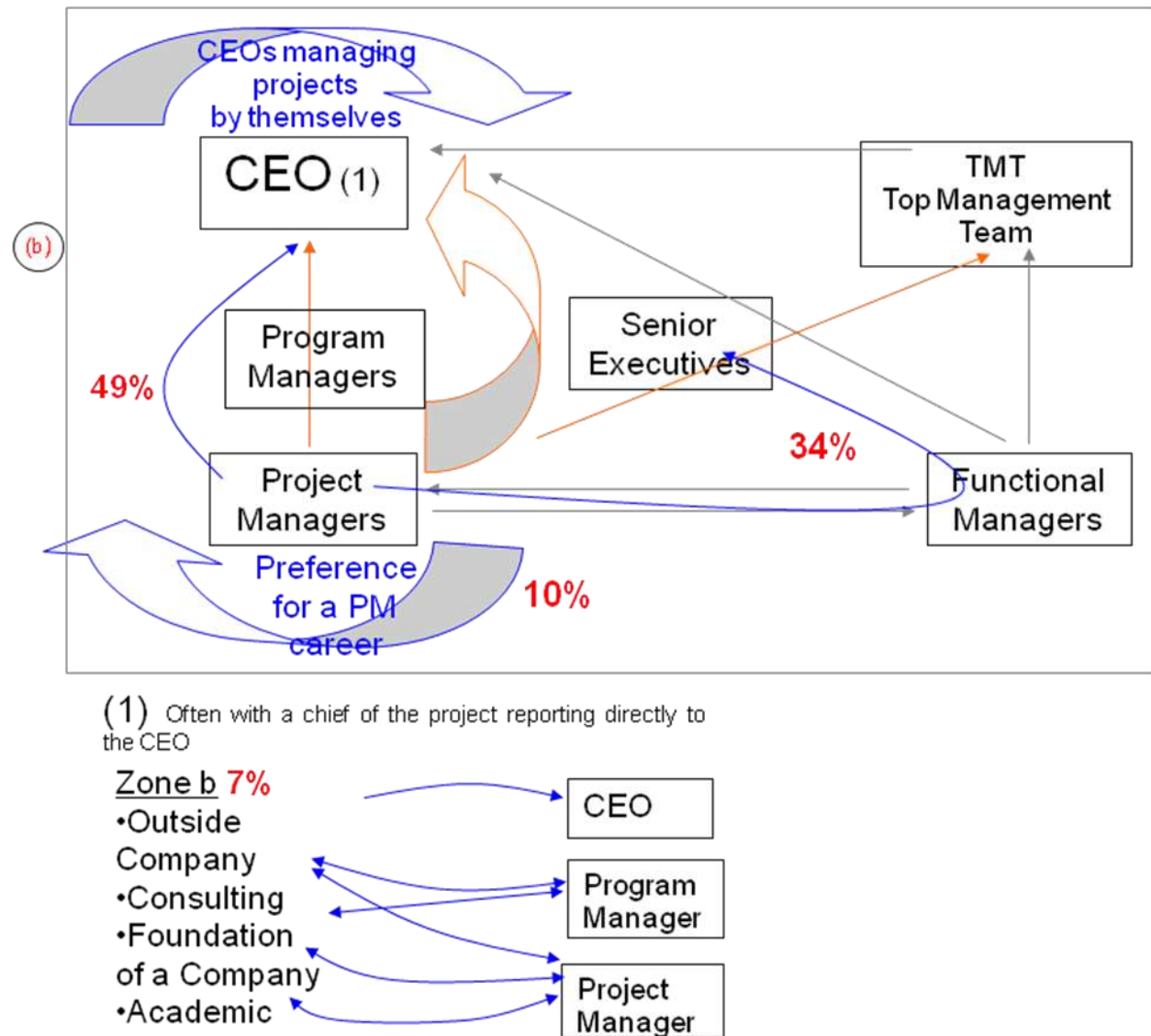


Fig. 1. General Model of Advancement Showing Overall Percentages of Responses.

Conclusions and Proposals Relating to Career Planning and Capability Development for Individuals

The following conclusions and recommendations have been developed from the numerous findings of this research project for presentation in this present paper. The conclusions and recommendations presented here relate primarily to the career planning and capability development efforts of individuals who are now project or program managers and who wish to progress to senior executive positions. For full

understanding of the overall findings and recommendations the reader is referred to the complete 502 page research report.

1. **Experience** as a Project and Program Manager (P/PM):
 - Is excellent preparation for executive positions (88% of responders believe this), *but*
 - Is normally not sufficient in certain respects related to roles and skills (according to the CEO interviews.)
2. **The 16 roles** of Senior Executives and Project/Program Managers:
 - Are similar in many respects, *but*
 - There are several specific, important differences that indicate the roles on which P/PMs must focus and gain experience in order to become promotable.
3. **The 21 hard and soft skills** of Senior Executives and Project/Program Managers:
 - Are about 90% similar, *but*
 - The important skills that P/PMs generally lack must be acquired to enable and enhance their promotion to senior executive levels.
4. The **type of organization** has a significant impact on the advancement of P/PMs to senior executive positions:
 - **Project-driven organizations** generally provide a rather clear career path for P/PMs to reach senior executive positions and experience as a P/PM is essential for advancement within these organizations, *but*
 - **Project-dependent organizations** today do not have such P/PM career paths, and advancement to senior executive ranks is much more difficult for P/PMs in these organizations.
5. **Advancement from Project to Program Manager** usually has a positive impact on later advancement to senior executive positions because:
 - A Program Manager's roles, responsibilities, and skills are usually broader than those of a project manager and therefore more closely associated with those of a Senior Executive, and the Program Manager often reports to a higher level in the organizational structure, *but*
 - This advantage depends heavily on the definition of a program and the size and complexity of projects in a given organization.
6. When asked for their **preferred paths for advancement to Senior Executive positions**, 362 research questionnaire respondents indicated the following:
 - 49% preferred to advance through the project management hierarchy,
 - 34% would accept a lateral move to a functional position if it would enhance their ability to advance,

- 10% preferred to remain in project management for the remainder of their career, and
 - 7% chose none of the above and entered other options.
7. **According to the country of residence**, the answers are rather the same for the USA respondents and for the respondents from other countries in the project-driven companies; but the strongest difference relates to **project-dependent companies** and to the **importance of experience in project management as the preferred path for advancement**: USA: 35.6 %, other countries: 51.3 %.
8. **According to the gender**, the differences between men and women for the preferred career paths for advancement are strong; the women prefer to remain in the project management positions, and are rather reluctant to climb the ladder, apparently due to the political aspects of a progression towards a senior executive position.
9. **Some aspects of the career paths of the respondents**:
- **The first job of the respondents** does not generally begin with a project management position, but with a functional one. The second job is generally represented by the program/project manager or director position.
 - **Around 15% of the respondents** achieve a senior executive position; that is in line with the results of the research in human relations and career management.
 - **The project managers** mainly report to the medium level of hierarchy
 - **60% of the respondents** have occupied 3 functions or less.

Proposals to Enhance Advancement: Individuals, Enterprises, and Professional Associations³

There are three levels of proposals resulting from our research fostering program and project managers to reach the top level:

- The personal level,
- The company/organization level, and
- The professional bodies' level, particularly the Project Management Institute and the International Association of Project Management.

The Personal Level Proposals

Proposals issued from the web questionnaire (English): Our respondents consider that in order to progress to the top level, they need:

³Summarized from Chapter 6 of the final report (Debourse and Archibald 2011).

1. To develop their visibility and their political action (33% of the answers);
2. To develop their experience, their personal development, and skills (29%);
3. To move to other positions (20%);
4. To have a relationship to project management development (8%); and
5. To be lucky (1%).

This vision of the respondents is reality from within the hierarchy.

The proposals issued from the literature: Project managers have predominantly based their proposals on the "What": what to do for moving forward, when the literature mainly focuses on "How." *PM Network* magazine is a good source for proposals, where we find four orientations:

1. Building your brand (Kent, 2006).
2. Improving your power (Pinto, 1998).
 - Making yourself an expert
 - Finding ways to promote your project
 - Promoting yourself
 - Enlisting a sponsor's support
 - Working to establish some positional authority
3. Planning your career and your career is a lifelong project (Logue, 2004; Gale, 2005).
4. Following the five rules of career management for the project manager (Flannes & Levin, 2005):
 - Actively consider what you want to do;
 - Network, network, network;
 - The higher you go, the more it becomes a matter of chemistry;
 - Keep your resume current and active;
 - Put your personal references in order; and
 - Consider a portfolio career.

Lessons from Human Resources Management Literature:

- Emotional stability is positively related to intrinsic and extrinsic career success.
- Extraversion is positively related to career success.
- Openness to experience bears little consistent relationship with career success (contrary to what one might imagine).

The two approaches of HRM literature are also useful for the project manager's career plan:

- The fit between the person and the environment (Holland, 1959, 1997).

- Importance of personality traits (Judge & Meyers, 2007).

Our synthesis is issued from the three types of capital (economical, cultural, and social) that a person more or less possesses. It is possible to show the project manager a synthetic vision of the assets he or she has or can get for career progression by referring to Bourdieu's (1986) theory:

Everyone has at least three categories of capital.

- **Economic capital** is especially useful for founders or for investing in the company.
- **Cultural capital**, especially intellectual:
 - Incorporated: language, intellectual capacity, knowledge and know-how.
 - Certification: e.g., PMP[®] credential.
 - Highly recognized degree, for example an MBA, or a degree from a prestigious university.
- **Social capital**, which is the network of relationships that someone can use to achieve his or her goals. Social capital is determining for progressing to the top level. There are six rules to develop it:
 - No retribution without contribution;
 - A social network gets worn out only when it is not used;
 - Be visible, when not visible one does not exist;
 - Never neglect in a network the *eminences grises*;
 - Developing a social capital is both a day-to-day and a long-term action; and
 - Everything is much easier when one has a powerful sponsor.

Proposals for the Companies and Other Organizations

Four approaches act to bring a better position to a program/project manager in his or her run for a senior executive position:

1. Integrating project management into the formal evaluation processes.
2. Developing the excellent approach that is driven by the Project Management Institute and J. T. Roecker. PMI[®]'s career framework is an outstanding tool for companies to define the different positions of project/program management, and the necessary skills and roles required. It also prioritizes positions relative to each other and is a good tool to evaluate program and project managers. Now it is accessible through the PathPro[®] software, which is designed to help practitioners or corporations navigate the career paths, review the full list of skills and competencies, and conduct a self-assessment against the data.

3. Developing the project-oriented organization.

If one can generate a project culture in the organization, one can deduce that it can promote the program/project manager's career to senior executive positions. Such is the crusade of Roland Gareis (2005). It is also the whole meaning of the thought and broadcasting of the importance of maturity in project management in organizations.

Projects to promote project management career paths, gearing the company towards a project culture, can only be achieved by decisions made by leaders who are aware of the benefits involved, who are motivated and influenced to do so, and who have the power and talent to achieve it. These situations are enhanced when:

- The head office is convinced;
- Project-oriented senior executives have the ability to influence the head office;
- External organizations, such as PMI, can act as partners of knowledge, and influence and help the implementation of effective project management practices.

4. Developing project management education, certification, and related credentials.

The academic world has to play a role, and it plays it more and more. Large public organizations, for example, can have powerful leverage effects by demanding, for instance, to deal only with program/project managers who are highly qualified and certified in the projects they sponsor (such as NASA, Department of Defense, the World Bank, etc.).

Proposals for Actions by PMI, IPMA, and Other Professional Bodies

These proposals are based on the following conclusions drawn from this present research.

- To reach a senior executive position, a program/project manager must demonstrate capabilities beyond technical ones, including strategic and soft skills;
- A majority of opinions believe that project/program management is a real possible path to reach a senior executive position;
- The distinction between project-driven companies and project-dependent companies carries a strong sense of reality;
- In project-driven organizations a program/project manager' career toward the top is quite generally assured; and
- In project-dependent companies, the situation is different and, in many cases, not currently very encouraging for the common goal of the PMI and this research project. The project manager is often seen as a technician.

From these facts, our proposals here primarily concern these project-dependent organizations and companies.

The Logic of Our Reasoning Is the Following:

- A successful project manager who reaches a senior executive level or CEO rank, where he or she is in a position to recruit other senior executives, will take into account each candidate's ability and success in project management.
- A senior executive or a CEO who is in a position for recruiting senior executives, but who does not have project management culture and experience, will not consider project management as a factor of choice.
- The role of PMI and other project management professional bodies is to communicate to the largest possible number of senior executives the proper knowledge of project management culture and its importance in developing and selecting future senior executives and CEOs.

The Strategy for Project Management Professional Bodies Could be the Following (inside and outside the bodies):

Inside the project management professional bodies:

- To provide more guidance and resources to program/project managers in order to reach senior executive positions, for instance in developing certifications of a more strategic nature.
- To capitalize on their members who can be "go-betweens" linking project/program manager positions with senior executive positions. PMI has members who are CEOs, and so is in a position to:
 - Identify them
 - Work with them, especially when they belong to project dependent companies, to build a development policy of the project management culture in the organizations.
 - Create, for instance, a special interest group (SIG) or Community of Practice (COP) for CEOs and high-level leaders, with seminars, research topics, and other projects on the interaction between project management and general management. The SIG/COP will be used as a channel for dissemination of the external policy of PMI and others.

Regarding the strategy external to the professional bodies or "outside the project management ghetto," different approaches are possible:

- To encourage the best writers in project management to be published in top-level journals, such as *Fortune* magazine or the *Harvard Business Review*, that are read

by CEOs. The pioneering article on project management from Paul O. Gaddis was published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1959.

- To develop specific seminars on program/project management for the non-project senior executives.

- To negotiate and build partnerships with the professional bodies of CEOs and human resources managers. The PMI® Global Corporate Council could be the best PMI® organization for developing such strategies.

Continuation of the Research

We will continue to use our huge database by working more deeply on the answers to qualitative questions and by differentiating them by gender, age, program and project managers, current position title and level of reporting, certain aspects of education, certification, PM career paths, projects and programs managed, level of PM maturity. This is the next step of our research.

Beyond this, many related research opportunities are open to interested researchers:

- Women, their careers and project management
- Project managers in project-dependent companies
- The plateau-ing of careers of project managers
- The development (or not) of the project manager as a profession toward the recognition as a certified profession like architect, doctor, and others.
- And others.

Interested researchers have the opportunity to access our data bases through authorization from PMI. Contact the PMI Research Coordinator at research.program@pmi.org to arrange this access.

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Now 93, with careers spanning more than 70 years, Russ Archibald has had broad international experiences in piloting and designing aircraft, corporate engineering, operations, and program and project management. His three project management related careers have been *Military/Aerospace (19 years)*, *Corporate Engineer & Executive (17 years)*, and *Management Consultant (34 years to date)*. Russ has consulted to a wide variety of large and small organizations in 16 countries, has trained thousands of people in project management, and has resided in the USA, France, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama Canal Zone, and Peru with Marion, his wife of 70 years. For the past 23 years they have resided in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico.

Russ is founding member number 6 of the [Project Management Institute/PMI](#). After presenting the [first PMI paper in 1969](#) he was President of the PMI Southern California Chapter in 1991-2, founding member of the PMI Mexico City Chapter in 1996, and in 2006 was awarded the PMI *Jim O'Brien Lifetime Achievement Award*. A PMI Fellow and Certified Project Management Professional, he co-authored with Prof. Dr. Jean-Pierre Debourse the 2011 PMI research report [Project Managers as Senior Executives](#). He was also a founding member in 1970 and is an Honorary Fellow of the [Association of Project Management \(APM/IPMA-UK\)](#). In 1967 he was co-author (with Richard Villoria) of [Network Based Management Information Systems \(PERT/CPM\)](#), Wiley, one of the first books to appear on project management.

Russ is co-author with his grandson Shane Archibald of [Leading and Managing Innovation-What Every Executive Team Must Know about Project, Program & Portfolio Management](#) (2nd edition CRC Press 2015, 1st edition 2013 also published in Italian, Portuguese and Spanish); author of [Managing High Technology Programs and Projects](#) (3rd edition Wiley 2003, also published in Italian, Russian, and Chinese), has contributed chapters to 15 books edited by others, and presented 88 papers at many PMI, IPMA and other conferences in many countries. He holds BS (U. of Missouri 1948) and MS (U. of Texas 1956) degrees in Mechanical Engineering. Russ was awarded an honorary Ph.D. in *Strategy, Program, and Project Management* from the *Ecole Superieure de Commerce de Lille* in Lille, France in 2005. See russarchibald.com. Russ can be contacted at russell_archibald@yahoo.com

Debourse and Archibald were lead authors of the two-volume research report published by the Project Management Institute in 2011 entitled "*Project Managers as Senior Executives*". Information about that report can be found at <http://russarchibald.com/recent-papers-presentations/p-m-senior-executives/>.