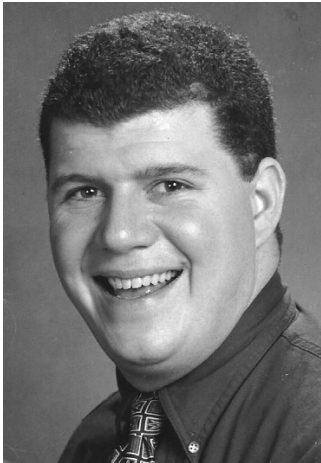


Rick Morris
President
Project Management Institute
Birmingham Alabama Chapter



This is the 10th in our series of interviews with business executives, government officials, academics, and project managers published in the PMI NAC Newsletter.

Our goal is to present leading ideas and insights on the practice of project management for our readers.

***Rick Morris** is President of the PMI-Birmingham Chapter and he is President of Highmark Technology, also in Birmingham.*

In this interview – Rick discusses some of the factors that helped him get an early start in the world of project management and his insights about opportunities in the Alabama PMI community.

Rick Morris was interviewed for the PMI-NAC Newsletter by Don Ross, PMP

Rick A. Morris, PMP, ITIL Practitioner, consultant, author, mentor, and creator of a non-profit foundation to promote Project Management in charities and other non-profits. He has earned an MPM (Masters of Project Management) and Six Sigma Green Belt as well as MCTS, MCSE, TQM, ATM-S, ITIL, and ISO certifications. Rick is the President of Highmark Technology in Birmingham, Alabama.

Highmark Technology offers expertise at managing culture change, process development, and choosing the right technologies for business clients. The firm believes the key to success in today's complex business environments is the ability to integrate the appropriate technology to meet business needs of customers.

The combination of these skills helps customers use technology to gain a competitive advantage in their industry. The firm provides strategic solutions based on Business Intelligence, Software Development, Business Process Solutions, Project Office Solutions, and Microsoft Dynamics.

Highmark Technology consultants employ cutting edge methodologies to help supplement or outsource business services needs. Services include Project Management Office (PMO) Development, Application Systems Integration, Document Management, and Database Solutions.

The greatest process and technology in the world is worthless unless employees understand how to use it. Highmark Technology also assesses training needs for client organizations to help maximize productivity and leverage existing investments in technology. Highmark Technology training solutions include – the IT and Project Management Academy, Webinars / Teleconferences, and Onsite Training.

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PMI-NAC: *For our readers who may not be familiar with your background starting with Walt Disney and later at MGM – are there things you learned in those early days that made a difference for you? Are there any experiences from that time period that had life-changing implications for you?*

Morris: Growing up was different around celebrities and with Disney exposure. But that was just normal for us. We didn't really think that was special or even unusual.

When I was 11 – I got the chance to perform in what was called the Sparkling Christmas Spectacular – which was at Walt Disney World. I remember coming out onto the stage at Cinderella's Castle and you can see people all the way back down main street. What that taught me really was just how to be myself in front of a lot of people.

I figured out later on – a lot of people have this fear of speaking or fear of being in front of people. I always think it's just a lack of opportunity. It's a fear of an unknown more so than the fear of actually doing it.

Once you're in front of people and you are out there doing it with some repetition involved you start to get pretty comfortable within yourself.

Working at MGM – again we didn't think we were doing anything special. So, it was me and six of my best friends just working on the Mickey Mouse Club and doing audio-visual technician stuff – really just doing geeky high school stuff.

And we were recording a bunch of 11- and 12-year-olds on the show. Nobody knew they would turn out to be Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake, and all those kids that turned out to be just phenomenally famous. But you know for us, we were just recording a bunch of kids singing!

PMI-NAC: *Looking back – did you have any sense that these kids were special?*

Morris: You knew they were talented. But there's a ton of talented kids. Still, having that much talent on a single show was unbelievable. So the casting director certainly did the job brilliantly when it came down to it. Out of all of those kids maybe just six or seven didn't really excel in that field and haven't done much since. You've heard of the rest of the bunch and you've seen what they can do for yourself.

And to top it off, I have to thank my dad who trained me for this all my life. And I really had no idea he was doing it. He started a software company in 1978, which also was the first company to automate an insurance claim.

They bought a company back then called USSI. It's still running today. They bought this company and it was my dad and two others. It was a privately-held company and they just loved what they did! So I grew up around computers. I had no idea that's the field that I would end up in – but it has been great and I'm very thankful for this experience as well.

PMI-NAC: *Looking at your experience – you have a wide range of training and experience in management and quality disciplines – not just PMI but in ITIL, Six Sigma, TQM and other areas. Based on your understanding of these management models – is there a unifying perspective you gained studying these disciplines?*

Morris: The one thing everything has in common is – make something measurable. So whether it's PMI and I'm trying to measure scope, time, or cost – and adhere to that, or if it's Six Sigma – I'm trying figure the quality metrics that are measures there.

ITIL talks about configuration items and SLAs. TQM is the same thing. Everything comes down to *you must be able to measure and quantify expectations*. And then you've got to see whether or not you're meeting those expectations. So regardless, no matter where you are, you've got to figure it out: *If it's not measurable – it's not doable*.

In every case – you must find a yardstick! So you can take that broad perspective and decide some of these things are fads. But two things really stand out here: *you need (1) service level agreements, and (2) project management*. TQM and Six Sigma are just up and down. But all of it requires project management and metrics to measure.

So in my experience, that's been the unifying principle across the board.

PMI-NAC: *In your years managing and consulting on projects in areas ranging from financial services to manufacturing and virtually everything in between – are there lessons learned about how to manage people, projects, and technology you can share with our readers?*

Morris: The greatest lesson I ever learned – what changed my career – was I read this one sentence in a book by Rob Thomsett called *Radical Project Management*.

He wrote, *"It's the context, not the content."* So he taught me that a project usually is going to get done no matter what. On a project to create a software application – 99 percent of the time the software application is going to be written.

But we're going to decide whether or not that was successful based on the context of the situation. Was it on time, for a certain budget, and did we meet all the requirements?

These elements are all context. And the one thing I truly have control over as a project manager is the context.

And the moment that I recognized and realized that – my career took off. So if I go back and look at a defining moment in my career – I was in Indianapolis and I was questioning *"Do I really want to be a project manager?"* My daughter was two years old, I was gone all the time, I missed her growing up, and I was just getting beat up and beat up and beat up on a project – and I really was *done*.

Everybody has that moment. I was walking through a bookstore and I picked up that book and read it cover to cover that night. *My perspective and career changed right there*.

PMI-NAC: *Combined with your background in show business – does that give you any special synergy now?*

Morris: I just learned not to have fear. I mean – I don't fear outcomes. I'm not afraid to speak to anybody for any reason. So whether you are a CIO or a janitor – I'm going to treat you exactly the same. I'm going to talk to you like you are a real person. But I'm not going to fear your title. I think that comfort in knowing myself and knowing who I am now comes across as confidence. When you're confident people trust what you say.

If I feared the CIO or if I was fumbling on my words or I looked like I was searching for the right way to say something – they pick up on that and shut it down. That's where a lot of people get into trouble because they don't know how to recover in that moment either. So if I know I'm controlling the context, then I know what message I want to send, I figure out how they are going to listen, and I send the message. And it is what it is. I don't fill the dead space. I let the message sit there for what it is – and then wait for a response.

Nice people or tough people – it's the same. Again – it is what it is, whether they are tough or not. Whether I'm scared or not – there's still a message that has to be sent.

Even if I sugarcoat it – it's still not going to change the facts. So if I stick to the facts then I'm never going to get into trouble. You can be mad at me all you want but it's not my fault. The facts are the facts. Be sure you always have a “*breath-taking grasp*” of the facts!

PMI-NAC: *The PMI Birmingham Chapter you lead is a close neighbor to us here in PMI-NAC. Do you see areas where our two chapters might collaborate and help one another as we work to expand awareness of PMI principles and benefits?*

Morris: At the Region 14 Conference this spring I had a meeting with Bill Carswell from Huntsville and Liz Fant from Montgomery. As a result of this meeting, in the first quarter of 2009 the Birmingham Chapter will host the first Alabama Symposium. Our three chapters will come together for that meeting and we'll have volunteers from each chapter and we'll share the costs and revenues in putting together a centralized *Alabama Symposium*.

The year after Huntsville will host the event and then Montgomery after that. So we'll all rotate these duties. We'll make it an annual event and ensure we get visibility in Jackson, Mississippi where they don't have a chapter and with our near neighbors in Nashville and Atlanta. I don't think we could do that as single chapter. But working together as a team it will work out very well for all of us.

We have now about 470 members in Birmingham – and there are from 150 to 200 there in Montgomery as I recall and with Huntsville about 370 – if we get just 10 percent of all our chapter members to attend and participate we'll have a phenomenal event!

My job in this is neat. I'm speaking at eight or nine symposiums for the rest of the year and I'm looking for the right speakers to bring in that are great and will help us put together an awesome event. So we're already moving down that path of collaboration and if we do it once a year we'll start to build natural cross-bridges anyway by sheer networking.

PMI-NAC: *Given your experience with PMI and other management disciplines you apply– what excites you the most about opportunities and challenges in project management – in the years ahead?*

Morris: There's really no better time in history to be a project manager. We're now finally becoming understood and embraced. The corporate fallout that's happened over the past 10-15 years has brought that into focus. First you had the dotcom bubble burst and right after that there was Enron and HealthSouth – and today there's a mortgage and banking crisis and energy supply problems that just scream for better risk management.

As a result, voters and shareholders in all of our public and private institutions are starting to look hard for increased accountability across the board. And if there's one profession that can improve accountability across all these institutions – it's project management.

People are finally starting to see this and it's no longer just a buzz word to say you have a project management office (PMO). You're actually starting to hear titles such as the Chief Project Officer (CPO) and Enterprise PMO. Protective Life Insurance in Birmingham just hired a CPO. That's the first one of I've heard of in town. So with Sarbanes-Oxley, with IT governance, and with new software tools like Clarity and Mercury available the business community is starting to embrace total project cost and life cycle management as well.

The project management profession is growing rapidly and PMI is growing 1,000-percent almost year-over-year. It's an awesome time to be doing what we're doing. And we're still in our infancy. We're still trying to figure things out and make advances in fundamental project management theory and practice.

Working with engineers and engineering disciplines is still a key to this because that's where project management started in the 1960s. So look at that from the perspective that the history of project management in the IT field is so much shorter – maybe just 20 years where project management disciplines have been applied and adapted to fit the needs of that business model.

PMI-NAC: *Your experience also includes an interest in the project management needs of the non-profit sector. What attracts you to that management area?*

Morris: I started the Ramsey Foundation, named after my daughter, because I wanted to build a community for her. I started to volunteer my time in the community and what I saw was – you have this great bunch of people here who have great big hearts – but there's not always enough direction or coordination to pull things off and optimize the results.

So, for example, you take a service club that wants to do something every year for the children in the community. You take that club and there's probably 8-10 similar groups right there in the same area. So why not pull all 8-10 of them together, add the project management, and say: *"Each of you will do your individual projects but we're going to benefit a greater whole by doing that as a team."* That's the idea that grabbed me!

I would love to write that \$5,000 check to United Way. But I'm still growing my business and I have a couple of kids growing up so if I can save \$3,000 for a good cause by using my project management skills locally – that's the same as writing them a check.

From there, I set up a meeting with the PMI COO and now I'm lobbying to get the rules changed for earning PDUs. Right now if I give my speech today – I get 5 PDUs. If I work for a charity for the entire year I get 5 PDUs. So we need more balance in the outcomes for services we provide as project managers and volunteers – especially something as important as making our communities healthier and more rewarding places to live, work, and raise a family.

So the Ramsey foundation will be a separate organization that can award PDUs based on the merits or benefit a project manager delivers to the end users – in this case charitable organizations in the community.

There will be a central location and charities will come to us and explain what they need. I'll go to PMI and get project managers to do it.

Then, based on the benefits they create – we'll determine the PDUs to be granted for service to those who need it most.

About Rick Morris

Rick A. Morris, PMP, is an ITIL Practitioner, consultant, author, mentor, and creator of a non-profit foundation to promote Project Management in charities and other non-profits. Rick is an accomplished project manager and public speaker. His appetite for knowledge and passion for the profession makes him a sought after speaker at PMI chapters, various civic organizations, and a frequent guest lecturer at local universities.

Rick holds the PMP, MPM (Masters of Project Management), Six Sigma Green Belt, MCTS, MCSE, TQM, ATM-S, ITIL, and ISO certifications. He has worked for organizations such as GE, Xerox, and CA and has consulted to numerous clients in a wide variety of industries including financial services, entertainment, and construction, non-profit, hospitality, pharmaceutical, retail, and manufacturing.

Rick also is the President of Highmark Technology and the author of two books: *The Everything Project Management Book, 2nd Edition* published by Adams Media and *Project Management That Works!* published by AMACOM.

An active member of the Project Management Institute and currently President of the Birmingham Chapter, Rick is no stranger to being center stage in front of large groups of people. At the age of 11, Rick was a Walt Disney World Performer in their seasonal shows.

In high school, he worked at MGM Studios on projects including the New Mickey Mouse Club. Taking the experience of his youth and blending it with knowledge he attained throughout his career, Rick has been able to inspire and mentor many project managers. His blend of real world experience and down to earth delivery makes his passion for the profession contagious.

Thanks to Rick Morris for discussing his life and activities as the PMI-Birmingham President in this interview published in the PMI-NAC Newsletter.

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