

Project management

Career advice for beginners



**Knowledge
TRAIN** ●●●

Introduction

At Knowledge Train, we recognise that the decision to attend a project management training course is often motivated by the desire to improve job performance, and enhance employment prospects.

Our training advisors regularly speak to people who are eager to obtain a professional qualification, develop new skills, or update their existing certification in order to drive their careers forward.

If you are considering training in project management, we can talk to you about relevant course options, before helping you to choose the most suitable course in the light of your requirements.

With the relationship between training courses and students' career advancement in mind, we have produced a guide to getting ahead in the project management sector. How might professional certification aid your project management career? What do employers often look for when hiring a project manager? What kind of free project management careers advice is available to unemployed professionals with an interest in the industry? Can project support be considered as a career in itself? This ebook will answer all of these burning questions, and is split into the following topics:

- **What is a project manager?**
- **What makes a great project manager?**
- **Starting your project management career**
- **The value of formal training and professional qualifications**
- **Retraining to work in project management**
- **Developing your project management career**
- **Advance your career with professional qualifications**
- **Finding suitable vacancies by writing a winning CV**

Whether you are taking tentative first steps into the industry, looking for the next challenge in an established project management career, or actively seeking an employment opportunity that involves working on projects, read on to help improve your chance of success!

What is a project manager?

Project managers are found amongst all industries, and they are the people responsible for planning and delivering a project on time and within budget. They need to predict what is coming next and understand the value of what they are doing, whilst knowing when to focus on each.

As they will be working within a team, project managers will certainly need 'soft skills' to communicate and build trust with their colleagues and stakeholders. Other skills commonly associated with project managers include planning, budgeting, risk analysis and reporting.

Project management is a popular career choice, and it is becoming ever more important due to the pressures faced by organizations in an increasingly globalized world.

Projects enable organizations to change and succeed in the face of these pressures, and you will find opportunities to be a project manager in every sector worldwide.

According to the American-based Project Management Institute (PMI), more than 20% of global GDP is spent on projects¹. Furthermore the PMI also say that between 2010 and 2020, 15.7 million new project management roles will be created globally across seven project-intensive industries². That means there are huge opportunities for people with the right skills to move into project management.

What makes a great project manager?

A great project manager (PM) is a charismatic team-player and leader, capable of getting the most out of team members yet without being overbearing. Top PMs possess a talent for making people sit up and want to work with them. This is not to say that encouraging enthusiasm and co-operation among project team members - not to mention maintaining that sense of camaraderie throughout the duration of the project – is an easy task, even for the most socially adept of individuals. If the idea of motivating your colleagues while steering a project to its successful conclusion is rather daunting, soft skills courses such as management skills team leading and managing conflict, could prove invaluable. If a project manager fails to demonstrate good interpersonal skills, his or her lack of clear communication and openness to others could undermine the confidence of the whole team, ultimately jeopardising the project's progress. A high level of adaptability is required from a project manager, and never more so than if he or she is brought in from outside the company launching the project. In this case, the employer is likely to consider whether or not each candidate for the role of PM fits into the culture of the organisation. Employers often view the importance of candidates' personal qualities as equal to that of their professional background when deciding who is best suited to managing a particular project.

It is important to remember that project stakeholders are likely to be drawn from a number of different departments, each of which will possess its own style of operation, in addition to being subject to existing chains of command.

Project managers also need to gain the trust and confidence of senior managers in an organization, in order to help deliver the changes required.

Unsurprisingly, effective, efficient communication is imperative, and it is also placed first on our list of top five qualities demonstrated by great project managers:

- 1. Communication** - always be as 'specific' as possible when requesting information from project team members, particularly when working across departments
- 2. Leadership** – managing projects inevitably involves an element of leading people
- 3. Organisation** – an efficient, structured method of working, in addition to considerable attention to detail, are required as a project manager. This can help balance the many demands made on your time
- 4. Confidence** – it cannot be denied that a project manager assumes considerable responsibility, but being comfortable with what it is you're actually doing is often the key to building 'credibility' in the eyes of those with whom you work
- 5. Decisiveness** – judging when to act in order to keep a project on time, on budget, and on schedule is crucial

While numerous traits and talents can be advantageous when managing projects, we believe that the above are absolutely essential to success in this career path. That's leaving aside the skills more commonly associated with project management such as planning and budgeting which are often taught as part of project management courses.

Starting your project management career

The current economic turmoil is to a great extent 'dictating' the decisions businesses make about whether or not to undertake projects, especially given their attendant risks and financial commitments. Consequently, employment opportunities in the field of project management are highly competitive. It is vital for an individual hoping to succeed in this challenging industry to demonstrate a firm grasp of the ways projects can be efficiently managed. You can begin by contributing to small projects and encouraging new initiatives at work, with a view to fostering solid interpersonal and organisation skills. The need to get some core skills and experiences in place is arguably more pressing than ever.

When embarking on a project management career, think carefully about your strengths and achievements in both personal and professional life - any relevant experience can be made to work in your favour (a careers advice service will show you how). There are many aspects of everyday life you can draw on for project management. It sounds clichéd, but excellent communication skills and the ability to lead others are the foundations on which a career as a project manager can be built. Remember that report your manager asked you to research and write? Its completion is evidence of some of these kinds of skills.

If you have coped well in situations in which you assumed considerable responsibility or co-ordinated a series of complex activities, this can also prove advantageous. In addition, you should give careful consideration to the possibility of attending training, in order to help complement experience gained in the workplace. While project management training courses are not intended to be alternatives to first-hand experience, they consolidate your knowledge and equip you with a structured way of working. They boost your confidence, and help you to avoid a skills gap further on down the line as your career progresses.

How do professional qualifications help?

Having the relevant soft skills is one thing, but for actual proof of project management knowledge it is advisable to attend a training course.

Gaining professional certification shows potential employers you have project management knowledge, which is important because many organizations now adopt project management methodologies such as PRINCE2® (PRINCE2® is a registered trade mark of AXELOS Limited).

Basically, project management qualifications fit into two categories:

- 1. Knowledge-based:** these require candidates to show their knowledge by passing exams.
- 2. Competency-based:** these require candidates to display a range of project management knowledge and are usually assessed by interviews with a panel of assessors and/or observation of the candidate working in a group

Knowledge-based qualifications are ideal for those people trying to get into the project management world, whilst competency-based qualifications are better suited to people already working as project managers who want to benchmark their skills against others in the profession.

In today's competitive jobs-market, many candidates often have the same qualifications e.g. PRINCE2 in the UK and PMP in the USA.

Candidates with more than one qualification (PRINCE2 and PMP) will stand out in the race for the best jobs, due to the fact the two complement each other in terms of the topics covered.

PRINCE2 is great at describing what needs to be done on a project, by whom and when, whereas qualifications based upon project management bodies of knowledge (e.g. the PMP in the USA and the APMP in the UK) are much better at describing the how. Therefore, having PRINCE2 and one of the latter gives project managers the tools they need to manage complex projects.

There are many roles that fall under the project management umbrella, besides working as a project manager. We advise relatively inexperienced individuals to cut their teeth on projects, without shouldering the burden of managing them, by working in project support positions. Experience gained as project administrator, project co-ordinator, or project support officer, for example, will set the foundations for a future role as project manager.

To assist your move into a project manager role, entry-level qualifications such as PRINCE2 Foundation, the PMI's Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) in the USA, or the APM's Introductory Certificate in the UK are recommended. All of these are readily available as a 2-3 day course with exam, and will help give candidates basic knowledge of project management.

Retraining to work in project management

When approached for advice by individuals interested in retraining to work in project management, we always begin by asking exactly why they want to become involved in the industry. The purpose of this question is twofold: it allows us to ensure that our students' perceptions of project management are accurate, as well as helping to determine the kind of positions in which they would be best suited to work. If you intend to find a job in project management, the first step is to see where you can pitch yourself. With specific roles in mind, you could consider the ways in which project management training courses may be beneficial.

Whatever position(s) you decide to pursue, it must be emphasised that you have to be a very determined individual to get along in the project environment. While relatively good salaries (a project manager's typical starting salary will be in the region of £20-25k) and an interesting, varied workload attract many people to project management, involvement in the industry is also extremely competitive and frequently stressful.

If the best aspect of working in project management is that no one day is the same as another, the worst is the high pressure that characterises people's workloads. Project managers need to develop extremely thick skins and must be effective communicators with a wide range of different stakeholders within an organization.

Nevertheless, some individuals thrive within the pressured project environment. Project management also presents excellent employment opportunities for both sexes; while women used to find themselves largely confined to project support positions, the industry has seen that change significantly over the past few years. Today there are many women employed in very senior project positions. Furthermore, gender isn't a significant factor when selecting an individual for a senior role in project management; the choice made ultimately comes down to experience.

Numerous people receive some project management exposure, in their roles within the business sphere. We have noticed that during the recent economic turmoil, a greater number of course attendees than usual are choosing to build on this exposure by retraining as project managers. When considering why this might be the case, it is important to note that key project management skills are transferable from other sectors, so project work can provide an outlet for individuals struggling to find employment opportunities in other areas. Involvement with projects could offer a way forward in your career, particularly in the current financial climate when many industries are suffering. Those businesses employing effective project managers will stand a better chance of weathering the economic storms. Ultimately, effective project management is at the forefront of moving businesses away from the worst effects of recession.

Developing your project management career

While the scope for project management career development is vast, the level of your achievements ultimately depends on how you drive your career. Many organisations have implemented policies concerning Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that can benefit employees hoping to develop new skills or enhance their CVs. Even if you work for a company that lacks policies of this kind, by paying careful attention to your professional development needs, you should be well placed to take advantage of opportunities to boost your career in project management.

You must be proactive when considering the ways in which you can improve your skills, and gain useful experience. You could ask your employer whether there are any courses that might be relevant at this stage in your career, or research the options available to you before discussing your needs with your manager. If you would like to attend training funded by the organisation at which you work, be prepared to talk about the ways in which both you and your employer could derive benefit from the course in question. Attending a project management training course is likely not only to improve your ability to work as a project professional, but also attests to the fact that, as someone who is prepared to devote time and effort to career advancement, you're serious about your professional life.

When gaining project management experience, it is of course possible that a project with which you are involved falters or fails. When hoping to move beyond project failure, you should concentrate on the lessons learned from the process that led to the project's demise. Describe an unsuccessful project on your CV or at a job interview by stating the facts, while emphasising what was achieved and how later projects did, or could have been, better by applying those lessons. By discussing the project lifecycle, you can draw out elements of the project that were completed satisfactorily, in addition to generating ideas about what actions could be undertaken next time, in the hope of reaching a more successful outcome.

Finding suitable vacancies by writing a winning CV

The best source of project management job vacancies is the internet. It is worthwhile browsing relevant employment opportunities advertised on popular job search websites such as Monster, Reed, and Total Jobs. If a vacancy catches your eye, familiarising yourself with the experiences, skills, and qualifications demanded by the role will help you to create an effective application.

An excellent networking tool to use when making contacts in the project management industry is LinkedIn. It features numerous profiles of professionals, and by spreading your network and maintaining an active online presence, you should improve your chances of hearing about employment opportunities that may not be widely advertised.

The question of how to produce a winning CV is often debated on project management discussion forums. While there is no set formula for the perfect CV, always remember that a good CV contextualises project experiences, foregrounding the key details about budgets, scope, and so on. Always proofread your CV several times, particularly if it contains complex information: spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are unlikely to impress employers!

When applying for your first project management position, you may wish to take advantage of a CV review service. For an experienced project professional concerned about career advancement, this kind of service may be beneficial, providing a fresh viewpoint on his or her CV. Bear in mind that the key to creating an outstanding job application is to present the most relevant information in the best possible light, bringing out the experience required to secure that next role in project management.

Finally, if you wish to move beyond the management of single projects and would prefer to orchestrate multiple projects at the same time, programme management training courses could help to prepare you for your next career challenge.

Good luck!

Endnotes

1. Actual data comes from a World Bank study
2. PMI's industry growth forecast for 2010-2020.

Acknowledgements

“PMI” is a service and trademark of the Project Management Institute, Inc. which is registered in the United States and other nations. “PMP” and the PMP logo are certification marks of the Project Management Institute which are registered in the United States and other nations. CAPM is a certification mark of the Project Management Institute.

Here is some advice from the project management experts



“My advice would be to try and get involved in a project. If your company conducts projects, you can ask to participate, or even volunteer to collaborate or shadow someone on the project after hours. If your company is not strong in managing projects, seek employment in a company that is. Then get involved.”

Cesar Abeid, Project Manager at Remontech



“Find yourself a good coach. I have coached many project managers, at various stages in their career: prospective, newbie and experienced. They have all gone on to bigger and better things. A good coach will help you to identify the most important topics, and focus on them. A coach can work with you to work out where you want to get to, understand where you are now, look at the alternatives for getting there, and decide a course of action.”

Russell Whitworth, Director at Q2 Associates Ltd



“Practice project management with many activities in your personal life: sports, music, training, blogging, reading, etc. It may feel somewhat excessive (although you may be surprised by the results of such focus), but it will definitely help you master project management methodologies.”

Michel Dion, Director, Professional Practices and Development at Health Canada



“I’d advise you to be clear on the business case for the project. If you’re clear on what benefits the project has to deliver (and what those are worth), you will be clear on the amount of money you’ve got to spend. If you know how much cash you’ve got in the pot that will automatically shape your plan, and therefore what you need people to do. If you know what you need people to do then you’re well on the way to being a project manager and a leader.”

Francis Hooke, Managing Director at Quality Project Delivery



“If you’re new to the project management world, go into observation mode first and shadow other project managers in the organization. Joining project management communities online or offline will give you a basic feel for the job and whether it fits with what you’ll want to do in the future. Start managing smaller low risk/budget projects and learn as you go. Both aspects - learning from others and hands on work are great teachers! Thereafter, some formal education/ recognized certification will help to put things into perspective, expand further and make you marketable.”

Ankoo Batra, PMO Manager at IT World Canada



“Look for opportunities to volunteer within your organization. Find projects within your company, make yourself known, talk to the teams and volunteer to get involved.”

Tony Adams, Program Manager at NBN Co Limited



“Communication, communication, communication!! Project managers are often judged when gossip starts flying around about the project. To solve this, the project manager needs to constantly communicate project progress in a variety of ways at different frequencies. The art of good project management comes from being able to communicate the right message at the right time to the right stakeholder. Perfecting your communication will result in better project perception and therefore increase your credibility.”

Barry Hodge, Project and Programme Manager at Bromford Group

About the author



Simon Buehring is the founder and Managing Director of Knowledge Train, a PRINCE2 Accredited Training Organization based in the UK. Simon regularly delivers project management and PRINCE2 training courses in the UK and overseas and writes a blog about project management and PRINCE2. For more than 25 years Simon has worked on or managed software projects for a wide range of organizations both in the UK and internationally, including the BBC and HSBC.