



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### How to Break Into the Project Management Field

Some people have been project managers off and on during their careers. Others have not had the opportunity to have the role yet. To a certain degree, being in a position to be named the manager on a project relies on timing, company needs, and the skillsets of the candidates. You cannot always count on what projects are coming in the future. However, you can control your skills and capabilities so that you will be a candidate for project management positions with increasing responsibilities. If you desire, you may be able to make project management the focal point of your career.

Many people tend to take their skills for granted, especially while they are young. They have a decent job that pays a decent salary. Then one day they start to realize they do not have the right background or skills to get where they really want to go. Sometimes, after you have been in the business for a number of years, you look back with regret at not having been more aggressive in proactively managing your career.

There are a number of things to look into to be more proactive in managing your career. Consider the following options for future growth.

**Gain experience.** Continue to look for opportunities to gain project management experience. Depending on your job situation, you may find these opportunities to be readily available, or you may have to be alert and dig around a little. Since projects are all different, and since you are dealing with people, much of your project management capability will be based on what you will learn and remember about prior project management opportunities.

**Increase your responsibility.** If you have some opportunities to manage projects today, you also want to try to manage larger and larger projects, or multiple smaller ones. The complexities involved with managing larger projects will stretch your skills and your limits.

**Be successful.** It goes without saying that if you have opportunities to be a project manager, you need to take advantage of them. This means you have to find a way to be successful. There are many examples of experienced technical people that want to be project managers. This goal can be permanently damaged if the person fails miserably on his or her first project management assignment. Sometimes this is less of a training issue than it is a mindset issue. If you enjoy the technical side of a project, you may have trouble focusing on the work required for project management. Needless to say, your organization will not be ready to give you another opportunity soon.

**Formal training.** If you have some level of experience, training can be an effective way to learn additional project management techniques and practices. The training can be instructor led or self-taught. Many classes contain exercises where you can practice the skills you are learning.



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**Find a mentor or coach.** In addition to formal training, you might try to identify a person from your company or someone else you know that is a successful project manager. If you can find the right person, ask him or her if he or she will provide ongoing coaching to you on what things he or she does to be successful. The coach has limited value if you are not actively managing a project, since one of the major benefits is to ask questions based on real situations that you are encountering today.

**Join professional organizations.** Search out what project management associations are available in your area. The largest is the Project Management Institute (PMI), which has chapters all over the world. These organizations provide an opportunity to network with other project managers, as well as sponsor training and other professional development classes. PMI also sponsors a project management professional (PMP) certification that is recognized more and more as a sign that the individual is experienced and possesses an advanced understanding of project management processes and techniques.

**Search the web.** If you enter 'project management' into any of the major Internet search engines, you will find hundred of links. Many of these are for people selling training, services, or software, but there are some very good websites that focus on project management.

**Learn about related topics.** When you think of project management, you normally think about the planning and controlling aspects of the job. Do not forget that to be truly successful, you have to have good soft skills as well. This includes good written and verbal communication ability, good listening skills, conflict resolution, performance management, etc. If you can manage issues, scope, risk, and quality in a perfect manner, but no one on your team can stand to work with you, then you probably are not going to be successful. These related soft-skills need to grow and improve as well as you progress through your career.

**Read books and magazines.** There are hundreds of books available on general project management and specific subsets. Find time to read some when you can. Authors each have a way of describing aspects of project management that are different than others, and they can provide perspectives that you may not have thought about before.

### Summary

These are all ideas to consider as you try to gather more experience and learning. Based on your circumstances, you may or may not be able to do some or all of them. For instance, if you do not have a current project to work on, it may be hard to find a coach who you can rely on for assistance. Formal training may not be offered in your area or may be more than your company can afford. However, books and magazines can be fairly inexpensive, and of course, it does not cost you anything to utilize the content that is available on the web.

But the key is to be doing multiple things. If you really want to specialize in project management as a profession, you will want to be working on gathering experience, as well as gaining knowledge and contacts. The payback is not measured in terms of days but in terms of years. Over time, you will find that you have more experience, more



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fundamental knowledge, more contacts and more successes than your peers. When the need arises for an experienced, seasoned, successful project manager, who is your company going to look for? Well, of course, they are looking for the best.

They are looking for you!