

# A career guide to Project Management

## Introduction, why Project Management?

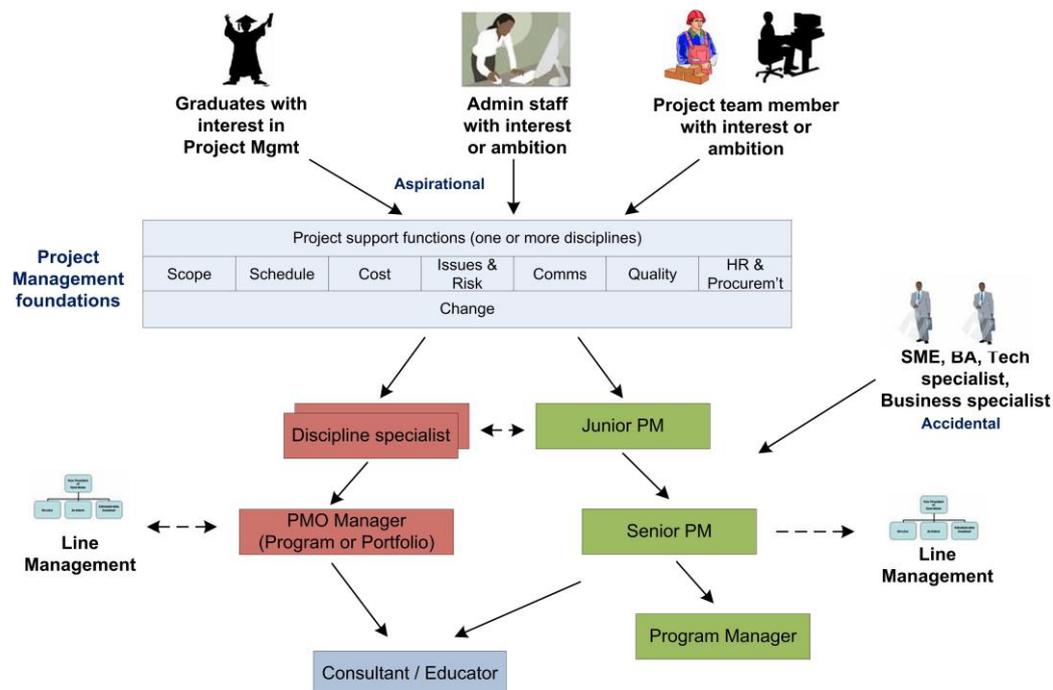
Project Management is fast becoming a career of choice for some young people, a stepping stone for others. The 2008 Hays salary guide had permanent Senior Project Managers in high demand and Program Managers earning up to \$200K per year.

Project Management skills are highly sought after as they are applicable to general business management. When one considers the communication and people management skills, together with financial, risk management and the ability to “get things done”, Project Management provides tangible and useful skills.

While lecturing recently at Melbourne University, the most common question coming from Post Graduate IT students was “How do I get a job in Project Management?” They mistakenly assumed they could get a Project Manager’s job straight out of University, realistically that is not the case.

## Pathways to Project Management

There are a number of pathways into Project Management as shown below.



There has been much written about the “accidental” Project Manager and indeed the focus of the industry over the last decade has bridging the skills gaps and

accreditation. “Accidental” Project Managers will usually find themselves in an unfamiliar role due to desire, circumstance, strategic reasons or resource shortage. They are often expected to hit the ground running.

By focusing on the “accidental” Project Manager, Australian industry has neglected the next generation of young, “aspirational” Project Managers. The lack of graduate recruitment through the late 1990s and early 2000s is now affecting business with staff shortages and generational gaps. There is currently an acute shortage of project support staff with discipline specialists such as planners attracting very high income levels. We also see people moving into specialist roles such as PMO Management who lack the foundation skills and experience.

The diagram shows the common pathways into Project Management. The different PMBOK domains, in which support staff tends to provide a “controls” function, provide the foundations or building blocks for a career in Project Management. They provide the logical first step for “aspirational” Project Managers and should be the focus of Graduates when job hunting. They provide both a tangible role as well as the opportunity to watch stakeholders, project team dynamics and leadership styles.

An alternate pathway for Graduates who may aspire to Project Management is to obtain a job in associated areas such as testing, finance or business analysis. They can then try to gain as much business, technical and project knowledge as a team member prior to stepping up into Project Management. They would need to undertake Project Management studies in their own time to enable this step up.

Occasionally we see people with Project Management experience who change industries in order to maintain interest and increase their employment prospects. We have seen people from Engineering/Construction move to IT and be particularly effective. They would need to read extensively about project and system development life cycles, testing and requirements management to enable this change.

### **Skills and attributes of effective Project Managers**

There is an interesting disconnect between what recruiters look for when recruiting Project Managers and what makes for an effective Project Manager long term. Think of the typical job ad for a Project Manager, “Must have x years industry experience, must have done similar projects before, must be accredited, must be good with xyz tools”. Now think of what attributes make for an effective Project Manager, they will be heavily weighted towards people skills, particularly communication.

Based on this observation, and work done in many industries, the following order of priority in terms of skills is proposed:

- Soft skills (Communication, Leadership, Problem solving etc)
- Astuteness (eg knowing when to push and when to back off)
- Project Management domain skills (which can be taught)
- Industry experience (which can be supplemented through mentoring/coaching)

*The 2008 Hays salary guide recommended to candidates that they focus on soft skills, business acumen and have an outcome focus.*

In fact most formal Project Management accreditation and competency assessments completely overlook the soft skills since in terms of skills development, they are very difficult to measure and teach. Some people seem to be born with soft skills, others learn through years of experience. It may be better in the long term for recruiters to go with the people with natural soft skills over those who lack them but who have more traditional Project Management skills.

There is a significant cultural element to soft skills, some International students in particular struggle to reconcile Australian norms with their own upbringing. If International students aspire to long term careers in Australia then our advice has been to supplement their social and part time work networks with local Australians where as possible. While uncomfortable, it is necessary if they wish to be effective in the Australian workplace. Fortunately with global projects and global outsourcing, we believe professionals who can bridge the cultural gap will be highly sought after.

### **Skills development and accreditation**

There will always be a role for formal, structured training. Technology innovation will see this supplemented with self paced components. Astute Project Managers realise they, not their employer, need to push to make sure training happens and find the time to supplement training with reading and research. Skills development is an investment, mainly of time, so it will take effort on the part of employers and aspirants.

A blend of independent reading, hands on practice (with a recognition mistakes will be made), formal training and mentoring/coaching provides the optimum skills development approach. People need to make the time, particularly in busy projects and busy roles. This is particularly true of Project Managers who work on a casual/contract basis rather than full employment.

Accreditation is a necessary goal for Project Managers, whether “aspirational” or “accidental” although it will take time as accreditation can only be gained after skills and experience are demonstrated. There are significant numbers of Project Managers looking for work, accreditation provides one tangible differentiator between them. Recruiters are time poor too, so when comparing people any obvious differentiator will be used during the selection process. Once chosen for an interview it is down to soft skills and communication to land the role.

### **Coaching and Mentoring**

Industry has started to formally recognise the experience of senior Project Managers through formal mentoring and coaching programs. These programs can be quite effective, with benefits to both the mentor and mentee. Programs such as these can only work where there is a strong desire, on both sides, and there is a commitment to making time available. The mentor/coach should not be the line manager of the mentee and should be ideally co-located. The mentor/coach provides a sounding board, different strategies for dealing with a problem, advice on difficult people, independent deliverable review as well as emotional support through difficult times. It will take at least an hour or two on a fortnightly basis to fulfil this role.

Peer review, particularly of deliverables, is an important aspect of Project Manager’s development. Through a network of similarly experienced people, a significant amount of support and advice can be sought through peers. There is sometimes a role to be had by the mentor/coach to make Peer review happen.

### **Wrap up**

Whether “aspirational” or “accidental” there is a need to develop skills in order to be successful in Project Management. The key skills for effective Project Managers are the soft skills, unfortunately recruiters focus on experience and more traditional Project Management skills. It is unrealistic for “aspirational” Project Managers to secure a Project Management role straight out of University. There is however a large demand for jobs in the Project Management support functions, these provide ideal foundations for a Project Management career.

#### ***About the author***

*Martin Vaughan is a Senior Consultant and Director of Core Consulting Group who has specialised in Project Management across Construction, Defence and IT. With a strong interest in education, Martin has been active in the Project Management profession, helping to define standards and competencies, particularly around Cost and Schedule. He has also been lectured regularly in Project Management and has implemented two graduate programs.*