

A Career in Project Management!!

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Introduction

Selecting a career is certainly one of the most significant decisions one has to make in his/her lifetime. With so many interesting, varied, challenging and rewarding occupations to choose from in today's diverse and dynamic world, this is truly a perplexing dilemma. I'd like to share with you my perspective as an admitted advocate and long time practitioner for considering the challenging but enormous vistas of gratifying experiences, opportunities and satisfactions available for selecting project management as a career vocation.

This paper/presentation combines the perspective of my 25 years in project management with that of my father, who has been a career professional in the domestic and international Petroleum, Petrochemical and Chemical industry. Hopefully this point of view will give an insightful look at the diversity, excitement, technical, financial, ethical & cultural challenges and holistic combination of experiences and issues that all interact in most Project Management situations, to make Project Management the ultimate field of endeavor for some, but certainly not all.

Before launching into the various aspects of a career in Project Management, let's try to establish a couple of basic definitions.

What is a Project?

"A one-time, specific task to be accomplished within prescribed quality and economic parameters in a finite time period. Task should include a definition of desired end results in terms of a facilities and/or work description, containing measurable performance criteria."

What is Project Management?

"The function of identifying/planning, organizing, resourcing/staffing, implementing/directing and controlling an array of often diverse activities in a unified effort to perform a defined task within pre-established performance/achievement parameters."

Diversity of Project Environment Experiences & Challenges

Let's recognize right up front that we are all unique individuals, each having our own collection of likes and dislikes, as well as competencies and limitations. No profession will fit or satisfy all or even any large group of us; so a discussion of this type should start out with a listing of the general characteristics, interests and attributes that most successful Project Managers have in common.

Let's first start off by discussing some of the framing characteristics of a typical project environment. Project evolution can be staged in numerous ways; however, one of the most popular uses five sequential phases:

1. Business Planning or Defining the Opportunity!
2. Analyzing Alternatives!
3. Defining the Selected Option!
4. Executing the Selected Option!
5. Operate & Evaluate!

The interface between each of these phases is an important evaluation and decision point. The thoroughness of conducting each phase and the attractiveness of the project at each juncture helps determine whether the project should move forward into the next phase, recycle back for improvement or be terminated.

Capital projects often involve a diverse mix of business/financial, scientific/technological, human/social/cultural issues with relatively large groups of people with different skill sets and competencies, frequently in different locations, all trying to develop/implement a synchronized and efficient, competitive solution for the project sponsor. Throughout this process, there are frequent & numerous temptations and pressures to digress from proven "best practices" and carefully designed plans usually in attempts to cut cost and/or accelerate schedule – and do all this while trying to earn a reasonable return for their expertise and respective contributions.

Furthermore, the playing field is often in a state of flux, with business, technological, social, environmental, marketplace, resource and political, financial situations often changing concurrent with the development and various phases of the project. Thus, inherent in this dynamic environment is the ever-present need for a stabilizing, rational influence, excellent communications, along with risk awareness and adroit management. Obviously, teamwork and common focus are also vital throughout. Above all is the recognition that "People Build Projects, Not Companies" and that "Better People Build Better Projects."

Most Significant Attributes/Requisites for Success

Having set the Project Management backdrop, let's now look at some of the more important attributes and requisites for those who enjoy the most fulfillment and success in this field. Obviously, it's not required to be a master of all these characteristics, but certainly a candidate should be proficient in many and feel comfortable in essentially all. I have attempted to separate the more significant of these into an initial major group:

- Holistic vision and perspective.
- Understanding of and respect for the varied and complex talents, skills and competencies and how they interface/interact to successfully carry out an industrial capital investment project.
- Inclination to organize and facilitate groups of diverse subject matter personnel to analyze problems, develop solutions and implement same – get things done!

- Diverse experience; understands/respects varied & complex contributions/facets of a project.
- Create and maintain an environment that allows knowledgeable people to work enthusiastically, creatively, efficiently and effectively.
- Compulsion for organizing, planning and executing creative initiatives with shared participant satisfaction.
- Technical, business, legal and financial appreciation.
- Ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant.

In addition, there are a number of other attributes/requisites which are also desirable:

- Ability to think both strategically and tactically.
- Good human interaction skills – diplomatic but precise.
- Practical/sound balanced judgment.
- Resistant to stress and strain.
- Organizationally/politically astute.
- Open-minded and decisive.
- Sets and monitors objectives.
- Determined, dedicated and dynamic.
- Organized and an organizer.
- Solid contract administration skills.
- Achievement oriented.
- Respect for people and their sensitivities.
- Persuasive and articulate – communicator.
- Inspires confidence and team work.
- A team “leader” or team “player”.
- People development interests.
- Organized and predictable.
- Persuasive/convincing.
- Strong facilitation skills.
- Determined but realistic.
- Creative, flexible but focused.
- Like to work in a group, rather than alone.

Rewards, Fulfillment & Gratification Potential

Now let's turn to some of the benefits of a career in Project Management for those who have the interest, aptitude and capabilities. I can personally attest to the reward, fulfillment and gratification potential for a career in this vocation. For most of my life I've been around people immersed in the project business and have observed and experienced the satisfactions as well as the disappointments involved. From my perspective, the positive aspects significantly outweigh the negative. Among the many significant benefits offered include:

- Pride & accomplishment.
- Responsibility/accountability oriented.
- Combination of technical & managerial skills & leadership.
- Tangible, visible results.
- Team camaraderie, ever expanding life-long friendships.
- Exciting, diverse, constantly challenging work environment.
- Both personal and team satisfaction.
- Collaborative, unified work setting.
- Interesting, progressive, learning experiences.
- Psychic income.
- Well paying and prominent.
- Job recognition, respect & security.
- Multi-faceted and multi-discipline situation mix.
- Competitive.
- Interesting and gratifying.
- Contributing and value-added.
- Dynamic ambiance.
- Compliant yet innovative.
- Personnel development.
- International exposure.

Since projects are a micro mix of the variety of challenges and situations we usually encounter in every day life, we should expect that they would offer a wide range of interesting and gratifying opportunities. Obviously, it's not everyone's elixir, but if it does suit your taste and talent, it might well be your path to success and satisfaction.

Limitations & Sacrifices

As with any profession, there are certainly some downside features and Project Management is no exception. Among these, one might include:

- Lots of travel – both domestic & international!
- Usually somewhat longer work hours than involved discipline personnel.
- Broader, more diverse background and experience requisites.
- Collaborative rather than self-dependency.
- High stress with pressure to get the job done.
- Greater visibility.
- More responsibility & accountability.
- Less technical and more managerial/impersonal skill driven.

Opportunities Available – Welcome Aboard

Clearly there are certain attributes, interest areas and skill sets that, if properly combined and nurtured, provide the right foundation for a very inspiring and gratifying career in this important and valued field.

You may have noticed that you can hardly pick up a technical or business magazine or journal these days that doesn't advocate the benefits of **Project Management** to corporate development and progress. Project Managers are being sought to lead many corporate initiatives with a much broader charter than ever before. Leading Project Managers are being looked upon as "Venture Managers" to take the lead in pursuing new research and development efforts, development of international operating and manufacturing centers, acquiring new technology and assets, etc. You name it and it's a potential opportunity for someone with Project Management skills and proficiency. Most leading corporations have clearly identified Project Management as a core-competency. In fact, many corporations are increasing their Project Management staffs and reducing other in-house skills which can be outsourced and assigning management of these outsourced functions to their Project Management personnel. The field of Project Management continues to expand in almost every direction, and is only limited by the availability of people with the interest, skills, dedication and commitment to fulfill these expanding horizons.

This article addresses the personal attributes and areas of interest, which combined, convert what would otherwise be a routine daily job into an exciting, interesting, challenging, fulfilling and thoroughly enjoyable and value-added lifetime crusade for some, while earning an impressive income to boot. A Project Management career is not suitable for all, but for those with the right credentials and interests, it can be the "wind beneath your wings" or, for some of us, "what lights your Bunsen burner."