



Education and reality TV create tipping point for PM career opportunities

Tony Marks

As professions go, Project Management is very young, having only really become established in a formal way during the 1960s.

Consequently it suffers from a bit of an identity crisis and similar educational issues to many other younger professions, HR and PR being good examples. For project managers, one downside to this relative immaturity from an educational perspective is the lack of collaboration between the many trade bodies who dictate the standards of the professional qualifications and the universities running traditional academic qualifications.

Added to this is the mistaken belief amongst businesses and public sector organisations that they can run their projects perfectly well without having to engage professional project managers. There are an awful lot of people with the title 'project manager', who run small projects without any professional qualifications. Usually,

with one or two botched initiatives under their belts, they tend to change their minds about this latter point and begin to appreciate the benefits of education.

Ultimately educational institutions and professional bodies need to work together very closely to recognise the contribution each party plays in continuing the development and maturity of this very important skill. Only in doing this will we be able to address the very real talent shortage our industry is experiencing at the moment.

Apprentice brings a touch of glamour to the PM profession

In spite of these issues, PM continues to attract a lot of interest among graduates looking for an interesting and potentially financially lucrative career option. Perhaps the most important factor behind project management's recent 'celebrity job status' has arisen thanks to The Apprentice and Alan Sugar's practice of calling his contestants 'project managers'.

Perpetuating the notion amongst employers that a 1 week PRINCE2 course is all you need to know for a successful career in PM

This is all very ironic because as we know, those typically pushy upstarts are not project managers at all - most of them are so lacking in empathy they would be absolutely terrible at it - but this misuse has brought the term into common parlance. Even in Premier League football, we have heard managers referring to their team coaching efforts as 'projects', which then sparked off a separate discussion in the media about whether it was accurate to use the term in this way.

All this has certainly helped to glamorise the profession and inject much needed young talent into the total pool. In addition to football and reality TV, the role of the project manager has also been raised in profile because of the number of large scale mess ups which have occurred in projects that have become widely known, we have all read case studies citing companies who ended up going out of business as a result of project spending going way out of control or inadequate risk assessments. Added to this, more enlightened organisations with project managers are beginning to recognise they have specific expertise, which can be moved from project to project for commercial benefit.

Having worked in the profession myself for 30 years, I was asked by PM Today to share my opinions and experience of education in this field. In addition to my own work experiences, I am also actively involved with teaching and a co-lecturer on Aberdeen University's MSc in Project Management, which I believe puts me in a good position to comment and answer some specific questions: What are the different routes into Project Management? Is a university degree better than a professional qualification? And how will the new apprenticeships launched by the Government make a positive contribution to broadening and further professionalising project management?

First or Second Career PM?

Looking firstly at the different routes to becoming a PM, during my years working in the field, I have encountered two different types of project manager, what I call the First and Second Career PM. The First Career PM is someone who decided early on this is ultimately what they want to do and gone straight into a consulting firm to learn their craft as a graduate trainee. These types of PM tend to be academic high achievers, who often study a technical first degree and then a masters specialising in project management. It is a fair generalisation to say that Career PMs tend to work for consulting firms rather than in house, although they might move to in-house later on in their careers, perhaps for personal reasons because a non-client facing work life balance can be more easily managed.

Career PMs also tend to study for professional qualifications in addition to their university degrees, often resulting in a high level of content duplication.

This is not because their original degree courses are lacking in conceptual depth, but because, as I explained at the outset, there is little collaboration between the professional bodies and higher education institutes. This then forces students to cover old ground simply because there are no exemptions available to university graduates in project management from professional qualification modules.

As the profession becomes more mature, one would hope this situation would cease to be the case and that degree courses could be run with greater levels of collaboration between professional bodies and so begin to award students relevant exemptions from professional body exams. It's the same situation for HR practitioners doing MSc courses, some of which now offer a partial CIPD qualification for good students.

Collaboration will raise standards overall

I believe that a more collaborative approach between academia and professional body will ultimately offer better long term value to students who commit to expensive degree courses, which in return give them the necessary conceptual grounding to embark on their PM careers. It would, potentially, also help to raise standards generally, because it would accelerate the learning journey for students to more quickly reach the higher levels of professional expertise, for instance, achieving Level B and C of the APM qualification, than if they had to retake Level D in spite of having completed this content in their original degree course. As someone who teaches on a Masters course and runs an organisation specialising in professional training courses, I understand only too well that a 1 year intensive masters course prepares the novice practitioner far more for working life than a 60 hour intensive training course, which is designed to impart specific knowledge. Added to this, the lack of integration also plays its part in perpetuating the notion amongst employers that a 1 week PRINCE2 course is all you need to know for a successful career in PM. If only it was!

What other routes into the profession exist?

Nowadays, a very new route into the profession for budding Career PMs is to take an undergraduate course. There are just a handful of universities offering first degree courses in project management and they tend to be linked to a specific field. For instance, the University of Lancashire is running a Construction Project Management BSc, designed for students wanting to become project managers in the construction industry and achieve associated Chartered status. At the moment, courses like this are very unusual to

find, because in the main, most people take the initial masters route and then turn to getting professional qualifications once they're in their first job working in the field.

The second way into the profession tends to be predominantly where the Second Career PM's come into the equation. As their name suggests, these are people who find themselves managing complex projects in their chosen fields, and then need to think about getting appropriate professional training through a specialist provider. These individuals tend to have high levels of commercial and technical acumen and use the course to understand project management theory and methodologies plus some organisational psychology.

Apprenticeships to widen access and roles

The last and most recent route into project management is via an apprenticeship. These are designed for people who do not have a degree and offer an opportunity for people who are perhaps less traditionally academic to enter the profession. Some people in the industry believe the introduction of apprenticeships will create a 2 tier profession and be seen as a lesser qualification. There may unfortunately be some truth to this but it is unavoidable and requires time to change perceptions. Apprenticeships have historically suffered some level of stigma for being 'less academic' but something like the City & Guilds qualification in Project Control offers huge value and fills a big skills gap. Project controls, whereby costs and schedules are continuously monitored, are absolutely vital for all major infrastructure and large projects. This is something project managers have been reluctant to do in the past because they feel it is not within their remit, which has created a huge gap and perfect starting role for project control specialists who complete apprenticeships, especially in engineering and technical areas. Once the value of those individuals to their organisations becomes more widely understood, so the stigma of entering the profession via this route will slowly alter.

In terms of general career expectations for apprentices, at this level you should expect to enter an organisation in a more junior role than project manager, starting out as a project controller or planning engineer. But the apprenticeship would give you the academic foundation to move up the career ladder relatively quickly from modest beginnings.

What this diversity of different educational routes into PM indicates is how quickly it is maturing as a professional field at many levels. There is wider acknowledgement generally that projects need to be managed according to specific methodologies to deliver against objectives which means greater demand for professional courses and a widening of entry points

to attract candidates at all levels. Graduates believe it offers an interesting and rewarding career path and now, thanks to regular misappropriation on reality TV, we are even seen as glamorous!



About the author

Tony Marks is Group Managing Director and the author of '20120 Project Management' a guide to project management excellence published by Kogan Page which will be published in October 2012. He is also the founder of 20120 Business Insight a consultancy offering project management services and professional training to organisations across all sectors of industry. Find out more about 20120 and the services it offers at www.2020businessgroup.com.

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20 | 20 case studies

Further illustrating the diverse routes into the profession, 20|20 itself employs a range of consultants, each of whom followed one of the career paths described in Tony's article.



Neil Harkin, Director of Operations

Neil did a BA specialising in Modern European History, History of Fine Arts, International Relations, Economics, Statistics and Middle English before an initial career in retail management. He moved into technical sales and then IT sales starting with Apple in 1989. This gave him his first taste of 'project management' and after a decade of unofficially managing projects for IT companies, he decided to gain professional qualifications and undertook Microsoft certification. This highlighted the importance of soft skills needed to manage projects successfully, which led to Neil joining the APM and eventually joining the Aberdeen Chapter's management team. He has been an APM Aberdeen Chapter committee member for 4 years and is actively involved with its application for Chartered Status with the Privy Council.

Qualifications include

APM Introductory Certificate in PM, CompTIA Project+ and CDIA, PRINCE2 Practitioner, PRINCE2>APMP, APMP (IPMA Level D) Currently studying for the PMI PM Professional (PMI) exam

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight

'I'd probably decide this was the route to take rather than stumbling into it ... PM is a hugely undervalued discipline and raising its profile will make it easier for people to select it as a career choice as opposed to the traditional 'accidental project manager' route.'

Advice to new entrants

'Take your time to think about what the environment you want to work in would be like and if it's a fast moving, demanding, people centric environment that gives you lots of challenges and a huge sense of achievement and job satisfaction then this is probably the place for you.'

Melanie Thom, Consultant

Melanie took a BA (Hons) in Business Studies, gaining a First at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. In her third year, she spent 18 months on a work placement where she handled a variety of HR projects for a large organisation. This experience made her realise she wanted a career offering a lot of variety and the opportunity to work on many different initiatives simultaneously, which led her to consider PM and apply for a Masters degree in project management, also at Robert Gordon. After graduating, she spent the summer working for a management consultancy, where she gained some initial project based work experience before starting the full time MSc. During her Masters, Melanie secured a 6 month internship with Petrofac Training, which led to a full time position as a Project Management Office (PMO) Team Lead. There, PMO activities included preparing plans, schedules and budgets, providing advice on best practice, completing project audits, liaison between PMs and Senior Management, dashboard reporting and general project reporting. After 2 years in this role, combined with an excellent academic track record, Melanie had enough practical experience to obtain an initial position with 20|20 as a PM consultant. She now works as a Consultant at 20|20 where she advises organisations across all sectors of industry about their project management capabilities and acts as a hands on project manager for specialist projects.

Qualifications include

MSc Project Management (awarded with Distinction), APMP Level D and CAPM

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight

'I'm happy with the route I took into the profession and after reaching the position of consultant by the time I was 24, don't think I could have progressed more quickly than I did. From the outset, I was aware that a depth of knowledge of the discipline's tools and techniques were necessary to be successful in any PM role so I set out to achieve this via academia, whilst also obtaining practical hands-on experience.'

Advice to new entrants

'Although formal project management qualifications are valuable, professional experience is equally important. Whilst at University I undertook placements to build up my experience, skills and contacts across different industries. This proved invaluable on my CV and helped me to get my first job very quickly.'



Doug Littlejohn, Chief Operating Officer

Doug Littlejohn completed an HNC in Mechanical Engineering and an ONC in Industrial Measurement and Process Control. Starting from a mechanical engineering base, he has held Project Delivery and Operations Management roles within international oil companies and some of their major contractors, working as a freelance project management consultant. Following this, he managed the delivery of an integrated ERP solution as part of a larger business transformation project and led an initiative to deliver a sustainable management and operating system. Doug has over 25 years direct experience in oil and gas project delivery and ran his own successful independent project management consultancy for over ten years prior to joining 20I20 as a Director and Co-owner. At 20I20 Doug is responsible for all Operational Delivery of Consulting Services and Project Management Training. In addition he is responsible for streamlining business processes involved directly and indirectly in the successful delivery of our client projects, including revenue generating or capital based initiatives.

Qualifications include:

HNC in Mechanical Engineering, ONC Industrial Measurement and Process Control, General management training and project based software applications

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight

'There aren't many things I would change because although it didn't seem that way at the time, my career has followed a fairly logical progression from project to programme to portfolio management. I came away from traditional PM some time ago and moved into portfolio management, which I find a very interesting field.'

Advice to new entrants

'Always remember that PMs are generalists – you really have to be jack of all trades and master of none, so a good solid degree is important but not what project management is all about. Focusing on the details is less important than seeing the big overall picture. Scope is everything, if you don't fully understand the scope and cannot "manage its capture" in a cost estimate and schedule, you cannot manage the project properly.'



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