

# Transform Your Project Management Career



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## ABSTRACT

Many of us may have stumbled into project management and may have become successful at it by necessity rather than careful planning. But that does not mean you can continue to be successful without taking care of your project management career. The problem is, very few people really know how to plan a project management career because project management does not typically show up on any organizational chart or career road map. This white paper can help the reader identify where they have been, where they are in their career, and how they and the organization of which they are an integral part can establish a credible and beneficial career management model that can potentially benefit both.

**Keywords:** career, resume, interview, promotion, attitude, influence

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## INTRODUCTION

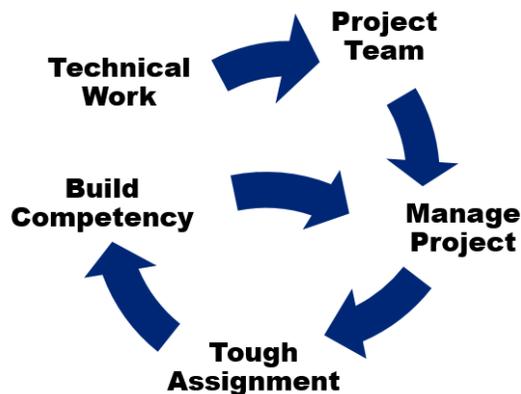
Many project managers are evaluated based on job performance, just like most other jobs out there. That is, how successful we deliver projects in terms of scope, budget, and schedule. The golden triangle. We all have read in personal value statements and résumé summaries that John the project manager has consistently delivered his projects on time. Sarah the PM has always delivered her projects under budget. If these statements are true (and I have my own doubts if they are consistently true), then they have become meaningless. Because this is what everyone expects to see from a project manager, it is no longer a differentiator in a project management career. Yet, this is how we are still being evaluated in terms of how well we can perform as a project manager. If “alignment” to the golden triangle is not the end-all and be-all of our career, then why should it be the only gauge through which we are evaluated as a professional?

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## A TYPICAL PROJECT MANAGER CAREER

Many of us get into project management by way of necessity rather than by way of design. Meaning, we happened to end up being a PM, rather than careful consideration and

intentionally pursued. The typical path by which a professional becomes a project manager typically looks like this:



We typically start out doing some kind of “technical” work. Accounting, finance, programming, testing, design, database administration. Something that we actually went to college and trade school to learn how to do. And one day we join a team composed of other professionals who are also doing other technical work, though theirs may differ than our own. And as the “project” is carried out, it becomes difficult to deal with in terms of everyone’s skills, time, responsibilities, and ability and willingness to contribute. So the team decided that they need a leader to “lead.” And that person becomes the Project Manager. As time goes on and the project continues, that team actually performed well and the PM is looked upon as a strong and needed component on other projects and other teams. So the boss comes over to the PM and says, “Hey, I have another tough assignment for you, managing another very important project.” So you say yes, and you go out of your way and learn more about project management and possibly even try your luck at getting certified as a Project Management Professional (PMP). Once you have continued down that path of building competency and reputation as a good PM, you get more tough assignments as the PM, which allows you to gain more experience and competency in managing another project, perhaps with different organizations within your firm. And you seem to

get stuck in an endless cycle of gaining experience and competency just so that you can go and deliver yet another tough project. Year after year, you get great performance reviews as a great PM, but there seems to be a huge chasm between what you do and your next promotion or the next step in the corporate career ladder.

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## BREAKING THE CYCLE

Many project managers that I talk to have some kind of a work plan for the projects they are managing, whether it is an elaborate MS project work plan or a piece of napkin with some bullets and effort estimations and team assignments. These same project managers, however, few would have any idea when I ask them, “Where is the project plan for your career?” As important as the projects that they are executing and managing, their career should at least deserve a piece of napkin with some high-level career goals, preferably some semblance of strategies or steps that they should follow to make it to the next level. Sadly, many project managers do not really know what the next level is. We need to break the cycle.

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## THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAREER PERSPECTIVES

### Perspective #1: Organizational

In any organization, there are two common threads that tie all the knowledge, processes, methods, tools, and solutions together in terms of how they serve the greater teams of people that go to work daily: ability and influence. Every individual has his specialty and ability to perform his job. Every professional has her sphere of influence to affect how she can do her job successfully as well as how her colleagues can do theirs. Each one of us must focus our career on how to influence the organization’s ability. Whether positive or negative, an

organization is dependent on the collective ability of its professionals to fulfill their responsibilities with competency and professionalism. Anything short of that tall order could mean a negative impact to the organization's standing in the market place and how it is perceived as an employer. Particularly in the area of project management, developing a career path for professional project managers has been somewhat lacking and has not received the attention that is desperately needed. More and more project managers are finding that in order to leap across the career chasm, they may have to leave their current organization and get into leadership roles outside the project management realm, taking their collective wisdom and experience right along with them.

A career path in project management does not have to be complicated or elaborate. Any organization that can develop a career path based on the following six areas to maintain a healthy project management culture can define its project management career model accordingly by focusing on the common threads that we mentioned earlier: ability and influence.



Every organization can place its employees in one of three areas: doers, thinkers, and contagion.

**The Doers** are the ones who may be less experienced, still learning their jobs and learning why their job is critical to the operations of their department or team. Doers tend to focus on learning and supporting the business and helping

to ensure relevance of their craft to the business processes, methods, and tools that are at their disposal. Doers can still have influence. It would be wise for leadership to make themselves available to the doers and gain insight on how their daily battles are won. Doers are the ones in the trenches delivering the results and are able to identify ways to help improve and demonstrate their value. Doers should do likewise. They should find ways to connect with leaders of the organization and understand their needs, support their causes, and align their day-to-day activities to the strategies and goals that have been set at the organizational level. This is also a great way for the doers to give the leadership insight into the value they are delivering for the benefit of the organization. Influence does not flow in one direction. The doers can have just as much impact to the wellbeing of an organization as the decision makers at the top of the food chain.

**The Thinkers** are the keepers of the gate. They are the ones that spend their time enhancing the way things are getting done, how to best implement project management methods and tools, and how to best communicate to the rest of the organization on how to deliver projects successfully. They are the experts who know the ins and outs of all the organizations policies, processes – the “how’s” of doing business. It is also their responsibility to approach the doers for ideas for improvements, enhancements, and identify future capabilities. They are also the ones who will take their time to decide whether an existing process or tool needs to be revamped or replaced by determining if their user base is readily adopting, vociferously rejecting, or finding alternative ways to do better and be better. It is to the Thinkers’ advantage to leverage these voices to identify ways to improve how projects are managed and how the organization can support their project managers.

**The Contagion** is responsible for the ideation and proliferation of project management knowledge. The Contagion has more experience

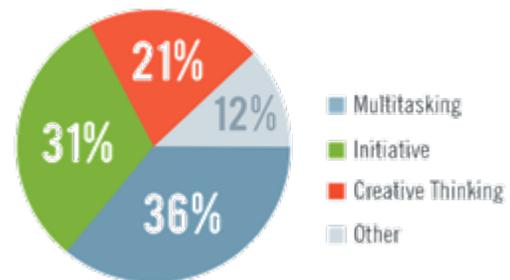
and awareness of the organization's project management processes, the inner-workings of various project organizations or departments across the organization. Their focus should be around maturing the organization – not just the PMO – but the entire organization. They should also focus on helping the Doers and Thinkers learn and contribute to the organization's PM capability. Ideas that are formulated by the Contagion should be followed up with action plans and strategies to improve or to implement. Knowledge sharing is a must and it must be done readily across the organization. Finally, the Contagion should encourage and facilitate innovation across the organization. The Contagion should also know how to quantify and qualify success and pinpoint how the project management practice is contributing to those successes. Each successful project completed should be leveraged to encourage learning, innovation, and knowledge sharing to maintain success and growth across the organization. Proliferation of the science and art of project management is highly dependent on an organization with a strong Contagion group.

## Perspective #2: Marketplace

We live in a world in which change is no longer just a possibility. It is an inevitability. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average tenure of employment around the world has significantly decreased over the past 30 years. This change however does not necessarily need to cause any angst among project management professionals but rather an opportunity. This change also gave us a clear indication that our job is no longer about doing our job. If we cannot manage change in our professional career, then we could become extinct because someone else may be trying to get rid of our job from above or take our job from below. We have to be comfortable with change, which means we need to learn to deal with change.

The professional job market has taught us over the years that we are not hired to just occupy a desk or even to just perform a specific function. We are hired to deliver value, to improve our organization, to innovate, to share our knowledge, and to drive the changes that are necessary for the organization to remain competitive in today's world economy. Project management is the facilitator to making all these things happen and your project management career should be especially change-ready.

The modern job market is also teaching us one very poignant face: the days of the one-trick pony is over. You can no longer spend a 45-year career doing one thing. What employers are looking for from perspective employees are no longer just technical skills, traditional business or scientific acumen, but rather attitudes and willingness to learn and adapt.



Source: *How Businesses Choose Between 2 Qualified Candidates*, Doug Horn (blog.recruitifi.com), October 28, 2014

The traditional career ladder that may offer fewer job changes, linear promotions, longevity in a single firm, and highly dependent on internal politics is being replaced by a career lattice that can offer many role changes, promotion by transitions (job changes), short sprints, and opportunities that are made available through extensive networking, both inside and outside the organization and sometimes even industry. Jobs are also becoming more nonlinear in that one person is expected to take on multiple roles, wear different hats, doing different things in this age of “do more with less” mentality.

One of the best things you bring to work every day is your attitude. Your attitude is revealed in the marketplace by the relevance of your knowledge and skills, how well you are connected with your network of peers, professional contacts, and leaders within your organization and your industry. Your attitude is also demonstrated through your competence; that is, demonstrating tangible business and operational results that you can point to as your past success. More importantly, you will need to be able to correlate your past successes to future benefit of the organization. And finally, your attitude is reflected by your eminence on your team, in your organization, in the industry, and in the professional community. Are you known in the work place for your expertise, your professionalism, your achievement? Are the leaders in your firm referring to you and your success as an asset to the organization? Are you willing and able to share those successes publicly? As a professional, humility is great, but invisibility is not.

### **Perspective #3: Personal**

Over the years, the job market has seen huge transformations to what the employers are looking for to how jobs are marketed and filled by HR organizations, staffing firms, and independent recruiters. The following statistics are very telling to how the job market has transformed its business practices as a result of the transition from the “career ladder” to the “career lattice.”

- 80% of job openings are not posted anywhere. Not in the newspaper, not on a job site, not even in most company’s job postings They remain between the ears of the hiring managers.
- On average, 118 people apply to a single job posting and only 20 out of those receive an interview.

- 50% of résumés are weeded out by “talent management software” before a single human even looks at a single one.
- It takes a hiring manager just seven seconds of “eye time” to reject a résumé.

Source: *7 Things You Probably Didn't Know About Your Job Search*, *Forbes.com*, Jacquelyn Smith, April 17, 2013

### *The Résumé*

The importance of a well-written résumé is obvious. With the amount of scrutiny that a résumé goes through in a job search process, it certainly deserves our utmost attention. However, most of us have never had any formal training in résumé writing. It is not until recently that colleges and universities began teaching resume writing as part of a formal curriculum. For most experienced project managers, they historically resort to borrowing and leveraging templates from colleagues, friends, family, and even online. Though not necessarily a bad thing, you have to remember that not all résumés are equal. In fact, not all of your own résumés are equal. Let me explain.

Most people have a single résumé that documents their entire working life. From the moment they stepped off the college campus until now. The résumé is inundated with job descriptions and experiences in a life epic. The problem with such a resume is that though it may contain what a recruiter or hiring manager is looking for, it also contains a whole lot of things that do not have any bearing to specific job requisition, leaving the hiring manager having to fish for information. In a world where there are 118 resumes being submitted for every job posting, hiring managers do not have the time or patience to sift through 118 resumes that contain mostly seemingly irrelevant experiences. Your résumé should be meaningful. Meaning, the “stories” you choose to share should be relevant to the job you are applying for. This also means that you will have to craft the content of your resume to address the holes that the hiring

manager is trying to fill. If every single one of your experiences, and more importantly, who you are and how you have behaved in those experiences, demonstrates clearly an ability to address the most pressing needs of the hiring manager, you will have a much better chance of gaining at least an interview.

Remember, your résumé is about YOU. Not your previous job, not your previous teams. It is about how you have BEHAVED on your job, with your team, through tough situations, delivering certain value and achieving certain results, and how such behavior in such context can achieve the desired results for which the hiring manager is searching. Your goal of writing a résumé is to get your point across, not your entire history. Quantity is not better than quality. So when you write your résumé, consider these:

- Write in paragraph form
- Write about your performance, not your job description
- Highlight your career and how it is relevant to the person reading

Highlight your experiences by using this simple technique that I would like to call the C.A.R. technique.

### C – Circumstance

For each experience, start off by offering the context of your experience. What are the business problems that you were trying to solve or the business condition or problem statement that was given to you? What was the gravity of the situation? What are the pain points you are trying to alleviate? As a hiring manager, context is just as important as the characterization of you. If I told you I ran 26 miles, all you know was that I ran 26 miles. You do not know why I did it, how I did it, how long it took, or who was with me. Uphill? Downhill? I really do not know how good or bad of a runner you are. Your résumé should tell me who you are, how you

have behaved, and the results you have achieved and you cannot do that without a setting.

### A – Action

Once I know the gravity of the situation you were in, I want to know how you behaved. Now, this does not mean I want to know what you were tasked to do. I do not really want to know your job description. I want to know how, based on the context that you have just described, you have understood the problem or situation and behaved in the manner that demonstrated your ability to think creatively, to leverage your knowledge appropriately, to communicate broadly, to answer questions succinctly, to deal with animosity professionally, and to collaborate continually. Those are the qualities for which, above all of your credentials and accolades, most hiring managers are looking.

### R – Result

This is the part that most people leave out on their resume. What were the end results? Did you save your organization from needless spending? Did your team avoid certain risks that would have been otherwise unavoidable? What were the tangible benefits realized or improvements achieved that can be directly or even indirectly attributed to your actions? It is not a good story unless you know what happens in the end, so do not leave out the ending to yours!

### *The Interview*

There are so many self-help books and Internet article on interviewing that I can probably do less justice here in one paragraph. I will simply remind you of what we have been discussing previously. Your entire job search process is about you as a person, as a worker, as an employee. Your interviewers will be less concerned about your credentials and your skills than who you are and how you have behaved in your previous professional environments and

endeavors. Your job at the interview is to bring your attitude, which, as we had previously discussed, is demonstrated by the relevance of your skills, your competence that leads to future benefits, your professional connections, and your eminence in the industry. Be a storyteller at the interview and let yourself be the main character. And, remember, the story is about its main character, not her job description or her team.

*But, I already have a job...*

If you already have a job, congratulations. However, we live and work in a very tough and competitive business environment. Someone above could be looking to get rid of your job and someone below you could be looking to take over your job. Having a job is great, but having a career is better. And in order to achieve a successful CAREER, you have to be mindful of the way “jobs” fit into a modern career. In order for you to ditch the “career ladder” and embrace the “career lattice,” you ALWAYS have to be on the lookout for your next “job.”

Now, looking out for your next job does not mean that you should be applying for new jobs every day. Looking out for your next job means that, every day, you are doing something to prepare yourself to be successful at your next opportunity, whether this next job is with your current organization or not. Always ask yourself these questions:

- What are my unique skills and abilities today?
- How marketable are my skills and abilities?
- What skills and abilities do I want to acquire tomorrow?
- What do I enjoy doing today?
- What do I want to pursue tomorrow?
- How can I differentiate myself from others?
- What am I worth in the market? Why?
- What value do I add to my employer, customer, and industry?

You should be, in fact, constantly thinking about your personal brand. Your personal brand is your unique promise of value. It is composed of your business expertise and its viability in the market place. If you are still holding on to 50-year-old technology and methodology that has not been updated or improved, your expertise may not be as marketable in this fiercely competitive job market. Your brand is also about how you are uniquely known in the marketplace. Do you create value? How do you create value? What character defines you? What are your principles? What will make your brand great will be based on how integral your behavior is to your craft, whether it can be clearly understood, whether it is compelling. It showcases your passion about what you do and subsequently demonstrated by your behavior. This is what will differentiate you from others. A great brand indicates future value, substantiated by past relevant success and well-articulated with confidence and executive presence.

*Every Job is an Audition*

You are either auditioning to your current boss or a potential future boss. The term we like to use for auditioning to your current boss is *promotion*. However, our tradition may have led us into some very unrealistic attitudes toward promotion. We tend to think in terms of the organizational structure and job titles when we should think in terms of ability and influence (remember those?). True promotion is about your ability to influence backed by your experience. True promotion cannot be easily taken away from you because influence is not guaranteed by a job title. It is by your dedication to your work, your ability to visibly demonstrate your competence, and how well you are connected in the work place. A title may be a manifestation of someone else’s recognition of your influence, but by then, it is just icing on the cake.

## *Building Your Network*

Having a good professional network does not make you the “teacher’s pet” or a “brown-noser.” Having a good professional network means you have demonstrated professional competence and that you are known in the marketplace for your knowledge, dedication, and ability to communicate. Having a good network can provide you with the exposure to the right experience to allow you to demonstrate your ability and increase your reach in the marketplace. Your network can also help you stay relevant because you connect to others who are just like you – they too can demonstrate their abilities – and learning from other professionals about what is viable in their profession is never a bad thing.

If you have not already, it is critical that you begin building your network by identifying those who can be your mentors. You need to learn from those who have been where you are and where you are headed. Learn from their mistakes and failures and how they recovered from those mistakes and failures to achieve results. Mentors can also find opportunities for you to shine and provide insight to how you can personally and professionally improve to maintain the proper “attitude” (in the sense that we have previously discussed).

At the same time, be a mentor. Find someone who is more junior than you and share your experiences and your past mistakes and failures and how you have recovered and succeeded. Find opportunities for them to shine. If you are worried about “grooming someone to replace you,” do not. I have never seen someone losing her job for being a good mentor.

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## SUMMARY

Some final things to remember:

- Never be a “one trick pony”
- Never throw away a business card
- Never turn down an opportunity to lead

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kane has more than 19 years of management and consulting experience implementing PMO solutions to large, complex and highly visible projects for his clients. He is currently responsible for assessing, tailoring and deploying project management offices on client engagement of more than \$50M in revenue for Deloitte Consulting. Kane is also currently serving as the Vice President of Programs for the Dallas Chapter of Project Management Institute (PMI).

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