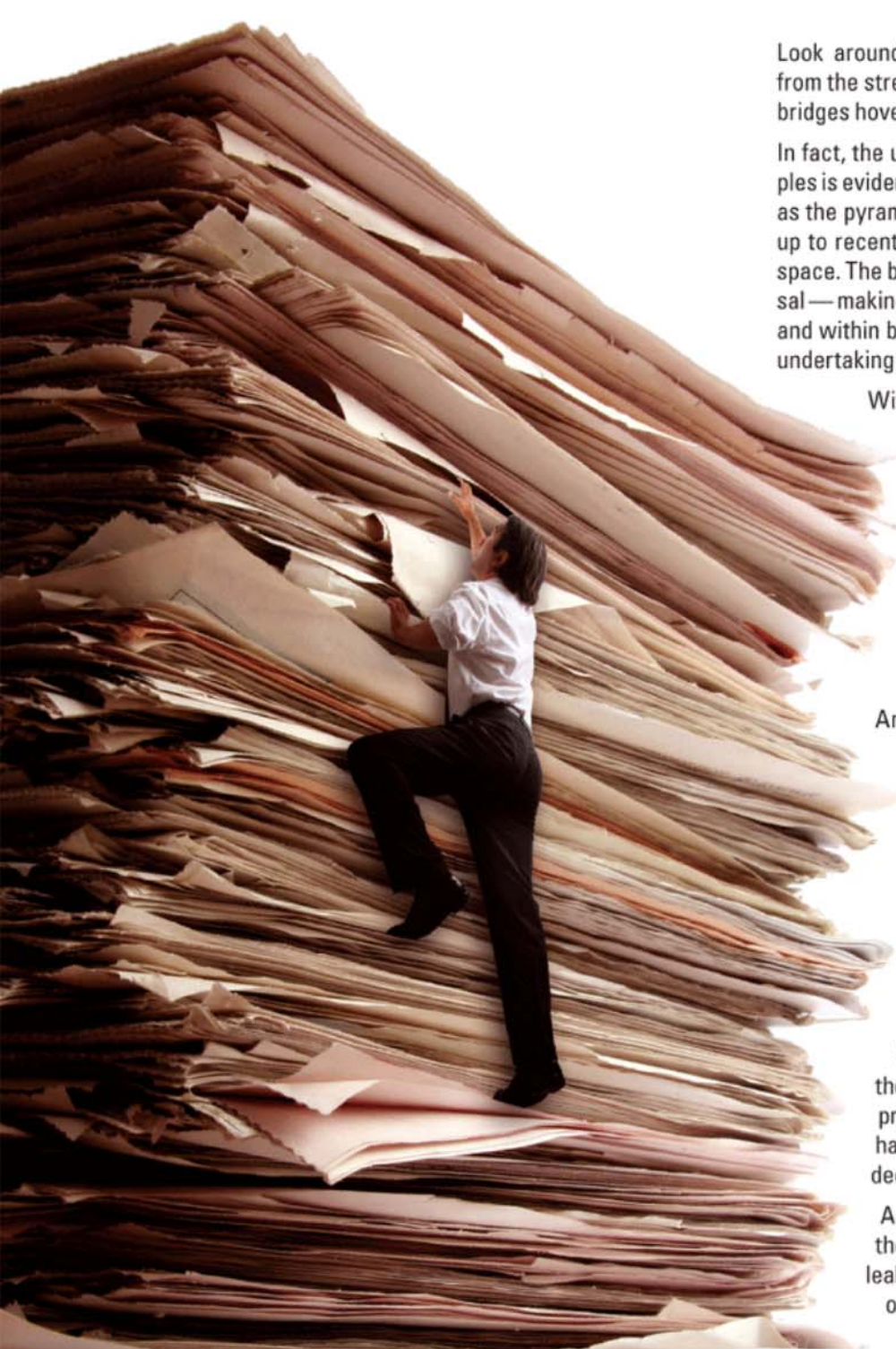


Project Manager: Managing the World, One Project at a Time

ERICA BRATH



Look around: Project management surrounds you, from the streets underneath you to the buildings and bridges hovering over your head.

In fact, the use of basic project management principles is evident in almost every civilization, as far back as the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China, up to recent accomplishments, like the journey into space. The basics of project management are universal — making sure a project is done correctly, on time and within budget — ensuring every element of any undertaking is accomplished in step with the rest.

Without project management and, just as important, the project manager to oversee each step, projects as small as a house or as large as a major highway would collapse.

The role of the project manager is to plan every step of the way to make sure all the pieces come together, from materials and planning to coordination of all the people involved.

And coordination between all parties, from local departments to workers on a site, is just as important as coordination between stages of the actual project. Without it, chaos ensues.

One well-known example is Boston's Big Dig, a megaproject designed to reroute traffic via a 3.5-mile tunnel under the city. Poor project management in the form of time overruns, cost overruns and poor planning made it the most expensive highway project in the U.S. The original cost estimate for the project was \$2.6 billion. To date, the project has cost \$14.79 billion and taken nearly two decades to design and build.

Add in manslaughter charges following the collapse of a roof segment, significant leaks throughout the structure, complaints of poor planning and construction, quality issues, safety violations and a law-

suit filed by the Massachusetts Attorney General demanding approximately \$100 million from the contractors, and this is a shining example of how project management can make or break a project.

Project management crosses all industries and is present in every corner of the globe. In fact, anytime something must be completed, project management is at work.

"Whether or not you call it project management, your life is filled with things that you manage like projects," said Beth Ouellette, president and CEO of the Ouellette Group. From organizing a holiday dinner to planning for a family vacation, "whether you realize it before this moment or not," you're practicing project management.

With the exception of certification, which has specific time requirements related to experience and education, potential project managers can come from any work or educational background.

From there, the profession can be broken down into two types of project managers: those who go into it to become project managers and those who go into it to better manage projects within their particular industry. While those interested in the former can take project management certificate courses at places such as Stanford University and George Washington University, project managers come from a variety of fields.

In fact, many project managers entered the profession as a way to better their skills in their specific industries.

"What happened is I would be assigned a project, given resources and people, and, in a sense, I developed a way of delivering projects," said Michael Yinger, president of Pythia Inc., who was working in transportation at the time. "There is a logical way, in that you plan, execute, review and replan. You can't really do those things in any other order and get anything done.

"I just grew into those roles, and the projects kept getting bigger and bigger, and about 10 years ago, I realized I'm a project management consultant, that's what I've been doing. So, I've been a project management consultant in one form or other for the last 10 years."

As a profession, project management only goes back 50 years. In that time, however, the profession has grown from a nearly unknown specialty to a career path that is becoming increasingly more important and attractive.

"It's only been in the public eye for the last 15 years or so," said Yinger, who also serves as the deputy project manager on Project Management Institute's standard, the Project Manager Competency Development Framework. "It's been going on forever, but it's always

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been limited to certain industries. But now there's the recognition that it's going on everywhere."

In fact, there's never been a better time to toss your hat into the project management ring, as employers look for the expertise to help ensure their projects are completed on time, within budget and within scope.

"There is a great demand for project managers globally," said Ron Hanchar, director of certification at Project Management Institute (PMI), the Pennsylvania-based global organization for the project management profession. "It is an ever-expanding market. Currently, the PMP and the CAPM exams are translated into 10 languages and there are over 250,000 PMI-credentialed individuals."

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"I think as a discipline there's a huge opportunity for growth for a couple reasons," Yinger said. "There's a growing recognition that what takes place in the workplaces is projects, and by being disciplined in [project management] you can effect more positive change.

"The reality of the marketplace is there is more pressure to have the certification to even get the work," said Yinger, who holds a PMP certification. "I think what happens is that over time, as a discipline matures, there's the recognition that there are those who can and those who say they can, and certification becomes the bar against which to measure people. That's not to say all PMPs are good project managers, but it becomes a measure of your dedication and another way to distinguish yourself, or for someone who's hiring to distinguish the candidate pool around that. And it's a sign of maturity for a particular discipline."

Project management certification is available from a variety of organizations, while some companies offer their own internal certification. Overall, they all mean that the credential holder has the basic project management competency that goes with each type of certification.

"Certification is a process by which a nongovernmental organization or association recognizes the competence of an individual who has met certain qualifications as determined by that organization or association," Hanchar said. "Benefits include better job marketability, usually higher salaries because of

assumed increased skill levels, professional recognition and personal satisfaction."

PMI, for example, offers three main types of certification for those at different levels of their career.

"Although there is no typical path — individuals enter the profession at various levels through various roles of employment — we have been promoting our 'family of credentials,'" Hanchar said. "Within the framework of PMI's family of credentials, there are a number of roles that contribute to the success of individual projects and to the accomplishment of organizational objectives and strategy. Within project teams, you can expect to find a project manager," or PMP, who holds the Institute's Project Management Professional credential.

"Also operating within project teams are CAPMs," Hanchar said. These are Certified Associates of Project Management. "CAPMs may be aspiring project managers, or they may be established professionals who provide specialized skills to project teams. These professionals may specialize in cost estimating, marketing or a host of other disciplines."

At the highest level are those who are in charge of more than one project, or program managers. For this, PMI offers the Program Manager Credential, or PgMP.

"Program managers oversee a group of projects that are directed toward a common organizational objective," Hanchar said. "Individuals who attain this credential will demonstrate a high level of experience and competence in managing programs."

It's Everywhere

To throw out another project management-is-everywhere analogy, organize the rehearsal dinner, wedding and reception, and you're managing a program.

Of course, project and program management take place at some of the highest levels of business and government. The Olympics are a prime example, with multiple locations, events, people and organizations that must be managed at the same time to ensure the smooth running of multiple sites and events. International certification, such as that offered by PMI, gives PMPs and PgMPs the credibility to run projects in any part of the world.

In fact, globalization plays a large part in the growth of the profession. Not only has competition increased as people do business with those in every corner of the

globe, but the need for those who can communicate with their peers around the globe has grown as well.

More project teams work virtually, from all parts of the globe, making many of the nontechnical skills that much more important. With that in mind, communication is key.

"You have to be organized; you have to be able to deal with details without getting flustered," Yinger said. "You're not going to be a very good project manager if you're not detail oriented in the first place. You have to be able to listen, and finally — it almost goes without saying — you have to be really good at speaking and writing. So much of what you do is communication; project management is primarily communication. Making sure you're hearing what the client is saying, and being able to turn that back around in the form of written communication" is an absolute must.

"Really having stealth communication skills" is of absolute importance, added Ouellette, who also holds a PMP certification. "You have got to have communication skills that can take you where you need to go on your projects. You need to know how to make the best decisions for the projects and communicate to all these stakeholders why these decisions are made.

"Next to stealth communication, I would highly admonish them to build a network of senior sponsors and mentors," said Ouellette. "Build your network early, and build it strong."

On the more technical side, prospective project managers need to be able to keep up with the times.

"You have to be a power user of current technology," said Yinger. "You don't have to be a developer. But if you can't use this stuff in your sleep, you're going to spend too much time behind the eight ball."

"There are a lot of good things you can learn from a PMP prep course," Yinger said. "Whether or not you get your PMP, you

have to have an inherent understanding of project management to make the best of it. I was a project manager for 20 years before I sat for my PMP."

Project management prep courses and career paths within a company or industry are becoming more common, and there are also many online resources to help the project manager in training. Yet, most agree that on-the-job training is one of the best ways to determine if project management is right for you.

"A lot of project management, even today, is learning on the job, and it's hard to short-circuit that experience," Yinger said. "Someone has to be willing to give you a project. The typical path to becoming a project manager is to begin in some form of analyst role, so you're part of the team."

Yet, when it comes to managing complex projects and keeping all the pieces in place, not every skill can be taught. That's where good old-fashioned experience plays the biggest role. 📌

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