

ESI Horizons

Newsletter

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Working with the “Accidental Project Sponsor”

By Bob McGannon, PMP

We hear this all of the time — project management is the “accidental profession.” Very few of us went to university with the objective of being a project manager, nor did we enter the business world with that objective. Somehow, through the course of human events, we ended up at the wheel of a scheduling management tool, and we stumbled into a new career. This pathway to a role in the world of projects is not restricted to the project manager. Project sponsors also end up in their role by accident — often with little personal focus toward that role, and with little knowledge of what they are supposed to do.

As project managers, it is up to us to train and leverage this reluctant resource. We need to teach without lecturing and engage without monopolizing the precious time of the senior executive who serves as “the accidental project sponsor.” Here are a few techniques you can start using today.

1. Don't tell the sponsor what to do, ask about acceptable techniques

Senior leaders are used to carving out their own way and capitalizing on approaches that are comfortable to them as individuals. Telling them what their role needs to be is rarely an accepted approach. Define your own role as the project manager through the eyes of the sponsor, while at the same time asking when and how the sponsor wants to be engaged in project decision making.

It is a good idea to have a checklist of things that you feel you need from the sponsor; you can share that checklist if you believe it will be well received. In cases where you don't think it will be taken appropriately, prioritize the items on the list in the order in which they will have the greatest impact on the project or will require the greatest degree of time and attention from the sponsor. Ask how and under what circumstances the sponsor wants to be involved and informed in that area of the project, focusing on what authority for decision making you will take on as the project manager. When you understand the limits of decision making the sponsor will provide to you as the project manager, it then leads to an opportunity for productive dialog

about sponsorship activities. Asking the question “When a decision has to be made and reaches beyond the limits you have defined for me, how would you like me to engage you in that decision, and what information would you like me to bring to you to facilitate that decision making?” can be a powerful tool. Along the way, in striving to receive an answer to that question, you can certainly make suggestions about that process and the data you provide. In that way, you are actually educating the new, accidental or hesitant sponsor without preaching about what they “should be doing.”

2. Bring multiple choice questions/ options to every discussion

Don't bring problems to the desk of the project sponsor, bring options. This technique, if used consistently, does put a burden on us as project managers. However, if we don't have time to do the research to understand the pros/cons of the various options that we believe should be considered, certainly the project sponsor won't have time to perform this analysis, and the decisions we need won't be made. The formulation of those options and the resulting consequences are relatively straightforward. Just apply what we have learned through PMI® and via good solid project management training. First and foremost, define the probable impact on the triple constraints of time, cost and scope. Secondly, determine the impact on the quality of the project's product. Lastly, we need to consider an area that usually is very important to the project sponsor, but is often overlooked by individual project managers: examine the impact of changes to your project on the other projects being championed by the sponsor. This involves talking to other project managers and making sure you are aware of the status of other initiatives. Remember, our sponsors are often in the same “accidental” role for other projects as well. If you are looking to a sponsor to provide a decision and you don't provide data as to the impact on other initiatives, you are very unlikely to get a decision. Rather, you will get a “send away” to do more research or, more often than not, you will get an “I need to consider this” type of response that goes unanswered for a long period of time.

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Navigating the New PgMPSM Credential

By J. LeRoy Ward, PMP, PgMP

In October 2007, the Project Management Institute (PMI®) began offering its first credential that demonstrates skills in the emerging discipline of program management, the Program Management Professional (PgMPSM). I say emerging because, while program management has long been an accepted profession and practice within the U.S. government, particularly the Department of Defense, it has just recently gained more interest and acceptance in commercial applications around the world.

Program management deals with the many complex interdependencies between component projects and helps ensure that projects align with an organization's overall strategy. In other words, program management is really about delivering business results and benefits. The PgMPSM recognizes that a program manager, while needing skills in project management, needs to also have strong business skills and acumen to be successful.

Earning Your PgMPSM

Before we talk specifics, let me ask you this. Have you ever helped your friend move a piano up a flight of stairs? Have you ever climbed Mt. Everest, wrestled a bear or lifted a Volkswagen Beetle over your head? Now think about doing all these things at the same time and you'll have an idea of what it takes to actually earn your PgMPSM.

OK, I'm exaggerating. There weren't any bears involved; however, I can tell you from firsthand experience that PMI® hasn't made this process easy — nor should they have. From documenting literally thousands of hours of experience to a grueling exam to an assessment by 12 of your colleagues, it's as much a test of endurance as it is experience and intellect.

So, for the benefit of any of you who might be seriously thinking of going after your own PgMPSM — and, judging from all the buzz at this year's PMI® Global Congress 2007, there are a lot of you — I've put together a rundown of everything you'll need to do, as well as a few tips along the way to help keep your sanity in check.

The Requirements

To even qualify to begin the process, you need to have extensive experience in the business of both project and program management. Specifically, those with a bachelor's degree or global equivalent must have at least eight years of

experience — four years managing projects and four years managing programs. Professionals without a bachelor's degree must demonstrate these requirements plus an additional three years of program management experience.

PMI® considers one year of experience to be 1,500 hours of actual work in a calendar year, or at least in a 12-month period. Eight years times 1,500 hours equals 12,000 hours of work experience. 12,000 hours. No problem, right?

Three-Stage Process

Unlike the PMP® certification, there are three separate stages involved in earning your PgMPSM. Let's take a look at what they are.

1) The Application

The process begins with an extensive, Web-based application that requires you to resurrect and document your experience as a project and program manager. There are no points for brevity or vagueness here, so make sure you've got your facts straight before you begin.

On the project management side you need to document four years (6,000 hours) of experience. You must list the names of the projects you've worked on, the start/end dates, your role on each project, the industry the projects applied to, the organizations you worked with (including their addresses and phone numbers), a contact name at each organization and descriptions of your relationships with those contacts.

The program management side (6,000 hours) requires even more detail. You must be able to provide program names, budgets, direct reports, direct project managers, start/end dates, your specific role on each program, the industries the programs fell within, a description of program strategies and objectives, your job titles, and specific organizational and contact information.

Here's a tip: when identifying your job title for projects and programs, it's best to go with the highest profile title possible while still remaining truthful. You want to make yourself look as good as possible — without fearing being struck by lightning, of course. Also, make sure that your 6,000 hours of project management experience don't overlap with your 6,000 hours of program experience. You don't want to get rejected on a technicality.

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In addition to supplying this mountain of information, you'll also be required to complete eight 200-word experience summary statements. These will cover topics such as how you —

- Coordinated the management of specific projects
- Spanned functions
- Built credibility and established rapport with your stakeholders
- Selected and assigned project managers
- Aligned project scope with organizational objectives
- Controlled program scope
- Integrated multiple projects
- Conducted cross-cultural communications and handled confrontation, among a few other topics

2) The Exam

Once you've fully recovered from this ordeal and your application has been accepted (it's reviewed by an international panel of program managers), it's time for the exam. This 170-multiple-choice-question monster is put together based on the Program Management Professional Examination Specification and the Program Management Standard from PMI®. The questions cover program definition, initiation, planning, execution, controlling and close out, with particular emphasis on planning, execution and controlling. I wouldn't spend much time worrying about the specific categories in your preparation. To be honest, throughout the exam it was difficult to even tell which category any given question was referencing.

Oh, and by the way, 20 of the exam questions are "pre-test" questions and don't count; however, you'll have no idea which ones they are so just go ahead and get as many correct as possible. Easier said than done, I know.

The scoring for this exam is different than the PMP® exam. Here, each question is weighted based on its degree of difficulty. So, getting a more difficult question correct will yield a higher score — similar to an Olympic diver receiving more points for successfully completing a difficult dive. To pass the exam, your weighted or "cut" score must equal at least 325. Incidentally, you won't be told how each question is weighted. From my perspective, they all seemed to be weighted the same: difficult!

3) The Assessment

If you've ever wondered what your colleagues really think of you, well, you're about to find out — at least as a group. Once you officially pass your exam, 12 of your colleagues will automatically be sent a 360-degree assessment via e-mail. The topic of the assessment: you! These colleagues, which you are fortunately able to choose, will include one supervisor, four peers, four direct reports and three professional references (meaning, you can't pick people from your bowling league). The survey is made up of about 70 questions based on six different domains and, at least according to my colleagues, it doesn't take very long to complete.

Good Luck!

Hopefully I've been able to shed some light on this lengthy process and offer you a few insights that will give you a head start on earning your PgMPSM. As I've alluded to throughout, it's a difficult process indeed, but, when all is said and done, it's well worth it. Good luck!

J. LeRoy Ward, Executive Vice President, ESI International, is responsible for ESI's worldwide training programs and international partnerships. Ward has authored several articles and publications including Project Management Terms: A Working Glossary and PMP® Exam Challenge! He speaks frequently on project management and related topics at professional association meetings and conferences around the world. He is a member of numerous professional associations including the International Project Management Association and the Project Management Institute where he is certified as a Project Management Professional and a Program Management Professional.

Industry News and Notes...

WorkZone Releases New Version of Project Management Software

Trichys, the developer of online collaboration and project management software, recently announced the release of WorkZone 6.0. This new version includes Project Tracker, a Web-based, easy-to-use project tracking tool. Project Tracker incorporates durations, start and end dates, and dependencies on previous tasks. Users can also choose to view content in a Gantt chart format. As part of WorkZone, Project Tracker includes an integrated document manager and group calendar. And, because it is Web-based, the software is always current.

For more information on WorkZone 6.0 and Project Tracker, visit www.trichys.com.

Daptiv Launches PPM Fall '07 Edition

Daptiv, a leading provider of on-demand collaborative business software, has launched Daptiv PPM Fall '07 Edition, which provides a strategic recording system to help plan, execute, track and report on the work being done enterprise-wide. PPM Fall '07 Edition introduces Work Intelligence, a set of capabilities that give staff visibility into business operations and key performance data via drill-down reporting, dash board creation and data visualization. It reduces the complexity of managing distributed teams, projects and tasks, and increases efficiency. Work Intelligence allows organizations to make informed decisions about resource allocation, planning and forecasting based on real-time information gathered across the enterprise.

To learn more about Daptiv, previously known as eProject, visit www.daptiv.com.

About ESI Horizons...

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3. Make communications short, to the point and relevant

We all receive a large number of e-mails, especially as we work in a world with more home-based offices, virtual teams and international initiatives. In my work managing project teams and IT delivery contracts, I have managed teams as large as 460 people. Regardless of the environment, one thing is constant: the flood of e-mails. In my experience, that flow is actually quite consistent. On an average day, the number of e-mails I receive is 0.85 times the number of people I am managing. Consider that when working with your project sponsor — if your sponsor is managing a team of 460 people, he or she is probably receiving well over 350 e-mails a day. Considering more and more senior leaders are making due with a limited amount of administrative assistance (or none at all), just keeping up on e-mails can be a daunting experience. How is this done? Senior leaders rarely read their e-mails in their entirety; they skim them for context and relevance and sometimes don't even get beyond the subject line.

We always hear about “e-mail rules” that talk about using relevant subject headings and brief sentences with no more than two paragraphs, etc. In the case of sending e-mails to the busy sponsor, the use of these e-mail principles is absolutely mandatory. Get to the point, say what you need, present the options and a short snippet of the pros/cons and be done with it. If you need to communicate more extensively, state the subject and why it is important (hopefully by reflecting on the techniques discussed in the first tip of this article, or something like it) and request a discussion. Schedule it for no more than 15 minutes and practice getting your point across in that period of time while allowing time for questions and clarifications from your sponsor. If your sponsor wants to discuss this for longer than 15 minutes, he or she will, or will ask you to come back at a time that is convenient for him or her. Either way, you are sure to be communicating instead of attempting to communicate via a drawn-out e-mail that is unlikely to be read.

4. Strive to understand where the sponsor feels he or she is succeeding and needing to improve (hot buttons)

The successful project manager understands the product technology pertinent to his or her project; however, he or she also knows that, at its core, project management is a “relationship business.” We need to understand the tools of our trade, we need to fully understand our area's processes, and we have to ask the right technical questions to be sure we are producing the right product in the most efficient manner. This all falls by the wayside if our relationships with our highly matrix-oriented team members and our sponsors are not sound and strong.

The best way to develop that relationship and receive the support of very busy sponsors is to know what is important to them. “Feeding” them in ways they need feeding is the most efficient way to do this. Through discussions with the sponsor or others around your sponsor, determine what he or she feels is going well in the organization, and what areas he or she is seeking to improve. Tool your project objectives and risks around these areas, highlighting how your project will positively affect those areas of the sponsor's business or how risks might jeopardize them. That way you will keep relevant in the eyes of the sponsor and you are more likely to get the time and effort you need from that stressed individual who is the “accidental project sponsor.”

Bob McGannon is a founder and principal of MINDAVATION, a company providing project management services, leadership workshops and team building programs throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia. Bob can be reached at MINDAVATION via the Web at www.MINDAVATION.com or by calling (866) 888-MIND (6463).