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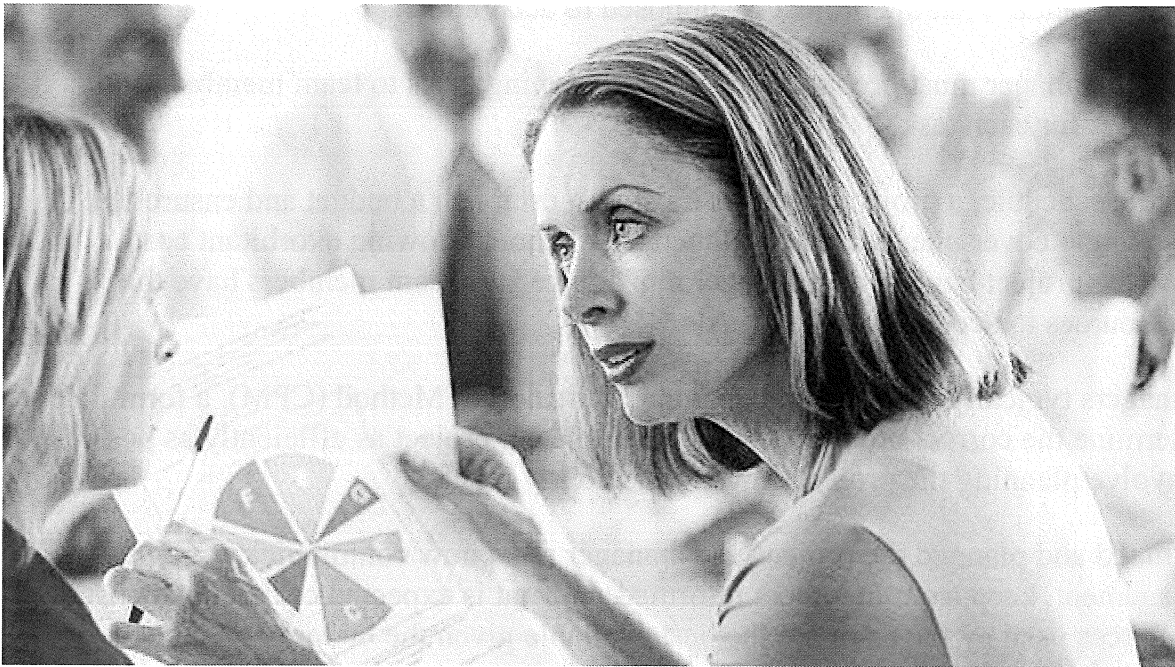
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What is Project Management?

By University Alliance

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While its roots lie in business practices that began more than a century ago, it is only in recent decades that project management has emerged as a vital component of any serious business operation. It has also become a key to success in a global business environment where companies constantly seek an edge over the competition.

Unlike department or business managers, project managers are not limited to overseeing just one aspect of an operation, nor are they constrained by the time required to deal with personnel-related management issues.

Instead, project managers are tasked with a complex assignment: oversee all aspects of a project, ensuring that it is done well, on time and within budget.

To succeed in the job, project managers must become adept at a number of tasks as well as earn certifications that qualify them for this demanding career. They must also demonstrate a blend of an analytical mind and the ability to be a people person.

For those who can master its complexities, project management can be a rewarding career.

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The Processes of Project Management

Simply put, project management is the job of overseeing a project to ensure it meets its goals, time line and budget. Clearly, however, this involves many processes once it is applied to projects within large organizations and involving many people.

Among the first jobs for a project manager is identifying the scope of a project – in other words, define in detail what the project is supposed to accomplish.

Next, a project manager must prepare a schedule, assigning tasks to team members and setting deadlines for each task.

Along with the schedule, a project manager must also establish a budget and ensure that it includes enough to cover unexpected contingencies without allowing exorbitant cost overruns. As the project begins, the manager must make sure team members have the necessary resources to accomplish their goals.

Project managers typically design plan using the Critical Path Method (CPM), a formula used to determine the correct order in which to complete a project as efficiently as possible. This can involve planning the project down to the hourly level.

Having initiated and planned the project, the manager must now communicate progress to upper management, keep team members informed on what is expected of them and ensure that the resources used by the team are the best available given the budget.

The Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide outlines five project management process groups, otherwise known as the traditional approach to project management, which is the standard for the project management of a project. The processes of project management should be carefully address by the project manager and performed by the project team. The five process groups are:

- Initiating

- Planning

- Executing

- Monitoring and Controlling

- Closing

The PMBOK® Guide defines these process groups as a set of interrelated actions and activities performed to achieve a pre-determined product, result, or service.

Pioneers in Project Management

Project management began to evolve in the latter half of the 20th century, partially because of the strategies used by military personnel in World War II to oversee large, complex projects involving thousands of people, such as weapons manufacturing.

The roots of project management can be seen in the large government projects of the late 19th century, particularly the transcontinental railroad. Started in the 1860s, the railroad project required the efforts of thousands of people and used tons of raw materials brought in from various locations.

By the early 20th century, Frederick Taylor had revolutionized industrial businesses by introducing the concepts of managing every phase of a work day for laborers. Rather than simply asking employees to work harder and longer, Taylor developed strategies for working smarter and thereby improving efficiencies.

Henry Gantt, an associate of Taylor's, studied ship construction during World War I and developed the idea of using bars and charts to graph when certain tasks, or a series of tasks, were completed.

Gantt's work led to project management becoming a separate discipline within the workplace, as well as studies into industrial psychology, marketing and human resources management. By World War II, military and industrial leaders began to employ more detailed management processes and strategies to get the most from the labor force, including network diagrams and the Critical Path Method.

Soon, these practices spread across industries. Although the details have changed depending on the era and the industry, the overarching philosophy has remained the same: In order to succeed, all the various personnel and systems within a business must work harmoniously to achieve goals and successfully complete projects.

Degrees and Certificates in Project Management

Depending on the field in which they work, project managers may obtain a degree in subjects such as engineering (for overseeing construction projects) and computer science

(for work in an IT department). An MBA is also helpful for project managers in all disciplines.

Within the field of project management itself, there are certain certificates that are considered necessary. The foremost is from the Project Management Institute, which offers the PMP® certification, considered the most respected and recognized certification available.

Many companies view PMP certification as a requirement for employment or promotion. Project managers may also obtain the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM®), which is seen as a stepping stone to the PMP®.

Career Track for Project Managers

Typically, project managers can expect to hold a variety of job titles as they work their way up the career ladder, among them:

Project coordinator: Employees in this entry-level position typically handle much of the paperwork that accompanies any large project, as well as dealing with scheduling meetings and distributing information to the appropriate parties.

Project scheduler: These employees handle the software system needed on larger projects, updating it as needed with schedule or deadline changes, for example. This is primarily a technical rather that a managerial occupation.

Assistant project manager: Expected to support the project manager as needed, assistant project managers also are usually given specific parts of the project to oversee themselves, under the oversight of the project manager.

Project manager: The manager takes ownership of the project and is ultimately responsible for seeing it through to its successful completion, as well as for communicating progress to executives.

Senior project manager: Oversees several project managers, coordinating the various projects, making decisions on what should take priority and managing the overall budgets and resources for all projects.

For more information about a career in project management see: Project Manager Job Outlook

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