HOW TO
BUILD A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Northeastern
University

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Choose Your Path

Professionals across industries find themselves in project management roles at various stages of their careers. Some intentionally embark on this path right out of college, where others might later find that they have the responsibilities of a project manager (PM) but without the job title or the proper training. Others still may already be succeeding in a project management role, while actively seeking ways to fast-track their careers and gain the traction they need to advance in the field.

Whichever path you're on, Northeastern has the actionable tips and advice that you need to build a successful career in project management. Pick your path using the interactive menu to the right, then jump ahead to learn more about the job titles, salaries, skills, and advancement advice you need to achieve your goals.

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Industry Outlook

Project management has become a crucial practice

in today's fast-paced and results-oriented workplaces. Organizations across industries rely on project managers to keep processes on track, ensure teams work together cohesively, and most important, to drive projects to a successful conclusion.

The broad applications of this practice—as well as the ever-evolving landscape of modern business—has resulted in a consistently growing need for trained project managers and a promising career outlook for PMs across industries.

On average, these professionals earn a median salary of **$116,000 per year**, which far exceeds the **national averages** for jobs in other industries. There are also many opportunities for project managers to **increase their yearly earnings** based on their education level, location, years of experience, certifications, and more.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) also projects that, by 2027, organizations will require **88 million** project managers to fulfill their project-related needs, leading to an estimated 2.2 million new job openings across the globe.

Learn More | Project Management Job Outlook →

As if project managers weren't already in high-demand, disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an even greater and more immediate need for these trained professionals. Organizations are working at breakneck speeds to innovate and meet the new, unexpected needs of their customers. They're now relying on the knowledge, agility, and practical skills of project managers to do it.

"Any change in the normal way of doing business creates a need for project managers … because change requires a project or initiative in order to be implemented," says Christopher Bolick, lead faculty within Northeastern's **Master of Science in Project Management** program.

To facilitate these changes, companies across all sectors are seeking project management support. However, Bolick says that the industries seeing the most substantial growth include healthcare, construction and utilities, and financial services.

"As everything becomes more digitized, what [companies need in order] to move all those traditional processes online and into a virtual environment is someone with a solid project management skill set to lead the way."

Learn More | Project Management Trends →

The COVID-19 global pandemic is not the first time the industry has been desperate for trained project managers. "Even before the crisis that we find ourselves in right now, there has been ... a gap in available resources," Bolick says. This **talent gap** has been an issue for years, yet it only continues to widen over time.

This is due, in large part, to the fact that "newer generations [often] don't have the necessary project management training to pick up some of the larger, more complex jobs," he says, explaining that programs like Northeastern's **master's in project management** are preparing students to meet this growing need.

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> – Chris Bolick, Lead Faculty in Northeastern's Master of Science in Project Management Program

PART 1:
Breaking Into the Project Management Field

The hiring and salary potential for project managers has inspired many to embark on a career in this lucrative field. Yet, for some, navigating a new career path can be overwhelming–no matter how promising the outlook.

Without prior exposure to the industry, for instance, it can be difficult to gauge what skills, education, and experience employers desire for entry-level roles. What's more, you may have a hard time beginning your job search without knowing what job titles, salaries, and responsibilities best align with your current abilities and future goals.

If you are an entry-level project manager, a **career changer**, or a career definer–which is someone who has project management duties **without the title**–utilize these tips to prepare for and effectively navigate a successful transition into the project management field.

The Fundamentals of Project Management

Before entering the project management field, it's first important to understand what exactly project management entails.

At the core of their work, project managers oversee the completion of a project from start to finish. These responsibilities include helping to determine the goals and objectives of the work, setting budgets and timelines, and facilitating communication across teams to keep the project moving forward.

Though the work of a project manager may appear facilitative on the surface, project managers actually have a variety of complex, actionable responsibilities within a project life cycle. This life cycle is broken down into five key phases, each of which requires project managers to draw on a different aspect of their expertise while working toward the completion of a series of phase-specific duties.

Below, we explore what each of these phases involves and how project managers must adjust their focus to meet the needs of the project at each specific stage.

The Five Phases of a Project Life Cycle

During the **initiation phase** of a project, the project manager will meet with the customer to assess their needs and help shape the overall project scope. This is often a complex process that involves "taking an idea or strategy … and executing a plan to deliver on that goal," Bolick says.

The Five Phases of a Project Life Cycle

1 INITIATION

2 PLANNING

3 EXECUTING

4 MONITORING AND CONTROLLING

5 CLOSING

From this initial conversation, project managers should be able to deduce the main objectives of the work, form a solid understanding of who the contributing parties should be, and set base expectations for the customer.

Keep In Mind

Taking the time to level set early on will ensure that both you and the stakeholders are on the same page before the project kicks off. This might include discussions to confirm the anticipated budget, the level of desired involvement, the cadence of certain deliverables, etc.

A project manager also creates a **project scope statement** during the initiation phase, which should outline the requirements uncovered during these high-level conversations.

Once initiation is complete, project managers will begin **planning** for the project. During this time, they must develop an actionable **project plan**, which all contributing parties will follow during the project's execution. A plan should outline factors such as stakeholder requirements, **budget**, **timeline**, **risk**, quality issues, and **communication**.

Learn More | How to Develop a Project Management Plan →

After planning comes the **execution phase**, in which individual members of the project team take action based on the established project plan under the guidance of the project manager. At this stage, project managers' work becomes increasingly facilitatory. They provide time management support for team members, facilitate communication between teams, streamline processes, and consistently adapt the project scope statement to reflect any changes that occur during execution.

The fourth phase of the project life cycle is known as **monitoring and controlling**, and its scope spans all previous stages, as well. During this phase, PMs oversee processes and adapt them to meet the evolving needs of the team, the customer, and the project itself. A project manager should be prepared to ensure teams are following project timelines, executing on deliverables, respecting the budgets, and reaching key milestones.

Finally, project managers will end the project life cycle with the **closing phase**, in which they ensure the project has met all of the requirements and goals set at the start of the project. Other duties in this stage include archiving files or deliverables for future reference and closing out contracts with any third-party vendors or consultants.

Project Management Methodologies

It is often helpful for project managers to rely on existing frameworks and techniques when embarking on a new project. These frameworks are known as project management methodologies.

"A methodology is a set of tools and techniques that a project manager can use to begin to plan, design, and execute a project," Bolick says. He explains that, while there are dozens of different methodologies project managers can choose from, there are three main approaches that can be effective across project types and industries: the Waterfall Methodology, the Agile Methodology, and a Hybrid Approach that combines principles of the aforementioned two.

Below, we offer a glimpse into what each methodology entails.

THE WATERFALL METHODOLOGY

This is considered the most traditional approach to project management. Similar to the previously outlined project life cycle, those who utilize the Waterfall method start by developing a clearly defined scope, schedule, and cost for the project, and then execute based on that scope. This approach aims to ensure all expectations set during the planning phase are met in a timely and effective manner. This method allows project managers to approach their work in a very linear, controlled way, and it is often utilized within the construction industry.

THE AGILE METHODOLOGY

The Agile approach, which falls within the greater Scrum Methodology, allows for maximum flexibility during a project's execution. In many cases, a project manager works to define the scope of the project while the project development is already underway. To accomplish this high level of flexibility and change, project managers that utilize the Agile approach must establish an open dialogue with stakeholders and internal teams. They often also work on projects in iterative rounds–known as sprints– while guiding the project closer to a final conclusion. This project management methodology is popular among software developers who often begin projects without knowing exactly what their final product might look like.

A HYBRID APPROACH

In Bolick's experience, "project managers [often] want to try to apply one methodology into all projects, but that doesn't really work." Instead, he suggests using a hybrid approach and combining the relevant features of different methodologies when necessary to fit the needs of a specific scope of work. "You want to have the necessary understanding of the different methodologies available in project management so that you can apply [the different aspects of each] to different project needs."

Project, Program, and Portfolio Management

There are three distinct types of work that fall within the project management discipline: project management, program management, and portfolio management.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

"In project management, you're managing one set of objectives or deliverables that have a definite beginning and end," Bolick says. These singular, temporary projects might include the development of a product, service, or a process.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Program management involves working on a suite of projects that relate to or impact each other. In these scenarios, the projects could be managed on a case-by-case basis, but instead are grouped together to coordinate resources, remain within a predetermined budget, or simply because they support a common goal.

PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

A portfolio is a combination of many projects or programs that are managed collectively to achieve an overarching strategic objective. Usually, these projects are complex and require overseeing multiple, high-functioning teams that are each in charge of a particular subset of work.

Learn More | What's the Difference Between Project, Portfolio, and Program Management? →

Project, Program, and Portfolio Management: A Real-World Example

To demonstrate how these three levels of project management relate to one another, Bolick offers the Olympics as an example. The Olympics as an event is considered the **portfolio**, as there are many subsequent sectors of work that fall beneath it. Within that portfolio are dozens of broad **programs** such as transportation, safety, housing, facilities, etc. Within those programs, fall a series of smaller projects. If we look at the transportation program, for example, **projects** might include scheduling athletes' flights to the host country, developing proper traffic routes throughout the host city, hiring shuttles to transport athletes to and from events, and much more.

Entry-Level Skills for Project Managers

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It can be easy to get caught up in project management's complexity when entering the field. Considering the many responsibilities of a PM, you may worry you don't have the breadth of skills required to succeed. Luckily, you don't need to be an expert in project scope statements or risk management to begin your first role.

While there are basic skills and topics entry-level project managers should know, there is also ample opportunity to grow on the job. For that reason, aspiring project managers should invest their time and energy in honing only the project management skills most relevant to work at this level.

Below we break down the most important practical and interpersonal **skills** for those breaking into project management.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

1

Scheduling

Creating a project schedule involves setting the overarching project timeline and the duration of each stage of work. Often this includes adapting timelines to meet the various needs, time constraints, and abilities of each contributing team.

2

Estimating

Project managers must be able to compile information on a proposed scope of work and infer key components of the project at hand. These estimates might include anticipated project costs, resources, and project duration.

3

Risk Management

A project manager must also be able to **identify and assess the risk** for the work at hand. This work includes acknowledging any potential points of weakness, weighing the chances of a negative setback to the project based on those weaknesses, and developing a proper mitigation plan for getting the project back on track if trouble occurs.

4

Budgeting

It is a project manager's responsibility to keep every aspect of a project within the predetermined budget. Knowing how to set a spending limit and track purchases and pricing throughout the scope of the project will help ensure a project manager's success.

5

Quality Assessment

Project managers must have the ability to assess the effectiveness of a project while it is still underway. This includes determining and then measuring against a clear set of standards that the project should follow. As the PMI **explains**, "The goal is to catch areas of low performance and improve them before the project's close."

6

Time Management

During the scope of project work, project managers must closely manage their teams to ensure they produce quality deliverables and adhere to the schedule. There are many effective **tips and tricks** to improving time management skills, but this practice primarily requires project managers keep their contributing groups organized, productive, and prompt.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

1 Communication

Effective communication is perhaps the most crucial skill for project managers at any stage in their career. Project managers rely on communication skills to set expectations with their teams, write cohesive and well-developed project plans, address changes to the schedule or budget, present deliverables, follow up with internal teams, discuss project progress with stakeholders, and much more. Aspiring project managers should work to hone their verbal, written, and nonverbal communication skills, such as reading body language or the tone of the room, upon embarking on their first role.

2 Collaboration

"Project management is not a profession done in isolation," Bolick says. "It's really about networking and collaborating [across teams.]" Successful project managers work well with both internal groups and external stakeholders and can unite these individuals under a common project goal. Project managers should also know how to work collaboratively with other project managers, as some organizations may have multiple on staff.

3

Critical Thinking

To effectively drive a project toward its successful completion, project managers must be able to step back and identify opportunities where the project may derail from the predetermined plan. Thinking critically about the situation allows them to address the problem and generate a solution that effectively gets the project back on track.

4

Conflict Resolution

Naturally, when multiple teams work together in the pursuit of a singular goal, there are bound to be moments of conflict. It's important for project managers to remain impartial in these scenarios, while also leading the involved parties to share their perspectives in hopes of reaching an agreeable conclusion. In some cases, when a conclusion is unable to be reached, it will be up to the project manager to make a final call.

28%

of employees report that poor communication is often the root cause of a failed project, making communication a crucial skill for project managers at any stage in their career.

(AZ Central)

How to Gain These Skills at the Entry Level

To determine which of your skills need improvement, start by evaluating your current abilities and thoroughly examining your strengths and weaknesses.

By completing a self-analysis, you can determine what skills you're already bringing to the table, and which you need to improve before applying to jobs.

To help guide aspiring project managers through this self-reflection, Bolick suggests asking yourself questions like:

> Am I able to speak candidly with individuals on various levels within an organization?

> Am I able to bridge the gap between teams in order to facilitate high-value conversations?

> Am I comfortable presenting in front of a group and public speaking?

> Am I a people person? Do I like working on teams, or would I prefer working individually?

Evaluating your answers to these questions, alongside an assessment of your past work history, can help to inform what skills need the most attention. For example, if you're switching into project management from another field, it's likely you already have experience with many of the interpersonal skills required for project management. Similarly, if you've

been taking on project-related tasks in your current role without the project manager title, you might already have exposure to some of the practical aspects of the job as well.

No matter your specific background, it's important at this early stage to acknowledge where your abilities are lacking and take the necessary steps to fill those gaps. Just like with any new skills, Bolick believes that project management skills can be learned. "Once you practice enough, you can become confident in it and successful at it," he says. "Like anything, it just takes training."

"If you're thinking about getting into project management, I'd really encourage [you] to do a self-assessment in order to see where your strengths and weaknesses lie."

– Chris Bolick, Lead Faculty in Northeastern's Master of Science in Project Management Program

Navigating the Job Search for Early-Career Project Managers

When searching for a project management job, early-career professionals can hit roadblocks in the form of confusing or difficult-to-navigate job postings.

In some cases, a series of jobs titled "project manager" may each require a different level of expertise, set of qualifications, or amount of experience in the field. Candidates might find themselves wasting valuable time and energy applying for roles they aren't right for. In other cases, professionals may not know how to locate roles they're interested in, because searching with the title "project manager" may not generate the most relevant results.

"It really depends on how the HR department structures the roles within their organization," Bolick says. "I've worked in the industry for 15 years and I've never held the title of 'project manager.'"

Though these kinds of roadblocks might discourage new project managers from following through with their job hunt, those who take the time to learn the ins and outs of this process will see the benefits.

Bolick suggests that aspiring project managers "think creatively when searching for jobs." Instead of typing "project management" into the search engine, search instead by the competencies that you know you excel at. "Oftentimes, that will bring up other jobs that have those project management competencies involved, and will still [be relevant to] the industry."

Bolick also recommends figuring out what roles you might best be qualified for, and then catering your search to these titles. For early-career project managers without prior exposure to the job search, however, it can be difficult to know where to start. Below, we offer a roundup of the titles that best align with the skills and experiences of early-career project managers.

Early-Career Project Manager Jobs

Junior Project Manager

Average Pay: $50,585 per year
(**Payscale**)

Junior project managers might have the opportunity to initiate their own projects on occasion, but most at this level will work under project management leaders to support their efforts. This role might also include overseeing a long-term project once it has already been initiated by a senior team member.

Project Coordinator

Average Pay: $50,070 per year
(**Payscale**)

The work of project coordinators will vary depending on the industry and organization they're working in; however, the primary duties include working with the project manager to organize project-related resources, equipment, personnel, and data. They also may oversee a project manager's schedule, adapt budgets as needed, and complete other tasks behind the scenes to keep a project running smoothly.

Junior Project Designer

Average Pay: $55,503 per year
(**Glassdoor**)

While a project designer is considered the "architect" of a project, a junior project designer is often considered the "apprentice." These individuals primarily assist with the construction of a project plan, including the incorporation of a predetermined schedule, budget, and industry-specific regulations.

Project Manager

Average Pay: $74,263 per year
(**Payscale**)

There are some cases in which an organization might take an early-career project manager on under this title. Most times, these organizations are smaller, have fewer high-priority projects to manage, or have a team of seasoned project managers they are hoping to support with a new hire. In these situations, a project manager holds all the responsibilities of guiding a project successfully toward its conclusion, including initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing a project.

How to Kickstart Your Project Management Career

Whether you're hoping to improve your relevant skills or prepare to stand out in an increasingly competitive job market, there are a few steps you can take at this early stage to set yourself up for success.

Gain Hands-On Experience

Research shows that the **most efficient way** for humans to master a new skill or learn about a new topic is to spend time applying it in the real world. For aspiring project managers, this might mean conducting that assessment of your strengths and weaknesses and then finding opportunities to hone those

specific spots where you're lacking. You can gain experience within your current position, as part of an internship, or through paid experiential learning opportunities offered to you as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree program like Northeastern's.

No matter how you go about it, applying your skills allows you to establish a practical rather than theoretical understanding of how they're used in the industry. It also allows you to hone your approach, and gives you exposure to the kinds of real-world scenarios you will likely experience once you're a full-time professional. Taking the time to work on these skills prior to applying for jobs will also generate at least a few resumé credits that speak to your abilities and desired career path—something most hiring managers want to see when considering you for an open position.

Pursue a Master's Degree in Project Management

Alongside hands-on experience, a master's degree provides aspiring project managers with the set of core competencies, skills, and industry knowledge that you will need to succeed. Advanced programs are designed specifically to meet a project manager at any point in their career, meaning that the program can be equally beneficial to those who have just graduated from an undergraduate program and those who have worked 20+ years in an unrelated industry.

Did You Know

At Northeastern, the **Master of Science in Project Management** degree is offered in a variety of flexible formats including full time, part time, online, and on ground in a variety of regional locations. This approach helps to allow students of any background achieve a **work-life balance**, while simultaneously taking a strategic path forward in their career.

Bolick explains that, while the pursuit of a master's degree can be beneficial to project managers at any point in their careers, those at this early stage can often see some of the most fruitful outcomes. Led by industry-leading faculty, Northeastern's program provides opportunities for students to develop their interpersonal and practical skills, refine their approaches to the various aspects of the project management process, and learn how to apply what they've learned to real-world scenarios. All of this provides early-career project managers the knowledge and experience they need to thrive in this field.

"A master's [program] will allow beginner project managers to make sure that they've covered all their bases, and that they can go into an entry-level position within project management ready and prepared," Bolick says.

Learn More | 5 Reasons a Master's Degree in Project Management Is Worth It →

A master's degree also allows individuals to specialize in the specific aspect of project management they hope to work in. For example, at Northeastern, early-career project managers who are transferring into the industry from a field like construction or business analytics can declare a concentration in construction management or project business analysis. Doing so allows them to layer industry-relevant courses on top of their baseline project management training and further prepare them for specific roles.

Find Your Fit | Explore Northeastern's 7 Project Management Concentrations →

Today, 85 percent of all jobs are filled through networking, meaning that those who are trying to establish themselves in a new field might struggle to do so without industry connections to back them up. Luckily, a graduate program offers ample opportunities for students to **network** with professors, alumni, fellow students, and potential employers during experiential learning opportunities.

What's more, those who pursue a master's degree in any field have been found to earn an average of 23 percent more annually, and are likely to obtain a more advanced position early on in their career.

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> – Chris Bolick, Lead Faculty in Northeastern's Master of Science in Project Management Program

PART 2:
Advancing Your Project Management Career

→ **Advanced Project Management Abilities**

→ **Navigating the Job Search for Advanced Project Managers**

→ **How to Advance Your Project Management Career**

For current project management professionals, advancing your career likely feels like a natural next step. Taking on more responsibilities can lead to an increase in earnings, a higher title, and the chance to work on more complex projects and manage larger teams. However, it can be difficult to know how to best set yourself up to make these kinds of positive career moves.

Luckily, there are actionable steps you can take to set you on the path toward successful advancement in the PM field—whatever that might look like for you. Explore the advanced skills, relevant titles and salaries, and job search advice you need to move forward in your career.
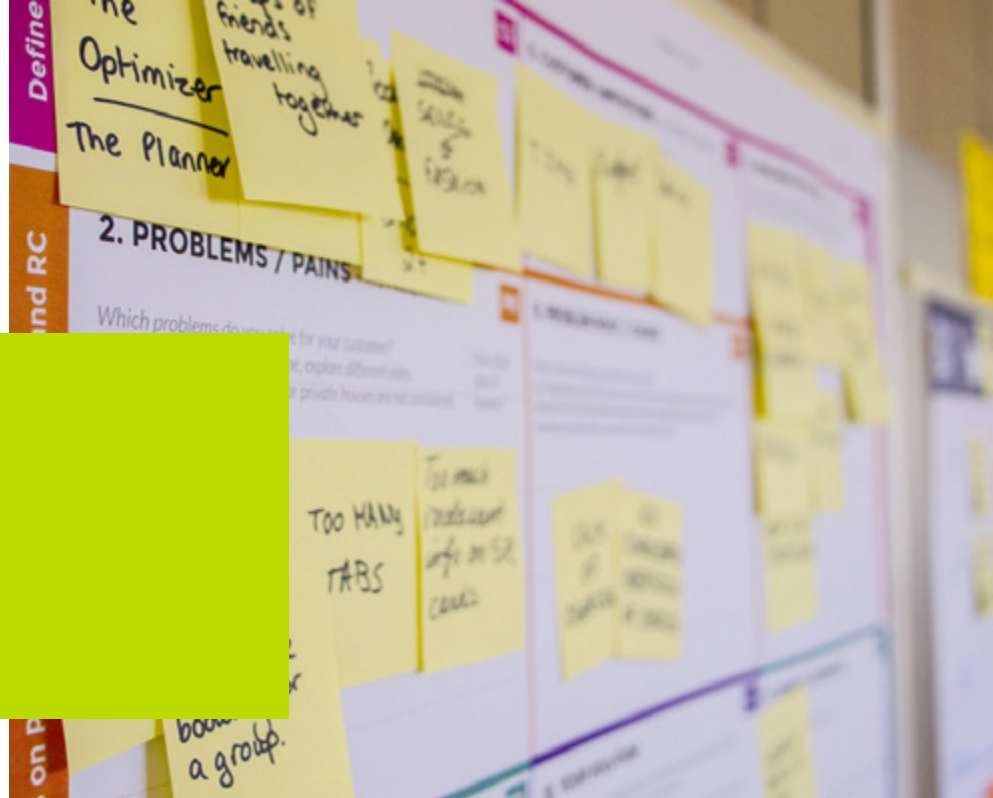
Advanced Project Management Abilities

Project managers hoping to advance should be ready to take on a slew of new responsibilities. For example, you may be tasked with managing more complex projects with larger budgets or ones that are more strategically critical to the organization, and are therefore scrutinized more closely.

For this reason, it's important to demonstrate to current or future employers that you have the necessary skills to handle these elevated responsibilities. This might mean breaking out of old project management methodology habits or mastering some core project management competencies that are beyond

your current role. For most, however, this will simply require an exploration of two advanced skill sets: **leadership** and **strategic thinking**.

According to Bolick, advanced skills in these areas most commonly differentiate high-level project managers from those starting out in the field. Explore what these skill sets entail for the advanced project manager and consider what steps you can take to improve your own abilities.

Leadership

Every project manager needs to have some leadership ability, no matter their level. After all, a project manager's main role is to "manage individuals that you have no direct authority over," Bolick explains. PMs must assemble a team of stakeholders, third-party

vendors, and individual contributors–who may each have different objectives, expertise, and approaches to their work–and unite them under a common goal. To do this effectively, a project manager (at any level) must know how to keep a group organized and on task, and ensure that they reach their established deliverables and deadlines.

Learn More | How to Become an Effective Leader →

Those looking to advance in project management, however, must be able to elevate their leadership abilities beyond these basic tasks. To do so means mastering processes such as **negotiation** and **mediation**, learning how to **motivate** others, and establishing a code of **ethics** by which you and your team should adhere.

The Negotiation Life Cycle

DECIDE TO NEGOTIATE ▸ **PREPARE** ▸ **NEGOTIATE** ▸ **EXECUTE** ▸ **FOLLOW UP**

Source: **Project Management Institute, 2010**

NEGOTIATION

According to the **PMI**, "negotiation is a way of finding a mutually acceptable solution to a shared problem," and project managers must "embrace a mindset that everything about a project is negotiable." While early-career PMs do likely have the authority to negotiate, they are often hesitant to do so–either because of organizational politics or because they don't feel they have the right skills. Project management leaders must hone this ability and master the **Ten Rules of Negotiating**, which give them the tools they need to bridge these sometimes challenging discussions.

MEDIATION

Mediation is often considered a high-level version of basic conflict resolution. Project management leaders must effectively address issues that arise between team members or vendors. This includes knowing how to communicate with each group to understand their concerns, deduce the root of the problem based on gathered information, and bridge a conversation with both groups that will diffuse tension and lead everyone toward a mutual resolution. Those in advanced project management roles must be incredibly comfortable with this practice, as they will likely oversee an entire team of people or multiple projects at a time.

MOTIVATION

A common skill set among leaders is the ability to inspire and motivate. In project management, this may include setting targets or keeping the team focused on the final goal they are all working toward. Advanced project managers must be familiar with the various methods of motivation most common in the industry—such as intrinsic motivation, performance reviews, the use of metrics and reward systems, and more—and also be comfortable utilizing them to generate desired results.

ETHICS

The higher the stakes are for a project, "the more opportunity there will be for unethical practices to facilitate," Bolick says. The practice of ethics centers around four main principles: responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty. Ethics is such a core component of advanced project management that the PMI has developed an entire Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for PMs to follow. Common ethical issues project managers may face include remaining objective, protecting the interest of all stakeholders, accepting and assigning responsibility, and more.

Strategic Thinking

Project managers hoping to advance their careers must be prepared to shift their mindset from tactical to strategic. At this stage in their careers, project managers should be prepared to identify the needs of an organization at a high level and help develop actionable plans to facilitate reaching those goals.

"You have to look at the broader picture of what's needed within an organization and have those conversations with the executive sponsors," Bolick says. "Then you have to be able to take their strategic ideas and put them into practice."

Strategic thinking is at the core of an advanced project manager's work, but there are also several other abilities that can help PMs advance.

PRESENTATION

Seasoned project managers must know how to take project conclusions or proposals and present them at a high level to executives or other organizational leaders. They must be able to step back from the

material, identify what information will be most relevant, and speak to those ideas from a place of knowledge and familiarity.

DATA AND ANALYTICS

Data is a **driving force** behind most strategic business decisions today. As a result, advanced project managers should have a firm understanding of how to leverage analytics to make informed decisions. They should also become familiar with common analytics practices like **predictive analytics**, **artificial intelligence, and machine learning**, as they are becoming increasingly relevant in decision-making practices across industries.

INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Having specialized industry knowledge as a PM will help set you apart when competing for advanced roles. Being able to speak to strategy and project scope with a deeper understanding of that specific industry and its trends will make you an invaluable asset to the team. Those without prior experience in another discipline should consider pursuing a **master's in project management** and declaring an industry-specific concentration in order to develop this unique perspective.

"You have to look at the broader picture of what's needed within an organization and have those conversations with the executive sponsors. Then you have to be able to take their strategic ideas and put them into practice."

– Chris Bolick, Lead Faculty in Northeastern's **Master of Science in Project Management Program**

Navigating the Job Search for Advanced Project Managers

Those looking to advance their project management careers have two options: either they can be promoted within their current organization, or they can find a role with a higher title or salary at another company.

Switching to a new company has its benefits–and may, in some cases, be the faster route to advancement. However, Bolick notes there are many benefits to growing within your current organization. For example, companies like to know that the senior-level project managers on their team have not only the wide array of skills necessary to thrive in their role, but also that they've established a complex understanding of the organizational structure and company culture– something which can only be developed over time.

"It's going to take time and exposure to different individuals within an organization to understand the culture and how you can effectively [manage a project] within that group," Bolick says. "Oftentimes, once someone enters into an organization and manages projects successfully, they [are able to] learn those organization process assets and enterprise factors, [and] are [eventually] promoted to a more advanced project or program managerial role."

To reach that payoff, however, professionals need to be patient and willing to make both lateral and upward career moves. Employers value project managers that strive to develop a holistic view of their organization's needs, including understanding how different departments or teams within the organization function and how they might be impacted by a project or change initiative.

Having that insight–and being able to communicate it with stakeholders during project planning–can be crucial to a project's success and, as such, organizations are often willing to invest more in their employees who stick around longer. "Having that broader exposure is going to be a lot more valuable than trying to move straight up the ladder," Bolick says.

Advanced Project Manager Job Titles and Salaries

No matter which path to advancement you choose, stay on the lookout for the project management titles that most closely align with the responsibilities, salaries, and goals of mid- and senior-level professionals. The top titles that fall within this category include:

Senior Project Manager

Average Pay: $104,496 per year (**Payscale**)

Senior project managers oversee the completion of high-value projects across multiple lines of business. In some cases, they also oversee the work of a team of lower-level project managers. While they may take ownership of an entire project life cycle, their work also focuses on ensuring each project properly aligns with organizational objectives.

Program Manager

Average Pay: $125,000 per year (**Project Management Institute**)

Program managers oversee a series of projects (known as a "program") from initiation to close. They must prioritize between projects, coordinate resources, delegate tasks to team members, and track and report project progress to stakeholders. They must also be able to recognize and address dependencies between projects to create a project plan, schedule, and budget for each that will be effective across the entire program.

Portfolio Manager

Average Pay: $138,000 per year
(Project Management Institute)

Portfolio managers oversee a series of programs, which are, in turn, made up of a series of projects. They have a very high-level view of project work and focus primarily on ensuring all projects and programs that fall under their scope are helping an organization work toward pre-identified strategic business objectives. Other duties may include broad scheduling, budgeting, and overseeing dependencies between related programs and projects.

Industry-Specific Project Manager

Average Pay: $125,000–$140,000 per year
(Project Management Institute)

Salaries and responsibilities will vary depending on the industry in which a project manager works. For example, in the IT field, agile project managers oversee the production of software, systems, and other technical tools. Those individuals earn an average salary of $140,000 per year. Similarly, those in high-level construction management roles might oversee construction, renovation, or maintenance projects, and will earn an average salary of $125,000 per year.

Director of Project Management

Average Pay: $180,000 per year
(Project Management Institute)

Project management directors are at the top of the project management field. They lead teams of project managers, oversee assignments, capacity planning, and profitability goals, and ensure that each team member hits project deadlines and fulfills deliverables. PM directors may also assess stakeholder satisfaction with the project management team and provide any necessary training to individual members, depending on their current levels and competencies. Project management directors also must be able to communicate at an advanced level, define overall goals and objectives for the project management team, and relate those goals to an organization's overall strategy.

How to Advance Your Project Management Career

The most efficient route to landing one of these high-paying, specialized roles is to pursue formal training. Doing so demonstrates to employers that you are a lifelong learner (something both employers and employees consider a **vital component** to career development) and allows you to grow your skills to meet the employer's needs.

Here is an exploration of two of the most common training options for those hoping to land mid- to senior-level project management roles.

Earning a Certification from the PMI

Through the Project Management Institute, project managers can obtain a variety of different discipline-specific **certifications**, including:

> **Project Management Professional (PMP)**: This certification is a great fit for experienced project managers looking to validate their competencies. This training is broad and includes a review of all aspects of project management and an exploration of how to lead and direct teams.

> **The Program Management Professional (PgMP)**: This certification is ideal for senior-level project managers that oversee multiple projects.

> **Portfolio Management Professional (PfMP)**: This certification allows advanced project managers to demonstrate their skills overseeing multiple programs within a portfolio.

> **Certified Associate in Project Management (CAMP)**: This certification provides project managers at any stage of their career an opportunity to explore the essential processes related to project management.

Though there are many more title-specific certifications offered under the PMI, Bolick recognizes that these four–alongside the **PRINCE2 Certification** for international project managers–are the most relevant to advancing PMs.

According to the PMI, a project manager with a PMP certification earns an average of 25 percent more per year than noncertificate holders, though this certification alone will not provide extensive opportunities to develop the advanced skills needed to continue growing your career. For this reason, many project managers choose to pair a certification like the PMP with a **master's degree in project management**.

It is also important to note that not all project managers will meet the qualifications needed to enroll in a certificate program. "With certificates you have to have so many hours of project management experience before you can even apply," Bolick explains.

For example, the PMP certification requires that project managers with a four-year college degree must have already logged at least 4,500 hours of nonoverlapping project work over at least three years prior to the start of their certificate program. The PMI uses random selection audits to ensure that every project manager has accurately completed this level of experience in the field prior to pursuing this certification.

Integrating a PMP Certification with Northeastern's Master's in Project Management

Northeastern's Master of Science in Project Management degree is accredited by the Project Management Institute's Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC), the world's leading association for project management professionals.

Graduates of our GAC-accredited program are granted a substantial 12-month reduction credit toward their experience requirement when they complete an application for any PMI certification. This means that those applying for the PMI certification will only need 24 months of project management experience, instead of 36 months as outlined by GAC.

This new benefit applies retroactively to our program's initial accreditation date of 2009.

Though these requirements may seem drastic, the fact that earning a certificate requires audited time working in projects can "validate to a university [where you might be applying to pursue a master's degree] or other organization that you have the professional experience of running projects," Bolick explains. "It kind of levels the playing field [among project managers], and shows that you are a serious professional in this discipline."

Pursuing a Master's Degree in Project Management

If you're looking to advance your project management career, a master's degree is perhaps the most efficient way to garner the skills, experiences, and industry insight required of high-level project managers.

"If you find that you're successful in managing projects at a certain level, a master's degree will demonstrate your seriousness in the profession," Bolick says. "Through a [master's] program, you will gain the understanding and insight needed to take on more responsibilities, to manage people, and to take on the kinds of projects that naturally have more risk."

34%

of project management jobs require a relevant graduate degree.

(Burning Glass Labor Insight)

Programs like Northeastern's **Master of Science in Project Management** accomplish this through a review of fundamental project management practices and even deeper explorations of the advanced theories, tools, and skill sets project managers need in higher-level roles. This approach allows students to refine their leadership and strategic thinking abilities, explore the specific subsets of project management that they can specialize in, and develop the holistic approach to the discipline needed to advance into mid- or senior-level project management roles.

"A lot of times, if you're wanting to advance in the field, you have exposure to … some concepts but you don't really understand how they fit together," Bolick says. "A master's degree shows you how all those pieces tie together, and [explores] all the critical aspects you need to take into account when managing a project."

Another benefit of pursuing a master's degree is the opportunity for students to practice their advanced project management skills hands-on. Through real-world,

"A master's program can help you advance in your career no matter what your goals are."

– Chris Bolick, Lead Faculty in Northeastern's **Master of Science in Project Management Program**

experiential learning projects, project managers can build out their portfolios, apply their skills across different industries, and test out various management specializations to see which might be the right fit for them.

Did You Know

Declaring a specialization in a specific industry (such as analytics, IT, or construction management) or in a specific type of project work (such as program and portfolio management) strategically helps project managers differentiate themselves through the development of a very specific subset of skills.

A master's in project management provides advancing project managers with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to carve a successful path forward.

An Insider's Perspective

Is earning an advanced degree in project management the right fit for your career goals? Read on to learn how some current Northeastern students have leveraged their degrees to set them on a path toward success.

"Obtaining a master's degree at the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University is the best choice I have made in my life so far. This degree allows for new doors to open and expedites your career by obtaining direct knowledge from industry experts who have decades of world experience. I have [also] gained great confidence within myself now that I have taken this step. My colleagues definitely take my degree into account, which enhances my reputation and aptitude within my organization.

Scott Whear, MS in Project Management, Class of 2020 | Career Specializer

Being a CPA, I had 6 years of experience in the finance field where I was involved in all project management functions … without any formal education. I decided to expand my toolkit and earn a master's degree…but there are a lot of times when I study about the intricate details of projects and their management that I realize I could have done things better had I learned about it earlier. Students who are starting up fresh with this program will be fortunate to avoid those mistakes with the practical XN project and in-classroom training.

Jyoti Asrani, MS in Project Management, Class of 2021 | Career Definer

For someone without an official title or position in project management, I would say this degree added an unlimited amount of value to the development of my career. While project management skills can be found in any position, this program really dives into how to maximize and best use them in the most successful way. I am now a program manager at a major world-renowned hospital, and while I am only just starting out, I know that this degree and field has unlimited opportunities for growth.

Melissa Grella, MS in Project Management, Class of 2020 | Career Changer

Project Management at Northeastern: Fast Facts

Master of Science in Project Management

Campus Locations

→ Boston

→ Charlotte, NC

→ Silicon Valley

→ Toronto

→ Seattle

→ Portland, ME

→ Online

Available Concentrations:

> Agile Project Management

> Construction Management

> Leadership

> Leading and Managing Technical Projects

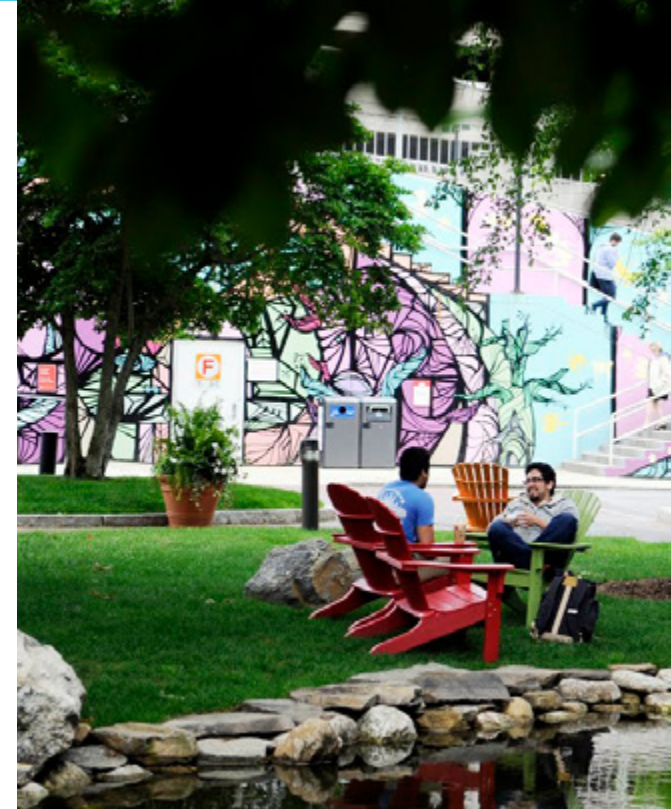> Organizational Communication

> Project Business Analysis

> Analytics

Commitment

> Full Time

> Part Time

Duration

> 1.5 – 2.5 Years

LEARN MORE →

Are you ready to take the next step in your project management career?

Northeastern can help you get ahead.
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