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The “Expert Series” is a collection of articles, papers and writings by PM Solutions’ associates and other industry experts that provides insight into the practice and value of project management.

Bridging Your Competency Gap ***Take ownership of your professional development*** by Frances Cruz, PMP

IN CASE YOU HAVEN’T ALREADY REALIZED IT, professional project management competency is more than just a list of project management items that you do well. Professional project management competency comprises elements from across three areas: interpersonal competencies (e.g., listening), business/ management competencies (such as financial analysis) and project management competencies (like risk management). Some competencies may even cut across multiple areas (for example, some aspects of planning could be covered under both business and project management) and may have both soft and hard elements.

If you decide to embark on improving your professional project management competency you will need to keep all this in mind. You should also consider the importance of such an undertaking. It will take commitment on your part to pull together all of the pieces needed to help you achieve your goal. You will need to stay on a four-step path: Inventory your present project management competency, identify your desired project management competency, assess the gap between your desired and present project management competency, and create a plan for developing your identified competency gap.

Sound like work? Well, it is. However, keep in mind that each step you take brings you closer to taking ownership of improving your professional project management competency. Now, let’s get started.

Step 1: Inventory your present project management competency (current state). Unless you happen to be lucky enough to work for an organization that values project management sufficiently to have aligned project management competencies with project management roles—and unless this same organization has aligned those roles within their existing job families—you will have a bit of work to do to inventory your present project management competency.

Don’t know where to start? Go to your human resources representative and ask for a listing of competencies associated with your present job. If you are one of the many “unofficial” project managers, be certain to request a listing of competencies for project management jobs within your organization. Should your company have no specified project management jobs as part of their job families, request a listing of business competencies required for managers.

If your HR representative doesn’t have a listing of competencies for project management, ask for a listing of business competencies required for managers.

In addition, should your present job be technical in nature with no specified project management competency (other than perhaps project management itself as a competency), or should your company have no project management jobs, you may need to do some sleuthing. You should look at competency associated with various project management roles/titles. You could do research at a library or university with a project management program. You could search for information on the Web, particularly at the various employment sites. You could also check for available project management competency information from a professional project management association like the Project Management Institute. Also, know any great project management practitioners? If so, you could interview them as to the skills they deem invaluable to performing their duties.

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Now that you've completed your sleuthing, you are ready to document your current state. Once you've created your current state list, have someone whose opinion you trust (career coach, mentor, valued peer) review your list. Ask this person to provide a sanity check as to the items you've listed. Be sure you provide the reviewer with enough background information to fully understand your request. You should set the context for their review and let them know how important this is to you. If you don't, you might get the ubiquitous "looks fine" when what you really want is an analysis of the data you are providing.

How many competencies should your list contain? A list of roughly between 20-30 items would be a good starting point. Any more than 30 and your list is likely to be unruly and unmanageable. Also, with any more than 30 items you are likely have some redundancy.

Step 2: Identify your desired project management competency (desired state). Now that you have your current state documented, you need to identify your desired project management competency. (If you were doing this analysis for a group, as opposed to an individual, I would recommend reversing the order of steps 1 & 2. However, for an individual, it would be all too easy to deceive yourself into thinking you meet more of your ideal than you actually do, should you document your desired state first. It's the old adage about a self-fulfilling prophecy.)

Setting aside your documented current state but using the data you collected in step one, review the information again, this time focusing on desired competencies. Feel free to collect additional data for review should you so wish. However, it shouldn't be necessary if you did your homework during step one. Remember to identify desired state items from across the three competency areas (interpersonal, business/management and project management). Also, when documenting your desired state, make sure you list all of the desired items and not just the ones you think you don't have. It's important to have a complete listing of items for when you move on to step three.

Once you've documented your desired state, you will again want to have someone sanity check your information. You could go back to the person that reviewed your current state list, however, you might consider calling on someone new for a fresh perspective. Set the context for the review to ensure the feedback you receive is useful. You should wind up with roughly 20-30 items on your desired state list. Again, check the list for redundancies as you did in step one.

Step 3: Identify the differences between your desired and current project management competency (the gap). Now that you have both your current and desired state list, you are ready to perform your analysis and identify the gap between the two states. Perform a gap analysis of your data. This may be done by doing a simple side by side comparison of the two lists. You could also create a table of some sort (Word or Excel) that shows both lists on a single document for easy review. Some of you techno geeks out there might choose to use Access or Oracle or perhaps even write a macrocode for Excel. No matter, as long as the end result is the same-identification of the differences between your current and desired states.

At this point you might be asking yourself "what if I meet part of one of items on my desired state list?" While I don't recommend giving yourself partial credit when performing the gap analysis, it's perfectly acceptable to make notes about items that you've partially achieved. Identifying the aspects of an item that you need to work on will actually help with building your development plan in step four.

Step 4: Creating your project management competency development plan (bridging the gap). Taking the gap analysis data you identified in step three, including any notes, you are ready to begin work on creating your development plan. You will need to create a matrix to display your information. The matrix

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should include the complete listing of desired state items, not just the ones you haven't achieved. Why? Well, not only will it make you feel good to have some items checked off as achieved, it will also help you keep the big picture in mind should you have to step away from the data for a while.

List the desired state items in rows and your development options in the columns. Include a couple of columns to help track progress and a column for notes. See Figure 1 for examples.

By now, you have your matrix laid out, but what are your development options? You are likely to have multiple options available for achieving a particular competency. However, each of these options should fall into one of four categories: instruction, self study, coaching or mentoring, and practical experience.

Instruction. This may include instructor led courses (often the most pricey, but check with your organization, as they may already be offering courses that would help you achieve one or more of your desired competencies), on-line courses or webinars (may or may not include one-on-one time with instructor), seminars (presentation of materials but no real opportunity for interaction and workshops (facilitated, interactive instruction and discussion of materials)

Self Study. This may include anything you take on where you self instruct based on an identified targeted area. It could include reading a book or magazine, researching a particular topic at the library or online (check with your organization or a professional organization with which you have an affiliation, as they may keep materials on particular topics for their employees/members)

Coaching or Mentoring. This includes any identified target areas that are shared with experts in that area who provide direct feedback and input toward your achieving a particular competency or multiple competencies. The role of coach or mentor may be very formal (again check with your organization or a professional organization with which you have an affiliation as they may offer these services) or informal (someone that is recognizes as an expert but isn't part of formalized program). Each can be equally beneficial, but formal programs tend to have guidelines as to interactions, including feedback and number of times to meet per cycle. Coaching occurs when someone is actively engaged in attempting to exhibit a particular competency and is receiving "live" feedback while going through the experience, which may be over a long or short

Figure 1. Project Management Competency Development Plan Sample Tables

Current State	Desired State	Notes
Project Planning	Project Planning	
	Schedule Development	
Scope Management	Scope Management	
	Business Assessment	
	Negotiating	General understanding good. Need practical experience.
Verbal Communications	Verbal Communications	Need additional practical experience.
Written Communications	Written Communications	Need additional practical experience.

Competency	Option 1	Option 2	Target	Achieved	Notes
Project Planning	Chapter meeting workshop	On-line planning course		Oct. 2003	Completed course
Schedule Development	Mentor sessions	Create "practice" schedules	Dec. 2004		Use prior project data
Scope Management	On-line scope mgmt. course	Company-offered course		June 2003	Certificate provided
Business Assessment	Work-offered course	Community college course	Jan. 2005		
Negotiating			Feb. 2005		
Verbal Communications	Volunteer to deliver two internal training sessions	Chamber of Commerce meetings	Nov. 2004 Jan. 2005		Schedule follow-up activities
Written Communications	Volunteer to deliver two internal training sessions		Nov. 2004 Jan. 2005		Schedule follow-up activities

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period of time. Mentoring occurs when someone receives input from their mentor on ways to achieve their goal, goes away for some specified period of time to try things out and circles back with their mentor at a later time to discuss what did and didn't work.

Practical Experience. This includes any instances where you are required to exhibit competency within a given area which you may or may not already possess. They include "trials by fire" or "on-the-job training." Practical experiences may take place as part of a formal or informal coaching or mentoring relationship.

WHEN IDENTIFYING YOUR OPTIONS for achieving an identified competency, you should keep in mind that the best option may not always be the most feasible (e.g., a 9-week project management boot camp that you know your boss won't pay for but which addresses every competency identified in your gap analysis). Also, be realistic when setting the timeframe it will take to bridge the gap between your desired versus current state. Don't give yourself so much time that you wind up ignoring your development plan, but don't set yourself up to fail by setting unrealistic expectations.

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