

Papers

Moving to a different industry

How to go about it?

Thanks to Kiron Bondale for triggering ideas for this paper.

That was some years ago, now revisited by Max Wideman

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Introduction

The broader question here is: "How do I get a project management position in a different industry?" Is this even possible? If you raise this question amongst a group of project management folk, their responses will inevitably fall into two groups.

There are those who argue – correctly in my opinion – that after all said and done, a project is a project. Indeed, the same hard and soft competencies that are required to successfully manage a project in one domain, also apply when managing a project in another. The members of this group will likely bring up examples in which experienced project managers have practiced successfully in a variety of industries, as indeed I have.

On the other hand, there will be those who will argue that in spite of how successful a project manager has been in one field, their effectiveness decreases when they have to manage a project in a different field. They may even point to the oft quoted data that indicates that the rate of failure of projects has really not changed much, if at all, over the last half century. This they suggest is due no doubt to the attempt to apply the same project management principles and practices equally across all projects.

So why is this and who is right?

Digging deeper

To answer this apparent conflict, it is necessary to dig deeper, a lot deeper. The fact is, not all projects are the same and therefore it is unreasonable to believe that the same "project Management" can be applied to all project regardless. In fact the whole meaning of "project" is, according to the Project Management Institute,¹ "A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result." In other words, every project is different. That being the case, every project environment is different, and each one needs to be managed differently. One size does not fit all. If you don't get this right, the result will most likely be a project failure of one sort or another.

Difference in environment?

Firstly, basic project management is formed from the application of a whole variety of "Tools and Techniques". These T&Ts may be applied in different measure or some not at all. Like baking a cake, what ingredients you include and how you mix them can make all the difference in the type and acceptability of the cake after cooking. Moreover, that cake can vary considerably depending on its eventual size.

Then the project itself may rise through a hierarchical scale from the simple T&Ts just mentioned, to a single project varying in size and complexity, to a de facto group of multiple projects collectively classified as a "Program". Then, several of such "Programs" may be conducted in a variety of

relationships, in different environments, and with differing overall objectives. Such a collection may be managed from even higher up as a "Portfolio". And yes, you guessed it, a large company organization or aggregation of authority, such as a government, might call for the overall application of what is known as "Governance".

All of these issues need to be factored in when contemplating a move from one project environment and level to another.

But that's not all

It is not only "not all", but let's say for the sake of argument, it is only about 30% of the total project environment that you should be considering. The other 70% will be in moving from one domain or industry to another, sometimes referred to "Area of Project Management Application". In ascending order of project complexity, typical examples may be identified within Construction; Healthcare Administration; Manufacturing generally; Information Technology generally; so called "Hi-Tech, Space; and Research; etc. Moreover, each of these areas tend to use different nomenclature, all of which has to be learned.

From the perspective of making a potential move, it might be better to view this last range of activities from a different perspective. After all, what is your own personal disposition in terms of working satisfaction? Do you really enjoy most in working with your hands, or do you like something that involves a lot of serious mental effort, especially involving intellectual goals?

Such answers can be conveniently divided into four clear boxes, namely: "Tangible-Craft"; "Intangible-Craft"; "Tangible-Intellect"; or "Intangible-Intellect". If you are not sure where you fit on these scales, a trip to the Myers Briggs typology self test to find your own personality type could be worthwhile.²

Of course, in real life, work usually involves a mixture of all or most of these things, but the emphasis is typically in one place or another. But if the majority of the work and your predisposition do not largely match, then eventually you are not going to do your best, and your decision to switch will not work out well. All of this, of course, depends on whether you get the actual opportunity to switch in the first place.

Factors to consider

Let's say you plan to switch departments within your own company, and you have a successful track record of delivery in your existing role. Let's also say that you have an established network of champions within your current department as well as the one you wish to enter, then the lack of experience in the work of the target department should not be a serious obstacle, and certainly not a showstopper.

Moreover, if you have the good fortune to work in a geographic location where the demand for competent, experienced project managers exceeds the supply of such talent, you could be offered a new position that advances your career.

But in your case these likelihoods are probably wishful thinking.

Few companies are large or broad enough to provide the lateral, domain-switching opportunities which a project manager may wish to pursue. In addition, the explosive growth of the project management

profession over the past two decades has resulted in a surplus of qualified talent in many parts of the world. Yes, there are some regions where demand still exceeds supply, but the number of qualified project managers willing to relocate significant distances remains low, and the economic or political conditions within some of those regions might not make them suitable for many professionals.

This raises the question of how valuable is it to obtain a project management credential? Again, this may be viewed from two perspectives, namely to better position you in the project management market place, i.e. your prospects, or for your own personal satisfaction? Again it depends on what credential we are talking about, but currently a majority of hirers of project management talent have only a minimal understanding of what project management is really all about and therefore do not give it a heavy weighting.

It's your track record that will carry the most weight. So be ready with a full description of your most successful project, and all that this implies as to your capability.

Time to rethink

Is this something you really want to do? If it is an unexpected opportunity, where does it fit in relation to the state of your current project? Is your project nearly done or can your deputy handle it? Or, as its present project manager, would you be leaving your team in the lurch? Such a situation will not look good on your resumé.

A long time ago I faced the same problem. I was responsible for the four-year construction of a very large and difficult project in the London (UK) docks, then in its third year. By coincidence, I was offered the opportunity to take responsibility for construction of the bank portion of the Toronto Dominion Centre then under development.

The offer included all expenses paid for moving from London, UK, to Toronto Canada. It was a wonderful opportunity indeed! After much careful thinking, my response was that I would very much like to accept, but I feel a responsibility to my present project for at least the next six months. The response that I got was a great relief – basically: "That's fine just let us know when you are available."

Such offers are rare and seem to come in cycles about every five years, depending on the state of the market for the type of work you are interested in. Meantime how do you unearth such opportunities? First, make sure that you really want to go through with this, and that you have exhausted opportunities with your present employer. If you have a potential employer in mind, do your homework and make sure that your vision is realistic. There's nothing worse than finding yourself in an unexpected employment situation, project or otherwise.

First, learn the "lingo" of the intended environment or project. You will need to be able to talk the talk if you are fortunate enough to be interviewed. This will help to impress an interviewer. Search out the best person to contact for potential new employment. Again, find out as much as you can through your own contacts or through other sources such as attending a relevant conference where you may "bump into the right person" to contact. Do a little soul searching for what of your experience might be relevant to the new situation, so you are ready to discuss the challenges of a new project with the new company.

Second, draw up a list of questions you would like answered, partly to confirm your previous findings and partly to obtain additional information to fill the gaps in your own investigations. Don't ask what the

pay is, leave this until later after you are satisfied that this a position that you would really like.

At the interview, don't just sit there and wait to be asked questions. First, thank your interviewer for the opportunity to discuss the possibility of employment with their firm. Then preempt the interview by asking a question about the proposed work, and even get into a discussion about it. This will generally please the interviewer, as they do not have to start the discussion.

If they happen to get in first and ask you to talk about your background, you are quite at liberty to ask a lead question first so that your response to theirs is all-relevant. Chances are that the subsequent discussion will then never get back to a discussion on your background. Discussing the challenges of the new project manager position that you are seeking will be much more illuminating and valuable to you.

Finally, if they make you an offer, ask for time, maybe a few days, to consider their offer.

Here's wishing you good luck with your project management career mapping.

¹ In their saner moments, that is.

² See <http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/profiles/intro.htm>