



Getting Started in Project Management

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Founder of pmStudent.com

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Welcome to the pmStudent.com Community!

Welcome! My name is Josh Nankivel, and I put this together as an introduction to project management and the community of pmStudent.com readers and contributors that number in the thousands.

As you read this, it is likely that I am working on creating a new blog post, new video tutorials, or other pieces of content that I hope you will find useful. I ask myself “what would have been great to have back then” when coming up with ideas. Even better, I ask the pmStudent.com community what will be valuable.

Only members of the pmStudent.com community have access to this eBook, so welcome aboard! If you have a moment, I would love to hear exactly what kind of helpful resource(s) you would value personally. I will listen to the voice of the community when deciding where to focus my efforts.

<http://pmstudent.com/what-you-want>

Thank you!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JN', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Josh Nankivel

Founder of pmStudent.com

My Story

In early 2004 I had been laid off (again, my 3rd time) and was re-assessing my career. I asked myself "what parts of my previous roles have I really enjoyed doing?" The list was fairly long, but here is an example of the items on it:

- figuring out what the business needed
- working on something brand new
- leading people

I found out about something called project management.

My title had been "Operations Manager" and I had stood up a service center and support team and led them on dozens of projects to set up infrastructure and support the business. I

started to realize that leading all those projects was really the part of my previous job I was most passionate about, and even the positions I had before that.



During my research into going back to school and what companies were hiring for, I found out about something called project management. It was a discipline, with organizations and standards, etc. I was shocked and overjoyed!

I had found my calling. This is what I was meant to do, and all the pieces fit into place. There were parts I loved and hated about my previous work....nearly all of what I loved

lined up with this crazy thing called project management!

This is what I was meant to do

I decided it would be a very good idea to go back to school and get a college degree. Not just any degree, but specifically one in project management. I was prepared to settle for a business degree if necessary. I had dropped out of a technical college after about a year or so out of high school. I didn't appreciate the value of higher education back then. I was able to get what I thought were really great jobs, and so I figured I didn't need a degree.



I was able to get into positions that normally would have required a degree, but it was always a struggle. By now I knew I would learn a ton of great knowledge and

***keep my resume
out of the trash
bin***

skills by going back to school, and it would keep my resume out of the trash bin before I got my foot in the door with potential employers.

Additionally, my wife Tamara was pregnant with our first child. Believe me, THAT will inspire someone to get their ducks in a row and figure out what they want to do with their lives, devise a plan, and follow it!

Since then, I dedicated myself to learning as much as possible about the project management discipline and gaining as much experience doing it as I could. Starting in the spring of 2004, I took several deliberate actions.

☑ Months were spent researching companies in my local area, looking specifically for those where I could actively learn about and do project management as a part of my job. The company culture had to be right...they had to take project management seriously as a discipline.



One of the key factors I looked for was how they titled various job postings. Even if there were no current positions available, I looked at previous openings. With some companies, the job description was very much a hybrid between general management and project management, with the title usually reflecting the general management title. Then I found some companies who specifically used the word “project” in the job title. Some examples included “project manager”, “project analyst”, “project coordinator”, and “project assistant”.

By reading through the position description, it became very clear to me that some companies “got it” when it came to project management as a discipline, and others did not. Reading through multiple position descriptions from the same company even gave me an idea of what the project environments were like.

***Some companies
“got it”....
others did not.***

I found a local college where I could take night classes to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in Project Management. At one point I interviewed for and was offered a position supervising the technology team at a state university about 50 miles from where I live.

Oddly enough, my own educational options would have been limited had I accepted the position! The university did not offer night classes, and I would be limited to just a few credit hours per semester. I wouldn't have been able to make it back to town to start my night classes at the other college by 5:30 each day. Plus, they did not have the kind of projectized environment I was looking for. I had to turn the offer down.

Rejecting that offer was a turning point for me. I had decided against the short-term option in favor of my long-term career goals, even though we were going to have a baby and I was worried about it.



Rejecting that offer was a turning point

In late 2004, I selected a company. It was a large organization in financial services where I could learn about project management from mentors and work my way up. It was also a massive pay cut, about \$20K less than the offer I turned down at the university, and \$30K less than my previous salary. I moved from management into an individual contributor role as a developer and process improvement “jack of all trades”. It was difficult and we had to tighten our family budget to make it work, but sometimes you have to take a step back in order to position yourself for giant leaps forward in the right direction!

☑ Shortly after starting school, I looked into something called a blog. I had heard about it, but didn't really know what it was. I discovered that I could start one for free using blogger.com and it would allow me to write posts for anyone to see.

It seemed like a great way for me to document strategies for applying my education to my work. I started a little blog. My hunch was correct...it was a wonderful way to help formulate my thoughts on project management. There were unexpected benefits as well. After a while, other people started reading what I was writing. I started getting feedback from veterans who had been there, done that.

I think it was then that I first discovered the benefits of being completely open and public with your thoughts, and how amazing it can be to be told you are absolutely

how amazing .. to be told you are absolutely dead-wrong

dead-wrong on a topic. pmStudent.com has grown into an ongoing passion for me.

I have been able to connect and network with so many smart and talented people because of it.

And now, I am able to help new and aspiring project managers with the site. I get to help thousands of people who are in a similar place that I was in not so many years ago. It is extremely self-actualizing.



☑ Through 3 years of working towards my degree, taking anywhere between 12-16 credit hours per semester, I worked through business analyst / developer roles into managing small projects, then larger ones, etc. I eventually switched industries to aerospace and worked my way up from the bottom once again. While working in aerospace, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Project Management in April 2008.

I am now the lead project manager for my contract on the ground system of the Landsat Data Continuity Mission, a joint project between the USGS and NASA.



☑ I debated the efficacy and need for the PMP certification quite extensively with myself and others. I sought out dissenting voices on the topic to hear what they had to say. I wrote several posts debating the pros and cons of going through with it. In the end, I decided it was a beneficial journey to undertake, as long as I treated it the same way I had my college degree....it wasn't the piece of paper that mattered most, it must be the personal development I strive for along the path to the goal.

*it wasn't the piece
of paper that
mattered most*

In November 2008, I became PMP certified.

Why I Do This

Looking back, there are many resources I wish I would have had or known about that I didn't along my journey to get where I am today. Now, I want to re-double my efforts and focus on helping new and aspiring project managers achieve their own career goals. My goal is to provide useful information and resources.

If you are reading this, it is likely you are in a similar place that I was when starting my way towards project management as a career. If so, I want to help you along your own journey.

So now that you know my story, what's yours? Email me anytime at joshnankivel@pmstudent.com and tell me why you are interested in project management and/or becoming a better project manager. What difficulties and questions do you have?

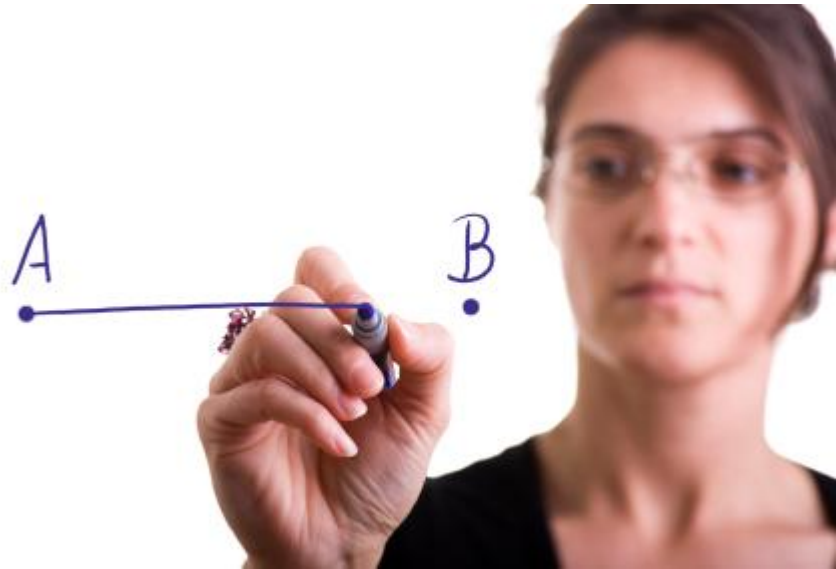
Josh Nankivel, PMP is the founder of pmStudent.com, a site dedicated to helping new and aspiring project managers succeed. He has been in management and project management since 1998 in various industries including computer hardware, wired and wireless telecommunications, financial services, and aerospace. Josh's academic background includes a Bachelor of Science Degree in Project Management from Colorado Technical University and he is PMP certified.



How Do I Get Started?

I get many questions from people who want to enter into project management as a profession. One of the most common is “how do I get started”?

Let me start off by saying that there are many, many ways that very successful project managers got their start. I can tell you about my personal experiences and share some pointers.



If you have to choose between formal project management education or real-world experience, go with the experience. In reality, this is not an either-or choice however. Go with both but always emphasize your opportunities to gain real-world experience. The

always emphasize your opportunities to gain real-world experience

optimal in my humble opinion is if you can be in a position where your projects are small enough that you have the flexibility to try out new concepts you are learning in real time.

Volunteer efforts are wonderful for this type of flexibility.

- ✓ Volunteer at work, school, and non-profit organizations you may not even belong to yet
- ✓ As you learn, apply the concepts
- ✓ Seek a mentor by asking questions of project managers. Take them out to coffee or lunch as a way to tap into their experience and build professional relationships.
- ✓ If you are already part of a project team, start paying attention to what the project manager does. Offer to assist them in any way, even if you find it menial, and ask lots of questions.
- ✓ Read books and blogs. Comment on the blog posts you find interesting. Ask questions in the comments, debate with others, and add your own insights. This is a wonderful way to retain concepts and think deeply about them.
- ✓ Listen to podcasts ([PM Podcast](#), [PM411](#), [PM Prepcast](#))
- ✓ In particular you may find [Episode 62](#) “How can I become a Project Manager” and [Episode 65](#) “BS and MBA in Project Management” helpful podcasts. I’m interviewed in episode 65. Since that was recorded, I’ve decided to NOT pursue an MBA in project management. I’ve earned my BS in Project Management and am focusing on gaining experience. An advanced degree just didn’t pan out in the cost-benefit analysis for me at this point in my career. (Although a PMP certification did)

*seek a
mentor*

- ✓ Join PM organizations. My experience so far is with the PMI. Join your local chapter, and some SIGs that look interesting. I can recommend the ISSIG in particular, they have a monthly webinar that is usually on topics that apply broadly to all project managers.
- ✓ PMP Prep material can be very valuable even if you're no where near ready to take the exam (as long as the material is geared to you understanding it, not memorizing it). The best one I've found for this is the [PM PrepCast](#)TM where I feel I learned a ton even if you set aside the PMP aspect of it.
- ✓ Ask your management at work about helping you with a project management career track in the way of training, special assignments, etc. It never hurts to ask!

What About Technical Skills?

A member of the pmStudent community contacted me for advice about where she should focus her efforts with the end goal of being a great project manager.

“I am wondering if it is better to be a good programmer first, really good specialist (technically) and then become PM, or maybe other way...would be better to gain more experience as a member of IT team as a programmer, then team leader, try to find a job in a big IT company OR to try to gain PM experience in small company with small projects.”

First off, I want to thank her for contacting me with the question! I applaud her maturity in formulating a plan to reach her career goals!

There are different thoughts on this, and it does depend on the type and size of projects you plan to work on. I agree with what Bill Duncan has said before here on pmStudent.com:

“Technically skilled and knowledgeable PMs are fine on smaller, simpler projects where they are as apt to be making technical decisions as management decisions. But as their projects get larger and/or more managerially complex, they will be making management decisions, and their technical skills are as likely to be a handicap as a benefit.”

“I’ve seen many, many, more situations where the PM got into trouble because [he or she] did not have the sense to defer to the technical leads on the project.”

One of the most dangerous things on a project can be a technical PM who *thinks they know (or really do know)* more than the technical leads and takes on technical decisions when they should not. On small projects this can be fine, but as the project increases in technical complexity and size, there's an increased risk of bad consequences from having too much power and knowledge in one person. The PM should know enough to understand what is going on at a high level technically, but not enough that day-to-day technical decisions are being made by a PM. The PM should be primarily focused on communication and management as much as possible.

The PM should be primarily focused on communication and management

The key is being able to *effectively communicate with the techies and business suits...you need a foot in both worlds for this. Personally, in your situation I would:*

- ✓ Continue working as a member of the project team
- ✓ Start asking your project manager (and those managing other projects) what you can do to help them out
- ✓ Show your interest in what the project managers are doing, and ask them questions. Most people are very happy to help as long as you are tactful and not too demanding or annoying!
- ✓ Be willing to commit your own personal time without pay to gain valuable experience and build relationships with mentors
- ✓ Start thinking about the work you and your team are doing from both the technical AND management perspective

Next Steps

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you have found this a valuable read, and I hope you are as excited about joining the pmStudent.com community as I am to have you be a part of it!

If you have signed up for one of the newsletters at pmStudent.com, they will provide a lot more helpful resources and tips for you.

If you have questions or ideas about how I can make your experience with the community better, email me anytime at joshnankivel@pmstudent.com.

I'll be seeing you around at pmStudent.com!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JN', with a large loop on the 'J' and a long tail on the 'N'.

Josh Nankivel, PMP

