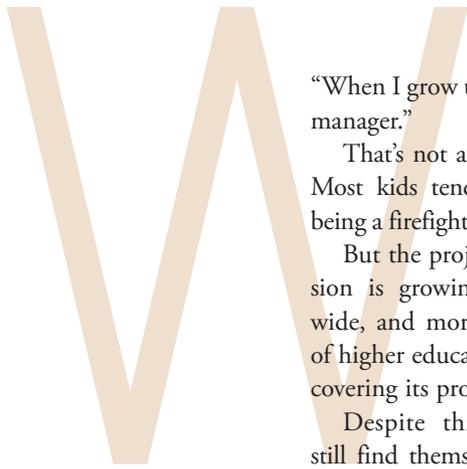


# the accidental project manager

by Kelley Hunsberger // illustration by Otto Steinger

Even as the  
profession grows,  
many are still thrust  
into it. Learning  
from peers is the  
way to go.





“When I grow up, I want to be a project manager.”

That’s not a line you hear too often. Most kids tend to dream of one day being a firefighter, actress or football star.

But the project management profession is growing exponentially worldwide, and more and more institutions of higher education are offering courses covering its processes.

Despite this, many professionals still find themselves working as project managers—without ever having applied for the position.

“At the beginning of their careers, typically people don’t have a burning desire to become project managers,” says Patricia Ensworth, author of *The Accidental Project Manager: Surviving the Transition from Techie to Manager* [John Wiley & Sons, 2001]. “They start out doing something else—marketing, social work, biochemical engineering—and after acquiring subject matter expertise and leadership skills, they are promoted into the role of project manager. Some accidental project managers accept their new responsibilities enthusiastically, some reluctantly.”

Whether enthusiastic or not, so-called accidental project managers find themselves with a host of new responsibilities as part of their workload—and that means they need to get up to speed as quickly as possible.

### WELCOME TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

James Bosak, PMP, fell into managing projects while working as an out-

side plant supervisor for a telephone company where he was responsible for complex installations. While he had the technical expertise for the position, he lacked any formal project management training. “There are too many organizations that expect people with technical expertise to just know how to formally manage a project,” he says.

The hardest part about moving from delivering a technical solution to managing a project is accepting that there may be a better way of doing things, says Mr. Bosak, director of program management at the IT management software giant CA Technologies in Cary, North Carolina, USA. “People want to believe that they have been doing a good job. And they may have been—but that does not mean that it can’t be improved,” he says. “There is always room for improvement. Introspection takes time and a willingness to change once you see a better way, and that is not always easy for people or organizations.”

It wasn’t until he began reading project management books and speaking with successful colleagues that Mr. Bosak discovered he hadn’t put enough importance on documenting, tracking and estimating. “When I realized all of the elements that I had always glossed over in my projects, I was stunned,” he says.

“Accidental project managers are often able to achieve a technically perfect result that is not what the sponsor had in mind,” he adds. “Or they may not meet the budget or timeline. The trained project manager understands that knowing how to deliver the result

## > TIP

**Join your local PMI chapter.** No matter where you are in the world, chances are there’s one nearby. It’s one of the best ways to connect with your peers face-to-face and gain valuable knowledge of the profession.

PMI also offers virtual communities of practice for a variety of industries and topics. When something stumps you at work, post a query on the community site—and gain insights from more experienced project professionals.

is only important if the result supports the requirements and is delivered when needed. There is a direct line from the requirements to the activities to the result to customer satisfaction.”

Mr. Bosak then took his project management career to the next level by acquiring the Project Management Professional (PMP)<sup>®</sup> credential.

The trick is finding a good balance between your old and new job responsibilities. “I am still in a technical field, getting projects delivered but managing different aspects, such as project selection and funding priorities,” he says. “I enjoy the challenge as well as the advancements in technology.”

## THE PLAYERS

Often, the background of an accidental project manager is loaded with technical experience and expertise, says Martina Huemann, associate professor of project management at WU (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien), Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria. “So they might be used to thinking very much in detail, providing expertise and concentrating on their technical task,” she says.

In their new role, however, these employees will need to start considering the big picture. That includes leading others, designing collaboration processes and understanding how the project fits into the larger organizational landscape.

One of the first things new project managers need to learn are the different roles people play in the project. “I think accidental project managers know that they are doing the project for ‘someone,’ but they don’t have a solid concept of sponsor versus stakeholder, and they always miss some stakeholders,” Mr. Bosak says. “This results in incomplete requirements and rework. A trained

# Accidents Will Happen

As project management continues to gain in popularity at organizations around the globe, will this trend of the accidental project manager begin to wane?

Don’t count on it, says Patricia Ensworth, author of *The Accidental Project Manager*. “Accidental project managers are not only here to stay, but also tend to increase in numbers when an organization formalizes project management as a core competency.” She says these accidental project managers will continue to head up small efforts where they can transition more easily into the role and learn about the position.

A lot of it comes down to where you live.

“The profession of project management is in very different stages in different countries,” says Martina Huemann, WU (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien), Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria. “In countries where there are education programs established and universities that offer project management programs, there is a higher likelihood that the career of a project manager is a planned rather than accidental one.”

Expect to see an increase in accidental project managers for internal projects, such as development or change efforts, which are often done on an *ad hoc* basis, Ms. Huemann says. That’s the case even in industries who utilize project management and have professional project managers established for external projects.

The accidental project manager’s future depends on how sponsors view the role, says James Bosak, CA Technologies, Cary, North Carolina, USA. “There will always be accidental project managers, and certified project managers need to recognize that fact. Project professionals need to work to create an environment where accidental project managers can recognize the change in their role and openly seek assistance.”

Organizations must understand that when they assign a resource to deliver a project, they are creating a project management position. As such, they need to train their resources appropriately, he says. That way they are creating project managers—and not of the “accidental” variety.

Companies can also benefit from the establishment of a PMO (program management office). “There will still be accidental project managers, but there would be a resource to reach out to them and assist them,” Mr. Bosak says.

project manager knows to find the sponsor and get requirements in writing, and hold sponsors accountable for the final decisions on things. And they also know to make a list of stakeholders and actually search for other stakeholders.”

Then it’s time to communicate effectively with the various constituencies. Sometimes that means taking on the role of entrepreneur when dealing with the sponsor and other senior managers, says Ms. Ensworth, president of Harborlight Management Services, a project management consultancy in New

# Is the “accidental project manager” a relic of the past?



We posed that question on the PMI Career Central group on LinkedIn. Here's how project professionals responded:

As long as organizations want to embrace change, they will have to initiate projects—whether they call them that or not. And since experienced project managers are always in short supply, there will always be people with no direct authority, who never expected to be placed in that position, managing projects. For many of them, it will be a once- or twice-in-a-lifetime experience; for others, it will be the beginning of a new career. —*Dave Gordon, USA*

My background has been identified as a good fit for project management. I've been a web developer, technical business analyst and an executive officer for a state agency. Those experiences have been invaluable with being able to communicate well with both technical and non-technical people. —*Brent Laning, PMP, USA*

I became a project manager by accident. I was in estimation and tendering and I submitted a tender. After the contract was awarded, I got involved in the project initiation, and the client approached our top management for me to continue as a project manager until the end of the project. Since then, I am on two “boats” (i.e., estimation and tendering, and project management). Sometimes I feel it is good for me. But when I am overloaded, I feel I should choose a single boat. —*Nadeem Arshad, PMP, Qatar*

York, New York, USA. “Sometimes one must make a sales pitch for the project to obtain approval and initial funding,” she says. “And always, throughout the project life cycle, it is necessary to gather high-level information about the political and financial climate and to reassure senior stakeholders that the project is a good investment.”

## THE LEARNING PROCESS

Your boss pats you on the back and says, “Congratulations! You're managing this project.” Now what?

Don't just stand there wide-eyed and panicked. Learn from your peers by networking with other project managers inside and outside of your organization, suggests Ms. Huemann, adjunct professor of project management at SKEMA Business School in Paris, France, and a project management trainer and consultant at Roland Gareis Consulting in Vienna, Austria. Ask them what

methods have and haven't worked for them and any tips for successfully leading teams.

Talk to veteran project professionals “not only about the appropriate tools and techniques, but also about the informal network of political influence and the unwritten rules that determine how things actually get done,” she says.

Take their advice—and don't view suggestions for improvement as a sign of mistrust in your ability, says Diego Nei, project manager at CEACRE (Centro Evangélico de Apoio e Acolhimento), an orphanage in Salvador, Brazil. “People can unintentionally sound as if they are bragging or complaining when actually they are just trying to pass along information about what has worked in their experience.”

Help from peers will only take new project managers so far, however. You must also learn skills that can be paired

with your technical expertise.

“Take a *PMBOK*<sup>®</sup> *Guide* project management course, take an Agile project management course, then decide where on the spectrum of formal methods the project lies,” Ms. Ensworth advises. “Obtain a project management software tool and learn how to use it to create a work breakdown structure, a network diagram with a critical path and a Gantt chart.”

Courses on negotiation, presentation skills and public speaking can also be beneficial.

Once you have educated yourself and sought the counsel of more experienced professionals, the next step is to garner as much “in the field” experience as possible, says Joe Gartrell, PMP, San Antonio, Texas, USA-based process engineer at USAA, a financial services company for those who have served in the U.S. military and their families. “Keep going, get as many projects under your belt as possible and start down the route to earning your PMP<sup>®</sup> credential,” he says. “Experience is paramount. However, most employers use the PMP credential as an initial screen, especially in today’s difficult economy where you may be competing against hundreds, if not thousands, of other project managers. Detail your accomplishments with measurable results and develop the ability to translate your experience into any industry. In essence, how does your experience transfer to the job you’re applying for?”

Making these strides will help impress your team members and senior managers, Mr. Nei says. “If new project managers can show people how dedicated they are and that they can perform as well—if not better—than anyone, they will earn their peers’ respect soon enough.”

When seeking educational opportunities inside the organization, start with the project management office (PMO). If there isn’t one, see what lessons learned have been documented by more experienced project managers.

The organization should also be involved in educating accidental project managers on their new responsibilities and how to carry them out. To do so, project management processes should be ingrained in the corporate culture.

“Accidental project managers are more likely to hit their stride and stay in the race when their organizations take project management seriously as a profession, a body of knowledge and a skill set,” Ms. Ensworth says.

That means defining project management as a human resources job category, as well as developing clear criteria for evaluating the role’s competencies. In addition, project status should be reported to, and monitored and controlled by, executives at the managing director level and above.

“Most important,” she notes, “project managers should feel that they belong to a community of practice. A formal PMO can establish this structure, but it can also be created through peer-to-peer centers of excellence.”

### SHOULD YOU STAY OR SHOULD YOU GO?

Not everyone who falls into the role of project manager will remain there. A lot of it depends on personality.

“All types of management require one to accomplish things through the efforts of other people, so accidental project managers who want to be in the spotlight or to take pride in the craftsmanship of their own work products might not enjoy the role,” Ms. Ensworth says. “Moreover, project managers often need to accomplish things through borrowed resources, so accidental project managers who prefer ticking off checkboxes over hustling for favors will become frustrated by their lack of results.”

However, those who do stick with the career path may find themselves becoming more visible and more influential within their organization—and as a result, their stars can rise faster than those of managers who remain in purely operational roles. *PM*



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—Patricia Ensworth, Harborlight Management Services, New York, New York, USA