

HITTING THE BOOKS

BY DAVID WHITEMYER

Before going after that degree, project managers need to line up the necessary timing, resources and motivation.



AT SOME POINT

in their professional lives, many project managers consider going back to school to earn higher degrees—and they certainly have plenty of options.

More than 160 educational institutions around the globe now offer degrees or diplomas in project management. The Doctor of Project Management program at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Melbourne, Australia, for instance, includes candidates from Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Canada and the United States, says Derek Walker, Ph.D., developer of the program.

But before project managers make a commitment to obtain a higher degree, they should consider the myriad directions and logistics—as well as ensure the resources and enthusiasm are in place.

Looking Inward

Alejandro Arroyo is currently finishing his thesis in RMIT's doctoral program. After being involved in many large South American logistics projects in the oil, gas, transportation and mining industries, he left his job with Zim Integrated Shipping Services Ltd., a global ocean transportation company. Looking to start his own project logistics operation in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he wanted to learn more about project management to help him run his new business.

There are a number of reasons why project managers seek higher degrees. Some hit roadblocks in their careers, Dr. Walker says, while some are looking for avenues for advancement. Still others have a specific interest within project management they want to explore further—or simply the desire to network with other project managers and share ideas.

“Here in academia, we can go straight off the planet,” says Dr. Walker, touting the

joy of schooling. “It’s a chance to look at theoretical ideas and not limit ourselves to the real world.”

Scott Serich, Ph.D., PMP, professor of project management at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA, suggests a more practical reason to obtain a higher degree: It gives project managers a competitive advantage in the job market. “A master’s degree in project management is a very rare paper these days, when compared to the tens of thousands of MBAs out there in the labor marketplace,” Dr. Serich says.

Whatever the motivation, the decision to return to school should be based on a specific goal. Without that, it’s a waste of time and money.

It can take time to discover these objectives. “Project management education requires some level of on-the-job experience for the student to appreciate its value as a disciplined profession,” Dr. Serich says. With time and experience come a broader world view and maturity necessary for higher learning, Dr. Walker says.

Crunching the Numbers

Life is a constant juggle between work, family and personal commitments. In *Degrees of Opportunity*, a 2006 study conducted for Capella University, Minneapolis, Minn., USA, U.S. adults age 25 to 60 were asked about the challenges of higher learning. Seventy-three percent cited time management as the biggest barrier to going back to school. Even project managers, masters of time organization, may find it challenging to fit schooling into their day-to-day world.

“Combining travel, reading time, working time and family obligations turned out to be a parallel doctorate in itself,” Mr. Arroyo says.

To address the needs of working adults, many degree programs are now offered online or on evenings and weekends. “There are situations

where a person is in a mission-critical project,” says Raymond Levitt, Ph.D., academic director of the Advanced Project Management Executive Program at Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., USA. “Taking time off for school would be detrimental to the project—and your career.” The Stanford program is a certificate program, rather than a degree program, and is a viable option for the time-constrained because its courses can be taken in a few weeks either online or in live, open-enrollment programs on campus.

Not surprisingly, respondents in the *Degrees of Opportunity* study said money is another major barrier to adult education. The fear of sacrificing a few years’ salaries discourages many prospective project management students from applying. Tuition costs for an academic project management program can be in the tens of thousands of dollars. RMIT’s project management doctorate program costs approximately \$43,000. Dr. Levitt adds that relocation costs also must be considered if enrolling full-time.

But there may be help. Working adults can apply for scholarships and grants, and some corporations help support school costs through tuition-assistance programs.

It’s important, however, for project managers to look beyond the costs and consider the eventual payback. Completing a degree may convert into raises and promotions. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the difference in median annual salaries in 2005 between workers 25 and older who hold a bachelor’s degree and those who hold a master’s degree was \$9,984.

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—Scott Serich, Ph.D., PMP, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., USA

Some Have It, Some Don't

Once someone has made the decision to pursue a project management degree, he or she still has to determine which of the hundreds of programs out there is the best one. That process can be simplified with PMI's Global Accreditation Center (GAC).

“Thousands of potential students visit the PMI website each year to view the list of accredited schools” and find high-quality accredited degree programs, says Michael Price, Ph.D., PMI's manager of accreditation programs.

To obtain the accreditation, a school must submit a comprehensive “self-study” of its program to the GAC Board and undergo an onsite review to demonstrate the following:

- The curriculum effectively addresses each of 40 GAC required learning outcomes.
- Students are achieving the learning outcomes.
- Sufficient academic, physical and financial resources exist to meet the program's mission and GAC requirements.
- Continuous improvement plans are in place.

In addition, students who graduate from accredited programs obtain 1,500 hours of credit toward their Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification.

Currently, 25 programs at 10 schools in Canada, Australia, France and the United States have met the GAC criteria. And at least a dozen more, in countries such as Ireland, South Africa, Spain and China, are in the candidate process.

The Work/Life/School JUGGLE

Managing work, family and finances is tough enough. Toss school into the mix, and you have a recipe for stress and burn-out. These five tips can ease the burden.

- 1 **Involve your family.** School will eat into family time, “and you need to have 100 percent support from them,” says Joanne Gumaer, PMP, IlliniaQ. Talk about your courses at the dinner table, and study with the kids while they’re doing homework.
- 2 **Get the boss on your side.** Ms. Gumaer recommends talking with your employer to see if you have the support of the organization. Also discuss what types of arrangements need to be made for your school schedule.
- 3 **Use time wisely.** Find creative pockets of time during which to study. If you’re a morning person, wake up an hour before your family. If you commute via public transportation or take frequent business trips, use those uninterrupted moments for your schoolwork.
- 4 **Plan your budget.** School isn’t cheap, and on top of the tuition, “you may also be looking at lost salary and relocation costs,” says Raymond Levitt, Ph.D., Stanford University. Put together a solid budget and look into scholarships or consider certificate programs as an alternative.
- 5 **Enjoy yourself.** If you spend every waking moment on your job and studying with no break, your schoolwork may suffer. Take time out for fun: a long weekend away, game night with the kids or a periodic run to clear your head.

The 2006 PMI® *Project Management Salary Survey*—Fourth Edition shows similar statistics for project managers worldwide. In its survey of more than 5,000 project management practitioners in 15 countries, PMI found that median salaries of those with

a master’s degree were higher than those with only a bachelor’s in the majority of countries represented.

The Right Fit—or Not

The supply and demand for project management degrees is clearly there. But higher learning is not for everyone.

Dr. Walker reviews numerous applicants who just are not a good fit for his program. He says some are too young and inexperienced, some are looking for an ego boost and some drop out mid-stream because the complexities of life get in the way.

The decision to obtain a higher degree mid-career depends on a number of factors that are different for each individual. Not everyone has the same tolerance for change and disruption. There are as many pros as there are cons.

Project managers considering heading back to school should know their options—a master’s degree vs. a master’s certificate, for example, says Joanne Gumaer, PMP, project management trainer and consultant for consulting and training firm IlliniaQ, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. “The advantage of having one over the other is something that a person needs to decide personally after carefully examining their career goals and weighing the pros and cons of each,” she says. It also helps if the decision is strongly supported by both family and employer, as going back to school requires significant time commitments.

But in terms of money, Ms. Gumaer says she believes the investment is a good one. “Today, you can’t go wrong with getting a higher degree,” she says. ☐

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