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## The Seven Natural Phases of a Project Management Career

*By David L. Pells*

About 25 years ago, some five or six years into my career as a project management professional, I was befriended by a retired professor from the University of California at Berkeley. When I told him that I was planning to prepare a technical paper for a project management conference, he stated something like, "That's a good idea. It a normal sequence to begin writing and presenting papers at conferences; publishing is a natural step in your career."

In the years since then, and as I consider the phases of my own professional development and career (and those of many others that I have known), it has occurred to me that there is a very natural sequence of steps or phases in most professional careers. This is especially true in the project management field. While there might be little new here for experienced project managers, I believe it can be very useful for those just beginning, to have an idea about what is in store or what they should plan to do. In my own case, I was often impatient to advance. I think that some guidance regarding career planning might be very helpful for younger professionals.

Now I would like to suggest the following seven phases in a project manager's career.

1. **Learning.** Continuing from university, every professional must learn his or her "profession" through on-the-job experience, continuing education, seminars, workshops and in-company training. Initially this often involves learning some technology-based technical or functional skill. A certain level of knowledge and understanding naturally leads to a role on a project team, the next step in learning project management. The learning process must continue throughout one's career, but it is most important at the beginning.
2. **Contributing – as member of a Project Team.** Few people become a project manager without first working on a project team as an individual contributor. It is here that we begin to learn the value of professional project management, and various aspects of teamwork, communications and other PM-related activities. If one focuses on project management, it is possible to advance to team leader, cost account manager, task manager or another leadership role on the project, before becoming a formal project manager. This often depends on the industry and organization, but it is natural to progress from individual contributor to leader, based on experience and knowledge.

3. **Leading – as Project Manager.** Although project management is always a team-based process, the role of project manager often focuses authority and responsibility in a single position, even if only for reporting purposes. Project manager is the next logical step in a PM career in most organizations. It often begins with a small project. Based on performance, one can advance to managing ever larger projects. Strategic or mission-critical projects are normally assigned to the most experienced project managers, usually with 10-15 years of experience.
4. **Creating Change – as Portfolio, Program or Corporate Manager.** After leading projects initiated by others for several years, most project and program managers reach a point where they are involved in the creation or selection of projects. As a senior project manager, program manager or company executive, one has the opportunity to create change, to add value to the organization. In most organizations, this is approaching the zenith of one's career, when influence is highest and potential impact the greatest.
5. **Sharing Knowledge.** Based on experience and knowledge gained from actual projects, it is natural for professionals to consider opportunities for sharing with others. The sharing process can include authoring of articles, technical papers for conferences, white papers for the company or books. Of course, sharing knowledge and information is a normal requirement from a technical standpoint during the implementation of project management. But here I am talking about sharing the knowledge gained from years of experience. Mature PM professionals should seek opportunities for sharing their knowledge; for some organizations, this is also a desirable process of maintaining organizational knowledge and capacity.
6. **Contributing to the Profession.** I believe it is also natural and necessary for professionals to return something to the profession itself. Generally this means volunteering in professional bodies, on committees, or in elected positions. Many opportunities exist for such contributions, at the local, regional, national and international levels. After gaining the benefits of professional organizations over the course of one's career, it is only logical that something should be returned eventually. It is a necessary step for both individual careers and the profession itself, and professional bodies depend on these contributions. And while many young persons volunteer and participate in professional organizations, the experience, knowledge and wisdom of more experienced professionals are also needed.
7. **Advising/Mentoring Others.** Finally, I believe it is a duty of all mature project management professionals who are reaching the ends of their careers to consider advising, mentoring and teaching younger people. After all, isn't this how we pass on our knowledge and experience, our stories from real

projects and programs? This is a natural process and phase to be considered by us all as we get older.

These it seems to me are the main stages in a professional career – to learn, contribute, lead, create change, share one's knowledge, return something to the profession, and mentor younger professionals.

In summary, and to paraphrase the above, here are the phases that I have experienced and seen among my friends and colleagues:

- 1) Leave university and go to work for an organization with projects, accepting a functional or technical position working on one or more projects, and begin to learn something about project management;
- 2) Gain experience and advance to a significant project team member position;
- 3) Advance to leadership position, either as a task manager on a large project or as manager of a small project; continuing advancing to project manager position, on series of larger and more important projects;
- 4) Advance to program manager, portfolio manager, director or executive, with some influence over selection or prioritization of projects and resources;
- 5) Share knowledge and begin to grow one's professional reputation, by publishing papers or a book, as author or contributor;
- 6) Become active in a Project Management professional organization, get involved and make contributions to the profession, as you gain understanding of your own career and professional position; and
- 7) Begin to advise or teach younger PM professionals, either formally or informally, directly or indirectly.

Along the way, we might add more university degrees, training certificates, professional qualifications, certifications, licenses, titles, etc. These all help, with regard to finding good projects to work on and for earning more money. But there is a natural sequence of steps, milestones and phases. This is the main point. I hope it is a useful message for younger professionals who are just beginning the journey.

*Good luck on your projects!*

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David L. Pells is the Managing Editor of PM World Today and of [www.pmforum.org](http://www.pmforum.org) one of the world's leading online sources of project management news and information. David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management, with over thirty years' experience in project management related activities and positions. His professional experience includes a wide variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, transit, defense and high technology, and project sizes ranging from several thousand to ten billion dollars. He served on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice, and was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award in 1999. David can be reached via email at: [editor@pmforum.org](mailto:editor@pmforum.org)