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Navigating the New PgMPSM Credential

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In October 2007, the Project Management Institute (PMI®) began offering its first credential that demonstrates skills in the emerging discipline of program management, the Program Management Professional (PgMPSM). I say emerging because, while program management has long been an accepted profession and practice within the U.S. government, particularly the Department of Defense, it has just recently gained more interest and acceptance in commercial applications around the world.

Program management deals with the many complex interdependencies between component projects and helps ensure that projects align with an organization's overall strategy. In other words, program management is really about delivering business results and benefits. The PgMPSM recognizes that a program manager, while needing skills in project management, needs to also have strong business skills and acumen to be successful.

Earning Your PgMPSM

Before we talk specifics, let me ask you this. Have you ever helped your friend move a piano up a flight of stairs? Have you ever climbed Mt. Everest, wrestled a bear or lifted a Volkswagen Beetle over your head? Now think about doing all these things at the same time and you'll have an idea of what it takes to actually earn your PgMPSM.

OK, I'm exaggerating. There weren't any bears involved; however, I can tell you from firsthand experience that PMI® hasn't made this process easy — nor should they have. From documenting literally thousands of hours of experience to a grueling exam to an assessment by 12 of your colleagues, it's as much a test of endurance as it is experience and intellect.

So, for the benefit of any of you who might be seriously thinking of going after your own PgMPSM — and, judging from all the buzz at this year's PMI® Global Congress

2007, there are a lot of you — I've put together a rundown of everything you'll need to do, as well as a few tips along the way to help keep your sanity in check.

The Requirements

To even qualify to begin the process, you need to have extensive experience in the business of both project and program management. Specifically, those with a bachelor's degree or global equivalent must have at least eight years of experience — four years managing projects and four years managing programs. Professionals without a bachelor's degree must demonstrate these requirements plus an additional three years of program management experience.

PMI® considers one year of experience to be 1,500 hours of actual work in a calendar year, or at least in a 12-month period. Eight years times 1,500 hours equals 12,000 hours of work experience. 12,000 hours. No problem, right?

Three-Stage Process

Unlike the PMP® certification, there are three separate stages involved in earning your PgMPSM. Let's take a look at what they are.

1) The Application

The process begins with an extensive, Web-based application that requires you to resurrect and document your experience as a project and program manager. There are no points for brevity or vagueness here, so make sure you've got your facts straight before you begin.

On the project management side you need to document four years (6,000 hours) of experience. You must list the names of the projects you've worked on, the start/end dates, your role on each project, the industry the projects applied to, the organizations you worked with (including their addresses and phone numbers), a contact name at each organization and descriptions of your relationships with those contacts.

The program management side (6,000 hours) requires even more detail. You must be able to provide program names, budgets, direct reports, direct project managers, start/end dates, your specific role on each program, the industries the programs fell within, a description of program strategies and objectives, your job titles, and specific organizational and contact information.

Here's a tip: when identifying your job title for projects and programs, it's best to go with the highest profile title possible while still remaining truthful. You want

Also, make sure that your 6,000 hours of project management experience don't overlap with your 6,000 hours of program experience. You don't want to get rejected on a technicality.

In addition to supplying this mountain of information, you'll also be required to complete eight 200-word experience summary statements. These will cover topics such as how you —

- Coordinated the management of specific projects
- Spanned functions
- Built credibility and established rapport with your stakeholders
- Selected and assigned project managers
- Aligned project scope with organizational objectives
- Controlled program scope
- Integrated multiple projects
- Conducted cross-cultural communications and handled confrontation, among a few other topics

2) The Exam

Once you've fully recovered from this ordeal and your application has been accepted (it's reviewed by an international panel of program managers), it's time for the exam. This 170-multiple-choice-question monster is put together based on the Program Management Professional Examination Specification and the Program Management Standard from PMI®. The questions cover program definition, initiation, planning, execution, controlling and close out, with particular emphasis on planning, execution and controlling. I wouldn't spend much time worrying about the specific categories in your preparation. To be honest, throughout the exam it was difficult to even tell which category any given question was referencing.

Oh, and by the way, 20 of the exam questions are "pre-test" questions and don't count; however, you'll have no idea which ones they are so just go ahead and get as many correct as possible. Easier said than done, I know.

The scoring for this exam is different than the PMP® exam. Here, each question is weighted based on its degree of difficulty. So, getting a more difficult question correct will yield a higher score — similar to an Olympic diver receiving more points for successfully completing a difficult dive. To pass the exam, your weighted or "cut" score must equal at least 325. Incidentally, you won't be told how each question is weighted. From my perspective, they all seemed to be weighted the same: difficult!

3) The Assessment

If you've ever wondered what your colleagues really think of you, well, you're about to find out — at least as a group. Once you officially pass your exam, 12 of your colleagues will automatically be sent a 360-degree assessment via e-mail. The topic of the assessment: you! These colleagues, which you are fortunately able to choose, will include one supervisor, four peers, four direct reports and three professional references (meaning, you can't pick people from your bowling league). The survey is made up of about 70 questions based on six different domains and, at least according to my colleagues, it doesn't take very long to complete.

Good Luck!

Hopefully I've been able to shed some light on this lengthy process and offer you a few insights that will give you a head start on earning your PgMPSM. As I've alluded to throughout, it's a difficult process indeed, but, when all is said and done, it's well worth it. Good luck!

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J. LeRoy Ward, Executive Vice President, ESI International, is responsible for ESI's worldwide training programs and international partnerships. Ward has authored several articles and publications including Project Management Terms: A Working Glossary and PMP® Exam Challenge! He speaks frequently on project management and related topics at professional association meetings and conferences around the world. He is a member of numerous professional associations including the International Project Management Association and the Project Management Institute where he is certified as a Project Management Professional and a Program Management Professional.

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