

New to Project Management

Graduates
Career
Advice

arras PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Arras People has been running it's highly successful "Project Management Careers Clinic" for the last 3 years providing guidance and advice to people at all levels of their programme and project management careers from a wide variety of backgrounds and sectors.

One area of focus has been assisting those people who are new to project management, whether at the beginning of their career from leaving college or university or from people looking to take their careers in a new direction.

The broadest and most frequently asked question we get asked is: How do I get into a project management role. This is one of the most difficult to answer; the shortest answer we can give is – "It depends!"

Here are some of our thoughts, opinions, guidance and advice we've given to people, including specific questions and answers directly from our careers clinics.

GRADUATES

To those at the beginning of their career, the first response we give to the question "how do I get into a project management role?" is to answer with another question – "Why do you want a role in project management?" It doesn't matter what degree or college course you've just completed, you need to understand the real reasons behind what's driving you to pursue a career in this line of work. Answers have ranged from "we've done a module on project management at university and enjoyed it" to "they earn a lot of money" to "I think I've got good organizational skills and I think I would be good at leading a team." Hmm, good enough reasons?

If you are fortunate to know someone personally, who is a project manager, ask for advice – find out how they became a project manager. Unfortunately most people, including us at Arras People fell into project management by accident – it was a matter of being in the right place at the right time (Or wrong place depending on how you look at it J) which doesn't really help you much. What we are saying here is that few people leave school stating I am going to be a project manager. In our experience it is something people and their organisations realise they have a flare for once they have started on one of their career paths. Ask any project manager you know how they became one and you will unearth many stories!

So back to the practical advice and some things you can be doing to increase your chances of finding a role with real potential to lead you to a project management opportunity. One of the first things we can recommend you do is research the project management roles out there in the market place. Strip away the project terminology and really look at the skills, experience, people skills, personality and qualities these roles demand. Next look at your own skills and experience to date – and even harder to do objectively is look at your own personal qualities. It's often easier to take a blank piece of paper – split the sheet in four – See the table below:

<p>Work Skills</p> <p>Managed Budgets Good IT Skills Created Spreadsheets</p>	<p>Personal Qualities</p> <p>Very organised Proactive Good team player Trustworthy Ambitious Sociable/Friendly</p>
<p>Experience</p> <p>BSc IT with business Relevant modules Temporary roles Database admin</p>	<p>Evidence?</p> <p>Secretary of society whilst at Uni Part time shop work.(Checkout/cash handling) Organised an event</p>

Why do we recommend you do this? You need to be clear about what you can offer today to a prospective employer and more importantly be realistic about where on the career ladder you are.

To be direct - projects are about people and getting things done. If you enjoy working with people and can generally get other people to do things that are needed to be done you are probably good project management material.

The next step is your CV – [See the website for more information on this](#) - if you're looking to pursue that project management role, your CV is the most important document you have to show employers what you can do today, what you want to achieve in the future and how you're going to do that.

There's plenty of guidance on CV writing on the internet and there's no definitive right answer to writing the perfect CV but there are definite pitfalls to avoid – and certainly big no-no's!

YOU HAVE THE CV, NOW WHAT?

Research and apply, look at all the job seeking opportunities available to you, online job boards, newspapers (national and local), job centres and people you know. You need to understand more about two key things – what kind of organisation would be interested in me today and does that organisation have anything to do with project management now or likely to have in the future. You are looking for an opening into an organisation today, into a role that will give you valuable practical skills which will be transferable when taking that step into project management.

Do not be tempted to apply for every job going. This only annoys us as recruiters and makes us question whether you are serious about your next role. Rather identify the type of role and possibly the sector you wish to work in and keep to this strategy no matter how desperate you get.

The entry level into Project Management tends to be that of a Project Administrator or Project Co-ordinator role. Review the role of a Project Administrator / Project Co-ordinator available on the web – Arras People has an archive of all our previous roles <http://www.arraspeople.co.uk/Archived.php>

Here are some of the key experiences a good project administrator might have:

- Proactive, switched on, can manage multiple tasks etc
- Excellent communication skills - written and verbal
- Excellent organisational skills – the ability to co-ordinate many tasks and activities at once
- Strong work ethic
- Strong time management and organisation skills
- Interaction skills to be able to grow and develop working relationships

Find out more about the different types of project support roles—[information available on the website](#)

Good project administrators tend to come from an administrative background, they might have worked as PAs, business administrators or secretaries. Gaining good administrative experience is an excellent starting point to finding your first project management related role.

Finding an administrative role within an organisation which does have a project management department or a few project managers will mean you're in better stead when an opening becomes available. Remember – a lot of people fall into project management, project opportunities come to them rather than them going to the projects.

OTHER ENTRY POINTS

If you already have some practical work experience within a particular sector you should also try to capitalise on that. For example, organisations within a particular sector, like engineering, look for applicants who have prior experience within their type of organisation and would prefer to invest in training to bring them up to speed in project management. This is where the power of your degree can be realised. IT organisations look for graduates with degrees in technology and science because they know the graduate has existing knowledge, experience in learning about new technologies quickly or will have good IT skills.

Look at existing information for graduates and project management and there is a lack of advice and guidance. At Prospects (UK's Official Graduate Careers Website) – project management is only mentioned in relation to [Construction](#). No mention of project management spanning the different disciplines like Marketing, Arts, Education, Engineering, Finance, Healthcare or Information Services.

You need to research the sector you're specifically interested in and do the legwork yourself, look at the various business directories on the web, find the job/career fairs, use local websites and newspapers to get a feel for the businesses that exist in your local area or specific location you want to work within. What are they looking for?

Do they have projects within their organisation?
What's the entry level role into the organisation?
Is there anything specific about my degree that could help me get a foot in the door?

VOLUNTARY WORK

Voluntary organisations, charities and not-for-profit businesses could also be a good place for you to start and get your foot in the door and begin to build up some good basic project management skills. There are a lot of project management related roles in these sectors and the core skills you could be gaining include strong co-ordination skills, project team communication skills, managing and controlling budgets and overseeing issue resolution – all good core project management skills. If you have the ability to work for nothing for a good few months, this is definitely a track work taking. Commercial organisations might also be interested in voluntary works experience opportunities too. If you know friends and family who are working for businesses that might be interested, investigate further about the possibilities of works experience within a project management department or team.

One word of caution when considering voluntary work experience routes – you need to make sure you are committed to this and are planning on volunteering for a good few months. Charities and voluntary organisations are not interested in investing time in skills transferring and on-the-job training if someone is not committed to seeing the project through or at least to a natural milestone in the project.

It should also be noted that your approach to gaining experience in the voluntary sector should not be any different to gaining paid employment – charities and voluntary organisations don't just take on anyone who sends on their CV: you still need to ensure your CV and cover note is working as hard as it can for you, be clear about why you are looking for voluntary work – what you hope to gain and what you hope to give.

FURTHER EDUCATION

If you've just completed your degree or have gained some work experience to date and none of the avenues above appeal to you, there is also the possibility of gaining the MSc Project Management which would certainly be appealing to prospective employers.

A number of Universities are currently running the course:

[Lancaster University](#)

[University of Greenwich](#)

[University of Portsmouth](#)

[The University of Reading](#)

[University of Central Lancashire](#)

[University of Warwick](#)

Why is the MSc Project Management appealing to employers? I suppose for many it shows a number of things – they have a bright, educated employee who has shown dedication already in choosing this course to advance their career. You will also have gained a good foundation in project management which should allow any employer to build on quickly and soon have you practicing project management. The best degrees of course also have an element of practical works experience – so before making a commitment to returning to University make sure the Masters you choose includes some practical elements of project management – not just theory.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAREERS CLINICS

Here are a selection of questions and answers from previous project management careers clinics held by Arras People;

Should I complete the PRINCE2 course if I don't have any project management experience?

We get asked this question a lot, along with "If I have my PRINCE2 accreditation will it help me get a job even though I have no experience in project management?". The quickest way to answer these questions is – if you don't have any experience in project management, doing the PRINCE2 exams will not give any guarantees to gaining employment or indeed place you high up in the competitive ranks against someone with practical experience in project management and no accreditation.

Simply put gaining the PRINCE2 accreditation and having no practical experience is not a great selling point and could be a costly decision that brings you little benefit.

You need to ask yourself why you think the PRINCE2 accreditation would benefit you other than a tick in the box on your CV. If you are wanting to gain further information and knowledge about project management it's much cheaper to buy some of the good books that are out there – [Arras People Bookshop](#)

before making any commitments to expensive training courses. If you still want to attend training courses in project management, look for the courses that cover the principles and capabilities of project management not just the method i.e., PRINCE2

Some recommended courses include;

[APM's Introductory Certificate](#)

[BCS's Foundation Level in IS Project Management](#)

PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAREERS CLINICS

Here are a selection of questions and answers from previous project management careers clinics held by Arras People;

I want to be a project manager, should I be looking at project support roles first and are these role easier to get into?

Like the rest of the advice we have given, these are strictly our opinions so here goes. Project support roles like project co-ordinator, project administrator, project support officer etc are no easier to walk into than a project manager role. Many people make the mistake of thinking that the support roles in project management are less skilled or people will need a lesser understanding of project management to be able to perform the job – wrong! OK, the project co-ordinator doesn't direct the project or direct the team or act as decision maker but the project co-ordinator does need to know the project management techniques like project planning for example and the processes and procedures – like the risk management process. The Project Co-ordinator must also be a professional – someone the project manager and team can trust and delegate to. Once you've made the mistake of thinking this is an easy job to get into you will quickly realise that there are many project co-ordinators out there in the marketplace who are dedicated to project support and have no interest in moving on into the role of project manager – they have created a dedicated

specialist role in project management and are no longer just seen as a stepping stone to the greater echelons of project management (see the [PPSOSIG – The Programme and Project Support Office Specialist Interest Group](#))

Some Project Support roles can also be just as financially rewarding as project manager positions. To answer the question - should I be looking at project support roles first and are these role easier to get into? Yes you could look at these roles first but be aware of the stiff competition you might face from other experienced co-ordinators and you could quickly find out that no, they're not easier roles to get into.

[Read further information about the project support roles in the marketplace](#)

IN SUMMARY

In summary

You first employment role may not be directly in project management, however in most organisations there is change happening and companies are always looking for their staff to assist and lead in the implementation of change and new ideas that make a company more efficient and a better place to work. The focus here is your individual attitude, if you are willing to take on responsibility and make things happen you will be noticed for having seized the opportunity enabling you to demonstrate your capability and potential for project management.

If you feel this article does not provide you with an answer you're looking for, drop us a line at **graduate@arraspeople.co.uk** with a question and we'll get back to you

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