CAREER KIT

Project Manager Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Project Manager

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Most project managers get there by managing projects inside their current field, then backing that experience with a certification. Many employers ask for a bachelor's degree, and the PMP credential requires 36 to 60 months of experience leading projects depending on your education, plus 35 hours of training. Beginners can start with the CAPM or the Google Project Management Certificate. Project management specialists earn a median $102,320 a year (BLS, May 2025).

Timeline	6 months to 5 years, depending on your experience
Typical cost	$300–$3,000 for certificates and exams (more for a degree)
Education	Bachelor's degree preferred by most employers; not required for the CAPM
License	None required; PMP or CAPM certification is optional but common
Median pay	$102,320 per year
Job outlook	+7% (2025–35), much faster than average

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Start managing small projects where you already work

Time: Ongoing · Cost: $0

Project management is less about a job title and more about running work from start to finish: scope, schedule, budget, people and risk. Volunteer to coordinate a process change, an office move, a product launch or a software rollout. Write down what you planned, what you delivered and the numbers behind it, since this becomes your resume and your PMP application later.

2. Get a degree or build equivalent experience

Time: 0–4 years · Cost: $0–$120,000+

BLS reports that project management specialists typically need a bachelor's degree, often in business, project management or a related field. Many PMs instead have degrees in their industry, such as engineering, IT, construction or healthcare. If you do not have a degree, you can still move into project work, but expect a longer experience requirement for the PMP.

3. Learn the core tools and methods

Time: 2–6 months · Cost: $0–$500

Learn both predictive (waterfall) and agile approaches, since most teams use a mix. Get comfortable with a scheduling tool such as Microsoft Project, Smartsheet, Asana or Jira, and with basic budgeting in Excel. A beginner course such as the Google Project Management Certificate on Coursera covers these basics with no degree or experience required.

4. Earn the CAPM if you are new to the field

Time: 1–3 months of study · Cost: About $225–$300 exam fee plus training

PMI's Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) is meant for people early in their careers. It requires a secondary school diploma and 23 hours of project management education completed before the exam. The Google certificate counts toward those education hours. The CAPM shows employers you know the vocabulary and process.

5. Move into a coordinator or associate PM role

Time: 1–3 years · Cost: Paid work

Common entry points are project coordinator, project analyst, assistant project manager, scrum master or junior PM. These roles let you lead parts of projects and count months of experience toward the PMP. In construction, IT and engineering, PMs often move up from technical roles in the same field.

6. Qualify for and pass the PMP

Time: 2–4 months of study · Cost: $405 exam fee for PMI members, $655 for non-members

The Project Management Professional (PMP) is the best-known PM credential. Under PMI's July 2026 exam outline, you need 36 months of experience leading projects with a bachelor's degree, 48 months with an associate's-level degree, or 60 months with a high school diploma, all within the past 10 years, plus 35 hours of project management training. The exam covers people, process and business environment, with a mix of predictive, agile and hybrid approaches.

7. Keep your certification active and specialize

Time: Ongoing

PMI certifications must be renewed by earning professional development units (PDUs) over each renewal cycle. Many PMs add an agile credential, such as PMI-ACP or a Scrum certification, or specialize in an industry such as IT, construction or healthcare. Program and portfolio management roles come later with more experience.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Google Project Management Certificate	$49	$300	$49 per month on Coursera in the US; Coursera estimates most learners finish for under $300.
CAPM exam fee	$225	$300	Commonly listed as $225 for PMI members and $300 for non-members; confirm on PMI.org.
PMP exam fee	$405	$655	$405 for PMI members, $655 for non-members, per PMI.
PMI membership (optional)	$0	$160	Typical range, varies; membership lowers exam fees and includes the PMBOK Guide.
35-hour PMP training course	$50	$2,500	Typical range, varies by provider. Self-paced courses are cheapest; live boot camps cost the most.
Practice exams and study guides	$0	$300	Typical range, varies by provider.
Bachelor's degree (optional)	$15,000	$120,000	Typical range, varies by school. Not required for CAPM or the Google certificate.
Total	**$15,729**	**$124,215**	

Requirements

Education	Most employers ask for a bachelor's degree. It is not required for the CAPM, and it shortens the PMP experience requirement.
Experience	For the PMP: 36 months leading projects with a bachelor's degree, 48 months with an associate's-level degree, or 60 months with a high school diploma, within the past 10 years.
Training hours	35 hours of project management training for the PMP; 23 hours of project management education for the CAPM.
Certification	Not legally required. The PMP is the most requested credential in job postings; the CAPM and Google certificate help beginners.
Skills	Planning, scheduling, budgeting, risk management, clear writing and running meetings. Familiarity with agile and with tools like Jira, Asana or MS Project.
Soft skills	Leading people you do not directly manage, negotiating priorities and delivering bad news early and calmly.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Build the base

Days 1–30

Goal: Learn the fundamentals and start documenting project experience.

- ☐ Enroll in the Google Project Management Certificate or a similar beginner course and study 5–10 hours a week.
- ☐ List every project you have helped run in the last 10 years, with dates, your role, budget and outcome.
- ☐ Calculate your months of experience leading projects to see whether you qualify for the CAPM or PMP.
- ☐ Ask your manager for one small project you can own from start to finish.
- ☐ Learn one tool, such as Jira, Asana, Smartsheet or MS Project, with a free trial.
- ☐ Read the PMI pages for the CAPM and PMP and note the current fees and requirements.

Phase 2: Credential and position

Days 31–60

Goal: Finish your first credential and rewrite your resume as a project manager.

- ☐ Complete your course hours and download your certificate of completion.
- ☐ Apply for the CAPM, or for the PMP if you already have the experience.
- ☐ Rewrite your resume with project bullets: scope, team size, budget, timeline and result.
- ☐ Update your LinkedIn headline to target project coordinator or project manager roles.
- ☐ Create a simple portfolio: one project charter, one schedule and one status report from a real or practice project.
- ☐ Join your local PMI chapter or attend one of its events.
- ☐ Practice the interview questions in this kit out loud, using the STAR format.

Phase 3: Test and apply

Days 61–90

Goal: Pass your exam and land interviews.

- [ ] Take at least three full timed practice exams and review every missed question.
- [ ] Schedule and sit for your CAPM or PMP exam.
- [ ] Apply to 20 or more coordinator, associate PM or junior PM roles, including internal openings.
- [ ] Ask two people you worked with on projects to be references.
- [ ] Message five working PMs in your industry and ask how they got their first PM role.
- [ ] Follow up on every application within a week.
- [ ] Plan your next credential, such as an agile certification, for the following quarter.

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- [ ] Resume rewritten around project results
- [ ] Project experience log with dates, roles and descriptions
- [ ] Certificates of completion for your training hours
- [ ] Diploma or transcript showing your highest education level
- [ ] Government photo ID matching your PMI application name
- [ ] Contact details for people who can verify your project experience (PMP audits)
- [ ] Sample project charter, schedule and status report for your portfolio
- [ ] Two or three professional references
- [ ] LinkedIn profile URL

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

CAPM (Certified Associate in Project Management)

What it is: PMI's entry-level exam for people with little or no project experience. It covers project management fundamentals, predictive methods, agile frameworks and business analysis basics.

How to prepare: Complete your 23 hours of education first, then take timed practice exams. The Google certificate or PMI's own CAPM prep course both cover the education hours.

PMP (Project Management Professional)

What it is: PMI's main credential for experienced project managers. A new version launched in July 2026 with three domains: People (33%), Process (41%) and Business Environment (26%). About 40% of items use predictive approaches and the rest agile or hybrid.

How to prepare: Study from the July 2026 exam content outline, complete your 35 training hours, and take several full-length timed practice exams. Check the PMI handbook for current question count and time.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Tell me about a project you managed from start to finish.

Tip: Use the STAR format and end with a measurable result, such as time saved or budget met.

2. How do you handle scope creep?

Tip: Explain that you assess impact, use a change request and get sign-off before adding work.

3. A key team member keeps missing deadlines. What do you do?

Tip: Talk privately first, find the cause, agree on a plan and escalate only if needed.

4. How do you prioritize when everything is urgent?

Tip: Mention aligning with the sponsor on business value and deadlines, then communicating trade-offs.

5. What is the difference between agile and waterfall, and when would you use each?

Tip: Give a simple example of a project that fits each approach.

6. How do you keep stakeholders informed?

Tip: Describe a regular status update, a RAID log and tailoring detail to the audience.

7. Tell me about a project that failed or went off track.

Tip: Own your part, explain what you did to recover and what you changed afterward.

8. How do you estimate time and cost?

Tip: Mention breaking work into tasks, using past data and asking the people doing the work.

9. What tools have you used to manage projects?

Tip: Name specific tools and what you used them for, not just a list.

10. How do you manage risk?

Tip: Describe a risk register with owners and responses, and give one real example.

11. How do you motivate people who do not report to you?

Tip: Talk about clear goals, recognizing work and removing blockers.

12. Are you working toward the PMP?

Tip: Share your plan, how many months of experience you have and your target exam date.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Coordinated a 6-month CRM rollout for 40 users, delivered on schedule and 5% under budget.
- Built and maintained project schedules in Smartsheet for five concurrent projects.
- Ran weekly status meetings and sent written updates to stakeholders across three departments.
- Created a risk register that flagged a vendor delay early and kept the launch date on track.
- Managed a $25,000 event budget and tracked spending against plan each week.
- Facilitated daily standups and sprint reviews for a six-person agile team.
- Completed the Google Project Management Certificate and earned the CAPM.
- Reduced report turnaround from five days to two by redesigning the team's intake process.

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Waiting for a PM job title before managing any projects.
2. Paying for an expensive boot camp before checking whether you meet the PMP experience rules.
3. Not logging project experience as you go, then struggling to fill in the PMP application.
4. Studying from pre-July 2026 PMP prep material that does not match the new exam.
5. Listing duties on your resume instead of results with numbers.
6. Focusing only on tools and certificates and ignoring communication and leadership skills.
7. Letting a PMI certification lapse by not earning PDUs during the renewal cycle.

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **PMI: PMP Certification**

https://www.pmi.org/certifications/project-management-pmp

- **PMI: CAPM Certification**

https://www.pmi.org/certifications/certified-associate-capm

- **Coursera: Google Project Management Certificate**

https://www.coursera.org/professional-certificates/google-project-management

- **BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: Project Management Specialists**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/project-management-specialists.htm

- **CareerOneStop Certification Finder**

https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Training/find-certifications.aspx

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $61,580	**$102,320 per year ($49.19 per hour)**	More than $167,970

Outlook: Employment of project management specialists is projected to grow 7% from 2025 to 2035, much faster than the average for all occupations, with about 76,500 openings each year.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Project Management Specialists, May 2025 data — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/project-management-specialists.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.