

FA 26 Guide to Becoming a PMP

I've heard people mention the PMP as a desirable certification in our field since my first week on active duty. Unfortunately, it was usually referenced in ways which made it seem difficult to obtain. I never had the opportunity to work with anyone who had the certification, and I had a hard time finding information on how to prepare. While going through the 26B course we received a block on instruction on project management and I decided to go for it. After finishing the test, I wanted to write a small guide for anyone interested in pursuing a PMP certification now or in the future. It wouldn't be too hard for anyone outside of our field to read this and gain some insight from it, so please feel free to share it with others.

The requirements to earn the PMP are as follows:

- Bachelor's degree
- 35 hours of formal project management training
- 36 months project management experience
- 4,500 hours managing projects

We are all project managers. Beyond that, as 26 Series Officers, every single one of us has the requisite experience to apply for and earn the PMP certification. If you are a 26A or 26B then you must at least be a 1LT(P). That means you all have the minimum of 36 months of PM experience and 4,500 hours leading or directing projects. The only difficult aspect of the application process will be summarizing your experience into PMI-isms. That is to say, translating Army-isms into what the Project Management Institute wants to see on their applications (PMI-isms). The examples of this article will provide some real-world examples of PM experience descriptions that should serve as templates for anyone who was a Lieutenant (all of us) to tailor for themselves. Don't just copy and paste the descriptions provided into your application. You will also need to complete 35 hours of formal Project Management Education. The Army offers many avenues for which this can be completed. I was fortunate enough to receive a 4-day block of instruction on project management throughout the 26B course. For anyone not so lucky, Skillport has a whole section of PMP training available for free at <https://usarmy.skillport.com>. Additionally, every duty station that I've been on has PMP classes available, and yours probably does too.

While we often define what we do as operations, it is important that, before earning your PMP, you understand the distinction between operations and projects. PMI defines operations as ongoing activities which support the day-to-day business functions of an organization. The definition here is directly opposed to projects, which are temporary endeavors undertaken to accomplish clearly defined and achievable goals to improve or add a business function. Throughout the application and test process I found it helpful to consider the cyclical nature of the Army as an institution. With constant changes in leadership, redefinition

of mission priorities, and annual training plans and objectives it can easily be argued that the overwhelming majority of what an officer does relates directly to the management of projects. In example, planning and executing a company range to qualify Soldiers on their assigned weapon systems may sound like the conduct of typical operations. Envision this instead as a project. As the range OIC, you would fill the role of Project Manager. You are undertaking a project designed to validate Basic Rifle Marksmanship while improving qualification scores by 10% across the organization to ensure readiness and provide measurable benefits to a key business function of your organization. You must shoot before you can move or communicate. Carry this example forward and apply the logic to everything you've done thus far in your Army career.

Don't let the application process be a roadblock. It's simple to understand and complete. Once you open the application, all you need to do is document your PM experience and submit the application for review. There are a few steps worth taking before clicking the submit button. PMI conducts audits on 10% of all PMP applications. If chosen as part of the 10%, you will be required to provide proof of your project management experience. The biggest catch here is that you must first apply, then pay the test fee. Only after payment is received will PMI inform you whether you have been selected to participate in the audit. The easiest way to avoid getting hung-up is to document the same project management experience that you input on the application on separate memorandums for record. Talk to the supervisor that you're listing in advance. Explain to them that you are applying for the PMP, that you are listing them as the project sponsor, and that there is a possibility you will be randomly selected for audit. Have them sign the memorandum validating your experience as described on the application, and hold on to the memorandums until you know if you are going to get audited. If you are selected for the audit, it will then be as simple as mailing PMI those memorandums and waiting for them to complete the audit. It will take about a week. After the audit is closed (or immediately upon payment if you're not selected for the audit) your one-year window to test opens. You are limited to 3 test attempts within the year, but PMI doesn't restrict you beyond that. If you do require more than one attempt, some good news is that the test fee lessens for each subsequent attempt.

If you are like me then you probably didn't keep an hourly log of all the project-management experience you've attained over the past few years. It's easy to do some basic math and come up with accurate estimates of how much time you spent in each area for the application process. We have already established that almost everything an officer does is project management. Assuming 4 years of service, at 12-hour work days (without weekends), then you have a total of 12,480 hours to work with. It is by no means a stretch of the imagination to come up with 4,500 spent on the management of projects. While considering what to document realize that everything you've done has been in support of some sort of project outlined by a higher element. Think through what your daily actions were really supporting, identify that as a project (or program) and then document your actions in that light.

EXAMPLES

The following section contains a few examples of descriptions that might help get you going. Don't just copy what I've written here but feel free to use them as a template. Remember not to use words like, "operations" or "ongoing" in your descriptions.

PLATOON LEADER

RANGE OPERATIONS

INITIATION: 5, PLANNING: 10, MONITORING AND CONTROLLING: 50, EXECUTING: 100,
CLOSING: 20

Assigned as the project manager of Basic Rifle Marksmanship development for the 54th Signal Battalion in Camp Arifjan Kuwait. Responsible for the creation of the project charter, project management plan (and all subsequent plans). Stakeholder management was a major focus area throughout this project due to difficulties in acquiring resources and the necessity to leverage influence of key stakeholders to achieve defined requirements. Lessons learned were also of significant important to ensure continued process improvement across the organization.

HELPDESK OIC

INITIATION: 10, PLANNING: 50, MONITORING AND CONTROLLING: 450, EXECUTING: 450,
CLOSING: 50

Information Technology Project Manager responsible for the development and implementation of incident response procedures to improve network availability by 10% and improve customer satisfaction by 20%. I took over this project from a previous and as such was minimally involved in initiation and planning. Most of my effort was placed on Monitoring and controlling the Project with updates to PM documents being a constant focus. Human resources were the most critical constraint on this project and human resource management was a primary area of concern throughout its lifecycle.

FIELD EXERCISE (OR CTC ROTATION, OR DEPLOYMENT [INCREASE HOURS ACCORDINGLY])

INITIATION: 20-50, PLANNING: 100-300, MONITORING AND CONTROLLING: 200-700,
EXECUTING: 100-600, CLOSING: 25-100

Assigned as 2PLT A/3BN 2IBCT 2ID Project Manager for JRTC 17-06. Areas of emphasis were scope management, human resource plan development, and risk management plan development with additional focus placed on risk register development and controlling risk process. Ongoing participation in iterative program management as project manager. Stakeholder management was critical to the success of this project. Organizational process asset update of key importance to improve future projects.

EXECUTIVE OFFICER

COMPANY TRAINING/OPERATIONS

INITIATION: 50, PLANNING: 300, MONITORING AND CONTROLLING: 750, EXECUTING: 1800,
CLOSING: 150

Project Manager for A/53d Signal Battalion assigned to manage Unit Training to improve mission readiness by 20% and ensure 99% customer satisfaction across all mission areas. Developed project charter, stakeholder management plan, communications plan, change control plan, risk management plan, and human resources plan. Iterative project management planning and constant-updates to project documents outlined major areas of focus throughout the execution of this project.

STUDY PLAN

By now you've accepted the fact that you have enough experience as a project manager to take the PMP examination. This is important because having that knowledge and confidence is the most important aspect to incorporate into a successful study plan. I found <https://www.reddit.com/PMP> to be extremely helpful in preparing for the exam. There are a ton of people on there who outline exactly what they did find success. There are also lessons learned concerning what didn't work out for others. While this guide may become outdated the Reddit will always be up-to-date. Below you will find a revised version of my study plan which is also posted on the Reddit.

RESOURCES

- [PMP Exam Prep, Either Edition \(Rita's Guide\)](#)
- [Head-First PMP](#)
- [Project Management Body of Knowledge \(PMBOK\)](#)

The amount of time spent studying will probably vary by person, but 2.5 weeks was enough for me. It will probably depend primarily on how much free time you have. If you're on a 9-5 schedule and can study from 6-10, for example, then 3 weeks should be enough.

- Days 1-8, read "Headfirst PMP", approximately 100 pages per day, and complete the end of chapter examinations. Also completed the 200-question exam on day 8.
- Days 9-15 (minus days 10,11,12), read "Rita's Guide", approximately 100 pages per day and completed the end of chapter exams accordingly.
- Day 16, exam day.

Personally, I feel that the “Headfirst PMP” book in and of itself would have been enough to pass, but I wasn’t willing to bet on that assumption when it came down to it, so I opted to use “Rita’s Guide” as a supplementary tool.

I did all the exercises in the Headfirst book, and thought they were fun and interesting. In Rita’s book, due to the time I had available, I stopped doing the exercises after the second chapter. Rita’s book frustrated me in that the available space provided to complete the exercises is usually around 1/4th of what you’d need to write the actual answers as they define them. So, it creates a situation in which even if you did know ALL of what they expect you to, you literally can’t write it all down, and basically you are forced into getting it wrong.

I recorded my scores in each book to provide a comparison. Obviously matching these won’t guarantee success, but it might provide a baseline to measure from.

HEADFIRST PMP:

(by chapter) 100, 100, 100, 76, 96, 96, 87, 95, 73, 85, 87, 75, 100

Check on knowledge: 61, End of book exam: 83, Average: 88

RITA’S GUIDE:

(by chapter starting at 2 [chapter one has no exam]) 68, 80, 74, 63, 71, 58, 80, 94, 82, 71, 70, 84, 81

Average: 75

GENERAL TIPS

1) Don’t over-think the exam. If you are taking this test, you have PM experience. If you have PM experience, just answer the questions based on what you’d do in real life. Don’t worry so much about what PMI might expect you to choose. If you have the experience and have found success in your career, you probably know the right thing to do.

2) Closely related to number 1. Don’t second guess yourself. In both books’ exams, I missed at least 2 questions on most of the exams that I originally had right, but changed the response to be what I thought they wanted me to say, rather than sticking with what I would actually do. I didn’t change any answers on the actual PMP exam from my first choice.

3) The hardest part about the actual PMP exam is how easy it is. Let me clarify. A lot of the answers are super straight forward, to the point that I started thinking I must be missing something toward the end. Following my first two recommendations, I didn’t go back. Don’t get nervous over-analyzing questions because you expected the test to be hard. If you are taking

the exam, you have the necessary experience. If you have the experience, nothing on the test should stump you.

4) Remember that some of the questions aren't graded. If you get to a question that seems ridiculous either because you don't know the answer, or even because NONE of the answer are right, it's probably one of those questions. Just answer it and move on. You might see some weird stuff on there.

5) Don't get too caught up on the math. Learn the formulas. But on the test, I didn't feel that crunching numbers was necessary. I could determine the correct answers just by looking at the numbers provided.

6) There is no need to memorize the tools, techniques, process, or any of that. Again, you have the experience and that should suffice. Rita's guide reiterates that logically understanding each concept is enough, and I agree wholeheartedly with that assessment.

CONCLUSION

As 26 series Officers, we are encouraged to pursue what seems like an endless number of certifications. I personally feel that every organization I've been a part of up to this point would benefit immensely from the adoption of some of PMI's principals. I learned a lot while studying for this exam that I hope to use in the future, and hope that more of us can do the same to help grow the force and hopefully enhance the 26 community in the process. The test really isn't that hard in comparison to some of the more technical certifications most of us already pursue. It is within the reach of any 26 Officer and I encourage you all to at least give it a shot. I'm happy to answer any questions and can be found on the GAL at chase.j.tucker.mil@mail.mil.

Best of luck!