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As their role changes, **project managers** must acquire new skills—
or risk being left behind.

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a whole new world out there for project managers—and they won't survive with the same old skill set. Bringing projects in on time and within budget just isn't good enough anymore. These days, project managers may be called upon to handle negotiations with vendors, manage team members new to the game and advise company leaders on strategy—all in the course of a day.

That's often quite a leap. Yet the profession has traditionally attracted go-getters eager to cultivate new skills.

"In the past, a project manager could have been a receptionist who was promoted, a technical programmer who took on additional responsibility or someone from the manufacturing floor with seniority," says Crowe Mead, PMP, a partner and practice leader at Ceptara Corp., a management consulting and training firm in Seattle, Washington, USA.

Still, the profession has come a long way in terms of standards and career paths—and the economic environment mandates that project managers take that next step.

NEW MATH

With companies focused on the bottom line like never before, project managers can no longer rely on behind-the-scenes number crunching.

"The biggest objective of a good project manager in this economy is profit-centered project management,"

The New Must-Have Skill?

Sure, you can run a schedule, but how's your blogging?

As more companies look for project managers who can talk strategy, blogging is one good way to build your reputation as a well-connected thought leader, says Crowe Mead, PMP, Ceptara Corp.

"Blogging helps demonstrate the types of horsepower employers are looking for these days—not just that project managers have had success in previous projects, but that they are forward-looking and know what leads to success on future projects," he says.

The most effective blogs deal with "what project managers spend their days doing," Mr. Mead says. "Project managers can blog specifically about project management best practices and will always receive a good readership, but to establish themselves as thought leaders they need to be more innovative and market towards a specific theme. Writing about emerging trends in their industry, new leadership practices, people management or team motivation are strong choices."

There are some taboos, however.

"A blogger would want to stay away from any topic that may cause harm to the brand they are trying to build," Mr. Mead says. "With this type of a blog, that means you're not talking about the date you had on Friday night, how lousy the competition is or who you think should win an upcoming election, unless those topics are in line with your personal brand."

Anything else, he says, belongs in an entirely different blog—written under an assumed name.

Mr. Mead also says project managers should stay on topic with each new blog and publish regularly.

Good blogging goes beyond just publishing a stream of random thoughts online, says Marydee Ojala, a business information and Web search consultant in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.

"You have to budget not money, but time," she says. "Some people plan out their days to write a post daily and it becomes a habit. Others don't have that kind of discipline or they find out they don't have as much to say as they thought they did. Those are the people who run out of steam. You go to their blog and they haven't updated it in a year."

She recommends searching Technorati, Icerocket or Bloglines to find existing blogs that cover subjects of interest. Once you've tallied up a list of favorites, use RSS feeds to skim headlines and stay on top of emerging issues and trends.

Reading others' content may bolster your industry knowledge, but blogging yourself can open doors.

"It's sort of a wisdom of the crowds thing," Ms. Ojala says. "Unlike a printed journal, where you have no idea what anyone thinks about your ideas, blogs are interactive media. They are social. They are a type of conversation."



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To get the best results, project managers often have to dig in and hammer out contracts, oversee vendors and protect cash flow.

“Reduced workforces mean that the project manager is asked to wear many new hats. Contract negotiation is a common request. And if they don’t have the appropriate background and experience, they often end up with a zero-net gain,” Mr. Mead says. “A project manager needs to understand the negotiation process—what makes a project profitable, how to keep the vendor on task for delivering what they’ve promised, how to focus on the company’s ROI with that contract.”

They also need a firm grasp on how money flows into and out of the project—and when.

“Companies are very interested in their cash flow nowadays and they are looking for more precise estimates from project managers about expenditures,” says Thomas P. Stevens, PMP, president of PMAlliance Inc., a project management training and consulting firm in Stone Mountain, Georgia, USA. “In addition to total amount of expenditure, they want to know when the money is going to be spent.”

The concentration on numbers extends to project staffing. When Calvin Lee loses project budget debates with the sales staff, he has learned to get creative.

“Management will usually side with sales because they are the ones bringing

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—Tim Chase, Picture More Ltd., Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex, England

in the money. So we have to find a way to source cheaper resources without jeopardizing quality,” says Mr. Lee, Singapore and Bangkok, Thailand-based consultant for Verztec, a translation services company.

He used Facebook to recruit a student who was a native Malay speaker, for example, to work on a recent project in his former role as the Southeast Asia regional manager at Elanex, another translation company.

Mr. Lee also tries to build a solid relationship with his contractors.

“A project can never be successful if the project manager damages the relationship with the people doing the work,” he says. “They are unseen but very important stakeholders.”

To win the trust of his contractors, he pays attention to their customs and work styles—avoiding calls at certain times of the day, planning for lower productivity during specific seasons and accounting for varying Internet speed.

And in the current business climate, Mr. Lee is upfront about the reasons for rate cuts and urgent deadlines.

“It builds goodwill, and the nice feeling will be really useful when we have a new project and it’s not on standard prices,” he says. “This is a conversation. We are working together.”

TAKING IT IN

Economic woes are prompting some companies to cut back on outsourcing and drawing more heavily from internal resources for project management duties.

“With the economy tightening and profit margins reduced, companies want to reduce the amount that they are paying,” Mr. Stevens says. “They want to start managing projects themselves.”

In some cases, it comes down to legal logistics.

“In the United Kingdom, it’s much more difficult to lay off employees, so you’re more likely to see redistribution of existing staff and elimination of contractors,” Mr. Stevens says.

And there’s inevitably a bit of discomfort when project managers must contend with team members asked either to tackle work that outside vendors previously supplied, or to shift into new jobs to avoid being made redundant. No matter how you slice and dice it, flexibility has become the new necessity.

“The project manager has to be able to adjust their management style based on the makeup of the team,” Mr. Stevens says. “Some managers don’t like getting down in the trenches and working with their team members on the details of what they are doing each day. With a seasoned team, that’s a luxury

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that you can have—you can delegate and count on them to get it done. But with new team members, you have to get down in the trenches.”

VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

This is not the time to be shy. Companies want project managers with the confidence and expertise to advocate for themselves and their ideas. To do that, project managers must be willing to look beyond their traditional purview.

Tim Chase, a recruiter at executive search firm Picture More Ltd., Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex, England, says that their global law firm and financial institution clients are looking for IT project managers with business savvy.

“Not a ‘yes man,’ but someone who can interact with senior members of the business to influence them and help them understand the issues,” he says. “Rather than an executive saying, ‘This is what we want you to do,’

they’re saying, ‘This is what we need to do as a business. How do you think we can improve the process or affect company growth?’ That’s been one of the biggest changes in the last year. Everyone wants to know how to make money or save money.”

No longer viewed merely as technicians, project managers must act as consultants of sorts. The new project manager has to look not just at costs and schedules, Mr. Chase says, but feel comfortable talking strategy.

To tackle the new roles, he says project managers are expected to have more polished presentation and people skills than in the past.

It’s no longer just about killer scheduling and budgeting prowess. Project managers must develop a fluency in discussing not only how their efforts helped the project, but how they helped the company’s strategy—or better yet, the bottom line. PM