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Manage Your “PMP Exam Study” Project

One question I hear often in my work as a project management trainer and consultant is, “What is the best way for me to prepare for the Project Management Professional (PMP) Exam?”

Two main points are key to successfully passing the PMP Exam.

1. Establish an exam preparation strategy tailored for *you*.
2. Execute tactics to maximize your chances of passing the exam.

If you manage your PMP Exam studying as you would a project—analyze the situation and goals, establish a plan, execute that plan—you can succeed. Let’s walk through the processes of analysis and planning.

Analyze

In order to establish a strategy that works for you, recognize that we all learn differently and have different demands on our time. If you don’t have the discipline and/or time to study on your own, take a class or a boot camp. Remember classes and boot camps don’t eliminate work. Classes and boot camps concentrate and force you to work in the boundaries of the class time. The advantage of classes is that you can schedule them just prior to the PMP Exam and leverage the knowledge you have gained in the class while it is front-of-mind.

The disadvantage is that classes often saturate you with so much information so quickly, that you become overwhelmed and doubt your ability to retain the information and to pass the exam. Learning in an intense fashion over a short time period (cramming) rarely results in long term retention. The popular analogy that applies here for a lot of people is “It was like drinking water from a fire hose.” The brain retains information best when it comes in small amounts over long periods of time. If you do take a boot camp, use it as a refresher for knowledge you have been acquiring over a longer period of time.

There are numerous training classes and on-line training courses available, but you have to do your homework on the courses and their vendors before selecting one. PMI has recently come out with new guidelines about advertising claims because of numerous complaints. So do some leg work before choosing a training provider. Talk to a few people who have used their services. If you go with a training company, ask them about the experience and ability of the instructor that will be teaching the course you will

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attend. Large training companies often hire contract instructors and the quality of these instructors may vary widely. Ask how many times they have taught the course and for previous evaluation comments for this instructor.

If you choose to take a class, don't overlook classes offered by your local PMI chapters. Most chapters have a history of success with these initiatives. You can find list of PMI Chapters at this link http://www.pmi.org/info/GMC_ChapterListingUS.asp. Thousands have attained their PMP credential through local PMI chapters where classes are often taught by volunteer chapter members.

Whether you take classes over an extended period or a boot camp, you can prepare for and reinforce formal training with self-study guides. I recommend either of the training guides below.

- PMP Challenge – *J Leroy Ward, Ginger Levin*
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1890367265/qid=1143244072/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/102-7252983-4061724?s=books&v=glance&n=283155
- PMP Exam Prep – *Rita Mulchay*
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1932735003/qid=1143244120/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/102-7252983-4061724?s=books&v=glance&n=283155

There are other guides that may be of equal quality, but I know people who have used these two successfully. I personally used the PMP Challenge. You will be well served if you have the opportunity to examine these guides prior to purchasing one. These guides are often available used from people who have already passed the PMP exam. Make sure the study guide complies with the latest version of the PMBOK® and/or the version that you will be tested on.

Establish a Plan

When establishing your strategy for the exam, consider the following questions:

1. Do I have the money for a private tutor, class or boot camp?
2. Do I have the discipline to study for the exam on my own?
3. Do I work well with study groups and have access to others who want to be in a study group?
4. Do I have a history of success in cramming for tests?

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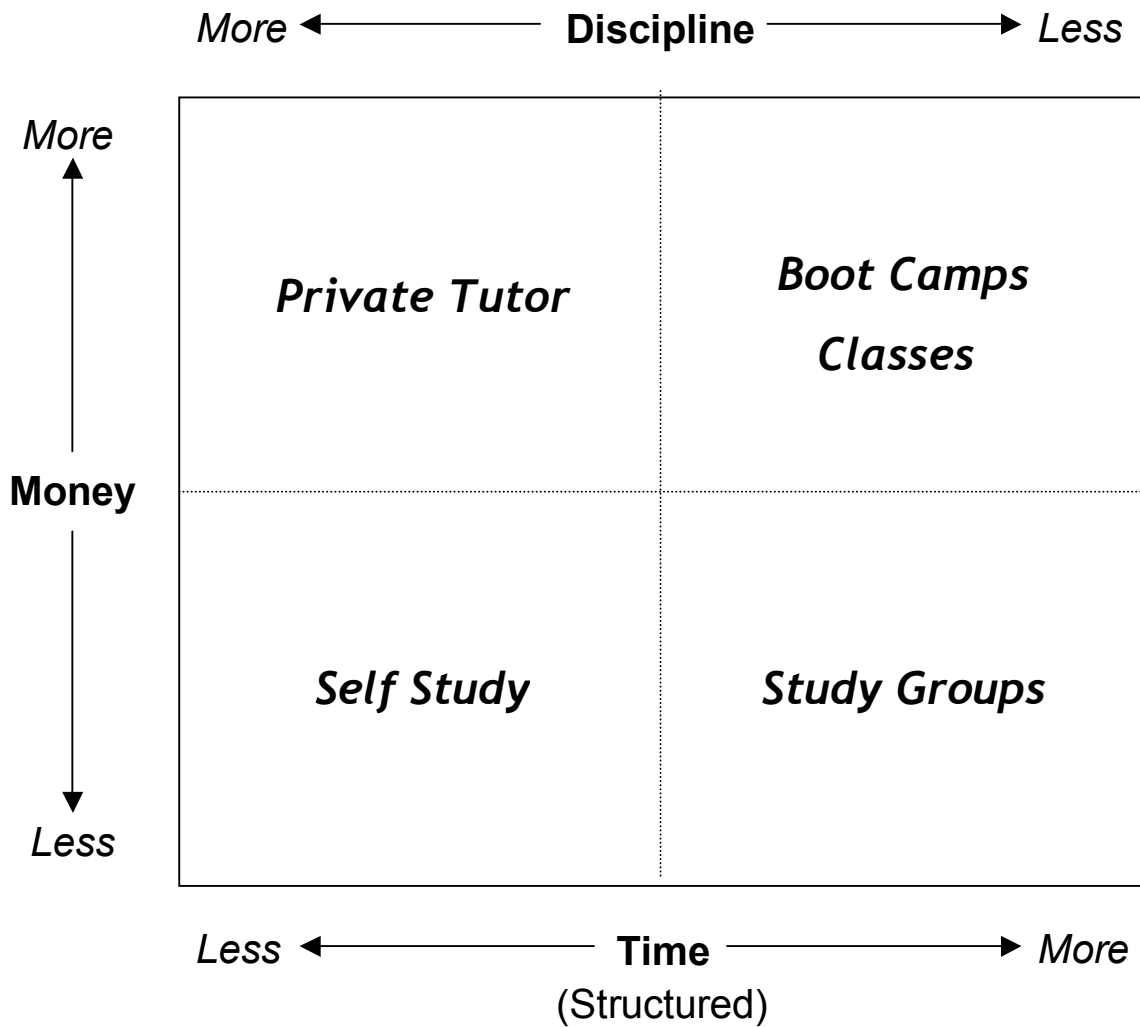


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5. Do I have access to a local PMI Chapter that conducts prep courses?
6. Do I work well in an on-line class learning environment?

PMP Exam Preparation Study Matrix



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How I Prepared

Examples of success can inform your own planning, so I offer my own preparation for the exam as a model. Colleagues who have passed the exam in your local PMP chapter may also offer their experience to help you plan.

Having had my fill of tests during my career, I was resistant to taking the PMP Exam. I have found when it comes to tests, like a lot of things in life, it is better to give than receive. However, since project management is a field I love, the PMP certification was on my to-do list, and I had to prepare. The demands on my time are numerous, so I couldn't commit to being part of a study group, and I didn't want to take a class. I bought a practice exam and a study guide that was "flash card" based. Before I studied anything I took the practice exam to see what I didn't know. I then mapped out a strategy for test preparation, which you see below:

1. **I didn't study the entire PMBOK®** - Since the test is based on different subject areas I made a conscious decision to aggressively study the areas I had a natural affinity for and to not study areas I didn't like (within reason). I believe it is ten times harder to study something you don't like versus something you enjoy or can at least tolerate. There were two of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®) Project Management Knowledge Areas I didn't study at all because my time was more wisely spent studying the areas I was naturally strong in. Since it is a multiple choice test with 4 choices per question with no studying at all I should be able to earn 25% just guessing for the questions in the areas I didn't study.
2. **I didn't even read the entire PMBOK®** - The PMBOK® is an excellent reference and I use it regularly as a reference. It is not a study tool and I did not study it or read it to pass the exam. If there were not dozens of study guides available that are based on the PMBOK®, this would be foolish. But with these guides, I consider it a wise, time saving decision not to read the PMBOK® in preparation for the exam. If I had chosen to study the PMBOK®, I would have taken the time to make note cards for all the key points. I bought a study guide and practice exam that did all of this for me for less than \$100. Calculate the ROI on that.
3. **I didn't set aside time to study** - My family had sacrificed considerably with my absence during pursuit of my graduate degrees. This time, I made a conscious decision not to block out four hours on Saturday or 45 minutes a night to prepare for the exam. Instead I carried around the flash card study guide with me everywhere. Since we live in a "hurry up and wait" society, whenever I had to

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wait during the day I would look at my flash card study guide and “hit” a few questions. I would look at questions while waiting for my son to come out of basketball practice. I would look at questions while waiting at the dentist’s office. I would look at questions while waiting in the drive-thru line while buying my lunch. Drips and drops of the PMBOK® would get dumped into my brain during those unproductive times during the day when I was just waiting. Little did I know then that incremental, or layered, learning is a strategy that ensures long retention and true mastery of information. Once I got comfortable with my performance with flash cards, I took the practice exam again. I then made up my own flash card for every question I missed on the practice exam. When I knew the information on those cards I sat for the exam.

4. **I knew all calculation problems** - You must know all computation problems cold. No excuses here. These are gimmies that anyone can learn.

Tactics to Maximize Your Chances

1. **Know about the exam.** - Make sure you stay abreast of all the rules, regulations and information regarding the exam. Everyone provides information and sometimes opinion on this. But always go to the source and read it for yourself. The PMP certification handbook (http://www.pmi.org/info/PDC_PMPHandbook.pdf) should be the starting point for resolution of exam questions.
2. **Don’t try to make an A** - The exam is a pass/fail proposition. Even though you are graded on a 100 point scale, ultimately you pass or fail. I made a decision not to be an A student when it came to the PMP Exam. I decided that if I made more than 75 on the exam, I would have studied too long and wasted my time. The true measure of a project manager isn’t the grade you made on the exam, it’s how effectively you apply your knowledge. If you know anyone that made more than 90 on the PMP exam give them a hug. They need some love.
3. **Manage exam pressure** – Do not over stress about the exam. Do not add stress by telling everyone when you are going to sit for the exam. This is pressure you don’t need. There is nothing wrong with taking the test in secret and then telling everyone you passed publicly.
4. **Remove all distractions prior to the exam** - If you live in a busy household, stay in a hotel the night before the exam to remove distractions. Studying should have already been done at this point and the purpose here is to ensure a positive frame of mind for the test. Tell your family not to call you unless the house is on

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fire or it's a medical emergency. Consider taking a ½ or full day of vacation before the exam. A calm brain will usually deliver the information you need from it right when you want it.

5. **Take the exam again if necessary** - Failing to pass the exam the first time is not the end of the world. Statistics show that thousands have done so and gone on to pass it later. Many believe as I do that the PMBOK® material and project management itself, for that matter, are not difficult. However, what some consider gobbledygook wording on a number of the questions make choosing the most correct answer challenging. Sometimes taking the exam once to figure out its tricky wording is just part of the preparation for passing it the next time.
6. **Don't be overconfident** - The seasoned project manager is at a disadvantage when it comes to passing the PMP Exam. Since the exam is based on the PMBOK® and the PMBOK® establishes standard terms for project management, most likely experienced project managers will have to un-learn some vernacular to which they have become accustomed. I am aware of many capable experienced project managers who failed the exam. There is often a choice between the answer that seems right and the PMBOK® answer. You only get credit for the PMBOK® answer. Don't be proud. Your goal here is not to be "right" on your own criteria, it's to pass – on the PMBOK® criteria.

There is no one right way to prepare for the PMP Exam. Preparing the way that is best for you based on your discipline, time constraints and learning style will not only maximize your chances of passing the exam, it will also reduce stress in the preparation process. Now, go execute your personal plan.

About the Author:

James T. Brown Ph.D., president of SEBA™ Solutions Inc., a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute, has provided training and consulting services for dozens of companies nationally and internationally. A recognized authority in project management, he is a frequently invited speaker on project management areas of interest. He is a member of the Project Management Institute and the National Speakers Association. He is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE) and a certified Project Management Professional (PMP). To learn more about James visit www.sebasolutions.com. You can contact James directly at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com.

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