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Project managers (PMs) need several strong skills to be successful. PMs work in various industries – health care, construction, and engineering – to name a few. PMs hold the ultimate responsibility for assuring project completion is timely and on budget. A PM leads the project by creating project plans, managing resources on the team, managing tasks, setting priorities and communicating with clients, vendors, stakeholders, management and the project team. PMs must have strong organizational skills to create a project plan, manage a project schedule, and know what each resource is responsible for and the status, at any given time. The project plan is a tool to organize the project time line, list tasks and assigned resources. The PM may choose to organize reoccurring meetings with team members to discuss status and barriers to the project. The PM's schedule is busy; she constantly juggles emails, phone calls and meetings alongside maintenance of the project plan. PMs should convey balance. Without strong organization skills, projects will appear chaotic. Without a solid line of communication from the PM to the team, clients, vendors and stakeholders, the project will fail. PMs must be adept to pulling their team together to communicate with one another. As the primary point of contact on the project, the PM must provide status updates to all involved. He must be able to communicate the project needs to the team, updates to the stakeholders and expectations to the client. This communication is usually done through meetings and reports. As a leader, PMs guide their team, make decisions, work well under pressure and need limited supervision. Project success is dependent on completion of tasks by those other than the PM. Therefore, the PM must make sure that project team members are completing their tasks timely, correctly and within budget. Her success is hinged on asking others to complete their jobs. The PM must have leadership skills to manage her team members and guide the prioritization of the project's tasks. The ability to troubleshoot and resolve conflict is an intangible skill that often comes with years of experience. A seasoned PM can spot conflict early and work towards a resolution before it becomes an escalated issue or puts the project at risk. PMs use solid judgment to make decisions to avoid issues. Whether the issue is interpersonal between team members, budgetary, delays in meeting targets or beyond their control, they must assess each issue carefully to troubleshoot the source. Adept PMs think through solutions before escalating issues to stakeholders, management and clients. Specialists in an efficient organization operate like cogs in a wheel, all doing their bit to churn out a finished product or service. There are some monumental tasks, however, outside a company's routine operations that invite their own kind of expert: the project manager.What is a project manager?A project manager is the person who coordinates a team to complete a goal in a given time period. Such projects may be complicated and long term, outside of an organization's routine, or involve the coordination of multiple teams.If this sounds to you like a regular old boss, note that while a boss has hiring, firing and mentoring capacities, a project manager has no such authority. The key difference, however, is that a project manager is only short term."The relationship is temporary because the project, by definition, ends," said Alan Zucker, founding principal of Project Management Essentials. While ordinary bosses oversee ongoing operations or manufacturing, a project manager's task is finite.Editor's note: Looking for the right project management solution for your business? Fill out the below questionnaire to have our vendor partners contact you about your needs.'Complicated and high risk'In many industries, project managers have become just as much a necessity as IT support or bookkeeping – especially if giant projects are their bread and butter."Companies that can't live without at least one great project manager are the ones with more complicated, high-risk projects," said Laura Stringer, principal at Ninth Fourth. "Think manufacturing, construction, technology, experience."Indeed, companies such as Google – where projects like "build driverless car" are the definition of complicated and high risk – may have hundreds of project managers on their payroll.Demand for project managers is increasing. According to the Project Management Institute, the five industries with the highest projected growth are construction, management and professional services, manufacturing, finance and insurance, information services and publishing, and manufacturing.Project management for small businessUnlike Google, it's unlikely that SMBs are going to have enough projects to justify an in-house project manager. Instead, many businesses bring in independent contractors, which is where the following five steps for better project management will come in handy.Project management tipsThe project management process should not be more daunting than the project itself. Luckily, for anyone with a goal that needs tackling, whether you've decided on hiring a contractor or not, project management experts have some important steps to keep in mind.1. Look for domain experience.When considering a freelance project manager, don't expect a specialist in your field. "Project managers are generalists; they often do not have detailed technical skills," Zucker said. Instead, the project manager's job is to draw upon and coordinate with the specialists. What employers can do is consider project managers not for their expertise, but for their domain experience. "Domain" refers to the areas they've managed, whether it's search engine optimization or skyscraper construction. The project manager may still not hold the answers – for that, you'll have to hire a consultant – but they will know the steps in the process. "Good project managers know the limitations of their technical knowledge and how to ask the right questions," Zucker said. "The more domain experience the project manager has, the better they are able to know which questions to ask." 2. Prioritize the soft skills.Note, however, that domain knowledge is still secondary. What the project manager is really there for is their leadership ability. "The soft skills are far more important," Stringer said. "The project manager must be able to coax the best performance out of every team member. They may need to function as a coach, helping everyone work together. They will need to have some tough conversations, both with team members and stakeholders. That all takes soft skills." With this specific skill balance, more and more project managers are choosing to get certification, though the job does not technically require it. Its value is debatable among those in the field. "I've been certified for about six years and renew every time, but only for the credential's perceived value," said Casey Raiford, director of R&D at Plex Solutions. "I've never actually used a specific thing I learned … the certification's real value, and it's nontrivial, is understanding how to create and implement [a] framework for actioning projects." When contracting a project manager, however, certification doesn't always mean high performance, according to Stringer. 3. Create a project charter.Hopefully, you already know why you're undertaking a project. Still, it's good to lay out your goals in coordination with the project manager. This is often referred to as the project charter. A charter may not always be formally written up, Zucker said, but clients and project managers should at least answer the following questions: Why are we executing this?What are our goals?What are our high-level objectives?What is our definition of "done"? There are two advantages to including the project manager in this process. For one thing, they'll have a better idea of what kind of expectations are realistic. More importantly, however, both parties have the same definition of success. "A stakeholder might say, 'We want to increase traffic to our website,' but they might really want to increase conversions or drive traffic to an app instead," Stringer said. "It's important to get to the heart of why we're doing this project, in order to understand what the goals ought to be." 4. Set deliverables.Once goals are outlined in the project charter, specific metrics must be set to track progress. In project management, these metrics are referred to as deliverables, or the quantifiable goods or services to be completed. This may align exactly with the goal (e.g., "build the house"), or it may be a tangible milestone toward completing a goal. Either way, these must be settled in advance, but especially in the latter case where there are more variables to consider. "Project managers should get as much agreement as possible upfront about what the deliverables will be and when they'll be complete," Stringer said. "Communication is so incredibly important throughout the entire project, and it starts right from the beginning." 5. Evaluate project performance.When a goal is completed, Stringer said it can be easy to skip this final step."Projects just get done, and everyone moves on to the next one, maybe with a cursory evaluation a few months later," she said.For any chance of future improvement, however, evaluation is vital. This can be broken up into two stages. The first is more meta – how did the project itself go? What worked and what didn't? These analyses are helpful for not just the project manager but the client as well, especially if they're going to be taking on anything similar in the future.The next evaluation is a review of the deliverables."You're looking to see how the deliverables moved the needle," Stringer said. "Whether the goal of the project was increased customer satisfaction, shortened production times in a factory, or bringing a hot new product to the market, you'll be measuring how much something has changed."For that reason, the second evaluation may be weeks or even months later, which is why it can be easy to forget this step. But don't – you'll want to know if the whole project was worth it.

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