

Project Management Personality & Skill Types

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Project Managers have wonderful tools, many from Project Management Institute, to review and evaluate their abilities and progress:

- The Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge provides a classification system for the knowledge of the profession
- Project Management Experience and Knowledge Self-Assessment Manual provides a self-test to quantify experience and knowledge levels
- Books and articles on specific tools and techniques, including Earned Value, Critical Chain, Risk Management, and many others
- General textbooks on Project Management, providing an overview of all critical techniques and specific training in popular techniques
- The Project Management Professional (PMP®) exam and certification, to clearly identify certified members of the profession

These tools are wonderful for someone who belongs to the profession and who wants to increase his or her skills, or document his or her credentials. These tools neglect two important groups, though:

- The potential Project Manager
- The experienced Project Manager, having second thoughts about the profession

Their focus is not external; they are not concerned with credentials and specialized skills. Their focus is internal; they are concerned with the nature of the profession. They are asking how it matches their own skills and interests.

Take a look at standard job-hunting and personality-assessment tools. There are literally hundreds of systems and techniques. Two of the most popular are Richard Bolles' hierarchy of skills, popularized in What Color Is My Parachute?, and the personality profiles of Meyer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®). Neither tool provides a quick and easy answer. Both, however, provide clues and guidance when answering questions like:

- What basic skills do I lack, and will they interfere with my work?
- What non-Project-Management experiences will help a person be a good Project Manager?
- What are my strongest skills, and will I exercise them daily?
- If I become a Project Manager, what style of management would I tend towards?
- What organizations will best reflect my own values and complement my personality? Where will I "fit in"?
- Why are certain parts of the job so difficult for me?
- How can I grow into the job? What training or experiences will help?

These difficult questions are never easy to answer. For anyone reflecting on their own career or acting as a mentor, the tools can be a first step, sparking creative ideas, constructive conversation, and concrete plans.

Skills Assessments

A skill assessment is one of the best places to start, when matching a person to the Project Management career. For this paper the term "skill" means basic skills that transfer between jobs. "Skill" excludes domain-specific skills and knowledge. Writing a project charter, identifying relationships in a network diagram, and writing a status report are all critical to the Project Manager job, but they are specific to the job. Imagine a non-Project Manager describing their skills and experience, and the critical skills that would apply to Project Management.

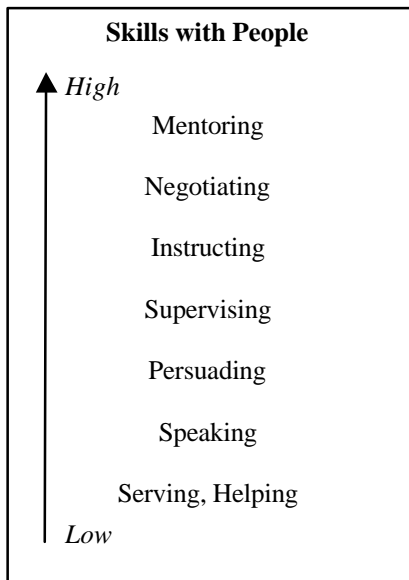
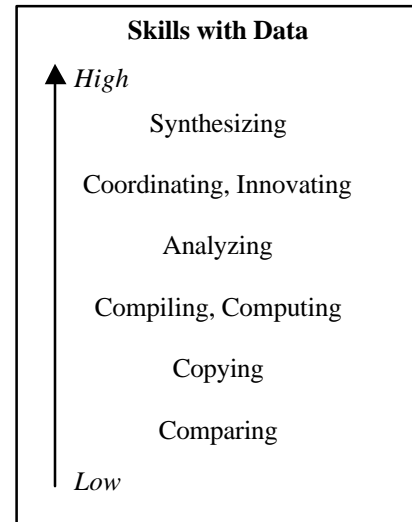
Richard Bolles in What Color is Your Parachute? puts skills into three categories: skills with data, people, and things. Within these three categories, he arranges the skills into a hierarchy. Focus on the top-most

skills when using the hierarchy; if someone can claim skills at a certain level, he or she has all the skills below it as well. (Bolles 2002, 160-165)

Skills with Data

Data is the life-blood of the Project Manager. Every day, the Project Manager must gather and analyze data about project deliverables and project activities. “Analyzing” is a minimum skill level for the aspiring Project Manager. Often the job also calls for coordinating multiple sources of data and coming up with innovative approaches to problems. Synthesizing data, combining multiple pieces of information into a consolidated, single theory or explanation is also critical to the job.

The Project Manager operates at the “analyzing” level on a daily basis, and a “synthesizing” level at key decision points throughout the project. Smaller projects might allow the PM to operate at the “analyzing” level for a long period of time, but large, complex project will consistently need “synthesis” to be successful. High-level skills with data are a definite indicator of Project Management success.



Skills with People

The only thing more important to the Project Manager than data is people. People skills should be at the highest level for any Project Manager. The job description typically focuses on the “supervising” level of skills; most of us count the number of people we manage when describing our jobs. “Supervising” is not the highest level skill, though. Instructing, negotiating, and mentoring are more difficult skills to master. The ideal Project Manager enjoys the negotiation problems that most people hate. Many successful PMs actually enjoy haggling on the price of a car, for instance, and relish the opportunity to try to get better contract terms from a vendor. Being a negotiator is an essential job requirement. (Adams, 79)

It is possible for a Project Manager to avoid mentoring. Some matrix organizations have department managers responsible for career development and advice, leaving the PM in charge of only project issues. To build a solid project team, though, the Project Manager should be able to act as mentor to the team members.

Effective team building also requires the Project Manager to diffuse difficult personnel conflicts and to identify skills development needs within the team. These activities require “negotiating” and “mentoring” skills.

The most critical skill of all for a project manager is communication; according to one source, Project Managers spend 90% of their time communicating. (Mulcahy, 121) It appears as a low-level people skill as “speaking”. Remember that all high-level skills depend upon the ones below them. Persuading, Supervising, Negotiating, and Mentoring all depend upon strong communication skills. A strong Project Manager will have experience communicating in a variety of ways, including speaking, writing, one-on-one, in large groups, formally and informally. Listening skills are also implicit in the higher-level people skills. Success requires not just expressing ideas, but hearing and reading ideas, then reflecting them back to many audiences. “Communication” does not appear directly in the hierarchy, but it is implicit in all the people skills.

Skills with Things

Skills with things are the least important to the Project Manager. Project success does not usually rely upon a PM operating, handling, tending, or setting up a machine or tool. Some people do believe that tools can improve project performance. There are a huge number of tools on the market for Project Management. The best tools, though, are fundamentally about data and people: communication, analysis, synthesizing complex data, persuading decision-makers, and defending project objectives (negotiation). Tools help as much as they support data and people skills. Tools that get in the way of analysis or communication are doomed to fail.

Some PMs are incredibly sophisticated tool-users, and skills with things are fundamental to their management style. These PMs typically have strong people and data skills as well, using the tools to create impressive analysis of data that persuades people to act.

Realize that a PM can be very successful, even if he or she has poor use of tools. PMs, particularly experienced PMs, often resist project-management software, templates, and guidelines. Many older PMs do whatever is necessary to avoid creating an official plan using the approved tool, and yet their projects are well managed and on-time. Strong skills with things and tools are not a prerequisite for success.

In some environments, skills with things will be critical, including

- formal organizations which require the use of complex tools
- projects that create or rely upon machinery and material

The need for industry-specific skills and capabilities in a PM cannot be understated.

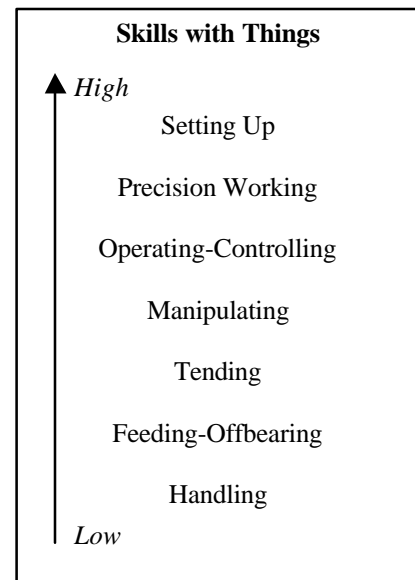
Putting Skills Hierarchies to Use

Put these lists to work. Collect stories about what the person enjoyed doing in his or her past and about accomplishments that make the person feel proud. Focus on concrete results, and what the person did to achieve these results. Jot down key words, especially ones they repeat. Write out the stories and underline the verbs. (Bolles 2002, 166-175)

All action verbs in some way map to one of the words on the three hierarchies. Find the highest skill claimed on each list. Those are probably the skills that the person is most comfortable using. Try probing for stories using higher-level skills, if desired. Often that probing will lead the person to reveal strong dislikes of the higher-level skills. Focus on the high skills; there is no need to check off all the skills. Ability in the “high” skills require ability in the “low” ones.

Armed with this information, guide the person towards the general skills that they will need to excel as a Project Manager. The skills hierarchy is a list of transferable skills, so the person can gain these skills from activities in almost any job. Learning the new skills will add to the person’s stories and accomplishments. These accomplishments will help get the person their first PM job. Complete disinterest in learning critical skills will help people understand why a PM job might not be for them.

A Project Manager can use these stories to review his or her own strengths and weaknesses. It is possible for someone to operate for years with a weak spot, completely blind to its consequences. Often the person develops other skills, ineffectively trying to overcome the problem. For instance, a poor negotiator (people skill) might create more and more sophisticated analysis and recommendations (data), and never understand why the other side does not agree to his or her recommendations. Sometimes and exercise like this one can help people start to pursue more effective strategies. A poor negotiator can partner with a strong negotiator in the future or develop his or her negotiating skills through books and classes. Data skills cannot solve all negotiation problems.



Personality Assessments

This discussion will focus on the Meyer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), but there are many, many types of personality tests. MBTI is popular among management coaches today, but the analysis below can be translated to match the terminology of almost any personality test, including The Forté Institute, The Kingdonality Test, or the Enneagram. When exploring personality tests, take several tests. Use the results that speak to you. None of this information is infallible. It is a tool to stimulate thinking, not a test that you pass or fail.

Four Dimensions of MBTI

The MBTI system divides personalities into sixteen different types. There are four dimensions, each with two choices. The choices are as follows:

- Extroverted (E) vs. Introverted (I)
- Intuition (N) vs. Sensing (S)
- Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F)
- Perceiving (P) vs. Judging (J)

Extroverts are focused on external world, including people and things. Introverts are inwardly focused, interested in ideals and symbols. Extroverts and Introverts are opposites.

Intuition is unconscious perceiving. It includes the recognition of patterns and abstract ideas, as well as visionary thoughts. Sensing is perceiving with the five senses. Sensing focuses on the real world. Intuition and Sensing are opposites.

Thinking is making decisions based on facts and ideas, like a judge. Feeling is making decisions based upon a personal point of view. Thinking and Feeling are opposites.

Perceiving is emphasizing the perceptive side of one's personality externally, either Intuition or Sensing. Judging is emphasizing the judging side of one's personality externally (Thinking or Feeling). (TypeLogic 2002)

Different authors have given different names to each of the sixteen types. For instance, I tested myself to be an Introverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judging (ISFJ) person. According to Keirsey, that is a "Protector" personality type. (Keirsey 2000) Indeed, before taking the test, I knew that one of the main reasons I enjoy management is the opportunity to take care of people, to protect them from management mistakes, to guide the project away from risks, and to keep the people's livelihood safe. My greatest work-related crisis was triggered when I could no longer take care of one of my employees. MBTI resonated with my life experiences.

Each dimension highlights just the **dominant** personality trait for a person. An Extrovert is still capable of Introverted thought. Personality exists on a continuum, and indeed most personality tests provide a rating to judge where each person falls on the scale.

Extroverted (E) vs. Introverted (I)

It is natural to see Project Managers as Extroverts, because they communicate constantly. To declare that only Extroverts belong in Project Management is to deny a critical part of the profession. Project Managers must be able to communicate many ways to many people. Project Managers also spend hours each day alone, scanning reports, holding projects up against an ideal. The managers that are working with people from nine to five every day are typically in the office early or out of the office late, doing their solitary work off-hours or on weekends.

Saying that PMs are all Introverts is patently ridiculous. PMs spend a huge amount of times speaking to groups, speaking to individuals, mentoring people, resolving disputes, and so on. The job requires external focus, on both people and things.

Either an Introvert or an Extrovert can do the job successfully, so long as they can also act opposite to their dominant type. An extreme Extrovert, with no interest in ideals and solitary work, will eventually fail in

the job. An extreme Introvert, with no interest in seeing their ideas take shape in the real world, will also fail. The PM job requires bridging the abstract world of one person's mind and the real world of society. It is about making ideas real.

One personality test showed that by nature I am an Introvert. On a scale of 0 (low) to 36 (high), I scored an 11. The test also had a measure of how I was currently adapting to that environment. By that measure, I was a 2 on the **Extroversion** side of the scale. I suspect that most PMs act out of their type, at least part of the time. During planning, the Extrovert is forced to spend more time alone. During team building and implementation, the Introvert is forced to get out in front of people, to get results. By that measure, PMs whose personalities are close to the center, balanced between extroversion and introversion, would be best suited to the job.

Intuition (N) vs. Sensing (S)

Intuition and Sensing can both serve a Project Manager well. I suspect that most PMs are Sensing dominant. Concrete, observable information is critical. Many modern management techniques favor the sensing personality type, including “pay for performance,” “objective, concrete goals,” and “behavior-based evaluations”. All these methods focus on concrete, observable outcomes, and explicitly exclude intuitive judgement. Intuition has gotten a bad reputation, because of its association with race-based and gender-based decision making. “Feeling uncomfortable” with a candidate or “just liking” one candidate over another can be veiled discrimination. For social and legal reasons, it is important that HR decisions carry the objective, observable evidence that a Sensing personality favors.

PMs, particularly experienced PMs, develop a sixth-sense about their projects. They know when the project has a problem, and they have an uncanny ability to ask the right questions to uncover that problem. Intuitive people look for patterns and have a vision of abstract ideals. PMs must be capable of abstract thought and defending a vision. Even the data-based, Sensing manager will look for patterns in their project data to form opinions about the likelihood of project success and failure.

Project Managers can tolerate extremes in the personality dimension of Intuition vs. Sensing. They must be able to operate somewhat on both sides of the line, but could favor either side and still be successful. Perhaps this personality dimension is a source of some of the real diversity in style among different managers. At a senior level, it is not uncommon to see heated discussions, with one manager demanding more facts, and another insisting that he or she KNOWS everything will work out fine. Sometimes these disagreements may be fact-based; one manager feels evidence is shaky, while another believes the existing evidence. When the discussion is emotionally intense, though, it is probable that a sensing personality simply cannot accept the conclusions of the intuitive personality. Personality differences can be an enormous source of conflict, particularly when neither party understands the difference. When two managers have a different “style”, think about this personality dimension; it may help to explain their conflicts.

Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F)

A Project Manager can thrive with either a focus on Thinking or on Feeling. This personality dimension will perhaps have the greatest impact upon selecting a positive work environment for the manager. An organization that strives for objective, fact-based decisions from managers will favor a Thinking manager. An organization that looks for managers to inject compassion into project decisions will favor a Feeling manager.

Unfortunately, most organizations blend these two extremes in their stated policies. Most companies do not put them right next to each other, but the conflict is there. To find the conflicts, combine policies for HR, performance reviews, and corporate goals:

- “We stand for objective, fact-based analysis with sensitivity to the concerns of all stakeholders”
- “Developing our respected employees while achieving above-market returns”

By working at a place, it is possible to find out what is really the top priority: fact-based or sensitive to concerns; developing employees, or returns. Some companies do an admirable job of balancing both

needs, but ultimately one will come first. Thinking and Feeling personalities can be happy in either type of environment, but they are more likely to thrive in a corporate culture that matches their personality.

It is important to note that a Thinking personality can have extreme compassion, and may be more sensitive to people's feelings than a Feeling personality. Personal values come into play. The key question in the personality type is what their primary, default reaction is: objective or personal. Given the large number of people involved in most projects, a Thinking personality who is sensitive to emotional needs of stakeholders is probably preferable to a Feeling personality. The Feeling personality is more likely to weight subjective elements in the decision. He or she may have a difficult time taking into account the needs of all stakeholders. A Thinking personality who makes decisions with little consideration for subjective concerns, based upon simple right and wrong, can be very destructive on a project. To negotiate is to understand subjective concerns; objective reality is never enough.

Like Sensing and Intuition, the difference of Thinking and Feeling is one of management style. The most successful managers will combine elements of both, but can be successful with either type of dominant personality. Thinking and Feeling matters desperately when it comes to issues of job fit, though. One element of my "Protector" personality type is a dominant Feeling personality type. I know to avoid working in a company that puts results before people, or an environment with constant, emotional, bad news, like a downsizing company. By contrast, I thrive in an environment where employee development is a top priority. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses helps with job choices.

Perceiving (P) vs. Judging (J)

The natural tendency for most Project Managers is the Judging personality type. Given the constant need for decisions that come with the job, Judging personalities are naturally drawn to it. The job is complex, though, and some element of Perceiving, or data gathering, is necessary for success.

An ability to operate in both spheres is necessary. The Perceiving manager becomes paralyzed if he or she must constantly gather more information. At some point he or she must decide and act. The Judging manager meets failure if he or she cannot take the time to gather required information, making decisions too quickly and with too little information. Between those two extremes, a manager can be successful. The Perceiving manager can gather information up to a point, and then make a judgement. The Judging manager can gather required information before following his or her natural tendency to decide.

Personality differences along the Perceiving and Judging dimension can amplify conflicts between Intuitive and Sensing types. It is difficult enough if one person intuits the answer while the second is focused on concrete evidence. If one tends to make quick decisions, while the other prefers to collect more data, the conflict between them grows quickly.

Introverts may have a complex relationship with this personality trait. The personality scale measures the EXTERNAL traits of the individual. The Introvert may have an INTERNAL tendency that is opposite. For instance, an Introverted Judging person might act as a Judging person, but prefer Perceiving for internal issues. Details of this phenomenon are outside the scope of this article.

Personality Types and Project Management

Put each of the four dimensions of personality together, and you get a four-letter summary, the MBTI code. Mine is ISFJ, the Protector. It would be wonderful to identify the ideal MBTI for a Project Manager, providing us with a scientific method to guide people to or away from the profession. I believe that there is no such ideal code; as a discipline, we should welcome a diversity of personalities and the diverse contributions that we each provide.

A useful area of study, however, is to see how Project Managers differ from the general population. This information would help potential Project Managers know whether or not they are in any of the dominant personality types. Further, this type of study could help get the profession listed as a recommended profession for certain personality types. Unfortunately, no such studies exist at this time.

Although there are no articles relating MBTI types to Project Management, there is an article that relates the scale to leadership (Keirsey 1998). David Keirsey relates the personality types of world leaders, including Churchill, Ghandi, Washington, and Lincoln. He reconstructs their personality types, and finds that they were all quite different. No two had the same MBTI code. He explains their success as follows, "It takes a certain kind of temperament to achieve certain ends." Leadership is not a personality trait. Each leader had certain qualities that he or she capitalized on, and which allowed him or her to achieve historical greatness.

Taking a personality test will not show who should or should not be a Project Manager. Armed with the test results, however, a person may have greater insights, including

- What elements of the profession are likely to come naturally
- What elements of the profession will be challenging
- What style of management will be easy or difficult
- What work situations are likely to be completely unacceptable

Putting It All Together

There is no fail-safe method to pre-select the ultimate Project Manager. If there were, no one would call it the "accidental profession". The typical Project Manager has held a number of titles before becoming a Project Manager, gaining experience in an industry before becoming a manager. Oftentimes people in Information Systems go from being a manager back to being a programmer, analyst, or some other senior specialist. Neither skills nor personality assessments will ever make the career an easy one to enter or leave.

A skill or personality assessment can spark a constructive discussion. An experienced Project Manager can use the tools to figure out strengths and weaknesses, and come to an informed decision about whether the job still meets his or her needs. A potential Project Manager can use the tools to identify areas requiring growth, to think about whether the job will use his or her best skills, and to figure out aspects of the job that will be easy and difficult. The results can help a potential Project Manager to explain past experiences in a job interview, showing how they demonstrate critical skills.

A candid skill assessment can identify basic skills, and identify areas for growth. The assessment translates job skills into human-resources-friendly terms. A training consultant or coach can review the list and recommend courses or assignments that will help build up specific skills. "Soft skills" are so important for our profession, yet courses in communication and negotiation struggle for enrollment while technical courses immediately fill up. After doing a self-assessment, many Project Managers may realize that they need a course in communications more than one in earned value.

Personality assessments provide fewer concrete results, but they are even more important, particularly for experienced Project Managers. They answer questions about why we prefer a certain management style, why we are comfortable with certain people, and why certain situations have a dramatic effect on our happiness. Expecting personality uniformity is unreasonable, even within a specialized profession like our own. Other professions, including software professionals, have studied the distribution of personality types within their professions, with interesting results. For instance, about 50% of the general population is Thinking and 50% Feeling, but over 80% of software developers are Thinking. (McConnell 1999, 24-26) Having that sort of personality profile for a Project Manager would be useful both to understand the profession better and to explain the profession to a wider audience. Perhaps personality profiles of Project Managers vary by industry. The payback from studies in this area is potentially great, and the cost of administering the tests to get useful data is low, as low as US\$20 per person.

The next time you are called upon to act as a mentor or the next time that someone offers to provide career guidance to you, try one of the exercises suggested here. You may find some surprises. Like the ancient Greek oracle, they will not give you the simple, clear guidance that you might wish for. They will stimulate your thinking, though, and over time you will probably find that they contain more wisdom than you originally believed.

Please share your experiences, good or bad, with me at alexbrown@alexbrown.com. I will share the best stories at <http://www.alexbrown.com/>.

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