

Joseph F. Paschall, PMP® , PgMPSM
Senior Program Manager
Northrop Grumman Corporation's
3001 International



Congratulations to Joe Paschall – on earning the challenging Program Management Professional (PgMP) credential!

This interview was requested to provide additional details and insights for PMI-NAC members who may now be increasingly interested in pursuing this credential. As the chapter leader of the recently formed Project Management Office Local Interest Group (LIG), Joe also will discuss the startup of this PMI-NAC LIG and what chapter members can expect if they want to get involved with the new LIG.

Joe Paschall was interviewed for the PMI-NAC Newsletter by Don Ross, PMP

To assist with scheduling needs of your newsletter editor – this May 2009 issue provides part one of our interview with Joe Paschall. Part two will follow in the June 2009 issue.

Joe Paschall is a Senior Program Manager with Northrop Grumman's 3001 International, which provides geospatial data production and analysis, including airborne imaging, surveying, mapping and geographic information systems for domestic and international government intelligence, defense and civilian customers. The 300-person company was acquired by Northrop Grumman in October 2008.

Visit <http://www.3001inc.com/GeoHome/news.asp> for more about 3001 International.

PMI-NAC: *First and foremost – congratulations on earning the Program Management Professional (PgMP) credential! Please tell us a little about the reasons that led you to pursue the PgMP.*

Paschall: Thanks Don. Ironically, and unlike most PgMPs, I have had less than one year of experience with PMI and all of their certifications. My journey to PgMP was relatively quick considering my lack of previous involvement with PMI. However, this came at the end of my 20-year career in the Marine Corps, so I had the advantage of that experience.

Toward the last few years of my military career, I began preparing myself for the transition. I had the academic credentials of an MBA and the requisite management experience, so I felt that I had prepared myself well enough for the transition.

As I began the interview process it became obvious that a lot of interviewers I talked with were asking about a PMP certification. It took me by surprise because I had assumed that having an MBA and 20 years of management experience spoke for itself. I thought, certainly I was well prepared for *anything*.

However, I thought I better look further into the PMP since the lack of it seemed to represent a potential flaw in my resume, at least in the perception of some interviewers. Upon doing a little research with PMI, I discovered I already had the requisite experience and training – although in some ways it was really quite different as well. I was not in the acquisitions community of the military; and if you are not in that community – then you are typically in more of a functional organizational role versus a matrixed or projectized type of organization.

From my 20 years of military experience, although I had experience at higher levels of management, not all of it was in the direct management of projects or programs. I had to reach back within my experience to look at all of the things I managed that were actually called projects, or met the PMI definition of what constitutes a project.

Looking back over the past decade of military experience, it was not difficult to come up with the three years of experience needed for the PMP exam application. After being authorized to test, I got one study guide and prepared about 90 days for the PMP and passed the exam.

That same month, I started my new career here in Huntsville, joining the PMI-NAC Chapter as a part of that. So I earned the PMP before really becoming enmeshed in the civilian project management community. My transition also happened to coincide with my company having set new objectives to increase certifications for our project managers. Because I had recently gone through the certification process, I was asked to lead that certification program internal to my company.

Part of that goal included my obtaining the PgMP. I was aware that there were so few PgMPs, and thought "This is going to be a long road." Substantiating the three years of program management experience was a much more difficult task because program-level experience is harder to come by in a functional organization.

However, I found enough program experience to apply, and after successful completion of an audit, my application was accepted by PMI. Again at the end of 120 days of focused preparation with a couple of highly recommended study guides, I was fortunate to pass the PgMP Exam. This is probably a drastically different journey to PgMP certification than that experienced by most of my fellow PgMPs who already bring a wealth of civilian program management experience to the application process.

PMI-NAC: *From your standpoint – what is the value of earning the PgMP?*

Paschall: There are a number of different levels that I find applicable from my perspective.

On the intangible level – personally – I've always been goal-oriented. Once I obtain a goal, my natural tendency is to at least weigh the feasibility of obtaining the next goal.

Thus, once the PMP was obtained, naturally the PgMP was next, which may be an intangible thing – but I appreciate the challenge of pursuing a goal, and the satisfaction in obtaining it.

More tangible from my perspective is that the PgMP helped facilitate my transition from the military. I came from a functional organization with program and project management experience, but now find myself working in a totally projectized civilian environment. The process of obtaining the PMP and the PgMP helped immerse me in a new business and management language. For example, some of the processes we use are similar to what are used in the military but are described with different terminology. Learning this new language has helped to facilitate my transition. I find that, even though my background of the past 20 years has been different, I can communicate with clients and teammates using a standard terminology. That goes along with communicating and interacting with other PMPs as well.

The certifications have been very helpful in easing my transition to this new phase in my career. The PgMP also brings tangible value to the company. Anything that strengthens the individual resume also strengthens the value of new proposals and new business efforts, which bring value to the company.

Because it is so new, it's really hard to put a distinct tangible value on the PgMP. At this point in time, the PgMP credential is so rare [*editor's note: Joe validated he was about number 215-220 in the world to have earned the PgMP*] that there are not a lot of RFPs and RFQs that are specifically calling for the PgMP credential as a discriminator. There are so few PgMPs right now – and it also will take time for a new credential to become identified and plugged into the planning and evaluation process in government procurement organizations.

The passage of time will help define the long-term value of the PgMP credential. One could and should assume that it will become more marketable than the PMP. Therefore, it will bring more value to the company. However, in the few proposals I have recently seen that have mentioned the PgMP, it is listed as “PMP/PgMP” as if the two were similar. Of course they are drastically different, but only the passage of time can provide the industry familiarity required for a more accurate awareness of this now-rare certification.

Overall, I think the jury is still out on the long-term financial and career value of the PgMP credential. However, I would like to hope we will see it grow in value as the number of PgMPs increases over time. Uniqueness is a perfect example of a strength that, when taken to an extreme, becomes a weakness.

PMI-NAC: *Can you describe your approach to preparing for the PgMP?*

Paschall: I used a self-study approach in preparation for both the PMP and PgMP exams. Each individual has to chart his own path according to individual strengths and weaknesses. I have a busy schedule with a wife and young family and some work-related travel as well, so I find that self-study works best for me personally.

For the PMP as well as PgMP, I carried those study guides everywhere I went like a ball and chain. When I was on a plane – that's all I read. When I was in a hotel room at night – that's all I read. I took my pre-exams in hotel rooms while on travel.

When I was in preparation for these exams, all of my travel was study time. There was no pleasure reading, and no television. That is the approach that works best for me because it enabled me to focus on study without taking away from my family time. I also find that the “immersion” approach to crashing hard for a few months works best for my retention.

Conversely, to saddle myself to attend a boot camp fulltime for a week would have been much more difficult to pull off. It was never really a function of my choosing to go without attending a boot camp or prep course – self-study was the only thing that really fits within my life style.

I did the best I could with the PgMP in reaching out to Allen Green in PMI-NAC because he was the one guy I knew in the state of Alabama to have earned the PgMP credential. There really is not much on the PgMP you can reach out for help on either. There are a few forums online. “PM Hub” forums are very useful.

Internationally, there are a number of PMs pursuing the PgMP that share their insights on what it takes to succeed through these on-line forums. Although ethics precludes anyone from discussing the actual exam, trading notes with others on recommended study guides and study schedules, was very helpful for me. I called on Allen when I had two weeks left before the exam and had run through everything I could think of, done everything that everyone had said you could do, and taken all the exams a million times it seems. I said, “Allen, what else can I do?” Allen said it was pretty simple: “Well, just read the Standard for Program Management 10 more times.” And I realized that his logic was flawless here.

It comes down to how much of the Standard for Program Management, which is a relatively small document – how much of it you can retain. That makes all the difference on certain questions in dictating which of those last two choices is the “most correct” answer. It is just some obscure piece of knowledge you might retain had you read it that tenth time instead only nine times!

So that's what I did. The last two weeks I read the Standard for Program Management time and time again and it paid off. I passed the exam on the first try, for which I am thankful.

That exam is really arduous. Just before I finished I recall thinking that whether I passed or failed, I could not envision enduring it again.

PMI-NAC: *Can you share some lessons learned and insights about preparations and studies you pursued to earn the PGMP?*

Paschall: I am sure everyone who is familiar with the PMP exam has already expressed their frustration with the subjectivity in the test. However, when you move from the PMP to the PgMP, you move from the 50-percent subjectivity range to the 95-percent subjectivity range!

That is really frustrating. It's almost laughable at times. If there was not so much at stake – taking a \$1,500 exam and all the study and preparation time you commit to it – it would be laughable.

The PMP has a number of quantitative questions on it such as Earned Value Management and that type of thing that involves a formula you enter variables into, yielding an answer which you can be certain is the one correct answer. You find that result amongst the four choices and you can assume correctness with minimal risk.

Not so with the PgMP. In fact, I only had two problems in my test that required working with formulas. There were no more, and the other 168 therefore involved much more subjectivity and risk in deriving the “most correct” answer.

PgMP questions are all situational and subjective. They are designed to put the manager in a certain situation: given a certain number of variables, drawing on your experience and judgment as well as knowledge of the Standard for Program Management and PMBOK, and forcing you to make a decision in the absence of perfect information.

You find (much to my frustration) that as you read through the four variables you have to choose from, your knowledge of the material helps you eliminate the two answers that are obviously wrong. However, you are then left with two answers that both appear to be right!

And of course, one is more right than the other given the test criteria they are driving you towards. I found in thinking about how I went through the PgMP exam that it was asking you to think through and make a decision in the absence of perfect information, which in some ways is realistic but in other ways is not so realistic.

For example, when you are talking about the PgMP, you are talking about "PROGRAM MANAGEMENT." That means management of multiple concurrent projects, which relates to a monetary value in the millions. When you are talking about that much money – you are not going to want to make a decision on a "hipshot" or a guess. The PgMP exam forces you to do that, which tests intuition and judgment in some aspects but is not the way a profitable firm wants the PM to make his decisions. I found myself time and time again looking at the question and thinking that I knew exactly what the gaps in my information were, and I knew where, in reality, I would go to get the information I needed to make a solid decision with minimal risk. But I could not get that information because I was forced to make my decision in the hermetically-sealed environment of a testing cubicle.

If there really were millions of dollars riding on my decisions, I would never make a guess sitting in a cubicle, but would instead get up and coordinate the last three or four pieces of information I needed to make the decision. I think a lot of realism is lost in this aspect of the test process. But there really is no way I can think of to increase the level of realism.

When I completed that exam, by no means was I comfortable with the outcome. I would not have bet on my having passed, but I felt that I had prepared as well as one could have and had no idea what I could have done to minimize the subjectivity and risk of failure.

PMI-NAC: *Overall impressions of the exam?*

Paschall: A very, very difficult exam. Four hours and 170 questions compared to the PMP which is four hours and 200 questions. PgMP questions are much more involved and they tend to give you a very involved and detailed situation similar to the reading comprehension portion of the old SAT with a huge paragraph of information to analyze. Some information is meant to distract and some is important. You have to be able to separate the chaff from the grain in that data, and then you may get three or four questions in a row on that material.

It really taxes your deductive reasoning and analytical powers because you don't just move from question-to-question quickly. You really have to get down into the weeds on a situation in order to answer three or four questions. It really puts you through your paces.

Thanks to Joe Paschall for discussing his experiences and learning points on passing the PgMP exam as provided for use in this interview published in the PMI-NAC Newsletter.

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