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

This is part two of an interview that was requested to provide details and insights for PMI-NAC members who may want to pursue this credential.

Also in this installment, Joe provides details on the PMI-NAC Project Management Office (PMO) Local Interest Group (LIG) he leads, and he discusses 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

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.

Editor's Note: Below is the final question and response from part one of Joe's interview as published in our May 2009 PMI-NAC Newsletter. Part two begins on the following page. To review part one of this interview, please go to <http://www.northalabamapmi.org/Newsletter/May2009.htm> to get the May newsletter.

PMI-NAC: Just to review, what were your overall impressions of the PgMP 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 tend to provide 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 same 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.

PMI-NAC: *Because the PgMP is so new – there must be less in the way of resources and support – so that must have made your efforts even more challenging?*

Paschall: Absolutely. Fortunately for me, Allen Green was very helpful in my understanding the landscape and what I would need to do to be successful. I used the Crosswinds Manual, primarily because it was one of the few PgMP study guides that was written by a PgMP. There are a lot of guides out there written by PMPs, or “vice PgMPs,” and you really have to be skeptical of someone who has not passed the PgMP exam themselves, yet is purporting to tell you how to pass it. The Crosswinds Manual was very useful and there are a few others out there that add value. I relied on the Crosswinds Manual and the Standard for Program Management (SPM®).

They worked for me. But for the same reason they worked for me, they might not work for other people because I study on my own.

I like the Crosswinds Manual because it was comprehensive and it ran all the way through A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®). I think it would also be a good study guide for someone who is going to attempt to take the PgMP without having already earned a PMP.

I would not advise that pathway personally because I think it would be so difficult to jump into it cold. For example, I earned my PMP in July 2008 and then the PgMP in February 2009. That was a logical progression; one follows the other. But if you are so bold as to go straight for the PgMP, the Crosswinds Manual is the best way to do it because Crosswinds really does provide a significant review of the PMP, even though it doesn't call it a review.

Many PMPs pursuing the PgMP have been frustrated with Crosswinds because they feel it takes a step back in rehashing PMP material. I was comfortable with it – but to each his own. When it comes to pursuing these things and taking difficult tests you can't dictate a path for anyone else. The best thing you can do to help is explain your reasoning and help others with questions. It all depends on individual preferences, strengths, capabilities, and weaknesses.

PMI-NAC: *While you have been sharing lessons learned on preparing for the PgMP from the start of our interview – do you have other points you can share?*

Paschall: My PgMP preparation was very similar to my PMP preparation. I don't want to get them mixed up because there is a common misconception among many folks that they are similar tests. The PgMP is focused at a much higher level than the PMP. It also is a more subjective or qualitative test of your judgment.

The PgMP goes from the strategic top-level corporate perspective down to the project level. It's a drastically different body of information you are studying.

However, my approach was similar to both. It is what I called “immersion study” earlier in our discussion. It's similar to learning a foreign language. Get the study guide and focus on it as a sole source of “entertainment” until you are finished.

Don't read newspapers and magazines, watch television, or do virtually anything else in your non-working time besides the absolute essentials. It's a real challenge to do this, but that was my approach. That book was the "albatross" around my neck for 90 days!

But it helps me the most if I immerse myself in the material. Basically, you are living that material on a daily basis. I find that by doing it that way – it truly helps me to compress my study timeline. I went from zero to test completion in 90 days on both the PMP and the PgMP – without the benefit of a boot camp.

I know this approach will not work for everyone. But it definitely worked for me.

The best analogy I can give you is that my brain seems to work like a "bucket with a slow leak." If I pour a small amount of information in there gradually, and the leak rate is faster than my pour rate, I retain very little. But if I pour it in really fast, I can top that bucket off. Then I can test immediately and not worry about a little leakage after the fact.

PMI-NAC: *Did you set a 90-day study goal from the time you started?*

Paschall: I did not, because I was more wary of the PgMP. But that was my approach on the PMP: one study guide in 90 days and then test. As I got into the PgMP study guide I realized that my retention was very good but it is very difficult information.

Like many mere mortals, at the start I was testing in the 50s and 60s on the chapter tests. After I went through the study guide a second and third time, I improved into the 80s on the chapter tests. Many folks think they are going to rip right through the study guide and take the test. I guess that's possible, but I don't know anyone that's been able to do it using that approach.

My approach is to go through a study guide at least three times, if not more. I go through every study guide I use at least three times, if not more, because retention improves as I increase the number of times I review the materials.

I found that at my pace, I was able to go through the study guide three times within the first 45 days. At that point I felt like "OK, I'm about half way there."

I wanted to add to my knowledge repository some other study guides and tests to make sure I wasn't missing anything. Each study guide seems to word questions differently. Thus, as you go from one guide to another you get very different impressions of what the PgMP test questions address. Of course none of them are exactly like the actual exam.

You are best served to take as many practice exams as you can. Allen told me just that: "Take as many tests as you can and as many different varieties as you can as many times as you can." Repetition is the key.

For me, it just happened to work out that about 120 days with the PgMP was what I needed. Lest anyone take that as a recommendation – that's a fairly short timeline, so just go with whatever your balance of experience and information recall dictates.

I know other folks have been successful on a 90-120 day timeline, but it really requires total immersion. My life was really not much fun in those 120 days.

There was no time off or leisure time. I never watched the television or read a book for leisure during those 120 days. It's kind of a rough way to go but it works well for me and that's just what I needed to get through that test.

It's the equivalent of choosing to pull a band-aid off slowly and bear less pain over a longer period or do it quickly, and bear maximum pain for minimum time.

PMI-NAC: *Any other points for us?*

Paschall: Quite honestly, I would not do anything differently. I don't believe I could have compressed that timeline anymore. I don't have the mental prowess to absorb information at a faster rate. And there's so much subjectivity in the test that there's no way a mere mortal could go through the information once and then test.

I'm very thankful to Allen who helped me in the last couple weeks with a few phone calls and a little bit of advice. That's pretty much what I needed at the time to get me through.

As I looked through the different PM Hub forums and online resources, most of the people who fail on the PgMP exam are similar to the ones who fail on the PMP exam in that they underestimate the difficulty of the exam and/or overestimate the value of their personal experience to carry them through the exam.

On both of these exams, it really doesn't matter a great deal how many years of project or program management experience you bring to the table. That's because no company or organization can manage a project 100 percent according to the PMBOK or the SPM.

What I've found is that even with 15 or 20 years of program management experience, many folks may never have heard of a Work Breakdown Structure or a Charter. These things are just absolutely written in stone according to the PMBOK, yet many companies do not use them on most projects.

So you have to embrace the new language PMI uses and you must take the time to learn it. Too many folks overestimate their ability to handle the material and underestimate the need to learn all the details that are relevant to PMI. Because I meticulously read through the lessons learned of everyone I could get beforehand, I did not make that mistake.

That probably goes with my background of being an intelligence officer. That is, you never want to go into a situation with a lack of information. I did as well as I could have. Certainly, I would have liked to get six "proficients" instead of three proficients. But when all is said and done that was enough for me to pass. That was the bottom-line.

PMI-NAC: *Let's discuss the PMO LIG. Tell us how you got this started and where you and the group want to go.*

Paschall: Like many chapter members that volunteer for things, I volunteered to join this new Local Interest Group (LIG). Allen mentioned in one of the chapter meetings that the chapter was going to stand up a Project Management Office (PMO) LIG and I assumed there was already a structure in place with someone to lead it.

I said I'd like to be a part of that because I'm interested in PMO-like functions even though I'm not a PMO and don't anticipate initiating one at my own company in the foreseeable future.

Allen explained we didn't have anyone to lead this LIG and asked if I would be interested in leading it. You can't let Allen down, especially after he has helped you prepare for the PgMP exam! So I said, "Certainly I'd love to lead this LIG."

I am not an expert on PMO. I've never been in one. But I think we're going to get the right group of people together. The small group of people we have already consists of a good blend of folks. Some are currently serving as PMOs, some are serving in PMO offices, and some aren't PMPs yet or working in a project management capacity. Others are project managers looking at how they can best utilize a PMO function or service.

Lest anyone be wary of the term PMO, this LIG is much more about taking basic PMO-like functions and then working to make them useful for the project manager. As I said, in my particular case – we have no PMO and we are not going to have one where I work.

I found that having attained the PgMP, one of the best things you can do is turn around and mentor other project managers towards earning the PMP or ideally the PgMP as well.

Leading and mentoring others towards training and different processes that embrace the PMBOK procedures, you are providing some de facto PMO functions. Part of our charter states we will be looking at how to take PMO-like processes and make them useful for project manager – even those project managers who work in the absence of a PMO.

My goal is to bring in a wide variety of folks and not just those affiliated with a PMO.

PMI-NAC: *You had your first meeting at the end of March 2009?*

Paschall: Yes. We've got a very small group right now. Currently our group consists of about six members. We had four of us there in our first meeting. That's a 67 percent turnout for our first meeting! Not bad!

We are small and have all the advantages and disadvantages of a small group. We can rewrite our own charter to change the focus or the scope of the activity to satisfy the goals and needs of our members. We can shape the future of where we go with this LIG and how we go there. In our March meeting, we spent a good deal of time talking about that growth and how we wanted to grow and specifically that we wanted to ensure we got a wide variety of folks and that we did not alienate folks that were not affiliated with a PMO. I think that the term PMO has a lot of misconceptions.

It also has a negative connotation because a lot of PMOs have tried to use PMO as a mandate to micromanage operations and expand line responsibility beyond the advising, mentoring, facilitating role and into the controlling role.

A PMO is really not supposed to be a control function, but is more in the facilitating and enabling capacity.

We don't want to cater to negative connotations of the PMO, but we would like to bring in a lot of different project managers and talk about how we can take on PMO-like functions to facilitate career growth for the individuals and growth for companies.

PMI-NAC: *How do you see the PMO LIG unfold over time? Do have a schedule plan and others plans shaping up at this time?*

Paschall: Certainly. Each of the LIGs is required to meet quarterly although we think it will be beneficial for this particular LIG as it gets started to meet more often on a monthly basis.

As we grow, we can make a consensus-based decision on how often we will meet. One of the things we discussed is reaching out to PMI chapters in Nashville and Birmingham to see if they have active PMO LIGs. It turns out Nashville does have an active PMO LIG. I have been in contact with them and we'll see if we can develop some teaming opportunities with Nashville and possibly join in on some of their speakers or presentations.

We've planned to keep our meetings in the evening at about 5:30PM and we want to work to keep it to an hour. In March we met at the Atlanta Bread Company. We met for dinner and it lasted two hours because we just went over a lot of things. However, the intent is to keep to an hour so we don't infringe on member's lives too much. This LIG will remain an evening venue. We are still in "recruiting mode" to help grow our membership. If you want to join or want more information email Allen Green at presidentelect@NorthAlabamaPMI.org and he will see that I get your message and I'll contact you.

PMI-NAC: *Thanks for your time today. Do you have other points in closing?*

Paschall: Allen Green is the other PgMP in PMI-NAC right now, and he has the experience with PMI and he knows this area so very well. In contrast, I'm still new to PMI, this area, and a new career here. I'm really looking forward to being more involved in things and bringing a new approach to things where it helps the chapter.

I'm also very grateful for the help I received on studying for my certifications thus far, and I think that in my new role, part of my responsibility is to "pay it forward" and help other PMPs work towards attaining the PgMP. I'm available as Allen was to me to help anyone who has questions, interests, or concerns on what it takes to earn the PgMP or the PMP.

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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