

Basic Interview Questions for Project Manager Positions

Questions + Question Intent/Background + Notes on Applicant Response

What is This?

A set of foundational questions that can be used for interviewing candidates for project manager positions that can be used in different ways. The questions might be used for applicant filtering and pre-interview questionnaires or for in-person interviews.

Options in Using This Document

Option 1 – Use “as is”, use all questions

Option 2 – Use “as is”, select a subset of questions

Option 3 – Use “as is”, modify the response notes to interviewers to align with organization needs

Option 4 – Add new questions, modify existing questions

Option 5 – Do not use these questions, use this document as background learning to develop your own question set (only recommended where significant knowledge of PM position needs exists)

Ideas for Modifying the Question Set and Implementation Approaches

- **Question Focus** - Every need for project managers is different. As an interviewer, consider this fact as you select which questions are most important to the position you are trying to fill and how you will ask each question.
- **Question Sequence** – The sequence of questions presented here is not necessarily the sequence the interviewer may wish to use. Sometimes grouping questions of a similar nature may cause the respondent to offer similar responses to different questions vs. those similar questions being spread out during the interview. On the other hand, grouping related questions can provide the interviewer the opportunity to better understand a given topic and to ask follow-up questions for areas of most importance to the hiring organization.

Basic Questions for PM Interviews

1) **Project Types Managed** - Please describe the type of projects you have worked on as a team member and as a project manager?

- Question Intent / Background: The complexity of work experience is a key factor in the level of project management skills. The intent is to understand the applicant's project and project management experience, the complexity of those projects in terms of project duration, team size, complexity of the intended outcome, complexity of stakeholder set, budget and schedule constraints, focus on managing cost or schedule or quality or other factors. This will be important information to ascertain if the applicant's skill experience is related to small easy efforts or large complex efforts. The outcome of projects, successful or not, is additional important information. Experience with projects where the applicant is not the lead is relevant information as team members learn good and inadequate techniques for managing projects as a result of their work.
- Notes on Applicant Response: If a limited response results, this could mean limited experience. Make sure the applicant clearly identifies which projects they acted in the PM role. Follow-up questions might include "what made that project successful" or "why did that project have trouble" and "what did you do specifically".

2) **Your Interest in PM** - Would you explain why the project management position is of interest to you.

- Question Intent / Background: Some applicants are just looking for any job and some applicants are truly interested in leading projects. Both types could make a good project manager, but the individual that has a clear interest may have acquired more training and experience and may work harder once on the job to grow and improve. The intent of this question is to understand the applicant's true interests.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for a true interest in leading, organizing and managing projects. A favorable response might include comments such as "I have become frustrated with poorly managed projects I have been assigned to and want to make projects more organized."

3) **Your View of Needed PM Skills** - What type of skills do you see as being valuable to being a good project manager?

- Question Intent / Background: There are many skills and attributes important to being a good project manager and an applicant's awareness of these is a clear indication of solid project management experience and a good probability the individual will perform well in the PM role.
- Notes on Applicant Response: Skills important to the PM position are many and one would expect the applicant to provide a number of the following: an organizer, a leader, able to plan projects, able to monitor and control a project,

self-confident but not arrogant, focused on customer and organization needs, team player, good listener and communicator, team motivator, able to cope with changes, able to effectively interface with management, able to work with customers and suppliers, strong balance between an optimistic mindset and common sense risk management mindset, focused on project success not personal success and able to advance the effectiveness of managing projects through the capture of lessons learned and best practices. These are only a few examples and many other good PM skills and attributes exist as well. The interviewer may have other key skills critical to the respective organization's needs that the interviewer will additionally look for. An applicant that can name many of these might be a good candidate for the position. If the applicant can name many, a follow-up question might be to provide some examples to ensure the applicant is just not reciting a list of PM skills they found on the internet. An applicant that only comes up with a few may still be a good candidate and their limited response is due to the fact that they have just not had the time to reflect on what being a good PM should be. This later situation may also mean that a candidate has limited PM experience.

4) Specific PM Actions - Can you describe what you specifically did on a recent project to manage that project.

- Question Intent / Background: This question is focused on understanding specifically what the applicant sees project management to be, what has the applicant done to manage projects and has the applicant performed in many PM skill areas or has the applicant just been in charge and monitored (vs. managed) projects. This will support an understanding of how the applicant views the PM role and also provides insight into actual managing skills.
- Notes on Applicant Response: A good answer would include a number of the following necessary PM functions: gathering of adequate requirements for the project, definition of what the project will deliver in sufficient detail to allow a project plan to be prepared and for all stakeholders to hold a common view of intended project outcome, building a productive project team, planning the project, communicating the plan to stakeholders, assigning roles and work to each team member, monitoring project progress in terms of schedule performance, work issues, budgets (where applicable), identifying problems, defining and taking corrective actions and managing changes to project work scope or constraints directed by management or customers. If the response is significantly less than these core PM essential efforts, the applicant may not have extensive PM experience or may not have a complete view of what actually being a PM means. Since all project environments are not the same, deviations from this core set of PM actions should be expected.

5) Handling Difficult Situations – An important aspect of being a project manager involves handling difficult personnel situations on projects. Can you discuss a difficult personnel situation you had on a project and as the project lead, how you handled that situation and how things turned out? Let me give you some examples, this could be a team member not pulling their load, late team member delivery of needed work, personal conflicts between team members, poor team member work habits, inappropriate team comments or behaviors to others, team member inability to take direction or a team member’s inability to assume accountability for assigned work.

- Question Intent / Background: Projects, large and small, always have personnel issues. A key attribute of a good project manager is the ability to surface and address these issues constructively to ensure teamwork is supported, so that the project stays on a successful track and so that the individual involved is not demeaned or de-energized in any way as the issue is addressed. A PM that does not address personnel situations or over reacts can be harmful for the project and the respective organization.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for real personnel problem surfacing and resolving skills. If the applicant does not have an example situation, it might mean limited PM experience, or might mean they are oblivious to such issues or that they hide from addressing personnel issues.

6) Working with an Issue Caused by Management - Can you discuss an issue you have had with your management (or customer) on a project, what it was and how you handled it. Let me give you some examples, management may have provided poor requirements to drive your project, may have requested changes that mean project cost or schedule goals would not be met, may hold unfeasible expectations about the project’s outcomes, may micro-manage the project, may go around the project manager to direct the team or suppliers, may have exhibited an inability to support the project when project issues arise or may have made critical comments about the project to the team that were not constructive or failed to acknowledge team strong performance.

- Question Intent / Background: Working with management and customers is a necessary part of the PM’s role and can be very challenging. Management is often pressured by many situations and can pass this pressure down to the PM. Sometimes it is best for the PM just to let management issues go and just get the job done and sometimes the issue should be constructively addressed. One key PM skill is the ability to determine if a given issue with management should be addressed or just let go. How a PM is able to be assertive in a professional and constructive manner, surface an issue, communicate impacts of a given situation, provide alternative solutions and to work with management (and customers) to resolve issues is a critical PM skill.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for a real project issue caused by a management or customers and how the PM responded to that

situation. Where the issue was worked with management, the response should include how it was communicated to management, if key situation impacts were provided, if offering solution alternatives was done, if working with management to agree on a compromise happened and if the issue was eventually resolved. If the applicant does not have an example situation, it may mean that they worked in a great environment void of management intrusion or it might mean that they have limited project management skills on this topic. Some PMs may see their role to just take direction without question, this happens in the military, but is not what is needed in the majority of industry. PMs need to speak up on major issues affecting customer value and organization goals and also need to just keep working on lesser issues and get the job done.

7) Project Plans - What do think about plans? Are plans essential? What do you see as the minimum parts of a project plan?

- Question Intent / Background: All projects need a plan, even if it is an informal one. Plans are used for many purposes including estimating resources, guiding project work, properly setting expectations for management and customers, a basis for measuring project progress and a basis to implement changes to the project when those happen. As such, all project managers must be able to develop a basic project plan and work with the team to keep the plan up to date. The intent of this question is to determine if the applicant understands the need for plans, has a planning mindset and understands what a plan contains. Another key point is that the project plan can only follow adequate project requirements and an adequate definition of what the project will deliver and a candidate's awareness of this is critical to being an effective project planner.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would be looking for responses including the following: "Plans are essential. Plans are used for many reasons (those are listed above). The plan cannot be prepared until the requirements for the project and some definition of what will be delivered is adequately known. The minimum components of a plan would include an identification of what work will be accomplished to produce the project's deliverable (work outline or WBS, Work Breakdown Structure), definition of the project team, allocation of all work to someone on the team, definition of team member roles, schedule of work, budgets for work (if the project tracks budgets), resources needed to perform the work. A plan often should include the identification of how the project team will meet and manage the project. Plans need to be kept up to date to hold any value as the project progresses". If the applicant is not able to identify a number of these core plan components, they may have no real project planning experience and/or may lack an appreciation for the need for plans. This is really a "pass / fail" question in a PM interview.

8) Managing Project Suppliers – Do you have experience managing project suppliers, forming subcontractor agreements, monitoring sourced work and coordinating supplier work with internal project work? If yes, explain some work that was subcontracted and how you were involved in the management of that work. (Note: This question obviously does not apply if project managers in the hiring business do not manage suppliers and does not apply if the applicant has no subcontract management experience.)

- Question Intent / Background: Many projects have work performed by businesses or organizations external to the project's respective business. Many projects will be successful or fail due to the success or failure of suppliers being able to meet project needs. A key aspect of being a good project manager is the awareness of the criticality of successful supplier management actions and the skills and experience to accomplish it.
- Notes on Applicant Response: When this question applies, the applicant should be able to identify key supplier management steps including the assembly of requirements for the supplier's work, clear definition and communication to the supplier of what specifically is to be delivered, ability to choose the best supplier where multiple suppliers exist, formation of an agreement with the supplier, tracking of supplier progress, working to resolve supplier issues and integrating the supplier products or services into the project's work flow. Follow-up questions may include asking how successful were past supplier relationships managed by the applicant, where there any issues with the subcontract and how these difficulties were handled.

9) Managing Project Risks – Managing project risks is managing threats to the project being successful. Risks are future potential issues, not current problems. A few example risks include possible conditions related to future loss of resources, future frequent requirements changes, future supplier failure to deliver and the failure of a concept to be accepted by a customer. Part of a project manager's job is to manage risks to project success. Have you performed risk management on past projects, can you provide several examples?

- Question Intent / Background: All projects have risks and must be controlled to support project success. Many will view the project manager's top priority to be the identification and control of risks to project success. Project risks are threats to the project's measures of success (i.e. customer satisfaction, quality, budget, schedule and other measures of the project's value). Some risks can be avoided by risk management actions and some risks cannot be avoided but the impacts to the project can be reduced. Risks are potential future problems, not current project issues or problems. All project managers should be sensitive to the need for risk management and have skills to perform basic risk management functions. Basic risk management skills include building a team awareness of the need for risk management, risk identification, risk prioritizing and implementation and tracking of effective control of risks to either avoid the threat and/or to lessen the

impacts to the project if the risk materializes. No extensive formality is needed, but a risk management mindset and a few basic skills to control risks are needed by all PMs.

- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would be looking for an applicant's understanding of why risk management is important for project success, that the applicant has effectively performed some level of risk management on projects and that the applicant has been successful in convincing the project team (and in some cases management) that some common sense level of risk management is necessary to support project success.

10) Managing the Project – Once a project plan is in place and the project work is underway, can you describe some of the things you do to manage the project.

- Question Intent / Background: Effective management of any project must address multiple aspects of that project. Information such as the project requirements, definition of the project's deliverable and the project plan must be managed to be both up to date and known by all appropriate stakeholders. Project status in terms of requirements compliance, schedules, budgets (where PMs control budgets), risk controls, supplier status and status of project resources are core and minimum areas that the PM must track and control. Periodic gathering of this information coupled with periodic status reviews with the project team for purposes of uncovering problems and the identification of corrective actions constitute minimum project control efforts.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would be looking for an awareness of the information stated above along with some type of structure to the management methods employed by the applicant. An ad-hoc approach like "I talk to the team often" is a good thing to do, but is not controlling the project.

11) Stakeholder Communications – A PMs job often is to be a communications focal point for various stakeholders that can include the customer, management, marketing, team, suppliers and others. Can you give an example of a past project you managed and how communications with various stakeholders was handled.

- Question Intent / Background: Projects are successful or fail often due to great or poor communications respectively. Many project stakeholders exist and good communications to all is necessary. In many organizations, project managers need to be "the managers of project communications" as the PM is closest to the real work and sometimes no other stakeholder is there to ensure adequate stakeholder communications exist. Example stakeholder communications that the PM often must manage include: communications with management and customers on project requirements and a definition of the deliverable, the project plan, project status, issues, needed support for corrective actions, scope or constraint changes and their impacts and risks and what is being done about them. Example communications with the team often includes technical status of project work, schedule status, resource information, corrective actions and risks

and their controls. Examples of communications with suppliers often includes: requirements for deliverables, schedule status, technical work status and supplier corrective actions. All of these communications need some type of structure to be consistently effective and can include communication vehicles such as periodic meetings.

- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would be looking to hear that a communication approach for key stakeholders was defined and implemented and successful.

12) Customer Value – The concept of customer value addresses the fact that an organization exists to build value for their customers, i.e. building value for customers is the organization’s reason for existence. Value to customers is often expressed in terms of quality, schedule, cost, support and other factors. Many factors are the same that we as consumers use to make a decision to buy a product or service. Projects make many decisions that affect the value delivered to customers and as such, all decisions made by a project must include consideration of how and if that decision will affect the resulting value provided to the customer. As a dramatic example, a decision to save time and money by eliminating a testing step very possibly would reduce the value to the customer in terms of product quality. In your experience on projects as a team member or project lead, have you made decisions, or been a part of a decision process where the customer value concept was used, i.e. where value to the customer was considered in project decisions.

- Question Intent / Background: (See explanation of customer value embedded in the question above. It is important that the applicant be provided this definition as the concept can be described in different terms in different parts of industry.) The concept of customer value should be an embedded mindset in every member of any organization, especially PMs since they make many decisions affecting value delivered to customers.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would be listening for an applicant’s understanding of the concept of customer value, whether or not that term is used, coupled with a real example of how the applicant used this mindset as a key criteria in project decisions.

13) PM Manages Work Only or the PM Works and Manages – Sometimes the PM only manages project work and sometimes the PM works on the project and manages the project. What are your thoughts on a project manager only managing the project vs. the project manager also being a working team member on the same project.

- Question Intent / Background: Both situations have advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes only managing the project is the right thing for a PM to do and sometimes also being a working member on the project is the right thing to do. For larger projects, being the PM is typically a full time job and the PM

should not generally be taking on a working role exclusive of resolving crisis situations. For modest size and smaller projects, the PM also might be performing project work and this is common practice in industry. Where the PM only manages, the PM is properly focusing his/her time and energy but can be insulated from important details on the project. Where the PM acts in both PM and worker roles, this provides the PM with greater awareness of project details but the PM may fail to provide a sufficient focus, time and energy on core PM responsibilities.

- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for an applicant to have an awareness of the pros and cons of each approach. Ideally, the applicant is able to provide an example of how they made a trade-off of managing vs. working and managing on a given project.

14) Leading and Empowering – Can you give examples of actions you have taken on past projects that demonstrate your leadership skills? Can you give examples of actions you have taken on past projects that demonstrate that you have empowered project team members?

- Question Intent / Background: The project management role, of course, needs strong leadership and empowering skills (and many other skills as well). Many examples of leadership can exist and common examples can include: Taking initiative where there is a team issue that needs resolution vs. doing nothing, being a buffer between the team and management or the customer, making sure the project maintains a direction consistent with customer needs and organization values and vision in the light of pressures and issues, doing the right thing all the time, admitting mistakes, supporting and growing team members, acknowledging strong performance, identifying and correcting weak performance and being a role model for others to follow are just a few leadership examples. Simply stated, empowering on projects is the mindset and actions demonstrated by a leader that provides team members with requirements for their assigned work and a definition of the needed work outcome and then allows team members the freedom to deliver the needed outcome using steps and methods of their own design, i.e. not being micro-managed. Certainly support and advice can be given, but team members have control over their respective day to day efforts. Additionally, team members are given the authority to make decisions within their own work scope that do not impact other areas of the project.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for real examples of leadership and some of the examples mentioned above would be good answers. Part of the answer should demonstrate an empowering mindset, where the PM truly gave the team requirements and then stepped back and allowed the team to do what was needed.

15) Personal Traits and Behaviors – What do you see as personal traits or behaviors that are important for being a good project manager?

- Question Intent / Background: There are many, many personal traits important to being an effective project manager. A few examples of desirable personal traits include: Organized, logical, questioning, results oriented, strong prioritizing skills, multi-task skills, great communicator, not overwhelmed with new work being bigger than past work, self-confident, customer focus, ethical and honest, putting customer and organization needs ahead of one's career, gets the job done, reasonable, consistent, loves to learn, improving mindset (and many more exist).
- Notes on Applicant Response: The applicant should be able to mention a number of personal attributes that make sense to the interviewer.

16) Adaptive Abilities and Mindset – When changing jobs between organizations, would you explain how you adapted to a new environment that probably included a new organization mission or focus, culture differences, new processes and systems, different work force characteristics and any other environment changes you experienced.

- Question Intent / Background: For any individual to be productive in a new environment and especially for project managers, which typically must work with a wide spectrum of stakeholders, the ability to adapt and thrive in a new environment is critical.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would want to hear several examples of how the applicant quickly adapted to a new environment.

17) Being Constructively and Professionally Assertive – Though “being a nice person” has benefits in working with stakeholders, being a good leader of a project often means that a firm position needs to be taken with team members, suppliers and sometimes management on important issues. The inability to stand up for what is the best thing to do can be the downfall of what otherwise might be a great PM. Where a PM believes he or she “is in the right,” the PM needs to be able to be assertive and to act in a constructive and professional manner vs. “being a nice person” and not causing waves. Can you provide an example when you were leading a project where you had to be assertive to support the right thing being done?

- Question Intent / Background: Being constructively assertive is a key PM skill and most often has advantages for all stakeholders involved. Many individuals may lack some level of assertiveness or may be overly assertive. Both characteristics are not desirable for the PM position.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer would want to hear an example of the PM acting in a constructive and professional assertive manner. If the applicant has no examples, their PM experience may be low and/or their assertiveness could be low. If an applicant has many examples, it is possible they are overly assertive to point of being non-constructive.

18) Business Sense – Managing a project can have many parallels with running a business. Let me give you some examples. Managing a business requires an integrated and mutually consistent approach to working with customers, managing money, understanding the marketplace and competition, efficiently allocating resources, managing schedules, making sure that customer needs are met, managing employees and following rules or regulations. Can you give some examples of how you managed a project with a mindset that would be similar to how a business is managed?

- Question Intent / Background: Since every project has a customer, spends money, utilizes resources, has problems and has many other characteristics that every business has, a “business mindset” is a key attribute of a good PM.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for the applicant to say “Yes” there are parallels and to provide some examples.

19) Major Project Problem Resolution – All projects have problems and some can be major problems. Describe a significant problem on a project you experienced as a project manager and what you did to resolve.

- Question Intent / Background: Since PMs exist on projects to keep projects out of trouble by surfacing and solving problems, the PM’s problem solving skills are critically important. This question can provide the interviewer with insights into the types of problems the applicant has experienced and assess the quality of the applicant’s problem resolution skills.
- Notes on Applicant Response: The interviewer is looking for the applicant to describe a real project problem and to walk through the steps that transpired to resolve that problem. The applicant’s ability to do so should be evidence that problem solving skills exist. The key information that the interviewer is looking for is the process the applicant used to resolve, or attempt to resolve, a major problem, not whether or not the problem was eventually resolved. If the applicant is unable to provide a situation, it could mean that limited PM experience exists. If the applicant provides a relatively minor issue on a project that they resolved, it also could mean that limited experience exists or that limited problem solving skills exist.