

What I'd Do to Move from Project Support Officer to Project Manager

How I would build my education, skills, experience and visible evidence so my manager would trust me with more responsibility for delivery, not just more tasks.

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As a Project Support Officer trying to become a Project Manager, the usual advice is to gain another qualification, keep performing and wait for an opportunity.

This thinking is not enough.

I have made this move myself, and I have spent years developing the capability of the people in my teams so I could trust them with a wider range of more valuable work.

You could say that is selfish. The more capable my team became, the more valuable work they could deliver and the more time I had to focus on the things only I could do. But it worked for them too. They got more meaningful work, more responsibility and a clearer route to progress. I got people I could trust with bigger outcomes.

The route is not mysterious. You need the right education and the skills to apply it. Your manager, like me, can then put you into activities where you can gain experience and learn how to use that education in your working environment. As you do the work, you need to make it clear which part of the contribution came from you. It may sit inside your manager's project, for which they remain accountable, but you were responsible for producing that work and seeing its output through to the end.

The figures and referenced wording in this article are derived from the published Project Delivery Capability Framework at projectdelivery.gov.uk. It places the Project Support Officer and Project Manager roles side by side, allowing us to see the education, skills, experience and evidence needed to move from one to the other.

It is a government framework, but the fundamentals of the career ladder are remarkably similar in public and private organisations. Banking, education, engineering and technology may use different words, but the decision underneath them is the same: can this person support delivery, and can we trust them to own more of that delivery in future?

1. It is not simply a step up. It is a change of category.

To make the different routes through project delivery clearer, the framework groups roles into what it calls families. A role family is simply a collection of jobs that make the same broad kind of contribution and carry a similar kind of responsibility.

Project Support Officer sits in the family called project delivery specialists.

Project Manager sits in the family the framework calls leadership. To make that clearer here, I refer to it as project delivery leadership.

That distinction matters. You are not waiting to move one rung higher on the same ladder. You are trying to move from a role that supports delivery into one that leads it and answers for the result.

You do not make that move simply by being an excellent specialist for longer. Being dependable, organised and brilliant at keeping the machinery running makes you valuable. It does not automatically prove that you can take ownership when the outcome sits with you.

Project delivery specialists

Project Support Officer

Supports the processes and activities that help the project deliver its outputs.

Project delivery leadership

Project Manager

Manages the project and brings its outputs together within agreed constraints.

Time served does not bridge the gap.

You have to demonstrate a different kind of responsibility.

What I'd do

First, I would become exceedingly good at the job I already had. If I kept giving my manager a risk register full of abstract statements, with no clear explanation of how the risks would be managed, I could hardly expect them to trust me with a project.

But I would not wait quietly for somebody to notice. I would show my manager what I had produced, explain my thinking and ask for feedback, including the critical feedback that would help me improve. Then I would look at the project plan, identify a contained piece of work I was interested in, and ask to manage it with their supervision.

If they trusted me with it, I would treat that as the opportunity. I could make mistakes and ask for help, but I could not disappear and return five minutes before the deadline with unusable work. I had asked for responsibility, so I would need to demonstrate that their trust had been well placed.

2. Look at the verbs used for each role

The Project Support Officer role is described as performing activities that help achieve the project's objectives, supporting the Project Manager by operating project-management processes, and coordinating business-management tasks and activities.

The Project Manager role is described as leading and managing the project and project team, driving and overseeing delivery, and ensuring that the objectives are achieved within the agreed time, cost and quality constraints.

Look at the verbs.

The support role supports, operates and coordinates. The manager role leads, drives and oversees.

The PSO role is written as running the process. The PM role is written as owning the outcome.

Runs the process

Supports

Operates

Coordinates

Owns the outcome

Leads

Drives

Oversees

Six words. The whole distance between the two jobs.

A Project Support Officer performs activities that help the project achieve its objectives. Those activities produce outputs: a completed analysis, an updated plan, an assessed change request, a usable risk register or another defined piece of work.

The Project Manager has a whole series of activities, tasks and outputs to coordinate. Their responsibility is to make sure those separate outputs combine to produce the intended project outcome. The organisation sponsoring the project expects that outcome to create a benefit.

That is the distance you have to cross. You move from completing tasks and producing individual outputs to managing how people, processes and outputs come together to achieve the project outcome. Doing the process brilliantly is part of it, but your evidence must also show where you have started taking responsibility for what was delivered.

3. The experience problem

The framework describes the Project Support Officer role as suitable for somebody entering project delivery, including people bringing relevant skills from a non-project environment.

For the Project Manager role, it refers to experience as part of a larger project team, or experience as a specialist or workstream lead on a smaller project.

That wording comes from the framework, but I would not tell a Project Support Officer to go and ask for a workstream. Depending on the organisation, a workstream may span several projects and sit with a senior functional owner.

I would look at the work the project already needs to deliver and identify one contained part where I could add value. That might become a formal work package, but it does not have to arrive with that label. What matters is that it has a clear output, a boundary you understand and enough substance for you to demonstrate that you can plan it, manage it and see it through.

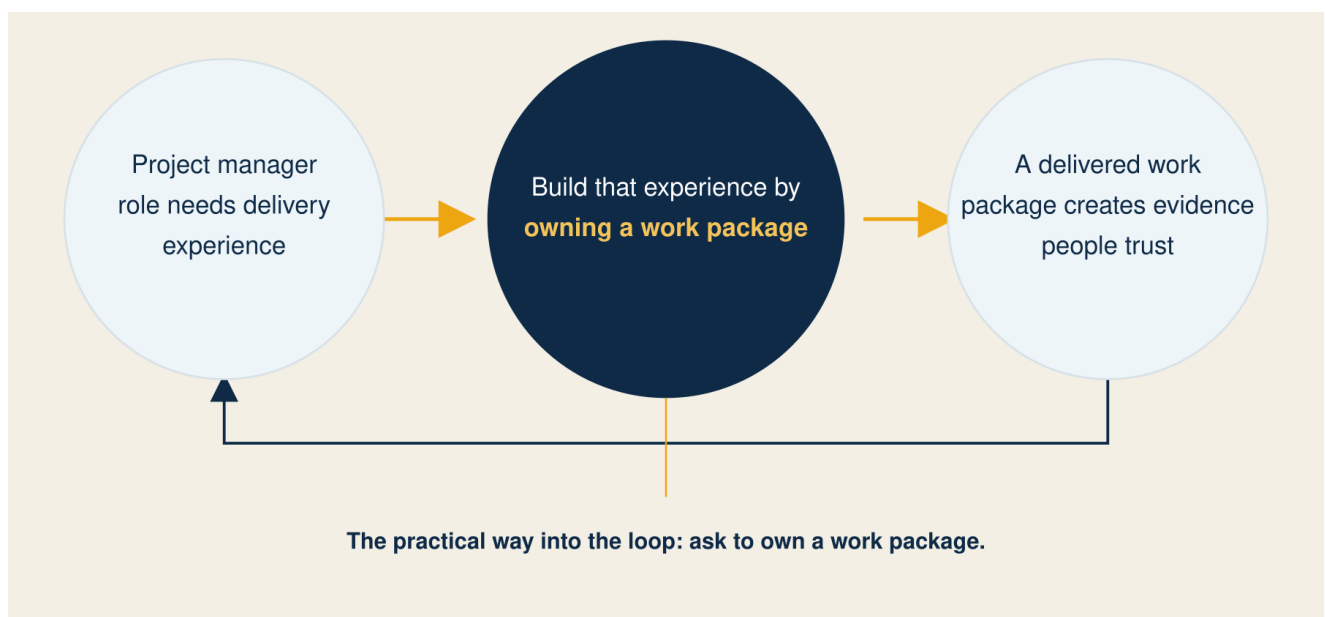
If the team were drafting the Project Initiation Documentation, for example, I might offer to document how the project would be managed. I would not copy a generic process into the PID. I would use the objectives and Business Case to explain how this particular project would be planned and controlled, where its checkpoints and stage boundaries would sit, which decisions would be needed and how those controls would help it deliver what the organisation had approved.

To do that properly, I would need to understand the Business Case, the organisation's delivery method and what good Project Initiation Documentation looks like. That is precisely why the work would be valuable. It would make me use my education and existing skills to understand the project as a whole, rather than complete another isolated administrative task.

Or I might bring a specialist skill from elsewhere. If I had an accounting background, I could offer to support the financial case in the Business Case by helping establish the funding requirements, affordability and expected flow of expenditure. Within the PID, I could help turn the approved figures into a usable project budget, cost baseline and reporting controls.

The strongest development request is not, "What do I need to tick off before you promote me?" It is, "I understand that this piece of work needs to be delivered. I have the skills to add value to it. Can I take responsibility for it under your supervision?"

That gives your Project Manager a controlled way to test you. It also gives you something much more useful than another line on a training record: evidence that you have taken responsibility for delivery.



What I'd do

I would not begin by asking for the promotion. I would ask to own a work package. I would choose something small enough that handing it to me did not feel reckless, but real enough that I could prove I had planned it, managed it and delivered its output.

4. The technical gap is smaller than it looks

The Project Support Officer role lists eleven technical competencies. The Project Manager role lists twenty-one.

Ten competencies appear on the manager profile and not on the support profile. Five are required at Working level and five at Awareness level. The comparison below also shows the two competencies where the support role is rated higher, and the five behaviours that step up.

The competency map



Manager role only



PSO rated higher



Behaviour comparison

Competency	Project support officer	Project manager
Requirements management	Not listed	Working
Resource management	Not listed	Working
Budgeting and cost management	Not listed	Working
Quality management	Not listed	Working
Benefits management	Not listed	Working
Commercial and procurement	Not listed	Awareness
Solutions development	Not listed	Awareness
Business change and implementation	Not listed	Awareness
Business case development	Not listed	Awareness
Asset allocation	Not listed	Awareness
Change control	Practitioner	Working
Knowledge management	Practitioner	Awareness
Influencing	Awareness	Working
Visible leadership	Awareness	Working
Conflict resolution	Awareness	Working
Inspiring others	Awareness	Working
Innovation	Awareness	Working
Working with ambiguity	Awareness	Awareness

Working with ambiguity is the one behaviour that does not change between the two roles.

At first glance, ten missing competencies can look like ten new courses or ten reasons not to apply. That is not what the framework says.

At Awareness level, the framework allows for limited or no experience. It includes applying knowledge under supervision or assisting somebody else with delivery. That matters because you may already have helped with requirements, budgets, resources, quality, benefits, procurement or business-case work without ever claiming that experience.

You do not need to pretend that assisting is the same as leading. You do need to stop treating it as though it counts for nothing.

What I'd do

I would take each missing competency and write down where I had already supported it. What did I produce? What decision did it support? Who used it? What happened as a result? I would then separate genuine gaps from experience I already had but had never recorded properly.

5. Two things where the support role is rated higher

The framework rates the Project Support Officer role at Practitioner level in two competencies: change control and knowledge management.

The Project Manager role is rated at Working for change control and Awareness for knowledge management.

That does not prove that every PSO personally operates at Practitioner level. It does show that the role can give you deeper experience in two areas than people commonly assume.

If you have managed change requests, maintained change records, assessed impact, controlled document versions, captured lessons or made sure knowledge reached the people who needed it, do not bury that work under "project administration". Describe what you actually did and the decisions it enabled.

Your role is rated at a higher level in these two competencies. Your job is to show that you personally have the evidence behind that rating.

6. The behavioural shift is the real transition

The two profiles contain the same ten behaviours, but five move from Awareness to Working: influencing, visible leadership, conflict resolution, inspiring others and innovation.

Those behaviours are about people rather than process.

Now think about what you actually do during an ordinary week. You chase information from people who outrank you and have no obligation to respond quickly. You take figures into meetings and answer challenges. You tell people that their update is late, their evidence is incomplete or their change has consequences they have not considered.

That is influence without much formal authority to fall back on. It is useful evidence, but only if you explain the judgement and behaviour involved. "Chased weekly updates" sounds administrative. "Secured overdue delivery information from senior stakeholders, resolved conflicting reports and produced an agreed position for the Project Manager" tells a different story.

The work may already be there. The way you describe it determines whether anybody can see the level at which you were operating.

Ownership begins before somebody gives you the next task.

A good Project Support Officer may already know that the risk register must be updated before the next highlight report and get it done without being asked. That is valuable. The next step is to look beyond the recurring process and think about what delivery will require next.

What is due? What could stop it? What happens to the rest of the project if it arrives late? Who needs to act? Which decision is holding the work up? What does the client need from us before we can continue?

A Project Manager cannot manage somebody task by task and simultaneously trust them with a piece of delivery. I need to be able to explain the result required, agree the boundaries and know that the person will work out what needs to happen next.

That does not mean disappearing when something is unclear. Asking for clarification is good judgement. If two approaches could produce different results, ask which one the client needs. If a delay has appeared, explain what has happened, what you think its effect will be and what you propose doing about it. Do not wait until the deadline to reveal that the work went wrong.

Taking ownership means thinking ahead, acting within your authority and communicating early when you need a decision or help.

7. Education matters, but it is not a shopping list

The framework lists typical qualifications against both roles. Do not read that as a compulsory list of branded courses that everybody must collect.

The qualification names will vary between organisations and sectors. What matters is the capability the education develops and whether it fits the environment in which you want to work.

For somebody moving from Project Support Officer to Project Manager in a PRINCE2 environment, PRINCE2 Project Management gives you the structure of the job. It teaches you how the project remains justified, who makes which decisions, how work is authorised, how progress is controlled and what should happen when delivery moves outside tolerance.

If the team delivers iteratively, PRINCE2 Agile shows you how to retain that governance while using agile ways of working. Agile is not owned by one awarding body and it is not simply a certificate. It is an approach to developing and delivering in shorter cycles, learning from feedback and adapting as the work progresses. PRINCE2 Agile connects those ways of working to a recognised project-management method.

The important question is not, "Which badge can I add next?" It is, "What do I need to understand so that I can manage the kind of project I want to lead?"

Some roles do require a particular qualification. If the employer says that an accounting qualification is essential, experience with budgets will not make that requirement disappear.

More often, qualifications are listed as desirable because the employer wants the knowledge and capability associated with them. Education teaches you the method or subject. The qualification provides evidence that you have been assessed against a standard. Your examples must then show that you can apply what you learned.

That is why I would read the whole requirement rather than collect certificates mechanically. What knowledge is the employer asking for? Which part is compulsory? Where have I already applied it? What evidence can I show?

I am a PeopleCert Accredited Trainer, so PRINCE2 Project Management and PRINCE2 Agile are areas in which I can help. But the qualification still has to be applied. Passing an exam gives you knowledge and a common language. It does not prove that you can manage people, uncertainty and delivery when the work becomes difficult.

What I learned

Education gives you a method for thinking about the work. Skill comes from applying it. Experience comes from being responsible for what happens. You need all three before the qualification becomes convincing evidence of readiness.

8. The four things I would build

If I were making the move now, I would build four things deliberately.

Education. Learn the project-management method used in the roles you want. Understand why the controls exist, not just the names that appear in the manual.

Skills. Apply that education to real work. Practise planning, risk management, stakeholder communication, change control, reporting and decision-making while you still have supervision around you.

Experience. Take ownership of a work package with a defined output. Manage it from agreement through to delivery and record what you had to decide along the way.

Exposure. Make the evidence visible to the people who decide what you can be trusted with next.

Exposure is not shouting about yourself or taking credit from your manager. It is making the chain of responsibility clear.

If you produce a report, plan, analysis or governance document, make sure the document records who produced it as well as who manages and approves it. Put your name against the work you performed. Put the Project Manager's or accountable owner's name against their role too.

You want your manager to look good. Give them something solid that they can take to their peers and senior leaders. But make sure the document also shows who produced the work, who managed it and who was accountable for it. That gives your manager a reason to trust you with more, while giving you evidence for your appraisal, CV and next application.

The career progression test

Education gives you the method. Skills allow you to apply it. Experience proves that you can take responsibility. Exposure makes sure the evidence reaches the people deciding what to trust you with next.

9. What I would do next

I would read my current role profile and the Project Manager profile side by side.

I would mark every missing competency where I had already assisted somebody, and write down the evidence before I forgot it.

I would identify one real work package I could ask to own. I would make the request specific: the output, the likely boundaries, how I would report, and where I would still need the Project Manager's supervision.

I would choose the education that supports the environment I want to work in, then deliberately apply it to that work package.

And I would make sure the work left a visible record with my name attached to what I had actually produced.

That is how I would move from Project Support Officer to Project Manager. I would not wait for the title before I started building the evidence. I would build a safe, supervised version of the job inside the role I already had, then use that evidence to make the next decision easier.

10. What the framework cannot tell you

The framework can describe the standard. It cannot make somebody give you the opportunity to demonstrate it.

Being placed on the right project, being trusted with a work package and being invited into the meetings where decisions are made depend on reputation and visibility as well as technical ability.

That is why simply collecting qualifications or quietly doing more work can leave capable people stuck. Your development needs to produce evidence, and that evidence needs to be seen by somebody with the authority to give you the next opportunity.

That is what Prepare2Lead is for.

Source: Project Support Officer and Project Manager role profiles, Project Delivery Capability Framework, projectdelivery.gov.uk. Competency level definitions quoted and discussed for explanation.

Choose what you need next

I need help building the career evidence

If you already have project knowledge but are struggling to turn your current role into the experience and visible evidence needed for Project Manager opportunities, Prepare2Lead is where I help you work through that progression.

<https://prepare2lead.com/community>

I need to test my PRINCE2 knowledge

If this article has shown you that your first gap is education, start by finding out what you already know. The Compalley Exam Centre gives you four free PRINCE2 mock exams: two Foundation and two Practitioner. Your results will show where your knowledge is strong and where it needs work before you decide whether to train.

jamesbailey.uk/exams