PM EXAM SMARTNOTES

Easy & Fast PMP Exam Preparation for Busy Working Professionals!

How I Sailed Thru PMP and How You Can Do It Too

tips, techniques and best practices

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www.PMExamSmartNotes.com

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Useful Links

These are not bibliography but some of the resources you may find useful at the beginning of your study.

- PMI FAQ answers mostly asked questions with respect to certifications offered by PMI
- A brief overview of PMP®
- PMP® Handbook contains all information about prerequisites, policies and procedure to apply for PMP exam
- CAPM® Handbook contains all information about prerequisites, policies and procedure to apply for CAPM exam
- PMP® examination content outline
- PMI membership benefits

Table of contents

As you can imagine many of PMP concepts can be applied for this 'project' of taking PMP exam - such as planning, risk management, costing and budgeting. I am also going to share few tips that can save you time, energy and heartburn during the time leading up to your exam.

So let's dive right in.

PMI Membership

Taking membership from Project Management Institute (www.pmi.org) is the first thing to do the moment you decide to take up PMP exam. Why?

Taking PMI membership has three distinct advantages -
1. You get your free, legal copy of latest PMBOK guide
2. You start becoming serious about the exam because now you have made a financial investment
3. You get a discount on the examination fee, and your overall cost of owning PMP certificate is reduced

The PMP beginner's guide explains nuances of getting PMI membership, and more. You can refer to the guide here.

Preparation

The suggested way by my seniors in the organization was to buy one of the well-known PMP books and then read PMBOK and that book one after the other at least 4-5 times, till I understood everything in it. This meant spending LOT of time reading, and re-reading even if I didn't get much in initial rounds.

As I started studying for the exam I realized that PMBOK wasn't one of the juiciest books you can read. Other books I researched about and bought were not all that great from a perspective of simplifying the subject. One book that came closest to the way I'd liked was Head First PMP - but I found it to be a bit convoluted from exam perspective.

Therefore, I decided to make my own PMP study notes.

My goals for this preparation were -
1. Get the PMP certificate with least time of overall study
2. Make sure what I learn for the exam will help me do my job better as a project manager

In short, **to learn the subject effortlessly and to be able to apply it on the job.** Both these goals meant that I make my notes with additional care (even if it took time to research concepts).

I had taken quite a few professional exams (before and during my Engineering study, Management study, for technical certifications and CSM certification). And during the course of these exams I had researched for and used effective study and note making techniques. "Why not use these techniques and make killer PMP notes" I thought to myself, "that I could then share with my friends who wanted to take up PMP exam as well".

With the above two goals and the raw inputs of my study notes PMExamSmartNotes.com blog was born.

Almost immediately I realized that I had an enormous responsibility now and my exam preparation was not anymore limited to what I would do if I were to prepare for just the exam alone.

I decided not to take up the exam until I finished the blog with all necessary notes, or else I might lose interest in completing it once I passed PMP. To add to this, PMBOK-5th edition based exam was just around the corner, and I wanted to be certified in the latest of the syllabus, plus, I wanted my notes on the blog to be relevant to PMP aspirants for a long time.

Research

PMBOK book touched upon many a concepts but not in detail (such as EMV, Critical Chain Method). On quite a few tools and techniques it only made a mention (QFD, quality theories, project selection criteria, and so on) but did not elaborate in a sense that I could understand application of these tools and techniques. As I started looking at sample PMP questions, it also became clearer to me

that many of the formula based questions were not covered in PMBOK (Point of Total Assumption, Cost of Quality, Future Value, Return On Investment and many more).

Hence PMBOK, a bunch of PMP books such as Rita, Head First and others, and areas uncovered by studying PMP sample questions and the INTERNET - became my inputs for the research and the output were my PMP study notes. These study lessons you will find on this blog have been prepared with painstaking research over the course of more than an year with about 4-6 hours of daily effort (that's over 2000 hours of research and blog development effort!). **You would be vastly benefited by making use of these blog lessons for your own PMP study, for they are the gist of everything out there, presented in a manner that is easier for the mind to grasp.**

When my PMP results came, the fact that I got 'Proficiency' level in three major areas - Planning, Execution, Monitoring & Controlling - served me well with this research effort.

Study Plan

First of all, you need to make sure to have a good study plan. You have seen this as one of the Study Principles in my PMP Blueprint.

By the way, if you haven't already I highly recommend you get your PMP Blueprint by [signing up on the right side/bottom of the blog](). This sets you on the right course of your journey to PMP certification. You'll also get tips for study and free resources as part of PMP Blueprint, so make sure you get yours now.

I pretty much spent all of my spare time for preparing and building this blog and studying for PMP. Yours may of course differ. However, consistency is the key. Even 1-2 hrs a day is good to start with. Consistency builds momentum.

Make sure you plan to give yourself at least 50 hrs of revision time (at about 4hrs per day) AND 1 week of sample tests time (at 4-6 hrs per day, more the better) right up to before the day of exam. If possible, take the week off from work before the exam.

Make it a habit to make your own study notes as you study. This practice helps your mind focus on the subject, and gives you the brain dump you need to create yours in the last week of the exam. More on this in just a sec.

My Recommendation for Study Resources

Do not choose too many study books and too many forum membership. This will distract you and wastes your valuable study time. Pick 1-2 good study resources and join just 1-2 good forums/community, that too only to clarify your doubts.

I would recommend the following -
1. **PMBOK** - this is the Bible. You cannot just afford to ignore this book. Read twice at least, and scan through once in the final week leading up to the exam
2. **Video series** - Research has proven that our brain latches on to the information much better via video mode than just reading or even listening. This has been my personal experience from preparing for any exam where I could get some video material. PMPrepCast by Cornelius Fichtner (affiliate link) is my tested and recommended resource on this one.
3. **One study resource book**. Like I said earlier PMESN.com (this blog) has all the relevant notes for the exam. You can just go through these, or choose to buy another study book of your choice. I am in the process of bringing out a study guide that is based on these notes and the missing areas/concepts/formulas covered from myriad of PMP sample test questions I have gone through. You could buy this when it comes out (slated for end of January-2014).

Join a good forum to get support for your own study. But be cautious not to waste your valuable study time in there. Forums are great place to get your PMP doubts clarified. My recommendation is to use them only for that purpose. Post your questions on forums in order to get your doubts clarified. And after passing your own exam go to forums to help others. Now a days I go to the forums to answer people's PMP doubts and questions.

Having said this, I'd invite you to join PMESN Facebook community, where you get a sample question a day, announcement on study resources, and notifications when study lessons are posted on the blog. Like the page to get notified. Participate in the community, win contests, learn from others, share your knowledge with others and get noticed amongst your peers.

PMP Exam Application

You would want to be prepared well for applying for PMP exam on www.pmi.org site. Although the steps are pretty simple, the core area is where you write about your professional experience.

Click here to understand step-by-step process of PMP Exam Application (with actual screenshots).
Click here to download the template referred in this guide.

Tip: Make sure you talk to your previous managers and get their latest contact information. Tell them that someone from PMI may call them to talk about your experience under them. You want PMI representative to hear inputs on the lines of what you have mentioned in your application. It is a good idea to share softcopy of your application. You can download this after you finish online application.

35hrs of project management education program a mandatory requirement for PMP exam. You need to have this before applying for the exam on PMI.org. I used and loved Cornelius Fitchner's PMPrepCast video series, and recommend you use the same if you like a resource for faster and simpler preparation. After two weeks of the purchase you can appear for their short 25 questions exam (you can take it several times until you pass) which entitles you for 35hr contact program certificate you can use to fill in your PMP Exam application.

Click here to grab your PMPrepCast (affiliate link*).

You are entitled for **18% discount** if you buy PMPrepCast along with Exam Simulator (which I recommend because sample tests give you a sense of real exam and passing good/tough simulated tests can make the real exam seem much simpler).

Further, use the coupon code **Jan14** to get another **10% discount** for PMESN blog readers! Moreover, forward your purchase receipt email to me to get my **250 difficult PMP Sample Questions ebook** as a thank-you bonus!

Be sure to clear your browser cache first.

* - affiliate link means that when you purchase the product through PMESN link I get a small commission, at no additional cost for you, that goes towards hosting and maintaining www.PMExamSmartNotes.com blog. Thanks in advance.
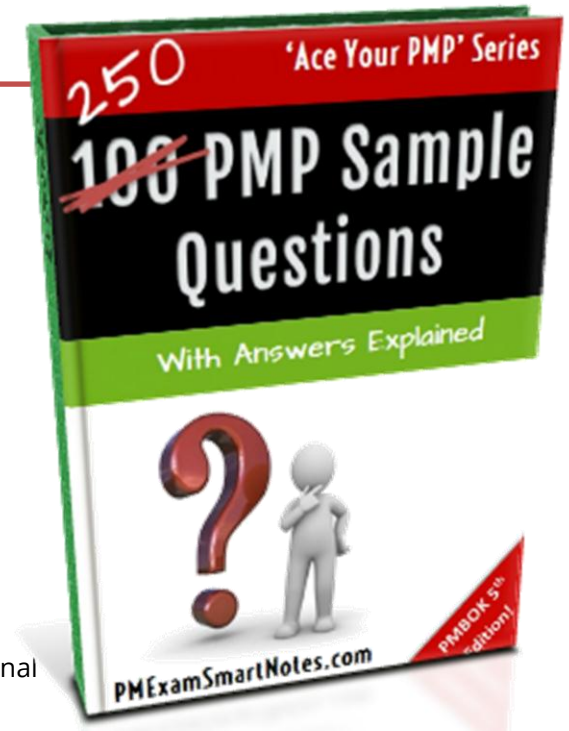
Scheduling the Exam

Once you apply for the PMP exam on PMI.org, you will get an email from them whether,
1. Your application is selected for the audit
2. You can go ahead and schedule for the exam at Prometric center

Audit

PMI randomly selects some of the applications for audit. Audit is the process where you are asked to send proof of your education and work experience. PMI may contact your manager(s), whose details you have provided while filling PMP exam application. If you shared your PMP exam application (you can download from your account at PMI.org) with them, it will prepare them to be in sync with the information in the application when they answer questions from PMI's representative.

Here's the FAQ page that answers questions related to the PMI's audit process.

Schedule Exam at Prometric site

You will need the Exam Eligibility ID from PMI you received via mail when applying at Prometric.com. You will have one-year eligibility period from this date to take up your exam. Make sure you read through exam cancellation/postpone policies and know the fees involved.

Scheduling for the exam, in my view, is the most critical step in your PMP journey.

Why am I making this bold statement?

I was pretty serious about PMP right from the beginning because I was building this blog in parallel to my preparation. Even then, I noticed that my preparation went into a higher gear, almost automatically, after I scheduled my exam slot with Prometric. Suddenly I

became more organized. I chalked out a study plan working backwards from the date of the exam. Since I had invested few hundred dollars by scheduling for the exam, it upped the ante somehow.

So do yourself a favor, and schedule for your exam AS SOON AS you get your email from PMI. You will be thankful to yourself for having done this. You will get this feeling as soon as you pass your PMP and come out of the exam center. Trust me on this. :)

The Week Before The Exam

I wrote earlier that you should plan to give yourself at least 50hrs of revision time (at about 4hrs per day) AND 1 week of sample tests time (spend at least 4-6hrs per day, more the better) right up to before the day of exam. Revision is very crucial. You will discover many misunderstandings and nuances of the subject during your revision.

If possible, take the week off from work before the exam. I know I am stating this for the second time in this post. That is because the week before your exam is very important for the preparation.

Make sure you do not eat out much (if you have to, don't try any "exotic" food) and avoid exposure to extreme temperature - basically do not do anything due to which you may fall sick. Get enough amount of sleep, especially on the previous night of the exam. You want to be fresh and relaxed during the exam and not want to be coughing and clearing your throat during the exam. By the way, as part of the pre-exam briefing they tell you that if candidate constantly makes any kind of sound/noise that disturbs others Prometric can ask them to leave the premises . :)

I did primarily these things in this 1-week period -
1. Start creating brain dump (more on this in a sec)
2. Scan through PMBOK
3. Take practice tests
4. Visit Prometric exam center

Create and Practice Brain-dump

Brain-dump is essentially a cheat sheet you create for yourself just BEFORE the exam.

What does this contain?
Anything (formula, names, things) that you find difficult to recall quickly - something that enables you to quickly answer a question on the exam.

Why is this necessary?
Because during the exam you get 15minutes to go through a tutorial that explains how exam interface works (it really doesn't take more than few minutes) and you can make use about 12-13 minutes from this to write down brain dump on the piece of paper given to you. During the exam if you need to use a formula, or names of phases a team goes through, or 7 basic quality tools, or the future value of project investment and so on, all that you do is refer to this brain dump and answer the question!

This is a neat trick that is perfectly legitimate. All you are doing is downloading important stuff from your brain on to a piece of paper so.

Tip: Make sure you start writing down brain-dump on your scratch paper when you are in the summary screen of this tutorial BEFORE clicking the 'End' button on the last screen. If you click on the 'End' button on the last screen, your tutorial time ends and exam begins!

Now, you can familiarize with the exam interface by taking a peek at it from this video!

Do not, I repeat, do not skip going through these instructions during the exam. You may miss a simple point here and it can cost you several marks. It's a risk you don't want to take. These two minutes are well spent.

Take Practice Tests

Practice tests prepare you for the exam like no other resource. They simulate a real exam and help you identify areas you need to study better, identify an approach you need to take to complete all 200 questions within 4 hours and help you manage your time on the exam well.

Again, if you ask for my recommendation, I'd suggest Cornelius's PMP Exam Simulator <affiliate link> (affiliate link), I got good help from this. This is not a must though. There are many free online tests available that you can take. But a professional product just makes it a point to get tough questions together and gives you bang for the buck you invest.

Tip: Make sure you practice calculations using the computer on your computer. During the exam you may or may not be supplied with a real calculator. You can save time if you are familiar with calculator program on your computer.

Scan PMBOK

It is essential to scan PMBOK in a methodical way to get the most out of it. Scan the following sections –
- Practice table 3-1 on page 61
- Go through data flow diagrams of each processes
- Run through whichever concept you find a need to revisit (EMV, Critical path, and so on)
- Glossary of Terms

Visit Prometric Center

This is hugely helpful step and you must take. Few days ahead of the exam, travel by car/bus/train or whatever means you are planning to travel to the exam center. Tell them when you have the exam, show the ID you are supposed to be showing on the day of exam, and ask about things you need to know about the exam.

My exam center was across the city and I drove down 3 days ahead of exam date. It took me quite a bit of asking around to locate the center and took over 2 hours to finally reach it. My city is notorious for traffic and driving aggression so I didn't want to take the risk of driving to the exam. Bus was the other option but it would take me over 3hrs to reach. I finally decided to take a taxi on the day of exam and cut down the travel time by an hour. I ended up reaching Prometric center couple of hours ahead of time.

Day of the Exam

Tip: Prometric does not allow you to use phone or laptop inside the study room there, so many it a point to carry physical book in case you have time to spend at the exam center.

Make absolutely sure to catch sufficient sleep on the previous night. Good amount of rest is very essential.

- In my case, I wasn't keeping well and couldn't sleep well the previous night. As a consequence I found it extremely hard to maintain focus through the exam - found myself reading even simplest of the questions 2-3 times to understand it thoroughly.

Wear something comfortable (nothing too tight), and multiple layers of clothing. Based on the temperature of the exam center you can take a layer of if required.

- I wasn't keeping very well and also wore just one layer of cloth (for some strange reason), making it much more harder to concentrate on the exam while I was shivering under the AC.

Travel well in advance to reach the exam center ahead of time. You don't want to get stuck in traffic, at security check, in line for the elevator, or any other unforeseen circumstances.

- I reached almost two hours early, and thought I mitigated the risk. However, the center in-charge said that I couldn't take my laptop inside for study. This was a 'secondary risk'! I mitigated it by sitting outside and studying for an hour.

Lessons Learned

PMP exam can be an eye-opening experience. Just kidding ☺. I hope that it will be a pleasant one for you (to make it so is one of the goals of this blog). So learn from others' mistakes.

Lesson 1: Do not ignore any Process Group or Knowledge Areas

While I aced the major-3 process groups Planning, Executing, Monitoring and Controlling ('Proficiency' level), the other two weren't so good. Knowing only 4 out of 47 processes fall in these two process groups, it feels kind of stupid! Make sure you do not ignore Initiating and Closing process groups just because they have just 2 processes each. Practice tests too have less number of questions in them, so you want to give special focus to these two.

Lesson 2: Practice at least a 1000 unique PMP sample exam questions

That's 5 practice tests. Practice Makes Perfect (acronym is 'PMP'!) - this is sooo true. You will find yourself discovering new areas to focus while taking sample tests. So get yourself a good resource like PM Exam Simulator, and also take any free practice tests available on the internet.

Tip: Now that we are using PMBOK-5th edition, many of free online practice tests contain questions from PMBOK-4th edition. Do not get confused by these. Identify what is old and what is new, and the moment you know a question is of PMBOK-4th edition, skip it. You may want to understand what exactly has changed from PMBOK-4 to PMBOK-5 by reading this post.

Although real exam needs you to score more than 61% from 175 questions (excluding 25 pre-test questions from 200) you will want to aim higher for practice tests. Usual benchmark is 80%. If you can consistently cross 80% in practice tests, you can be reasonably confident. Again, make sure you take PMBOK-5 related practice tests so your score is a realistic reflection of your preparedness. Just know that getting above 80% in practice tests is not a guarantee that one will pass the real exam. Most practice tests put this in bold letters. The other way around can be true as well, but you don't want to take chances. :)

There are different approaches one can take to answer the questions.

This is what I took -
   a. **Step #1:** Go through all 200 questions answering only easy and simple ones. Mark all questions requiring calculation. Mark all lengthy questions. Mark all tough questions. If you have taken some time to read a question and it appears to you that you can answer it, then just go ahead and answer. Mark a question if you are not too sure of the answer you have selected. Make sure you do not leave too many (not more than 25-30, ideally) questions marked. I backed myself to be done with step 1 in the first 2.5hrs.

b. **Step #2:** Go through all unanswered questions. Do the calculations. Make sure you mark an answer even if you are not sure. There are no negative marks, and you stand 25% of getting the answer right! Also, make sure you unmark each answered question to help during step#3.

c. **Step #3:** Run through remaining marked questions and answer them. If you are not sure, may be the very first answer you marked is correct (go with your instinct). Leave it at that.

My step #1 itself took about 3.5 hrs! Thankfully I had only about 12 unanswered questions, so step #2 took about 27 minutes, and there wasn't much time left for step #3 (about 4-5 questions). I made sure I answered all questions.

Bottom line: See what approach works for you and stick to it. Take at least one of 4hr practice test using exactly this approach. Know that your plan may not work in the end, but you'd do much better than not having planned at all. :)

Lesson 3: Plan well for the last week before the exam

This is the important period. You should be doing only practice tests, studying up newly discovered areas/formulas, scanning PMBOK and creating brain-dump. If possible, do not watch TV, read newspaper or socialize during this last week.

Lesson 4: Stay relaxed no matter what happens

Per Murphy's law things can do wrong. However, make it a point to stay calm and keep your mind clear and relaxed throughout day of the exam. Tell yourself that your will do very well at the exam.

Lesson 5: Hydrate yourself well on the day of exam

This is essential because lack of fluid can make it hard to focus. They won't allow you to take water bottle inside the exam. If you want to take a break for food or water, it will be un-scheduled break (timer on the screen will be running). And each time you go out of the room you will have to go through frisking before entering - this can take away as much as 4-5 minutes. That's the time taken to answer 3-4 questions! In my case I found myself wanting to go to the rest room within first 45minutes! I didn't want to waste any minutes so sat through the 4hr exam without a break. :)

Moral of the story?

Sip enough water throughout the day but do not over drink so as to necessitate a rest-room break during the exam!

Lesson 6: Manage your time well during the exam

Keep an eye on the timer on the monitor. Have some milestones of how many questions you should have answered every half an hour. May be you want to be on question number 90 or more in first hour, 175 or so at the end of second hour, and finish your first round in the first 2.5 hrs. Whatever it is, have some kind of milestones, this will help you pace your exam well.

Tip: Plan to complete your exam within about 3hr 45minutes. This is because while everyone is supposed to start the exam at the same time, in reality this doesn't happen. Based on when someone actually started the exam and/or how long they took for the initial tutorial, people will start completing exam while you may be at the fag-end of yours. When they do, there will be some noise around, staff explaining them how to end the exam or take the survey. This can distract you.

Celebrate!

When you finish your exam, it is time to celebrate! Take your loved ones out for dinner, or movie or picnic or something that makes them and you happy. Show gratitude for their support. Make sure to give your PMP examination journey a finish worthy of the efforts you put in it!

Bonus

As a bonus, let me share with you my secret to master PMBOK in the shortest time -

This is a 2-step process. If you are just starting now dedicate one hour every day to do this. In next 2 weeks, even if you did not study anything else but this from PMBOK you will have spent 15hrs and in return you will have mastered the CORE of PMBOK. Learning everything else such as specifics of tools and techniques becomes a walk in the park.

There is only one precondition for this -
You will spend this one hour with absolutely No Distraction and with Complete Focus.

Step 1: Open a spreadsheet and type table 3-1 from page 61
This should take about 10 minutes, but do not do this mechanically. Understand the sequence of processes and make a mental note of which process group and knowledge area each process falls in.

Step 2: Go through ITTO and Data Flow Diagram given at the beginning of every process
Understand where the inputs are coming from and where outputs are going into. Let your brain internalize this. Allow it to make connections.

Go ahead, commit yourself to this. If exam date is not already closing in dedicate next 1week or 2 weeks (based on how much of PMP study you have already done) for this exercise. Then write to me about your experience.

That's about it!

Passing PMP is not all that difficult as it has been made out to be, it boils down to managing your time well and being able to focus during 4hrs. The questions are worded to cause confusion so understand short as well as lengthy questions and take time to choose the BEST answer out of given alternatives.

There are several types of questions and specific ways to tackle them, I will write about them in a future post.

I know this post has been longer than usual but I hope you have noted few pointers for your own exam preparation, and I thank you for being such a wonderful reader and supporter of PMESN blog.

If you need any information don't hesitate to shoot a mail to shiv-at-pmexamsmartnotes-dot-com, I respond to all my mails as soon as I can (usually within 24hrs). If there is something urgent do ping me on Skype, my ID is shivshanker.shenoy

If you find this post useful, please share with your friends by using Social media share buttons on the blog.

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About Shiv

Shiv has been helping software product companies in enterprise, web and mobile domains build products, which is to say to build their Intellectual Property, for over 15 years. He works with start-ups to conceptualize product idea, build prototypes and help take products to 1.0 and beyond. He is a passionate techno-manager, blogger and painter.

Shiv has taken upon himself to help working professional that are hard pressed for time sail through PMP and CAPM project management certification courses, by turning his own exam notes into easily understandable, scientifically prepared simplified content that he publishes on the blog PMExamSmartNotes.com

Connect with Shiv at LinkedIn and on PMESN at Facebook, Google+ and Twitter.