Top Tips for a Successful PMP Exam Experience

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So, you have decided, or are thinking about, getting your Project Management Professional (PMP) certification, good on you! It is challenging to attain this certification. Most people reflect back on their achievement recalling that it was a very difficult, albeit a very rewarding journey. This article will look at some considerations and techniques that, when going down this road, can help you achieve your certification.

Preparation

Pace yourself. You are about to run a marathon, both on the day of the exam as well as in preparation for the day. Good marathoners know their individual pace, how to set and monitor it. Time yourself on the practice exams to get comfortable with your pace and develop the habit of being aware of the time. With 200 questions over 4 hours you have to answer at least 50 questions per hour. Check where you are at the end of each hour. Also, check the time at 50, 100, and 150 questions. It is just like checking key milestones in a project to gauge progress.

Study and review, a lot. The more you expose your brain to the material, the more your brain will dedicate neural resources to it. Review the materials frequently and on a regular basis. Create a realistic study plan for yourself and stick to it. Multiple short study periods are more effective than the same amount of time spent all in one sitting. Also, use at least two different resources. Relying upon only one resource, you will get used to their style and will struggle when answering questions

written in an unfamiliar style. Leveraging multiple practice exams from different sources will develop flexibility so as not to be uncomfortable with the writing style when answering the real questions.

Select the Correct Answer
RTFQ/RTFA.

Read the FULL question, read the FULL answer – make sure you are answering the question they are asking, not the one you created by "finishing the sentence". Further, while answer "A" may be correct, answers "B", "C" or "D" may be more correct. Passing the exam is based on selecting the most correct answer. Also watch out for those killer words; BUT, EXCEPT, ONLY, ALL, and MUST. When reading the answers and noticing that there are three "right" choices and only one "wrong" choice; double check for a "not" in the question. When you have a "not" question, confirm the three "right" choices and pick the answer remaining.

Avoid Absolutes.

Answers that are absolute, such as "always" or "must", are typically the incorrect response. Keep in mind that the world of managing projects is very situational. What is correct in one situation is not in another. An adjusted approach is often called for to reduce conflict and to increase collaboration. A key skill for PMs is to remain flexible, go with the flow and adapt to the changing needs of our clients. PMI will be looking for that in your answers.

Eliminate the Obvious.
With four choices, there are often one or two that are obviously wrong. Look first for the obviously wrong answers (refer to the above two rules). Now there are only two possible answers and the odds of a correct guess have doubled. There is no penalty for a wrong answer so even if it is a guess, then guess. Questions not answered are 100% wrong. A guess has a 25% chance of being correct while a question with two "obvious wrong" answers eliminated has a 50% chance.

The answer is in the form of a question. The answer to a question with which you are struggling may appear in a later question (same topic, different perspective). Don't be afraid to mark a question for review and come back to it. Remain cognisant of your timing though, and that an unanswered question is 100% wrong. Answer all questions and mark those that need to be reviewed. Worst case scenario is that there is not enough time to review and some of the questions are, well, guesses.

"Brain Dump".
Before the exam starts, write down all the formulas and any other reminders that are relevant to you, this will help you relax and concentrate on understanding the question. While the focus of the exam is understanding and not memorization, there is some memorization required. A great strategy is to create and practice doing a brain dump of those formulas and concepts that need to be memorized. Practice doing the brain dump as a part of your preparation, remember good practice makes for a good performance.

Put it to the 'Test'
With these strategies in mind, let's take a look at a sample question:

Q)   While planning a major IT project, your team has now decided that the project schedule is complete. They can continue on to generate other important documents during the life span of the project. All of the following documents may be generated by a project schedule except:

a)   Resource Utilization Histograms
b)   Cash Flow Forecasts
c)   Work Breakdown Structure
d)   Performance Measurement Baseline

Reading the full question it is obvious the last sentence is the real question and there is a watch word: "except". The word "may" is also key. The question is asking which documents could come from a project schedule, not all projects will go to that level. While all four choices are related to the project schedule, "c" is used earlier in the process that leads to a schedule while "a", "b" and "d" are artifacts that require a schedule to be generated.

Remember, you are preparing for a performance. As all good performers do, *rehearse*. All good performers practice and prepare for their performance. Practice what you are going to do on the day: pacing, RTFQ/RTFA, eliminating the obvious, looking for the answer in other questions, and doing the brain dump. Most PMP candidates have been in professional life for a number of years; hence exam-writing skills have faded. Brush up on those exam-writing skills, practice and prepare for your award-winning performance.

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