

The Project Engineer's Guide to Becoming a Project Executive

How to fast-track your career in the construction industry and other career milestones





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Introduction

So you've graduated college and hung your engineering degree on the wall of your first postgraduate apartment. How does a career in construction sound?

Construction is a \$10 trillion global industry and business is booming. Young professionals should also consider the significant labor shortage construction teams are experiencing across the world. This means companies are struggling to find talent to meet this high demand. This means finding a career in construction should have great potential for most job seekers. It's clear there are plenty of opportunities to kick-start a career in the field.

For those interested in working in construction, your career path can take you from project engineer—an entry-level job that exposes you to all the aspects of building—all the way up to the executive suite.

Here, we explore the steps required to move from project engineer to project manager to project executive and, finally, to vice president. We will overview the requirements and duties involved in each position, how long you can expect to remain in each role before advancing and offer some other tips for maximizing your opportunities so that you can put your career on the fast track.





What is a project engineer?

In every industry, you have to start somewhere. For someone interested in climbing the ladder in construction—both literally and figuratively—that “somewhere” can be the job of project engineer (PE).

PEs manage the day-to-day work on a construction site. PEs liaise with clients to determine their needs for a project, then translate those needs into a series of achievable goals within a certain time frame. Once a project is up and running, the PE is on site every day to troubleshoot problems, oversee safety, procure materials, make sure local building codes are adhered to and manage any one of a thousand other items that may pop up during the course of a build.

Due to the sometimes physical nature of the work and the number of minutiae they deal with, project engineering is a great job for someone young who wants to get a foot in the door of the industry. Nonetheless, a PE takes on a great deal of responsibility while learning every detail of carrying a project from conception to completion. This is where you acquire the base of knowledge to advance your career upon.

PEs are often hired right out of college and spend five to 10 years in the role. During that time, they may advance to senior PE. A senior PE takes on added responsibilities such as handling requests for information (RFIs) or gathering submittals of shop drawings and other plans.





PlanGrid product strategist Kevin Cheng worked in the construction industry for over 12 years, reaching the position of senior project manager. He explains why it can take up to a decade to move up from project engineer to project manager:

"People often get stuck as a senior PE because the people skills take longer to learn. You have to be able to drive these important conversations and lead important meetings with owners. In order to move upward, these soft skills are important to develop. To climb the ladder quickly, you have to find ways to train yourself on these people skills."

In other words, as important as it is to learn about the technical aspects of building, you will go nowhere if you can't figure out how to collaborate with the people performing the work. For a young professional who just spent their college years studying engineering, this can take some time.

Nevertheless, once you have developed those soft people skills, you are ready for the next step up.





What is a project manager?

Here is a bit of irony. Once you have mastered soft people skills, you will move into a job where you work less with people and more with spreadsheets: project manager (PM).

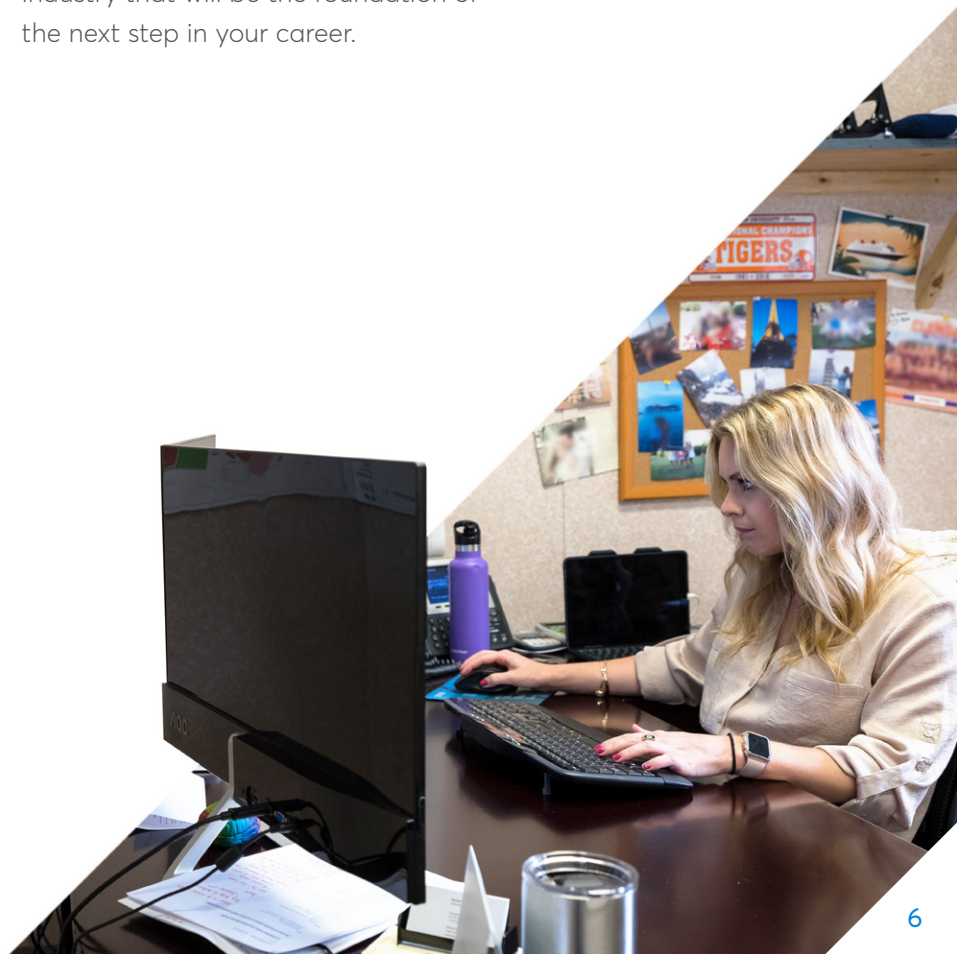
The simplest way to think of the difference between being a PE and a PM is that the PM structures the project and the PE executes his vision. The two positions complement each other and work in tandem to bring a project in on time and on budget.

A PM is responsible for the overall budget of a project, procuring resources, hiring subcontractors and work crews, obtaining work permits and keeping everything on schedule. Most of the time, a PM works in the office or project trailer and may oversee several projects at once.

Becoming a PM also requires an understanding of potential legal and financial risks to the company you work for. Knowing these risks helps you set and manage a client's expectations without exposing yourself or your company to liabilities.

After a few years, you may expect to move up to senior PM. This is where developing those soft people skills will pay off. A promotion to senior PM comes from showing an ability to manage multiple teams, navigate relationships and contract disputes with both clients and subcontractors and delegate responsibility without losing efficiency.

Most importantly, you will have forged relationships within the construction industry that will be the foundation of the next step in your career.





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“When I was looking to get out of engineering, I had somebody who’s a mentor to me say, ‘I think you should look at being a project manager in construction.’ Even though I didn’t know construction, he told me, ‘Don’t worry. They’ll teach you.’”

– **Kara Hermann**
Project Manager at Sprig Electric





What is a project executive?

By this point, you may have been working in construction for 15 years—maybe longer. Having driven your share of projects to completion, there are many clients who either want to hire you again or who will recommend you and your company to others. You have a sense of what it takes to be successful in the industry and have ideas for how to grow your business.

You will need everything you've already learned and more when you move up to project executive (PX).

A PX's job is to look at the bigger picture. How is your company positioned in the marketplace? What will it take to maintain and expand the business? What does the future look like?

Being a PX requires a combination of construction savvy and business development mindsets. In this job, you are overseeing projects and making sure they are staying within budget. You are managing clients and interceding when there are issues or they become unhappy. Furthermore, you're constantly analyzing and taking learnings from ongoing projects to apply them to new ones.

At the same time, you are looking to drum up new business for your company. As a PM you may have worked with a client multiple times and developed such a good relationship that they will think of your company first for new projects. As a PX, leveraging and maintaining those relationships is critical to moving your career forward.





What is a vice president of operations?

Much like a PX, the VP of operations manages multiple teams and clients, but they are now responsible for doing this across an entire division. Vice presidents are strategically thinking about the company's future. In this role, you are creating and implementing plans to improve project efficiency while keeping the company profitable. You are responsible for setting and reaching performance goals across the entire company while making sure everyone is held accountable for delivering on contracts.

At the same time, you are ensuring the company is following safety guidelines and observing all governmental regulations. This requires a constant evaluation of all the company's processes and thinking actively about improvements.

You are doing all this while evaluating opportunities for new business and keeping the company from stretching itself too thin (and yourself along with it).





How do you fast-track promotion?

Once you have decided to pursue a career in the construction industry, you might be anxious to get promoted as fast as possible. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts. But with focus, there are strategies you can pursue and initiatives to take each step of the way that showcase your commitment to your career.

Let's start with your work as a PE. This is the "growing up phase," when you are learning every aspect of how something actually gets built. A good strategy is to try to get put onto projects that expose you to a wide variety of the different trades you need to learn. If possible, try to get involved in working on the MEP (mechanical, engineering and plumbing) part of a project. This will give you more face time with subcontractors and allow you to learn more about what they do.

When you move up to senior PE, offer to mentor the more junior PEs. That will help you develop those soft people skills you need to move up to PM. You will also benefit from having a relationship with the PEs you previously mentored after you have moved up to PM and are working as their boss.

Another good strategy to consider is volunteering to take meeting minutes when the executives and managers above you are reviewing the progress on a project.



Kevin Cheng explains:

"Nobody wants to do meeting minutes. But, if you offer to join owners' meetings and take the minutes, you get exposure to senior-level conversations that you don't get to hear otherwise. You're essentially shadowing PMs and PXs when you're taking notes."

It never hurts to show your bosses you are happy to do some grunt work if it means a chance to learn more about the business.

Once you have moved up to PM and are working more directly with clients, there are two ways to build on those relationships to help you quickly move up to senior PM and PX.



According to Grace Link, project manager at Link Construction Group, "Ask as many questions as you can about how things are put together. The people you ask love to talk about their work and don't mind explaining things to you. You'd be amazed at how much knowledge you can gain from your field guys, supers and subcontractors."

One way is to work with the same client on several projects and build a good relationship. Or better yet, multiple relationships. As Cheng says, "Once you reach this level, you aren't judged for your work. You are judged for your reputation and references."

When clients get to know you and you have proven to deliver quality work, convince them to send new RFPs your way before taking them out for bids. If you can sole-source new projects and sidestep the RFP process, even better. This is the second hustle that moves you up: your ability to solicit work from clients. Once you prove your worth at drumming up new business, you will quickly get bumped up to PX.





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“There's no substitute for hard work, but you also have to genuinely care about people and be a good person. It's not only working hard, but it's caring about the people that you're working with.”

– **Travis Schultz**
ENR Top 400 Project Executive





Build the Road Map to Success

There is no single way to advance your career in the construction industry and there are certainly no shortcuts to take. Fortunately, there is a road map to follow that makes moving up the career ladder an achievable goal. By adopting the right strategies, you can learn every facet of the construction business—from initial concept to final project handover—which will show those above you what you bring to the table.

Above all else, even when focused on the task in front of you, make sure you are keeping your eyes on the bigger picture. The construction industry is ever-changing and evolving. Companies will always be on the lookout for strategies that will improve their efficiency while increasing profits. The person who understands the business at both a macro and micro level—while maintaining strong relationships with clients—will build value for any company they work for, not to mention for themselves.





See a Live Demo

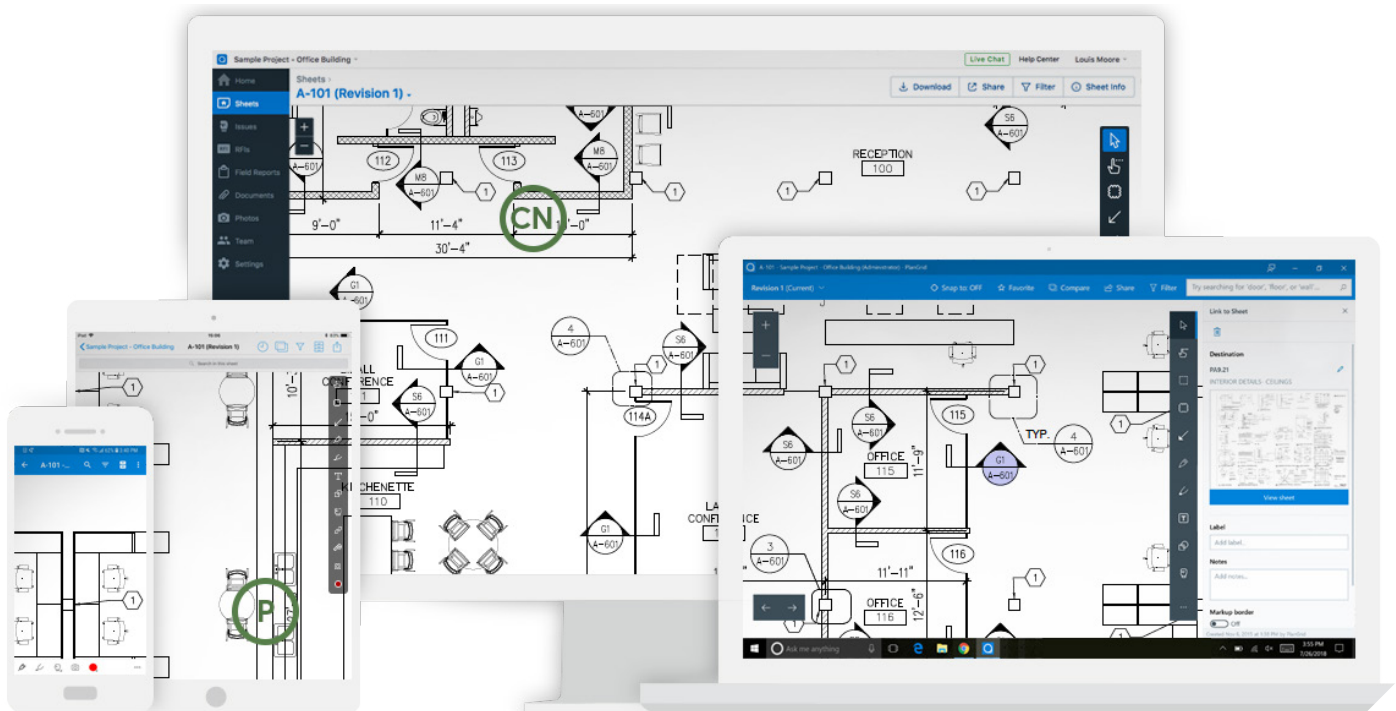
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PlanGrid is construction productivity software used on more than 1 million projects across 90 countries. Our software helps teams collaborate more efficiently with access to an intelligent record set on any device.





Used on more than 1,000,000 projects around the world, PlanGrid is the first construction productivity software that allows contractors and owners in commercial, heavy civil, and other industries to collaborate, collect, and share project information from any desktop or mobile device through the entire project lifecycle.

PlanGrid increases project efficiency by streamlining document management, providing construction teams with easy access to all project information from any device, and enabling seamless collaboration within teams.

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