

# Career of the European project manager

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## Streszczenie

**Cel:** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie charakteru kariery zawodowej menadżera projektów europejskich.

**Materiał i metody:** W badanie miało charakter jakościowy. Celem badania było poznanie przebiegu kariery zawodowej i opinii kierowników projektów UE na temat ewolucji ich kariery. Podczas wywiadu poruszano trzy główne obszary tematyczne:

1. Początek kariery menadżera projektów EU?
2. Rozwój kariery menadżera projektów EU?
3. Doświadczenie do przekazania osobom planującym karierę w dziedzinie zarządzania projektami UE?

Badania przeprowadzono wśród 100 osób, które pełniły funkcję kierownika projektu finansowanego ze środków UE w ramach perspektywy finansowej 2007-2013 i 2014-2020.

Badania przeprowadzono w okresie 01-09.2018 roku metodą wywiadu.

**Wyniki:** Wśród badanych 60% stanowiły osoby, które pracowały w instytucjach publicznych i zostały skierowane na szkolenia w latach 90 – tych XX wieku związane z transformacją ustrojową i wdrażanymi w Polsce reformami i programami pomocowymi realizowanymi przez Bank Światowy oraz programami przedakcesyjnymi przygotowującymi Polskę do włączenia do struktur wspólnoty europejskiej. Osoby te pracowały jako specjaliści, eksperci, pracownicy administracyjni w projektach zdobywając doświadczenie. Zdobyte doświadczenie i wiedza powoduje, że kontynuują oni swoją karierę realizując projekty finansowane ze środków UE. Osoby które od początku swojej kariery pracowały przy realizacji projektów tego typu stanowiły 9% badanych. Większość badanych (77%) zanim zostało kierownikiem projektu uczestniczyło w realizacji 4-6 projektów wykonując zadania administracyjne. Natomiast 18% badanych stanowisko to uzyskało już po realizacji 2-3 projektów a 5% badanych zostało kierownikiem projektu nie mając wcześniej takiego doświadczenia.

**Wnioski:** Wyniki badań wskazują, że kariera zawodowa kierownika projektów europejskich nie jest jednoznaczna i często jest dziełem przypadku. Częściowo wiąże to się ze specyfiką Polski związaną z procesami transformacji ustrojowej i gospodarczej. Tworzenie tego typu stanowisk pracy nasiliło się w konsekwencji wstąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kierownik, kariera zawodowa, projekt

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## Introduction

The period of transformation and adaptation of the Polish economy and entry into the structures of the European Union caused many changes, which resulted in the creation of careers of people involved in managing projects financed primarily from pre-accession funds, and then after joining the EU structures of the European fund. The management of projects financed from EU funds required and requires continuous improvement of competences in this area. One of the forms offered by universities were postgraduate studies, however, many people started working as a European project manager without formal preparation and used their management knowledge and experience gained in other areas. These people also undertook a continuous self-education process and participated in socialist courses and

training. The professional career of these people has been associated with the management of projects including EU-funded projects for many years and they have extensive experience in this area.

The aim of the study is to present the nature and specificity of the professional career of European project managers.

### **Career - conceptual range, classifications, concepts**

In the literature of the subject, the concept of professional career is not unambiguous, and the definitions presented emphasize various aspects of this concept. The word career comes from French - *carriere* and at the beginning it was explained as a road or a racetrack [5]. However, as the author often observes, a frequent use of this word led to a fairly large extension of its meaning.

Career is a sequence of professional actions they take and positions they do throughout their lives [13]. Koszałka [11] in his reflections on the concept of career points out that contemporary career definitions contain the following common elements: they emphasize the possession of the individual, consist of subjective and objective elements, the sequence of professional and non-professional experiences, and include various components within their reach or employment results. A broad analysis of the concept of professional career was made by Pikuła [20], indicating that the problem with defining it results from the fact that the issue of professional development of employees is the subject of research by scientists from many fields. The author also conducted his own research, based on which he states that professional career is perceived through the prism of work in various places (workplaces, offices, schools) and in various positions. In addition, the respondents associate a professional career with getting higher and higher professional positions thanks to their own mobility.

Smolbik-Barley [21] defines a career as a process of developing knowledge and skills, shaping attitudes, personal qualities, a system of values and motivating an individual in order to increase their value on the labour market and ensure employability.

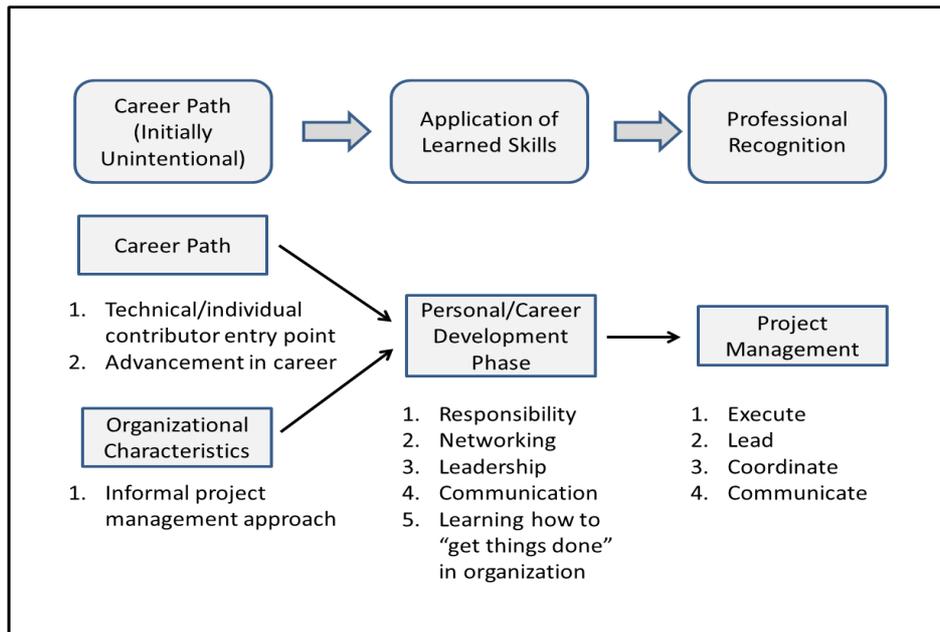


Figure 1. Project manager career path conceptual framework.  
Source: (Earnhardt, Richardson, Marion, 2015, p. 105)

Processes in the economy such as globalization, international competitiveness, new technologies and the functioning of the individual in a turbulent environment make the career go beyond the traditional framework [10].

Piekarska [18] in her literature of research drew attention to the emerging changes in the course and understanding of her career, related to going beyond the organization, situational status, determination and subjective defining of turning points, treating her own competences as "goods for sale".

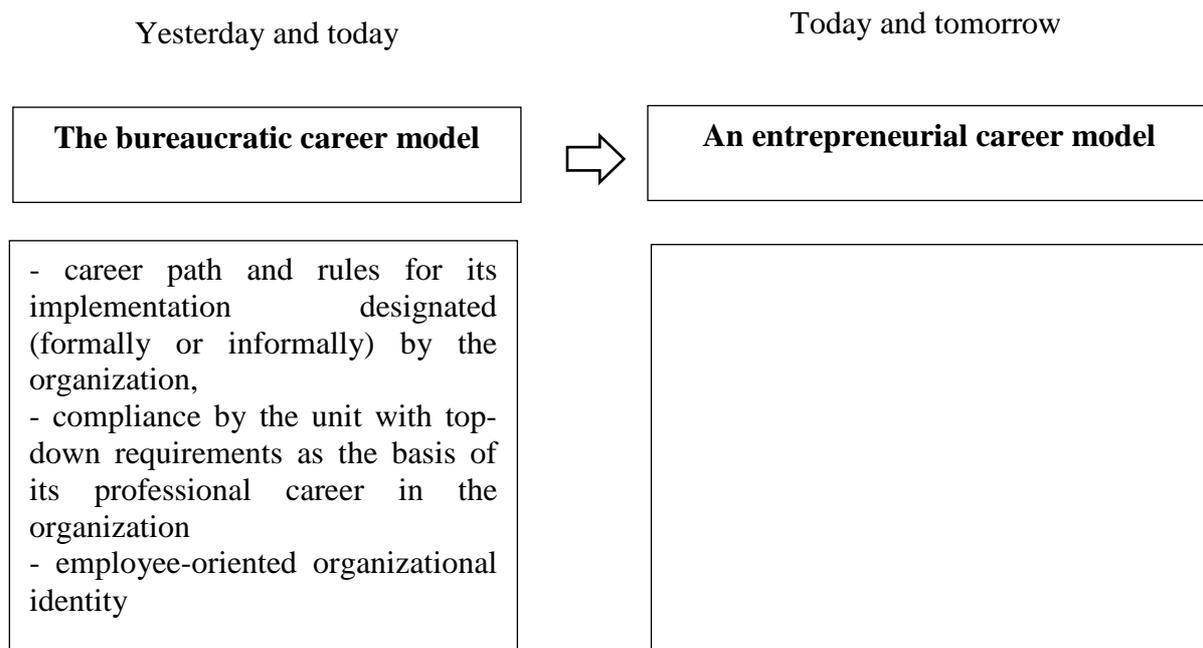


Figure 2. Models of pursuing a professional career  
Source: (Bohdziewicz, 2010, p. 42)

According to Myszka [17], new career models such as a career without boundaries and a prosthetic career come, from individual career management by the unit, not organization, because it is influenced by experience gained in various companies and institutions.

A comparison of the traditional and contemporary career model is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A traditional and contemporary career model

<b>Specification</b>	<b>Traditional career</b>	<b>Modern career</b>
General linear	characteristics, predictable stable (full-time job for life), most often in one company, cliches of promotions variable	(transitional, temporary, spiral), elastic, hardly predictable, individualized
Responsibility for the course and career development	organisation and partly employee	employee - "owner of career capital "
Type of relationship between a unit and organization	dependency	subjective - transactional
Forming identity;	organizational	professional
Key attitudes	reactive attitudes	proactive attitude
Reward and motivation system	associated with the type and features of a job	associated with value, a unit contributes to an organisation
Career Development	climbing up career ladder, promotion mainly vertical, education - the key to a career	continuous personal and professional development, promotion vertical and horizontal, building your own career capital and reputation
Acceptance of	Mobility	low high
Balance work-life	clear division into professional life and private, career at the expense of family life	career is perceived through private and social context of life of the individual
Limitations	related to age	related to learning

Source: (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2015, p. 58)

Career without borders is a professional career based on flexible forms of employment and is implemented on the basis of individual competence capital, which is the basic asset of an individual on the labour market [2]. It is characterised by transactionality and short-termness, and the individual negotiates his terms of employment with the organisation in his / her own way, guided by independence and possessed abilities and skills [21], the employee

often moves, changes the employer, the value becomes permanent employment, but the professional attractiveness of the employee and the readiness of employers to take advantage of his qualifications [12].

Career variable, so called protean career, a lifelong professional career and a sequence of acquired experience and the process of accumulating knowledge and professional skills. An important aspect in the implementation of this type of career is the individual's acquisition of professional identity, that is, perceiving oneself in terms of profession, not in terms of affiliation to an organisation, and high adaptability [22].

Another type of career is post-corporate career, which Miś thinks [15] is accidental and leads to uncertainty, as well as lack of trust and stability. The author indicates that it is typical for people who want to work until late, but they are forced to leave the organisation / corporation immediately after reaching the retirement age. Nowadays voluntary conscious departure from corporations is increasingly observed in order to build the future based on people's own unfulfilled dreams.

Kaleidoscopic career in literature is compared to a kaleidoscope. As part of this career, changes in priorities take place as quickly as in a kaleidoscope where countless numbers of designs and forms are created [14], [10].

Piekarska [19] concludes from the conducted research that young people perceive the non-linear nature of their careers as pro-market, pro-employment, in contrast to traditional forms of running professional paths considered inadequate in relation to the requirements of the modern market.

### **Project leader**

Although "project management" has evolved into a recognised profession, the paths to profession and development in the profession have little-known structure. For many scientists, project management was and still is an "accidental job" [4].

The project manager is broadly defined as the person running specific projects on a large scale in the company, doing everything from ensuring transparency in the field of work, to bringing on the market and education of other people necessary for the project, managing the dates and budgets related to the project. Project managers work closely with people from all levels and departments to help coordinate the efficient and accurate flow of information between all stakeholders of the project [9]. The role of the project manager is crucial to the success of any project, regardless of its scope, budget and duration [13].

The qualifications of project managers and their motivation to manage project teams are an important aspect. These factors and ensuring development opportunities mean that managers responsible for projects are an asset of the organisation [7].

Arendse's research [1] has shown that the necessary behavioural skills that a project manager should have include effective communication, reliability, the ability to motivate and indicate the right course of action. However, Moura, Janes Carneiro, Diniz [16] in their research showed that the personal characteristics of a project manager such as knowledge, attitudes and skills have a significant impact and partly affect the project results.

According to Kalinova (2008), the project manager should possess the competencies presented in Table 2. An important aspect is the development of the skills of project managers. Earnhardt, Richardson, Marion [6] in their research showed that project managers above all gain leadership skills through on-the-job training. Based on these research results, the authors conclude that project leadership can be learned to a certain extent through experience and training. In addition, the authors found that personality plays a certain role in the project leader's leadership traits and such skills as responsibility, communication, initiative and readiness for adaptation and change are important skills for the project leader.

Table 1 Final portfolio of project manager competences

Table 2 Portfolio of project manager competences

Field of competence	Managerial competence	Description / Characteristics
Customer orientation	Customer orientation	The project manager proving this competence increases the value of the company on the basis of its understanding of customers and market on which it operates, and on the basis of the quality of the services provided by him. He knows his customers, competitors, suppliers and regulatory environment and knows how to approach them.
Enterprise	Orientation to target	The project manager proving this competence thinks in the context of corporate, long-term operation of the company. Strategic thinking may be applied to a function or a process, product and market, a part of the company or the whole company. This competence requires the ability to engage in complex thinking, including analytical and conceptual skills. /
	Change management	The project manager proving this competence endeavours through change to improve and develop the company with the involvement of people, with the aim of transforming the company in accordance with new challenges.
Leadership	Behaviour in accordance with corporate values korporacyjnymi	The project manager with this competence proves the compliance of words and acts, which is manifested by the consistency between what he says and what he does. He is identified and fights for the maintenance of corporate values and is able to take risks in their defence.
	Development of team	The project manager proving this competence wishes to develop the abilities of others. He is highly motivated by the

	Members	possibility of influencing the career and development of others.
	Team management	The project manager proving this competence is able to concentrate, guide and build effective teams. This competence includes the ability to manage cross-functional, cross-corporate or project teams, as well as teams in the line structure.
Effectiveness	Cooperation	The project manager proving this competence is motivated to work with colleagues, partners and others on the fulfilment of corporate objectives.
	Development orientation	The project manager proving this competence participates in the achievement of expected results and continuous improvement.

Source: (Kalinová, 2008, p. 33)

Rarely does the career of project management begin within the framework of the learned profession, because a typical career results from successive stages of career development in the industry [13].

### Research results

The study was of qualitative character. The aim of the study was to learn about the career development and opinions of EU project managers on the evolution of their careers. During the interview, apart from demographic data, three main thematic areas were discussed:

1. The beginning of the EU project manager's career?
2. Career development of the EU project manager?
3. Experience to provide people planning a career in the field of EU project management?

The research was carried out among 100 people, who were the project managers financed from EU funds under the financial perspective 2007-2013 and the 2014-2020 outlook.

The research was carried out in the period from 01-09/2018 using the interview method.

Basic demographic data characterising participants of the study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic data of respondents

	Data	Own research N-100
Sex	Women	10.0%
	Men	90,0%
Age	The average age	46 years
	Over 45 years	49.0%
	35-44 years	46.0%
	Under 35 years	5.0%
Place of employment	podlaskie	25.0%
	warmińsko-mazurskie	25.0%
	mazowieckie	50.0%
Education	Secondary education	4.0%
	Undergraduate	20%
	Master / PhD	76.0%
Completed field of study	Management	14.0%
	Economics	36.0%

	Humanistic	10.0%
	Physics	0.0%
	Computer Science	8.0%
	Other not related to work	32.0%
Size of company	Small	72.0%
	Average	28.0%
	High	0.0%

Source: own research

A small percentage of respondents (9%) since the beginning of their professional career have implemented tasks related to the management of projects financed from the EU. They were purposely employed to carry out a project financed by EU funds just after graduation. With each successive project, they gained experience and climbed in the hierarchy of subsequent project teams. These people are involved in the preparation of applications for co-financing and implementation of projects performing management functions in these projects.

Among the respondents, 60% were people who worked in public institutions and were directed to trainings in the 1990s, which were related to political transformation and they implemented reforms and aid programs realised by the World Bank and pre-accession programs preparing Poland for inclusion in structures of the European community. These people gained experience working as specialists, experts, administrative employees in projects. The whole group of respondents, after participating in the implementation of several (3-6) projects, took positions of managers or deputy managers in subsequent projects implemented under pre-accession programs and after Poland's accession to the EU under the 2004-2006 and 2007-2013 perspectives. An interesting group of respondents are people who began their professional career as PhD students (27% of respondents). In pursuing PhDs in various fields of science, they had the opportunity to participate in the implementation of the first project as a trainer, a lecturer, and an expert. This allowed them to "earn some extra money" to support their low doctoral scholarships. As they state, the first experiences have resulted in the motivation to cooperate with the institutions that obtain pre-accession funds and then the EU, or independently obtain such funds for the implementation of projects. Cooperation in the implementation of projects meant that each of the respondents after some time received a proposal to take the position of the project manager (81.7% of this group or opened a company dealing with raising funds for project implementation (18.3% of this group).

The remaining respondents (31%) claim that they got to the project work by accident. Working in various companies and institutions at some point in their careers, they were given the task of carrying out specific tasks in a project that was implemented by the company /

institution in which they worked. The tasks they carried out were well evaluated which resulted in their self-satisfaction. This motivated them to seek opportunities to participate in subsequent projects actively, which in time also resulted in the fact that they began to perform managerial functions. Interestingly, the vast majority of the respondents (93%) did not plan a career of a project manager financed from EU funds. Their professional plans were related to their formal education, however, the development of their professional career caused that they began to perform managerial functions in the projects.

Working on the implementation of the project meant that the respondents began to work as project managers. Most respondents (77%) before becoming project managers participated in the implementation of 4-6 projects performing administrative tasks. On the other hand, 18% of the respondents obtained this position after the implementation of 2-3 projects and 5% of those surveyed became project managers, having no such experience.

On average, managers of projects financed from EU funds worked in their careers for more than 3 different employers. The average period of work for one employer was eight years.

To sum up, it can be stated that entering the career path of the project manager financed from EU funds is gradual and results from the work in enterprises / institutions actively raising external funds. The vast majority of respondents began their work on the implementation of projects with performing basic administrative roles in the project team. Interviews show that project managers are chosen or evolve for this role because of their experience, individual skills and commitment to work. In addition, the respondents emphasized that the function of the project manager is also a derivative of education, training and achieved results.

Respondents stated that the gradual onboarding into the implementation of projects causes the focus on acquiring knowledge related to project management principles, accumulating experience and motivates for continuous education in this field, both formal and informal.

Respondents pointed out that not only their skills related to the management of EU projects, but also the trust gained with their superiors and colleagues had a big impact on achieving the current level of career. It is true that they do not point directly to their leadership predispositions, but by analysing interviews, it can be said that these skills were of considerable importance.

The managers also pointed to the elements that make it possible for people starting out or planning to work as a project manager financed by EU funds. Respondents most often mentioned:

- flexibility (89% of respondents),
- cooperation skills (79% of respondents),
- coping with pressure (84% of respondents),
- technical skills (81% of respondents),
- motivation and willingness to constant learning and improvement (99% of respondents),
- planning skills (94% of respondents),
- trust in the team (93% of respondents),
- ethical behaviour (62% of respondents).

63% of the respondents believed that having a mentor, who was the manager in projects financed from European funds, was an important aspect that helped to succeed in building the career of the project manager. Respondents pointed to the invaluable support of the mentor in critical situations, which made it easier to solve problems and acquire important experience while avoiding making mistakes. Out of this group, as much as 87.3% of the respondents believe that the mentor's help accelerated their career and this contributed to them becoming the project manager for the first time.

## Conclusions

The project manager financed from EU funds (previously aid and pre-accession funds) is a relatively new position in Polish conditions. People working in this position must demonstrate broad skills and competences. Understanding the career paths of people who have achieved success as project managers allows the improvement and development of project management and careers of future project managers. The professional career of the European project manager, as the research results show, is not straightforward, and professional career in this area is often a coincidence. This is partly related to the specificity of Poland's conditions associated with the processes of political and economic transformation. The creation of such jobs has intensified as a consequence of Poland's accession to the European Union.

The subsequent research should focus on the premises of the success of EU projects and the impact on the success of skills and characteristics of the project manager.

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## Summary

**Goal:** The aim of the article is to present the nature and specificity of the professional career of European project managers.

**Material and methods:** The study was of qualitative character. The aim of the study was to learn about the career development and opinions of EU project managers on the evolution of their careers. During the interview three main thematic areas were covered:

1. The beginning of the EU project manager's career?
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The research was carried out among 100 people, who were the project managers financed from EU funds under the financial perspective 2007-2013 and the 2014-2020 outlook.

The research was carried out in the period from 01-09/2018 using the interview method.

**Results:** Among the respondents, 60% were people who worked in public institutions and were directed to trainings in the 1990s that were related to political transformation and they implemented reforms and aid programs realised by the World Bank and pre-accession programs preparing Poland for inclusion in structures of the European community. These people gained experience working as specialists, experts, administrative employees in projects. Gained experience and knowledge means that they continue their careers by implementing projects financed from EU funds. People who have been working on the implementation of projects of this type since the beginning of their careers accounted for 9% of respondents. Most respondents (77%) before becoming project managers participated in the implementation of 4-6 projects performing administrative tasks. On the other hand, 18% of the respondents obtained this position after the implementation of 2-3 projects and 5% of those surveyed became project managers, having no such experience.

**Conclusion:** The professional career of the European project manager, as the research results show, is not straightforward, and professional career in this area is often a coincidence. This is partly related to the specificity of Poland associated to the processes of political and economic transformation. The creation of such jobs has intensified as a consequence of Poland's accession to the European Union.

**Keywords:** manager, professional career, project

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JEL Classification System: M21, M50