

# Project Mentor in action

In early 2004, Project Mentor became an integral part of a project management excellence program within the cargo division of United Airlines.



## Background

One of the giants of the aviation industry, United Airlines has, like all its peers, found the need over recent years for improvements in the way that projects are managed and precious monies spent. United's cargo division is no exception. They have recently undertaken an innovative program to improve the expertise and levels of professionalism within the people that plan and manage their many varied and challenging projects. This excellence program begins with attaining Microsoft Project competency and culminates with successful candidates attaining formal Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. The end result of the program is to have United possessing more competent project managers, who themselves have attained valuable professional skills.



project solutions that make a difference

## Situation

Since late 2001, United Cargo has had to undertake several major projects with a significantly reduced workforce. These projects range from the outsourcing of warehousing and call centres to a stringent technical and procedural contract for the air transport of mail for the US Postal Service. The combination of these projects, together with strict financial constraints due to operating in bankruptcy and a recognised deficiency in project management skills is seen by United as a 'perfect storm'. One of the key obstacles recognised is the lack of proficiency in using Microsoft Project, the division's standard project management tool. With the majority of project managers self-taught on MS Project, this lack of proficiency is seen as a 'gateway obstacle'. As a result, most projects become 'dumbed-down' to the expertise level of the project manager. Quite often this results in little more sophistication than the creation of a work breakdown structure. This leaves United with a further problem, in that the perception of project management in general is coloured by the less than favourable experiences their project managers have from using MS Project.

***...lack of Microsoft Project proficiency is seen as a 'gateway obstacle'.***



## Requirement

To overcome the recognised deficiencies of the current situation and start an improvement program off on the right track, United needed to find a way to teach Microsoft Project that fulfilled best-practice project management principles yet didn't require many hours of classroom tuition. Their chosen option had to provide comprehensive computer-based training (CBT) that would also be cost-effective and easy to deploy. Another key goal was that the chosen CBT should provide testing and assessment to allow their project managers to pass a competency examination, allowing them to progress through the initial gate of the project management excellence program.

## Finding the CBT tool

Following a search across the internet, United purchased online a single user copy of Project Mentor to evaluate if it met the needs of the program. At this stage, Project Learning was unaware of the evaluation and the overall program itself. During the evaluation, a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) was created within Project Mentor to evaluate the effectiveness of the competency tests that they required. Project Learning became aware of the evaluation and the program when a request was received for a 25-user license purchase.

## Implementation and use

The initial order received was for a 25-user licence of Project Mentor – to train the first 25 candidates within the program. Software was shipped from the UK to United's Chicago HQ and user logins were created for the 25 candidates. The program was starting to take shape. A key requirement at this stage was for United to assess candidate progress and achievements. Regular reports and statistics were provided by Project Learning from candidate data within the PLP database. This information proved that the program was proceeding in the right direction; pre-learning scores proved the need for the training and post-learning exams confirmed that competencies were being attained.

***...the program was proceeding in the right direction; pre-learning scores proved the need for the training and post-learning exams confirmed that competencies were being attained.***

## Candidate successes

At the time of writing, several candidates have worked their way through all of Project Mentor's 10 modules and have attained examination pass rates of 75% or higher, thus allowing them to progress through the program. One particularly adept candidate has even scored more than 90%. The current statistics indicate an average pre-learning score of 44% and an average post-learning score of 78%. This indicates an overall knowledge increase of 34% and a relative knowledge increase of more than 75%.

***...an overall knowledge increase of 34% and a relative knowledge increase of more than 75%.***

Feedback from some candidates has indicated that they found Project Mentor more detailed than initially expected. However, as they progressed through the Project Mentor system they have commented that detail they learned within the initial modules has provided benefits when they work through the more difficult aspects of MS Project. To help keep everyone on track, United has also instigated 'lunch and learn' sessions with work-specific Microsoft Project coaching. As for United's candidates gaining formal PMP certification, that should be just a matter of time.



**Project Learning International Limited**

PO Box 41-143, Lower Hutt 5047, New Zealand

[info@projectlearning.net](mailto:info@projectlearning.net)

[www.projectlearning.net](http://www.projectlearning.net)

[www.projectlearning.co.nz](http://www.projectlearning.co.nz)