



Career Switch: Engineering to Project Management

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This post continues our series we're calling "Career Switch," in which we spotlight Cerence team members who have made the switch from one team or function to another to fuel their professional and personal growth. Enjoy!

Shifting from engineering to project management is not for everyone. Generally speaking, engineers like to solve problems and make cool things happen. Project managers like to own their (engineering) projects from beginning to end. This can, in some cases, create stress and conflict.

So, you must be wondering... why did I make the switch?

When I joined Cerence as an Audio Engineer in 2016, I was lucky to join our Speech Signal Enhancement (SSE) team based in Detroit (U.S.) and in Ulm (Germany). My role was to tune our SSE solution for vehicles equipped with Bluetooth hands-free calling, voice recognition, Apple CarPlay, and Android Auto.

Within my first six months, I quickly saw how the SSE team worked collaboratively across R&D, Software Engineering, Audio Engineering, and Engineering Project Management. During my first trip to our Ulm, Germany, office, it paid dividends to meet our SSE experts in person and to put faces to names. Over the years, we developed a great working dynamic and to this day remain close colleagues across the Atlantic.

In my time on the SSE team, it also impressed me how the project managers had a technical and hands-on background. This means that each SSE project manager has tuned many vehicles before making the switch from engineering to project management, enabling them to provide technical guidance based on their experience. They're also not afraid to hop in a car to work on vehicles when needed.

I started to think that I could make a similar transition and bring the same value to the team. A year later, an opportunity came up to become an Audio Technical Project Manager. It was scary, but I wanted to take the leap and try something new. I knew that I would get plenty of support from the SSE team. While it wasn't easy at first, my initial challenges revealed themselves to be simple growing pains. But, I still had a lot to learn.

A typical day in engineering project management is fast-paced and adrenaline-pumping. Frustrating at times, but the satisfaction of solving problems can be very rewarding in the end. From the regular day-to-day technical issues in the car lab, to keeping our customers happy, to unblocking my team and ensuring all of my projects are marching forward, it truly is a dynamic (and demanding) role. One of the most challenging parts of being a new project manager is rallying everyone together. It's up to you, as a project manager, to fight for your team, understand the tasks in-and-out before delegating, and build rapport with your engineers.

Over the past six years, the BIG lesson that I learned as a project manager is that you need to trust your team, so you can take time for yourself. Many project managers feel like they cannot take a vacation and risk burning out. But the reality is that they simply need to trust their teams to take care of things while they're away.

So, Should You Be an Engineering Project Manager?

Well, it depends. Transitioning from engineering to project management needs plenty of self-reflection.

If you enjoy writing code, want to keep tinkering with technology, and prefer to stay out of organizational back and forth, then I believe engineering is a better fit for you.

But if you feel ready to flex your soft skills, excited to drive your projects from inception to production, and driven to find a win-win situation for all parties, then I believe that you are ready to become an engineering project manager.

It's ultimately your decision to turn the job you have into a career that you want.

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