

Everyone Can Read Maps!

Plotting Your Career Path and Preparing for the Terrain

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ABSTRACT

Are you staring at your career path and wondering which way, or line managing an individual at a career crossroads? Whether programmer or statistician, we often set out on a common path and then specialise in one of three directions: technical expertise, project management or line management. Each direction calls for a set of skills, some of which overlap. This paper reviews the skills of these three common developmental directions, in particular the soft skills and behaviours that an individual may need to develop and demonstrate in order to achieve success on their chosen path. This paper also addresses the importance of working collaboratively with your line manager to identify knowledge and skills gaps with the goal of improving quality and excellence, and preparing for greater responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

When starting out in the pharmaceutical industry, your initial focus is likely to be gaining the essential skills. As time passes and your skills develop, you will naturally begin to pay attention to the direction that your career is taking. Understanding the main options may help. Working collaboratively with your line manager to understand your strengths and training requirements, identifying knowledge and skills gaps, and addressing them is all part of the process.

WHICH DIRECTION?

The concept that there are three usual paths that one may follow is not limited to statistics and programming, or clinical data science, but often applies to many disciplines within the pharmaceutical industry. This paper will refer to relevant technical skills, but the general concepts could be applied to a wide range of functional areas.

An individual's future path is something that should be discussed in line management meetings. It is a discussion that can be guided by understanding current job descriptions, and a list of skills that are expected to be developed. With each path comes a set of technical skills and soft ("people") skills. Technical skills are specific and defined, that can be taught and progress measured. Soft skills are less tangible, harder to measure and sometimes are referred to as people skills.

TECHNICAL

Our career journey often starts along a technical path as this is the direction which arms us with the skills we require to enable us to perform our role. However, to continue along the technical path requires an enthusiasm for the technical aspects of the role beyond those that are suffice to just "do" the job. A technical individual will be considering innovative and creative solutions, they don't just want to know about something, they want to know it inside out and strive to be an expert. They are industry aware from a technical and regulatory perspective. Additionally, they strive to keep up to date with advancements in their field.

Whilst the stereotypical perception of a technical individual is that they might be quite introverted, communication is an important part of the technical role. Communicating findings, knowledge sharing and being the "go to" person for a particular technical skill, all involve communication skills. In addition, there are other soft skills which benefit someone specialising along the technical path. These soft skills are those often associated with the paths of project management and line management, however, it is still the case that people in a technical role have customers and the development of soft skills is helpful. For example, empathy and active listening skills can facilitate managing customer expectations and negotiating resources and budgets.

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Project management skills are often initially acquired as an individual is given more responsibility within a study deliverable. There are several skills that an individual wishing to take the path to project management will need to develop. Personal organisation is something that all clinical data scientists should practice, however, it is essential in a project manager. Additionally, they should be able to organise their time well and become expert at using the project management tools available to them which will aid their ability to get the full perspective of their project status. Strong communication skills are also essential for successful project management, along with the ability to negotiate. Whilst project managers might foster a strong inclination to have complete control of their project, they need to recognise that they cannot do everything, hence, it is important to be able to effectively delegate. Giving responsibility to team members demonstrates trust, can add to professional development and contributes to feeling valued as a team member. A project manager needs to understand what technical aspects are required for them to deliver successfully, and whilst they cannot perform the role of every member of their team, they have a good understanding of the roles within their team. Furthermore, where possible they are able to match the skills that they have available to them within the team, to the tasks required.

Finally, project managers should develop skills in risk identification and management as it usual for studies to encounter unexpected challenges,

LINE MANAGEMENT

Personal experience has observed line management tacked on to job descriptions as part of the responsibilities of a role. However, the most effective line managers are those who are actively interested in developing others. It is less usual that line management is the whole role, more likely is that it is part of a role along with other responsibilities. Whilst there are effective line managers who have not used their original technical skills for a very long time, not losing sight of original technical skills has important benefits both for the line manager and their line reports. Line managers must be able to empathise with their line reports and be able to put themselves in their shoes in order to understand what challenges are being faced. Another key skill to develop is communication, which on this particular path needs to become something of a specialist subject. Line management requires an adaptable approach to communication as a one size fits all cannot be applied to line reports. Line managers should also be approachable, something which can only be achieved by the way in which line managers interact with line reports. Of course alongside communication is excellent listening skills, a line manager should be well practiced in the art of actively listening. As with the technical and project management paths, personal organisation is important; being prepared for line management meetings and following up on action points has an impact on the perception of how effective a line manager is considered to be by line reports.

The path to line management can be a progressive one, possibly starting with mentoring or training, growing towards the responsibility of developing others.

DIAGRAMS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SKILLS

Diagram 1 summarises the technical skills required for the three development paths and demonstrates where there is overlap. All the "people" skills discussed in the sections above are required to a greater or lesser extent for all three career paths. In diagram 2 they are distributed around the triangle closest to, or between the paths where they are most required. Note, communication is a key soft skill whichever path is taken, hence, is of a larger size.

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DIAGRAM 1 - VENN OF TECHNICAL SKILLS

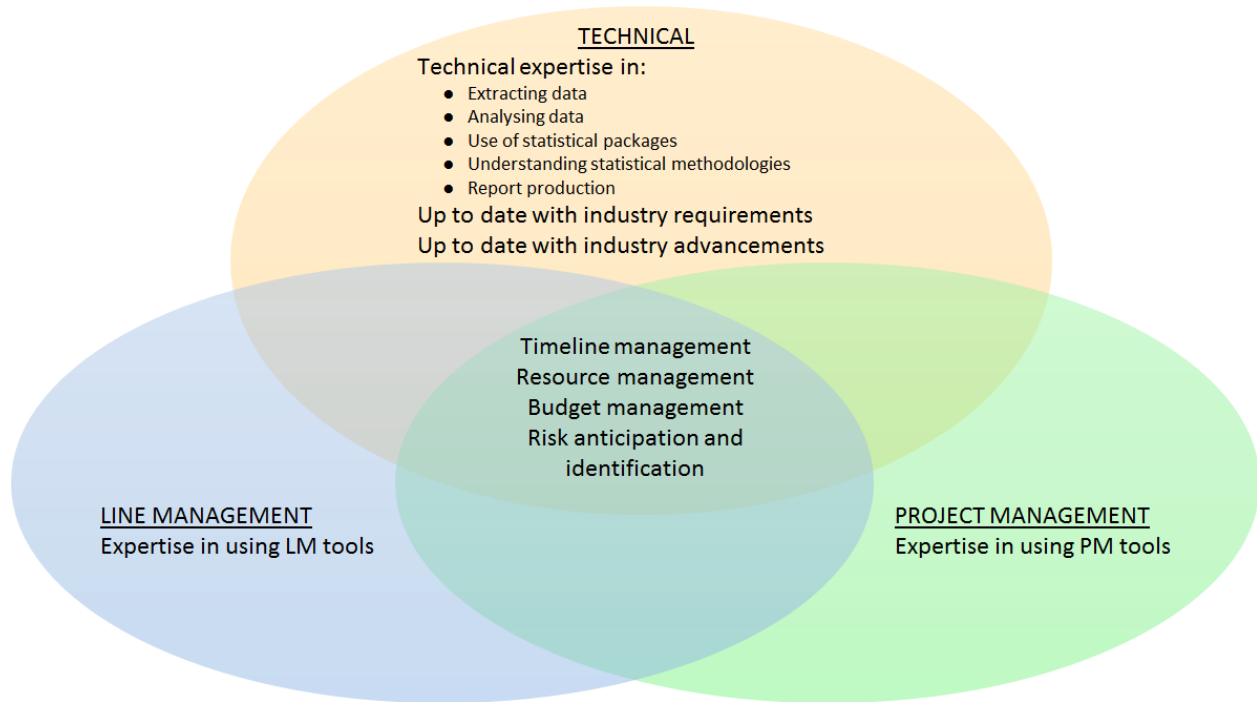
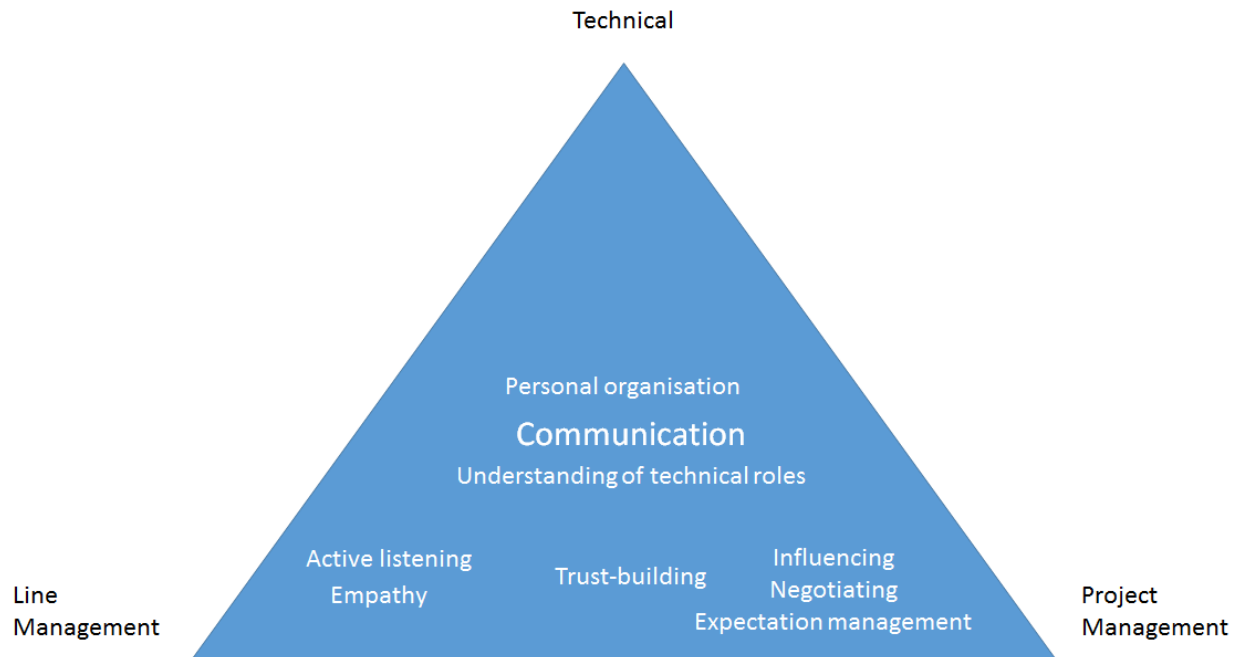


DIAGRAM 2 - PEOPLE SKILLS



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GUIDING AND BEING GUIDED

WORKING WITH YOUR GUIDE

“You can't just sit there and wait for people to give you that golden dream. You've got to get out there and make it happen for yourself.”

– Diana Ross

Or as **Dick Dastardly** would say-

“Don't just stand there, do something!”

Line reports should recognise and make use of the resource that a line manager is to them, using them as a guide to navigate their career path. This collaborative relationship should be an empowering one for line reports, because it is not an “I say, you do” relationship. Line reports can and should be proactive in their approach to the development of their career. At the beginning it may take a bit of time to get to the point where it feels comfortable and safe to share ideas, but that is the goal. Once there, open and honest discussion of which direction is being considered, what the strengths and developmental requirements are, and what are the suggestions going forward, can take place.

Through discussion and constructive feedback line manager and line report together can identify strengths and training requirements which can help an individual map their path forward. There are tools that can assist with this process such as utilising the role job description for the current level and the next level up, identifying knowledge gaps and addressing experience shortfalls. These tools can help guide discussions between line manager and line report which may help both understand the direction the line report is inclined towards, however, a line report could also use these tools to prepare before a line management meeting so that they can lead the discussion.

Google's Project Oxygen cited the importance of managers showing their belief in individuals, and it is important for line managers and line reports to celebrate the positives. It is also important to acknowledge when things have not gone quite so well and learn from these experiences. People who work in this industry are familiar with Corrective and Preventative Actions (CAPAs); this is a useful approach for line reports to use when they want to look at a situation, and assess what they are going to do to address an issue and what they will do going forward to prevent recurrence in the future. It also opens the door to having a constructive discussion about a difficult situation, and encourages learning from these experiences whilst helping identify knowledge gaps and learning needs.

A CHANGE OF ROUTE

These experiences where things have gone well or not so well have influence on our our career paths, and may pull us off one path and onto another, or we find that our path crosses with one that we had previously been dismissive of, or not skilled for, and with our more developed skill profile find that we are in a position where we would like to change paths. This is quite usual, and working with your line manager is an important part of the process of identifying opportunities.

ARE YOU LOST?

As an individual gathers more experience along a certain path and specialises, there is the danger that they may find themselves pigeonholed. To some, specialisation and becoming an expert may well be agreeable because they are getting satisfaction from their role, however, sometimes we find ourselves becoming experts in a particular area through necessity and the fact that we are good at it. This may lead to a reduction in opportunities offered to work in other areas, and in some cases previously well established skills becoming rusty. This type of situation can lead us to feel that we have become a little lost along our career path and we aren't going in a direction we would like. How we get out of this situation comes back to the relationship we have with our line manager, and being able to flag that this has happened and that a change in our professional development strategy is required.

Sometimes becoming pigeonholed happens so subtly that the individual hasn't realised it. An example of this is when a company has employed outsourcing strategies, and roles have gradually shifted from technical to project management as oversight has become the priority, individuals grow their project management skills and become specialists in project oversight, but stop using their technical skills. Unless an individual flags with their line manager that they would like to continue to have some opportunity to use their other skills, technical skills can become sidelined. Whilst specialisation is generally considered a good thing, it is important to not limit employment horizons and to be cautious if all technical skills become sidelined.

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BEING A GUIDE

"Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."

— Richard Branson

It is often said that people leave managers, not jobs, which has been supported by surveys such as the B2B marketplace Approved Index. Line managers have a significant role to play in whether an individual is fulfilled in their position, and should be aware that professional development is an important factor in staff satisfaction and engagement. A line manager's responsibility is to their line reports and they are responsible for building engagement, confidence and commitment in those individuals.

The combination of communication, empathy and active listening skills will contribute to the building of the important collaborative relationship between line manager and line report. In order to establish an effective working relationship, it is necessary to create an environment that helps build trust and encourages openness.

A final note about line management from a personal perspective: the approach to line management has evolved significantly since I entered the world of full time employment in the early 1990s, which I believe is due to more enlightened attitudes towards leadership, moving away from the perception that leaders were all knowing, and their authoritative and directive approach to management. I think it's fair to say that my personal experience of line management has been extremely varied, ranging from negative, wholly unhelpful and on occasion downright strange, to positive, supportive, inspiring and forward thinking. The effect line management can have, both positive and negative, should not be underestimated. If done badly can have an impact on staff turnover and staff engagement, both of which come with a cost to quality and profit.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

As the scouts say, be prepared. If your journey takes you upwards, then it is a good idea to be ready to take the next step. Many of us have worked in organisations where an individual has been promoted based on their performance in their current role, rather than being prepared for and already demonstrating the behaviours required for the next position up. You may have heard this referred to as the Peter Principle. Being promoted into a position that you are not qualified to perform is a scary experience and the consequences can be far reaching, for example failure to deliver a project, increase in staff turnover or personal job dissatisfaction. If you desire promotion it is preferable to work with your line manager to identify what skills are required in the higher role, and plan a professional development strategy for addressing gaps. The benefit of being ready to perform in a higher position are many, not least from a personal point of view to have the confidence that you have the skills in order to do a good job.

CONCLUSION

It is quite usual for individuals to head towards one of three main directions along their career path, and the directions are technical, project management and line management. Understanding what one can expect along the way and matching skills to the direction an individual takes is an important element of line management discussions and one that can be driven by line reports. Building an honest and collaborative relationship between line manager and line report is key to successful professional development. Preparing, and being prepared for the road ahead reduces the risk of failure when taking the next step up.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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RECOMMENDED READING

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TED:

https://www.ted.com/talks/roselinde_torres_what_it_takes_to_be_a_great_leader

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