

ON THE BLOG

MY JOURNEY AS AN APPRENTICE PROJECT MANAGER

A series of blogs by Jack Machin, ChPP MAPM



"Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do." - Pele

I have always had an interest in Construction given my family's history of working in the industry. It all starts with my Great Grandad, Harold, who worked as a labourer for Browns of Wilmslow for 58 years. I never got the chance to meet him, but I am told he was very well respected and loyal to a fault. Harold's son and my Grandad, Tony Dixon, has had a huge influence on me as a person and on my career path. He absolutely loved his work and has never really admitted that he is retired - although he is now 85! Every now and then he will still turn his hand to supporting me or my uncle, Richard with reviewing drawings and pricing up work.

His attitude and perseverance has always inspired me. He is particularly proud to have obtained some prestigious qualifications including 'City & Guilds' and the 'National & Higher National' in Building and Construction. He attended night school to achieve his nationals after a full shift on site and was the only person in his class to pass the course, later becoming a Licentiate of the Institute of Building (LIOB).

He got the opportunity to work on high-profile jobs. He was made Construction Manager of the Featherstone Prison site - the first prison to be built in Britain after World War 2. After that he went on to oversee the construction of BBC Studios on Oxford Road, Manchester and Thorn Cross young offender's prison in Warrington. Tony then decided to go it alone and setup a company called Dixon Building (now RAD Plant) in 1996 which is now being run by my uncle, Richard with the help of my younger brother, Harry.

My Grandad has instilled some values in me that I live by, and he keeps my feet firmly on the ground. He has always said that "there is always someone in the room who knows more than you" - encouraging me to listen to subject matter experts and make measured decisions without fear or favour. As a result, I try to adopt that approach of gathering all of the facts and observing before forming my own view.

He holds a formidable reputation from his days of being a Project Manager and he would always stand up for what he believes in. Despite his 5'5 frame he was not to be messed with! He still enjoys telling me the infamous story of when one of his senior managers asked him to approve some timesheets sent to him by his site team, but unconvinced that they have been completed correctly, he knocked them back. "Come back to me when they are right." His colleague was relentless and continued to pester but Tony had no intention of signing them off until he knew for certain that they were accurate. "Do me a favour and shut the door from the other side."

I went to school at Eaton Bank Academy in Congleton and academically I was bang average. Despite my best efforts I only got through my GCSEs with mostly C grades and then staying on at Eaton Bank I failed my first year of A-Levels. Looking back my move to Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College was one of my better decisions and I left there with decent results in Business Studies and English Language. The sixth form pushed me to apply for university, but I wasn't interested. I was ready to start working and earning my own money and my search for an apprenticeship began.

My journey into Project Management began at Stockport Council and in September of 2017 I embarked on a two-year apprenticeship as an Apprentice Project Manager in their Highways & Infrastructure department. In my first year I went on placement with Wilde Consulting Engineers who had been commissioned to deliver improvements to the Merseyway Shopping Centre. I was like a deer in headlights in those first few months and I was initially very quiet. It took time for me to build up the confidence to contribute to meetings and I found it daunting sat around the table with senior pros who had 30 years plus of experience. In the second year I joined the Town Centre Access Plan (TCAP) team delivering a suite of projects to improve roads and junctions along key routes in Stockport with a focus on walking and cycling.



The end-point assessment required that I pass the APM Project Management Qualification (PMQ) exam and write a portfolio of evidence demonstrating what I had learned during the apprenticeship, which I was to present to a panel of assessors. I am fortunate to have found a company that was so supportive of my development, and that meant I had no problem writing up my portfolio that exceeded 30,000 words when I submitted – the team helped me to build up the relevant experience, and I jumped into any opportunity that presented itself.

Exams were never my strong point, and the PMQ was no exception. A 3-hour written paper on project management theory with barely enough time to scratch your nose. It consisted of 16 essay-style questions from which I had a choice of 10 to answer. Brutal. It took me a few attempts to pass. In reality, it came too soon for me – I had only been in the job for a matter of weeks before my first attempt, and I am told that this exam has since been simplified. At the time, I felt there was an added pressure as if I couldn't get through the apprenticeship, maybe I wouldn't secure a permanent role, and it really tested my resilience (and patience)! You really do learn more from failure than you do from success.

The experience I gained during my time at Stockport gave me a great grounding in project management, civils engineering, and the world of work in general. Therefore, upon completion of my apprenticeship, I was pleased to secure a position in their newly established Programme & Project Management Team. With confidence building on the back of landing the job, I wasted no time in submitting my application to become a full member of the APM (known as MAPM), and in October 2021, I received confirmation that my application had been successful. After four-and-a-half great years with Stockport I reached a point where I felt that the scope for progression had become restricted and there was a rigid organisational structure. The promise of a new position being created for me in their impending restructuring never materialised, and I felt I would be waiting a while to move into a more senior position. I thoroughly enjoyed being part of that team, but given that I started working with the Council at age 17, I found it difficult to shake the 'junior' tag, and I knew that I needed a new challenge if I was to continue to progress.

I will be talking more about my development and the path I took to becoming Chartered in my third and final blog of this series: 'The Road to Chartership.'

