How to Pass the Certified Associate Project Manager (CAPM) Exam in Two Months

by Hans-Jörn Eich
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A few weeks ago, I passed the CAPM after studying for it for 2 months of studying time. I found quite a few others online that have been able to do that, but I can attest that it is a tough task to do it in that time frame. The complication for me lied in the fact, that I had no one to bounce ideas off, no teacher, no peers, which might have helped.

For now, here is how I did it:

Read through the PMBOK once.
This is just to get a broad overview of the material. Don’t worry about really understanding everything, and how it all comes together.
- It took me 2 weeks (not studying on the weekends), 4-6 hours a day. I planned it first, and then measured against it. I ended up being faster than expected (I had planned for almost 3 weeks).

Tested myself with the tests at the end of each chapter of the CAPM Exam Prep book by Rita Mulcahy. This gave me a mark to measure my progress before and after reading her book. (I photocopied the tests, so that would be able to go through them multiple times.)

Read through CAPM Exam Prep by Rita Mulcahy. This is a great book. Nicely lays out the general structure of project management (according to PMI). The author also uses a great sense of humor, which makes it much more fun to read, as the subject is pretty dry. I made sure to read through this book very thoroughly on the first go, and I made sure to understand absolutely everything: how everything connects, all the terms, every single comment that Rita Mulcahy makes on what you need to know for the exam.
- This took me three weeks, roughly one chapter per day (first day two chapters).

Tested myself again with the tests at the end of each chapter. At this point I’d gotten from 60% to 80%, but this test does not really represent your big three hour CAPM exam.

I also took a full three hour exam from a website online, that offered one for free. I scored only 64%, which would have been a failing grade on the real exam. But at this point, I still had not really done some of the heavy lifting of learning yet, so this was a real kick in the donkey for me.
At this time I also scheduled the exam date to put the pressure on. With a real exam date on the map, there was no more beating around the bush.

I also started charting out the “Project Management Process Groups and Knowledge Areas Map” once a day to memorize it. By the end, I was totally pro at it, it took me very little time to chart out all 42 process’ on one sheet.

Read through the CAPM Exam Prep book again and created flash cards, before reading each chapter, I wrote each term of the “quicktest” section on a flashcard. I then put the explanations and anything relevant on the back of the card. This had really two functions: 1.) you need to look closely to find the info, which makes you studying the material; 2.) creating the cards, makes you memorize a lot of the material. Writing and reading the material is very effective. Just buying a set of these cards makes you miss out on this advantage.

I also created flash cards for each process group, listing all inputs/ tools & techniques/ outputs. I called these cards the “ITTO” cards.

- This step took me 8 days (I took another course during this time, so I can’t just say that it took me a full two weeks).

Study the flash cards. Each day I would study the flash cards for one chapter. I’m not sure if you have ever memorized a lot of things with flash cards, this is how I do it. I would go through the flash cards, each one that I had memorized, would be sorted out, each one that I needed to spend some more time, went back on the pile which I rotated through, until there were maybe 10 cards left. These are the really tough ones, the ones with some really important information that you are having a hard time retaining. Oftentimes, they were the “ITTO” cards. I would then go on a walk with these cards. (Great tip from my mom and dad, who have both been studying all their lives. I think they both hold PhD's, which they studied for on the side, while still working full time jobs). There’s something about going on walks (especially nature walks) and how your brain retains information. These walks were relentless. Tough on the brain.

- This step took me ten days.

About the flash cards: I used them “in reverse”: the blank side was the front, the lines in the back, since I knew I needed them to write lots of stuff on them. In the front I wrote the term, and the chapter number to which it corresponded (good for sorting), the back had whether it was an input I, output O, tool & technique TT, or just an explanation if it didn’t apply. I colored the edges of the 42 cards of all the process’ (with the ITTO’s on the backside) with a highlighter, so I could easily distinguish them from the rest (detail on the first image)

Last day before the exam, I just flew over the CAPM Exam Prep book. It took me roughly 4 hours. Mostly reading the high lighted parts, just making sure that I had understood everything. This is a total no-panic-about-having-this-info-in-your-head session. I didn’t review any more cards, I even took the afternoon off for a sales meeting. I went to bed early, and woke up very well rested. No need to learn terms last minute. You’ll just send your head spinning and forget everything else you knew solidly.
Total Time

9 weeks (not including ~2 weeks off for working and taking another 6-day course): 2 weeks PMBOK, 3 weeks CAPM Exam Prep, 2 weeks CAPM Exam Prep with flash card preparation, 1.5 weeks of hard memorizing, 1 day of overview. Started learning on April 2nd 2013, passed exam on June 11th 2013 (just so you know that I'm not cheating here. Full month of April 2013, month of May 2013 minus one week and minus 2x 3 days of "passive house designer course", one week in June 2013, absolute time: 2 months 1 week, relative time: less than 2 months).

Total Cost

$454
- PMBOK $46 (Chapters Indigo online in Canada)
- CAPM Exam Prep $64 (Amazon, international shipping)
- 5x 100 Mead Index Cards $5 ($1/pack at the dollar-store)
- Exam fee $339 (includes taxes)
- Time spent at the library of Brock University: Payless. Thanx :-) (They welcome visitors, I made sure of that on the first day.)

Notes and Tips

• Important: study somewhere where you are not distracted. This will save you a lot of time. I ended up using our local library and the library of a university close by to get away from the noise and all the distractions at home (I also didn’t have internet at the university, which is even less distraction.)

• Don’t worry too much about failing the exam. You can always reschedule. Not panic’ing will make you learn with more ease.

• I went to the testing centre long before scheduling the test, to make sure I knew where it was, and what the testing environment is, so that there are no surprises (pen and paper or dry-erase board? This can make a difference, depending on which notes/"brain-dump" you intend to make). They allowed me to keep a bottle of water in the test room (sht, don’t tell PMI, I don’t think that is according to rules), and my notes were not erased each time I went to the washroom (not always the case either). As long as you know what you are dealing with before you take the test, I think you can prepare for it.

• Make sure you structure your exam time. I answered about 50% of all questions during the first 55 minutes, took “5 minutes off” to get up, maybe stretch a little. I got through the remainder of the questions after about 2 hours, 5 minute break, then I reviewed all the “marked” questions for the last hour. This was very tough. I ended up beating the clock by a few seconds (I could have just let it time out), but this was my pride working on me.

• In case I didn’t pass the plan, I only had three weeks left to study for another test (as the PMBOK changed on July 1st), I was going to pay for the study system that comes along with the CAPM Exam Prep book.

Happy studies, I hope this helps you create your own plan.