

Certification or Practice? A paradigm shift will help!

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Abstract

During the last few decades many professional organizations have developed worldwide in the field of project management, prominent examples being PMI¹, IPMA and APM. Each of these have laid emphasis on and grown differently in terms of structure, outreach and its area of focus. One area which seems to be the pre-occupation of these organizations is the focus on education and certification. There could be valid reasons why this is done not the least being that it is what the market demands. But for a professional organization to have more certifications products does not necessarily promote or enable practice! In reality, there appears to be a wide gap between the two and this is not very encouraging considering that a good and effective practice is required to ensure that projects meet their basic outcomes like scope time and cost or meeting organizational and strategic objectives. There is a dire need to investigate and analyze the reasons for the gap and possible ways to bridge it. This is the subject and focus of this paper.

Certification

Status today

Certification products are largely either knowledge or competency based with some based on methodology as mentioned below. (10)

- *IPMA – Competence based*
- *PMI – Knowledge based (with a minimal ‘time served’ requirement)*
- *APMG – Methodology based & does not require ‘time served’ or addresses Behavioral skills*

Certification from each of above bodies and has its features, merits and demerits which can be viewed from a practice based approach.

IPMA

- Certification at levels D, C, B, A
- Has many factors assessing practice beyond the basic knowledge based Level D certification

PMI

- e.g. CAPM, PMP, PgMP, RMP, SP, ACP, (PfMP)

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- Predominantly ... knowledge based
- Some of the certification has some practice based features e.g. PgMP and ACP

OGC/ Axelos/ APM

- Prince 2, MSP, APMP, RPP (Registered PP)
- Some knowledge based others practice based
- Aligned with IPMA certification in some cases

AACEI

- CCP, CEP, EVP, PSP
- Largely knowledge based with some practice based requirements e.g. submission of technical paper

Criteria, Benefits and Research

Criteria

What criteria should we consider to assess the value of a certification? An interesting analysis has been done (3) using parameters like level of effort to obtain a credential (pre-requisites) , extent of coverage of content(breadth) and methods of assessment to get certified (rigor). Certification effectiveness is calculated as a product of pre-requisites, breadth and rigor.



Exhibit 1 – Certification Effectiveness

(Source (3) Goff, S. *Comparing PM Certifications - which is best for you?*
http://ipma.ch/assets/PM_Certifications_Compared.pdf)

In addition, another factor is popularity which is based not on the attributes of the product itself, but is the result of marketing, and market positioning. While one could have a difference of opinion on the academic rigor or results of such an analysis, it is no doubt a useful pointer on the need to have valid criteria to assess the validity and usefulness of a certification. Ironically, none of the criteria considered has any direct reference to the objectives of an organization or outcomes of a project.

Benefits



Exhibit 2 – Benefits from Certification

What do organizations look for as benefits in a certification or when they hire certified professionals? Ideally, they should be linking it with organization’s objectives whether they are financial, marketing , technical excellence etc or at the minimum to project outcomes like scope, time and cost .Personal experience has been that this is hardly the case. In most situations the effort stops at attending training programs or knowledge sharing sessions. There has been next to no research in this area - one which is clearly central to the whole argument for the associations as professional bodies.(5)

In most organizations training or professional development of project management personnel is the responsibility of the human resources or training department who do not have the requisite background or capability to manage such programs or initiatives. There are exceptions to this in large organizations which are at a higher level of maturity in project management practices or have a project management office or similar entity taking responsibility for it.

Research

PMP Certification and Competency in IT projects

Research on the relationship between project management certification and competency has been limited .One such study has been done for the IT Industry for PMP® Certification by Starkweather and Stevenson (8). Conducted in two phases, the objective was to first identify those characteristics most common to the successful hire of project managers, from the perspective of IT recruiters. Once identified, the study sought to determine preference for these characteristics from the point of view of corporate IT executives. Two hypotheses were tested in an effort to determine the valuation of Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification as a core competency and as an indicator of project success. Both hypotheses were rejected, as results indicated that PMP® certification was the least valued of 15 core competencies and that there was no difference in project success rates between PMP®-certified project managers and uncertified project managers.

Although the analysis from the research suggested that PMP® certification, as currently comprised, is a necessary, but not a sufficient factor affecting project management success, it was felt that further research on this topic is imperative if project success rates are to improve. Specifically, more information is needed regarding the IT screening process and IT executives' definition of project management success. Some questions that can be raised are

On the topic of IT recruiting:

- What metrics do recruiters use to assess soft skills?
- Is there a need to develop additional instruments that are more granular in their ability to discern specific soft skills?

Regarding IT executives' definition of PM success:

- What/how would they change PMP® certification to enhance its contribution to project management in their company? What PM competencies do they associate with PM success?
- What specific soft skills need to be present to facilitate PM success?

Some conclusions drawn from this study:

- Project management needs to be viewed and valued as a core activity in organizations - Not just relegated to the tactical arena.
- Organizations may need to consider developing additional screening procedures for new project manager hires. It may be unrealistic to think that recruiters can or will screen for project management success.
- Companies may benefit from defining their own version of project management success and retaining or promoting based on these proprietary criteria.
- Success is more than the technique and procedures incorporated in the current certification body of knowledge.
- a more relevant curriculum and experiential knowledge base must be developed.

More Research and studies (9)

- A 2006 Price Waterhouse Coopers survey found that "higher performing projects are significantly more likely to be staffed with certified PMs."
- PMP Pulse of the Profession Report 2012 found that organizations who have over 35% of their PMs certified have a 72% project success rate (compared to 64% success generally).
- IBM, which has the greatest number of PMPs than any other organization (approx. 15,000), reports that although they don't link certifications with better project outcomes, certified PMs have higher rankings on performance reviews and their projects turn out better.

While the above give broad indications on some connection between certification and performance, many other components need to be in place to improve project management: training, tools, process, and a culture that supports projects. When taken

together, these elements can help an organization produce better project outcomes than if they don't exist. Certification is useful because it encourages people to commit themselves to the profession and it provides an extrinsic motivation for those who need to do something extra.

The Practice of Project Management

Project Manager Competency

Project Management competency is the basis for the practice of effective management of projects and this is a result of not only knowledge, but also skills and personal characteristics and attitudes. Knowledge could be obtained through certification from PMI, IPMA etc, skills or performance competencies are achieved when the project manager applies the knowledge to meet project requirements along with appropriate competencies of behavior and attitudes when performing within the project environment. In addition to the knowledge, performance and personal competencies, there could be organization and industry or domain specific requirements. (7)

Knowledge, Practice and Profession

Knowledge, Practice and Profession can be viewed as three successive phases on the road towards effective professional practice.

Knowledge

Currently, most project management certification products offered by various professional bodies are geared only for acquisition of knowledge and stop at testing the same. However a few products have some components of practice included as part of the assessment process. Some examples include the B and A level certification from IPMA, the PgMP and ACP certification from PMI among others. Since most certification are knowledge based there are hardly any which would certify and validate a practice in a more holistic way. To do so, one would require not only testing the skills and performance of a professional but also evaluate if soft skills are appropriately applied. The competencies would vary in context of an organization, geography, domain / industry sector and so assessments and evaluation has to be structured accordingly.

Judging from what we have now as products from various professional bodies such as PMI or IPMA, we still have a long way to go before a certified project manager can be deemed to have the knowledge and skills to effectively practice project management. The assurance of performance on a project or for meeting project or organizational objectives could be of great value for organizations when hiring or professional development of certified professionals.

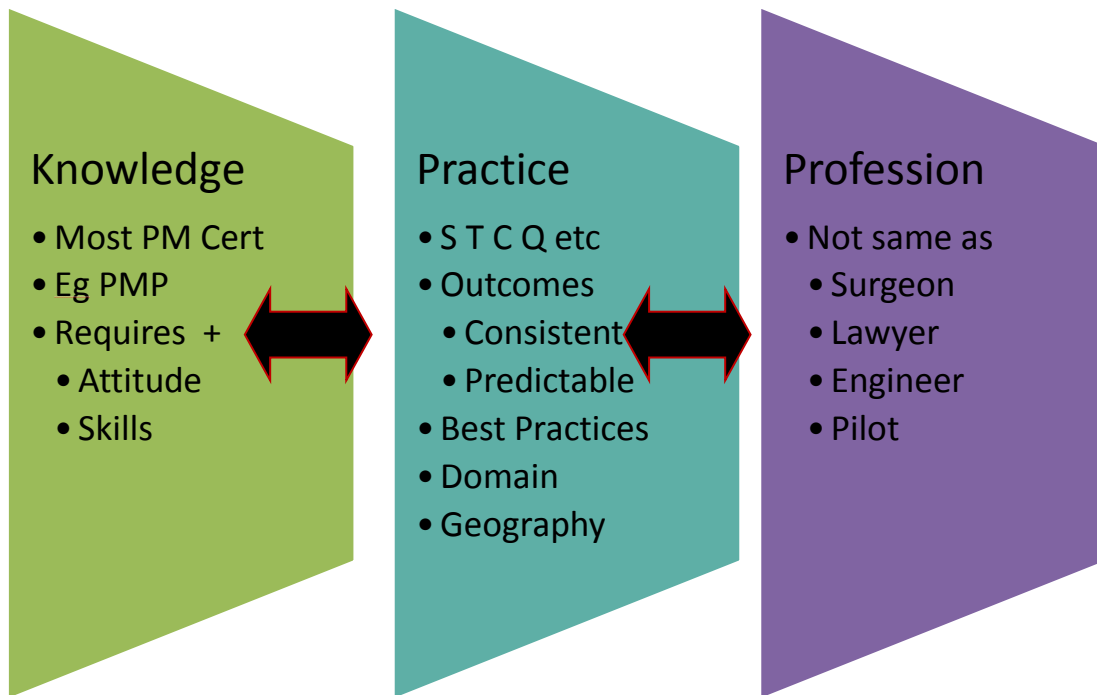


Exhibit 3 – Knowledge Practice and Profession

Practice

What is project management practice? Some definitions for the word 'practice' include

- The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it.
- The customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing of something.
- Repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it.

The practice of project management implies that processes (for e.g. those stated in the PMBOK guide) are applied effectively with the help of tools / techniques, templates and necessary documentation. Tools and techniques could include use of software and best practices usually followed in a specific industry / domain. Practice is also dependent on the application of people or soft skills to achieve objectives and has to view in the context of organizational culture and geography where the project is implemented.

How do we measure practice? The presence of processes, tools / techniques and documentation would be indicative of a practice but the real proof for its effectiveness will be the outcomes (scope, time, cost and quality or STCQ) and how it meets project or organizational objectives. Currently, while formal metrics do exist for measuring project performance they do not seem to be structured for it as a practice possibly because the project management community has not as yet viewed it as such and has not developed suitable methods and artifacts for it.

Profession

It is interesting to compare project management as a practice and as a profession. There has been considerable debate in the professional community on whether project management can be deemed to be a profession or not. Professions like surgeons, lawyers, professional engineers and pilots are at sufficient level of maturity and are formally practiced and have some specific characteristics. These include

- Evaluation of a practice component as a prerequisite for being certified as a practitioner
- The presence of a governing body which regulates the profession in a particular geography

On the other hand if one has to compare project management with other managerial practices e.g. marketing management or production management we can see a different perspective. None of these are considered as a profession and in that sense project management is similar to them.

Whether project management is accepted as a profession or considered the same as other professional management practices is immaterial so long as we realize that there is a benefit in comparing with them as it provides a roadmap for improving project management as a practice.

None of the professions or being a professional manager guarantees outcomes and so even if project management has to follow these paths it is logical to understand that the expectation of definite success may not be met. However imbibing best practices from these areas improves the chances of successful outcomes and therefore in that sense it will not be a retrograde step.

Steps taken by PMI towards a Practice Orientation

PMI has taken some steps in providing or facilitating a practice orientation for its products and offerings. These include

- Some of the certification has a practice component e.g. PgMP, ACP with entry level criteria experience criteria and peer evaluation.
- Practice standards and guides e.g. change management , organizational project management , risk management , WBS , complexity, etc.
- Community of Practice – various domains and knowledge areas
- Consulting Certification – OPM3
- Registered Consultant Program

The Knowing Doing Gap

Pfeffer and Sutton (6) have shown that often knowing is not adequate for action to take place. The gap between knowing and doing described in their book explains the difficulty in converting knowledge into practice and the pre-occupation and tendency for

professionals and organizations to stop at acquiring knowledge instead of focusing on practice.

So, talk gets more attention. Easy to understand complex concepts but difficult to implement e.g. ideas like decentralization and delegation of decision-making responsibility, sharing performance information, recruiting for job skills as well as cultural fit, and treating people with respect and dignity are easy to understand. But actually delegating, a process that involves giving up decision-making power, is not easy to accomplish in practice. Similarly, sharing information entails giving up the power and prestige that comes from knowing things that others don't. Actually putting people first and treating them as if they matter to the organization's success, although easy to talk about and to understand is notoriously difficult to implement.

The gaps exist because of differences in

- Talk v/s Action
- Memory v/s Thinking
- Fear and Knowledge
- Measurement and Judgment
- Internal competition

The gap between 'Knowing' and 'Doing' can be addressed by

- Why before how
- Knowing comes from doing and teaching others how
- Action counts more than elegant plans and concepts
- There is no doing without mistakes
- Fear fosters knowing-doing gaps, so drive out fear
- Fight the competition, not each other
- Measure what matters and what can help turn knowledge into action
- What leaders do, how they spend their time and how they allocate resources, matters

Many of the above measures apply to project management for progressing from knowledge to practice.

Viewpoint of Professionals and Organizations

In the context of understanding certification and practice of project management it will be worthwhile to assess as to how certified professionals and organizations view it.

Professionals

If we consider PMI Certified professionals, most of them focus on acquiring the necessary professional development units (PDUs). While, PMI has a broad based approach on this with sufficient breadth and opportunity which is positive for maintaining the certification the negatives are that they are less practice focused. To put it simply PDUs can be acquired by attending a course or a seminar without an

evaluation and this category has been given more emphasis compared to assessment of competence in the work place. Surely, if project management has to succeed as a practice this aspect needs a review.

No visible incentives or motivation seem to exist in organizations for certified individuals to practice the knowledge acquired. This is seen particularly in organizations having large number of PMPs where contribution to practice in is not commensurate with number certified. Of course, as in any field there are exceptions to this, and there would some self starters who focus on competency and practice through their own because of their interest in the profession.

Organizations

Organizations have generally focused on Certification or Knowledge based training and has yet to consider it predominantly as a practice or competency based approach. Ironically, it is organizations which should be interested in performance as a training objective but usually they stop at providing training with its usefulness evaluated through participant feedback. Further, the link or relationship between training and performance or competence has not been established and research on this subject is still at an incipient stage.

In most organizations training in project management is a function of Human Resources or Training / Learning and Development departments. It is not a part of a PMO and many organizations do not have a formal PMO as well.

Due to this, the level of understanding for structuring a project management competency development program is inadequate and often where PMOs do not exist, HR departments do not take the assistance of specialists or consultants.

There are exceptions to this where large transnational corporations have set up their own training academies and competency development programs.

One way of addressing this issue is to develop training and competency development programs by integrating Learning, coaching and product application (4)

What can we do? Some thoughts

How can professional project management associations e.g. PMI Certified Professionals, Organizations, Consultants and Trainers help in moving from certification as predominantly knowledge based to one which is practice based and therefore more useful in meeting project objectives?

PMI

The following observations or suggestions are for PMI but could apply to other similar professional organizations as well .What is true for PMI is largely the same for other similar bodies as well though there maybe some variation in the extent of application. Some certification products are more competency based but they are not sufficiently

promoted or evangelized and so many organizations stop at knowledge based certification.

- PMI has traditionally and predominantly been a certification based organization. It has little exposure to consulting though many of its certification products have included practice components. There is a need for a definite shift towards practice and modifying certification products accordingly.
- PMI has instituted a program designated as Registered Consultant Program but this is relatively unknown in relation to Registered Education Program which caters to certification products.
- The program for recertification through PDUs (Professional Development units) needs a review. There is no cap on 'Education' category but limit 45 PDUs per cycle (PMP) for category 'Giving back to community'. This category needs a relook.
- Marketing efforts need to be focused on application of knowledge rather than acquiring knowledge.
- There is need to promote the concept of an 'Improvement growth path' for organizations similar to 'career growth path' for individuals.

Certified Professionals

The Community of practice instituted by PMI for various domains, knowledge areas or geographies is a step in the right direction for a practice based approach. At present this is loosely structured. This has to more designed on a more formal basis so definite outcomes are visible on practice and which can aid professionals as well as organizations. Some of the suggestions below could be a part of this approach. These could be done in concurrence and support of PMI.

- Mentoring
- Internship
- Sharing Best Practices
- Recognition program for individuals

Organizations

- Usually the role of improving practice in organizations should be a function of a PMO or similar department. Many organizations have yet to put their focus on practice and instead do so with just training. This is an area which needs attention.
- Organizations can also develop or obtain with help of consultants a program for deployment / improvement of processes / tools / competency development e.g. applying OPM3 or its customized/ reengineered variants.
- Recognize individuals in organization who excel in practices.

Many of the above are being done by some organizations, but it is limited to larger set ups and generally not the norm in all.

Consultants / Trainers

Most seminars / workshops / courses conducted by consultants and trainers are more as an educational offering and do not include practice components. This is an area where a more result and practice and competency oriented program can be designed and developed. These could include

- Longer engagements – more in the nature of consulting
 - Programs integrated with use of soft tools / soft skills
 - Mentoring / Coaching as part of a program
 - Improvement programs including assessments and benchmarking
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