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*Prince or Pauper? Does project management certification really matter?*

Featured Paper

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# Prince or Pauper?

# Does project management certification really matter?

## By Dr Ayman Abu-rumman

## Abstract

Using evidence from the existing literature, this article explores if formal project management certification makes a difference to the outcomes of projects and explores what other characteristics project managers may need to possess in order to manage projects successfully.

Overall, a critical review of the literature finds that whilst there is some support for formal project management certification, there is limited evidence to suggest a correlation between this and project success. Instead of the generic set of competencies set out in formal certification schemes such as Prince 2 and from the Project Management Institute, studies suggest that effective project managers need a wider range of skills, attributes and behaviours in order to manage projects successfully.

In addition, the evidence suggests that a one size fits all approach purported by certification is not appropriate and that whilst a project manager may be extremely effective in one project scenario, they may not be in another if they are unable to adapt their approach and project management techniques.

The article recommends that further research is needed into identifying what other benefits, if any, certification can offer the field of project management and how it may need to be extended to incorporate a broader range of characteristic and attribute measures.

## Introduction

This article discusses whether or not formal project management certification makes a difference to the relative success or failure of different projects, or if there are other characteristics of individual project managers that are more important. Using a critical review of the existing literature it explores the question of what actually makes a good project manager, and if formal accreditation is really required.

Increasingly both public and private sector organisations now recognise project management as fundamental to their business operations, and a range of industry sectors view the successful delivery of projects as a key driver of organisational performance (Shepherd and Atkinson, 2011). More than ever before, organisations are adopting project management methodologies such as Prince 2 and Six Sigma to deliver their work programmes in a more controlled and cost effective way to create competitive advantage over rivals (Fisher, 2011).

Given that more organisations are adopting such project management approaches, the demand for project managers is increasing. This in turn has led to a growing interest in the

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competency of project managers and in the way the level of project management competence can be measured and assessed. Standards around project management are now being used extensively in training and development and professional certification programmes on the assumption that there is a positive link between these standards and effective management of projects (Crawford, 2005).

## Why formal certification?

In today's professional labour market, there has been an increasing emphasis on official credentials and having documented recognition by a professional body that a professional has the qualifications and technical knowledge to practice in a given field of work, and this has been extended to the field of project management (Remer and Martin, 2009), where increasingly, it is being seen as a profession rather than just a temporary management task (Hodgson and Muzio, 2011).

The credentialing process aims to signify attainment of a specified set of skills and experiences along with an understanding of a core body of knowledge. The term certification is used to represent a high level of expertise in relation to these skills, experiences, and knowledge, and provides written evidence that an individual has met these specified requirements (Starkweather and Stevenson, 2011).

There are a number of assumed benefits of certification for different stakeholders. For the individual project manager, it is an internationally recognised certificate of qualification and project management competence; for those organisations providing project management services it is evidence that their employees are professionally competent, and for the customer, it is a higher level of confidence in the quality of the service they will receive (Toljaga-Nikoli, Obradovi and Mihi, 2011).

## What certification options exist?

Two of the main certification routes for project managers are via Prince 2 (Projects in Controlled Environments) and PMI (Project Management Institute).

Prince 2 adopts a process based approach to project management with a strong focus on monitoring progress and the management of information, and is one of the most popular methodologies for project management in both the private and public sectors. It was developed and promoted by the UK government and was originally intended for the management of IT projects. It was modified and re-launched in 1996 for use in a wider range of project scenarios and aimed to provide a common language for all those involved in the project (Wells, 2012).

The Prince 2 foundation training takes three days to complete at a cost of around £1,200 and has a pass rate of 99%, although less than 75% of candidates pass the more advanced Prince 2 practitioner exam (Sawas, 2004).

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Successful completion of the PMI exams allows candidates to become a 'Project Management Professional' (PMP), and is one of the most widely recognised certification for project management.

It is far more intensive the Prince 2 certification and equates to a college degree, involving three years of project management experience, 35 hours of formal training, and a four hour competency based exam (Carr, 2007). PMI also offers another qualification known as a Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM). This is the entry-level credential for the more advanced PMP. The exam includes over a hundred questions referring to the material contained within the PMBOK Guide (A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge).

In addition, there is a PgPM (Program Management) qualification which requires a bachelor's degree from an accredited PMI university, four years of project management experience and four years of program management experience (Winding, 2007).

## Does certification make a difference?

In their study of the impact of project managers on project success, Muller and Turner (2007) found no difference in performance between certified and non-certified project managers on all projects, but did find a difference on high performing projects. They concluded that this suggests that certification makes high performing project managers better, and that other competencies need to be strengthened before seeking certification for low performing project managers.

Young (2011) in his review of Prince 2, argues that certification does not equate to project management competence. He claims that Prince 2 training focuses only on higher level project control and governance, and fails to address project management fundamentals such as how to lead and motivate the project team, and how to apply basic control tools and techniques to keep a project on track.

Similarly, in their study of project management certification and project success within the IT industry, Catanio, Armstrong and Tucker (2013) found that there was no evidence to support the claim that project success was linked with certified project managers, and contended that certification only ensures that a project manager possesses the necessary skills of the profession but gives no guarantee over the expertise of the person and the increased likelihood of delivering a successful project.

In their study of PMI certification in the IT industry, Starkweather and Stevenson (2011) found that only a small majority of recruiters viewed the certification as an important prerequisite for project managers, and formal education, training, and technical expertise in project management were among the lowest valued competencies identified. They conclude by acknowledging the importance of an advanced level of understanding of the project management body of knowledge and its methodology, but emphasise that tacit knowledge such as around when to exercise leadership and do this effectively and soft skills such as the ability to communicate on a number of levels, are in the end most critical to project success.

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Furthermore, critics of certification argue that it is being undermined by commercially motivated training organisations (Todhunter, 2010).

## If not certification, what else makes a good project manager?

If certification is not sufficient, then there is a need to identify what else a project manager needs to demonstrate their effectiveness. In order to examine this, it is perhaps first important to identify what constitutes a successful project. In the 1980s project management success was mainly measured in terms of the correct use of different tools and techniques (Pinto and Slevin, 1988), since then there has been a changing understanding of what project success is. For example, Cooke-Davies (2002) made a distinction between project success and project management success with 'project success' focusing on the achievement of planned business results based on the project's outcome (such as a new service or product); and 'project management success' focusing on the achievement of time, cost, quality and other aims set for the management of the project. At this time, it was generally agreed that this could be applied to all types of projects and settings.

Fisher (2011) argues that effective project managers, for most types of projects, need to be good managers of people. He identifies six key skills and behaviours of effective project manager including: understanding behaviour (by being genuinely open and honest with others); leadership (showing a high level of motivation towards innovation to inspire others); influencing and showing value for team members; authentizotic behaviour (being able to show genuine concern for others); management of conflict, showing loyalty, trust and willingness to compromise; and cultural awareness (having a clear understanding and acceptance of the cultural differences between project team members).

In their work on identifying what makes a good project manager, Cheng, Dainty, and Moore (2005) use behavioural and job task competency frameworks. Within this, job task competencies for project managers include delivering the project to the satisfaction of the client, maintaining control over the budget, effective communication with the project team, and quality control. Behavioural competencies include initiative, information seeking, leadership, conceptual thinking and flexibility. From their study they recommend that what is actually needed in recruiting a project manager is the use of psychometric testing to screen candidates for these competencies, and once recruited, using the competency framework to identify training needs, monitor performance, and allocate rewards.

## Are project management competencies generic?

Project management certification implies that there are a common set of competencies that can be applied across all types of project, and an assumption that project management is largely generic and common to most projects in most contexts, and applicable to a wide range of industries without need for any real adaptation (Wirth, 1992). However, there has been increasing focus on the variations in practice and projects, leading to criticisms of the concept that 'one size fits all' (Shenhar, 2001).

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Studies have shown that what might work well for one project may not work well in another. For example, from his study of what makes an effective project manager, Fisher (2011) found that that project managers working in the West have very different expectations to those operating in the East or Asia Pacific areas. He also noted corporate cultural differences that need to be taken account of.

Similarly, in his study of project management, Shenhar (2001) demonstrated empirically how different types of projects are managed in different ways. He found evidence to suggest that project managers need to use very different skills and approaches in the management of high technological projects as compared to low technological projects, particularly in relation to the leadership style of the project manager, and concluded that in essence, projects are not necessarily similar, and do need different competencies and techniques to manage them.

## Conclusion

Overall, it would appear that whilst there is a generally accepted place for formal project management certification, and recognised benefits to be gained for a range of stakeholders, there is limited evidence to suggest it has any significant impact on the relative success or failure of projects. The literature suggests that such certification is useful at the screening stage of identifying an appropriate manager, but thereafter, other attributes are more important with a greater emphasis on soft skills such as communication and on tacit knowledge around leadership and team motivation.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that whilst an individual may be an effective project manager in one setting, they may not be in another if they cannot adapt their project management approaches and techniques, suggesting that a generic set of competencies supported by certification do not fit all scenarios.

Further research is needed to determine what other benefits, if any, certification can offer the field of project management and how it may need to be extended to incorporate a broader range of characteristics and attributes.

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