Beyond the PMP: Advanced Project Management Certification

by Kevin Aguanno, PMP®, MAPM

The Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification from the Project Management Institute (PMI) has grown rapidly to become a major project management qualification in North America and is making inroads in other parts of the world; yet, many who have attained this qualification are now wondering “What next?” Project management training organizations and publications focus on providing the skills and knowledge required for attaining the PMP certification but since there is little public discussion of qualifications beyond the PMP few have knowledge of what further qualifications can be attained in project management.

Rapid growth has seen the number of PMPs jump from the start of the qualification in the 1980s to approximately 10,000 in January 2000 and to a current total of 46,890 in May of 2002, though the growth rate has been fairly level in recent months (Source: PMI). Such growth has been driven by the active promotion of the qualification by PMI and the lack of other widely-available PM qualifications in North America. This growing body of PMPs is now creating a demand for additional education and qualification opportunities. One result is the proliferation of project management certificate and degree programmes offered by universities around the world. PMI itself has started to address the issue through the development of Certificates of Added Qualification (CAQ) which essentially provide a method of certifying a candidate with an area of specialty beyond the general project management knowledge assessed by the PMP exam. PMI has also developed a qualification below the PMP for those beginning in the field called the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) but this addresses the needs of novices involved in the project management profession, not those seeking advanced qualifications.

Alternatives to the PMP

The experience in Europe and other parts of the world has been quite different than that of North America. While PMI is “going global” with the addition of new chapters in other countries, the world outside of the Americas largely turns to the International Project Management Association (IPMA), a Geneva, Switzerland-based umbrella organization of national project management associations formed in 1965. It counts among its members over 30 national PM associations in countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Russia, Azerbaijan, China, South Africa and Brazil (Source: IPMA). The IPMA sets a global PM competency baseline and sets standards for (and accredits) national project management certification programmes.
The IPMA promotes a four-tier certification programme that has both knowledge-based and competency-based assessment levels which provide a hierarchy of qualifications for project managers (See Figure 1). At the lowest level, the IPMA has a knowledge-based qualification, called the Project Management Practitioner (abbreviated to PMF, reflecting the use of the German word Fachman or Fachfrau) that roughly compares with PMI's CAPM. At the next assessment level, called the Certificated Project Management Professional (abbreviated to CMP), the IPMA introduces competency- and knowledge-based assessments. This is an important distinction as PMI's PMP, their highest qualification, is primarily a knowledge-based assessment only. The IPMA's two highest qualification levels, the Certificated Project Manager (CPM) and the Certificated Projects Director (CPD) are competency-based qualifications assessing knowledge, skill, experience, and personal attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Capabilities</th>
<th>Certification Process</th>
<th>Validity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificated Project Director (IPMA Level A)</td>
<td>Competence = knowledge + experience + personal attitude</td>
<td>Optional e.g. workshop, seminar interview</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificated Project Manager (IPMA Level B)</td>
<td>Application, curriculum vitae, self assessment, references, project list</td>
<td>Exam</td>
<td>time limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificated Project Management Professional (IPMA Level C)</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Exam</td>
<td>not time limited option: time limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificated Project Management Practitioner (IPMA Level D)</td>
<td>Application, curriculum vitae, self assessment</td>
<td>Exam</td>
<td>not time limited option: time limited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: The IPMA Four-Tier Certification Model (Source: IPMA)
William R. (Bill) Duncan, of Project Management Partners, based in Lexington, MA, USA, was the primary author of *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* published by PMI in 1996. Duncan has been a vocal critic of those claiming the PMP is a certification of project management skill or competency, stating: “PMI’s ‘Certification Handbook’ says that the program is ‘designed to objectively assess and measure professional knowledge.’ Knowledge is not skill. Nowhere in this document is there any statement to suggest that certification provides assurance of skill, competency, or expertise as a project manager. In fact, it is not even necessary to have worked as a project manager to become certified (schedulers, technical leads, and others are eligible as well).”

Mark Mullaly, president of Interthink Consulting Incorporated, of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, questions the perception that obtaining the PMP qualification assures employers of a candidate’s experience. In a recent article entitled “PM Certification Redux: An Immodest Response”, [http://www.gantthead.com/article/0,1380,143283,00.html](http://www.gantthead.com/article/0,1380,143283,00.html) Mullaly points out some of the misperceptions surrounding the experiential requirements of the PMP assessment process, stating “Consideration of whether the projects were delivered on time, on budget or to the satisfaction of the customers isn’t factored into the equation. Even whether formal processes or methodologies were adhered to is not taken into account. Finally, the third-party verification of project experience that used to be a condition is no longer in place. With internships, as done with doctors, lawyers and engineers, there is the component of a licensed professional attesting to the candidate’s actual, successful handling of real-world situations. Instead, with the PMP, the exercise has truly become an administrative one of tallying up the hours until the magic goal is reached.”

Addressing the IPMA model alternative, Duncan says “To me, the main distinction between the IPMA program and the PMP is that the IPMA program (starting at level C) attempts to verify actual workplace performance.” Clearly, there is recognition in the industry that advanced qualifications are needed beyond the PMP that assess skill and competency, and the IPMA model provides one such assessment method.

Another alternative for project managers “down under” is the certification programme of the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), a national project management organization founded in 1976 in Sydney, NSW, Australia. The AIPM uses a three-tier certification model: the Qualified Project Practitioner (QPP) a junior project office certification; the Registered Project Manager (RPM or RegPM); and the Master Project Director, an advanced qualification. All three levels are workplace-based assessments of competency in a project management role.

For project managers in countries that have IPMA-member associations, or who are located in Australia, there is a clear career and qualification progression beyond the PMP; however, for North American project managers, the path is less clear. Currently, the American Society for the Advancement of Project Management (ASAPM) is negotiating with the IPMA to bring the four-tier model to the USA. Some companies have addressed this issue by providing an in-house PM certification process that goes beyond the requirements for PMP certification. While these corporate certifications are not available to the public, they are interesting to study as they highlight different approaches to satisfying the need for a higher qualification.
In an article entitled “A Modest Proposal: Redefining Project Management Certification” (http://www.gantthead.com/article/1,1380,139441,00.html) Mullaly explores the role of the corporate world in developing assessments of project management competency and skill. He wonders “how can a certification program work that truly meshes knowledge, competency and skill? Arguably, I would say that the best place is within the organizations that are seeking them out. Some companies -- IBM being a noteworthy example -- are beginning to put such programs in place. For these programs, the PMP is the starting point, not the finish line. Once a common understanding is arrived at of what project management is, organizations can define and demonstrate what it means to be a project manager in practice. They can develop the apprenticeship opportunities to be able to develop competency in a safe environment. They can structure coaching and mentoring programs that are focused on the development of the person, not tied to the success of a project. And they can verify the development of competence and ultimately the demonstration of skill.”

In this article, we will examine the PM certification programme of IBM Corporation and compare it to the programmes of PMI and IPMA.

**IBM’s PM Certification**

In the mid-1990s IBM formed its Project Management Centre of Excellence with the objective to transform IBM to a project based enterprise. IBM had practiced project management for decades but different processes and standards had evolved in different business units around the world. The goal was to create one standard set of PM processes that apply to all business units and in all geographies yet flexible enough to address business unit needs. This set of processes includes a means to validate project management skills through an internal certification programme. Karen Cook, IBM’s Worldwide PM Profession Lead, believes that skills portability was an initial driver: “We wanted the ability to validate that our more experienced project [and] program managers have a base set of skills that can be applied around the world, anywhere in IBM.”

IBM’s PM certification process combines external and internal criteria. Requirements include passing PMI’s external PMP exam and meeting PM skill and experience levels relevant to expected levels of project and programme responsibility. The PM certification programme requires that IBM candidates successfully meet and maintain standards in several key areas:

- Knowledge (PMI’s PMP exam);
- Skills (technical, leadership, project and business management skills);
- Education (on a standard set of PM courses taught within IBM);
- Experience (project and general management experience); and
- Giveback to the Profession (mentoring, teaching, authoring PM books and articles, presenting PM papers).

Of these areas, PMI only requires a minimum experience level, a knowledge assessment through the PMP exam, and 35 hours of education (added in March 2002).
**PM Skills**

IBM’s certification programme requires PM skill levels in two areas: (1) basic “core” skills common to all project managers and (2) skills related to expertise in a specialty area. Skills attainment is self-assessed and then validated during the certification process. IBM also requires its project managers to certify in an area of expertise such as Application Development. This requirement assures that a PM has knowledge of and experience in the standard processes and terminology required to manage projects of a specific nature or within a specific business unit.

**Education**

IBM provides a PM education road map and requires more education of its PM’s than PMI requires for PMP certification. Courses within the PM curriculum are targeted for new PMs or experienced PMs transferring into IBM from other companies. The basic tier of its PM education addresses such areas as team leadership, finance, and contracting. Advanced education is then available for IBM-certified PMs wishing to enhance their knowledge and skills and maintain professional currency. In addition, many of these PM courses are accredited for university or college course credits.

**Experience**

As a key component of its certification process, IBM assesses the project management experience of its certification candidates. Experience is based on project results as well as the PM’s specific responsibilities on the project. IBM uses personal interviews as one method to assess this experience.

While PMI does not use personal interviews in its certification process, this approach is not unknown in other qualifications. The IPMA four-tier certification model, discussed earlier, requires face-to-face interviews for Levels A and B (the two levels above their PMP-equivalent). In this regard, the IBM certification model is more in line with international standards as a competency-based model like the IPMA Level B qualification (CPM), not just a knowledge-based model as in PMI’s PMP qualification.

**Professional Giveback**

Recognizing that project management is a profession in which competence is largely built through experience, and that senior project managers are storehouses of lessons learned and other valuable experience, IBM requires project managers to share their knowledge and experience to remain certified. Junior project managers are the primary beneficiaries of this practice that naturally fuels a healthy mentoring programme. Certified project managers may also participate through such activities as hosting “lunch and learn” sessions, teaching formal courses to other PMs, authoring or presenting PM articles and presentations.

**Value to the Company**

In November 1996, IBM’s Corporate Executive Committee issued a directive recognizing the high strategic value of project management and kicking off its massive transformation change to a project based enterprise. The result has been a
restructuring of business processes, the global standardization of its PM process, and the development of the already-referenced PM certification programme that incorporates PMI’s PMP qualification but also assesses skill, experience, and competency. The PM profession within IBM is flourishing in this environment, delivering bottom-line value to the business.  

DISCLAIMER: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of IBM Corporation.

Further Reading

This article was the inspiration for a book by the same title. For a much more in-depth discussion of project management certification and the career development options available for project managers, see the following book:


See the advertisement on page 4 for details on ordering the book.

About the Author

As a Certified Senior Project Manager, Kevin Aguanno specializes in managing complex software development projects. He has been managing consulting, integration, and software development projects in various industries since 1990.

Mr. Aguanno is certified by the Project Management Institute (PMI), and is a member of both PMI and the Association for Project Management (APM) in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Aguanno is the editor of Inside Project Management, an element-K journal, and has written several books. His articles appear regularly in various professional journals, and he speaks internationally on project-management related issues.

Web site: http://www.mmpubs.com/aguanno

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