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Where is Project Management Certification Taking the Profession?

Situation: You want to know what the new PMP and PRINCE2 certs are doing for us.

I've seen many, many postings about how the PMP test has changed, but not much on how the certification is changing what it means to be a project management professional (lower case). We recently spoke with Joseph R. Czarnecki, PMP, Senior Advisor, [ESI International](#), on this topic. He's a very seasoned trainer with a lot of expertise in this area and I think it's a topic that we all care about. So, I'd love to hear your take on the answers he offers below.

Q. We all know the PMBOK and PMP certification have changed, but how do you see those changes affecting the type of Project Manager that people will now see as certified? What do you think PMI intended with each element of the changes? Do you think the results align with those intentions?

A: Let's look at where it appears that PMI is headed with their PMP credential – where it has changed recently, then we will look at the PMBOK® Guide changes. Finally, we will discuss how these are viewed in the organizations that I have taken pleasure in working with.

First, I believe that PMI is working toward a family of credentials that will bear proof that the individual owner of the credential is, in fact, qualified in knowledge, skill, and ability.

I look to the recent growth of PMI and the PMP to help give a glimpse of where the profession is headed. As of June 2009, PMI reported having more than 300,000 members and more than 336,000 PMPs and close to 8,000 CAPMs. To be sure, their relatively new certifications in risk management, scheduling, and program management are also growing. That is a year-over-year growth of about 20%, since 1975. So from past performance, PMI is making an impression on just how people see certified project managers.

Over the last few years, PMI has changed the PMP Credential to make it more of a consistently measurable and applied standard in two ways. First, PMI continues to work with an outside organization that designs standardized examinations to improve the quality of the questions on the examinations; specifically, they have included many more scenario-based questions which test the application of knowledge, rather than knowledge itself. This helps ensure the exam questions are a direct indicator of what PMI is trying to measure by that question. Secondly, PMI has increased the number of audits for those applying to the credential; current estimates are that PMI audits 15% of the candidates. These changes will help modify the perception of the PMP credential from that of just an exam-based credential to one that includes demonstrable skill in the discipline as well. And it shows that the nature of the credential is changing to more of a skill, or application, based credential and away from a purely knowledge-based examination.

So, I do think that the changes, along with the interim steps that they are taking, are in line with where they want the credentials to grow.

The recent changes in the PMBOK® Guide actually make the book much more user friendly. It is a good guide to the body of knowledge about project management and, this time, a better read overall.

But to the question regarding the changes in the PMBOK® Guide and the PMP Certification itself and how they will impact how the certified project manager is seen in the bigger picture. I feel that the changes that they have made as far back as 2004 and then here with the 2008 update have been done with forethought to firmly establish project management as a formal profession, as opposed to a job. The PMP credential has become more of a standard by which project managers are going to be measured, and will become a baseline requirement for various organizations in the future – from organizations that require at least one PMP on the project when they release a major procurement to organizations that use the PMP as one element of their own internal certification process.

For an example of another type of credential that is further along a similar evolution path than the PMP, look at how the MBA started out as a college degree that became the 'gold-standard' of business. In the early days of the MBA, it was considered "special" for you to have the MBA degree conferred upon you, but today it has changed to being more of a requirement than something truly special.

This is what will become of the PMP Credential – not that it will lose its glamour and prestige, but that it will become the baseline upon which all project managers will be expected to perform, before they take on a project. The PMP is still a sound way for helping to identify those that have the knowledge and skill sufficient to lead a successful project. It is a way of ensuring that the individual knows about the tools, techniques, and processes to manage projects successfully.

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Q. Next month a new version of PRINCE2 is being released in the UK that significantly shortens the standard (<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/7115588/Next-Generation-Prince2-2009--Will-Become-Available-in-July>). Some say PMI should consider doing the same. How do you feel about that?

A. First, I want to say that there is a very fundamental difference between PMBOK® Guide and PRINCE2®. PRINCE2® is a process-based approach for project management; it has a series of processes which cover all of the activities on a project from start up to close out. It tells you what to do when on a project. PRINCE2® is a method for managing projects. It helps you identify who should be involved and what they will be responsible for. It provides a set of processes to execute and explains what information a project manager should be gathering along the way.

PMI's PMBOK® Guide is a work-based approach for project management and is not a method; and it says so in the publication itself. It is a "guide" to the larger universe of project management knowledge that currently exists. It is a compendium of what is known about project management. Like PRINCE2®, it is a collection of processes. But unlike PRINCE2®, the PMBOK® Guide suggests to the user that the processes are iterative in nature and therefore are not listed in a definitive series. It is not a prescriptive approach to managing a project. PMI gives you recommendations and "best practices" but doesn't tell you exactly "what to do and when".

So, the PMBOK® Guide could be seen as providing the theory and best practices to project management where PRINCE2® could be seen as one set of tools to deliver project management. In my experience, with a little effort, the two work well together – PMBOK® Guide with the guidance, and PRINCE2® with the how – the tools and timing.

Now to the question, should PMI shorten the PMBOK® Guide? No, I don't think so, actually I think it will continue to grow over the years as more and more is expected of the project manager. For example, our client base is very interested in improving the business, or soft, skills of project managers. There's actually very little in the PMBOK® Guide as regards this set of skills. Perhaps in the future there will be more in-depth treatment in this area.

Q. Overall, what do you feel the changes in both standards say about how the profession is changing?

A: I remember in the late 1990s the wide-ranging discussion about whether being a project manager was a job or a profession. Now, more than 10 years later, it is clear to me that PMI has been successful in moving that argument forward and has done a significant amount in making project management so much more than a job – they have helped to establish project management as a profession; but they have done it in concert with the many corporations and organizations that we at ESI have worked with for the past 28 years.

As the data clearly show, the profession is growing at an impressive rate. The changes to the credential show that PMI continues to support and advance a measurable, repeatable, and valid baseline against which project managers will be measured.

Q. What changes to the profession and standards do you see coming in the future?

A: As regards to the profession, it is apparent that the influence of certification and standards is having a profound effect on the development of project managers around the world. This trend will continue. In fact, PMI reports that 1.2 million project management job openings occur annually; yet, the supply of project managers is not keeping pace. With 30% of PMI membership due to retire in the next decade, organizations need to be constantly training and developing their staff. That development will only promote the benefits of certification and standard development.

PMI, as well as other professional project management associations, such as IPMA and APM, will continue to refine current standards, as well as introduce new ones, as the need requires. For example, I predict that other standards in the areas of program and portfolio management will become necessary for project managers to understand and use. In other words, there will be a more complete integration of project, program, and portfolio management. In the short term, I believe the changes to the PMBOK® Guide and other standards will be driven more by the research PMI is doing in the practice standards that they are working on rather than some large change in the profession itself.

I also think that there will be more continued discussions on how the various Project Management Organizations around the world can and do support each other. I don't think they will go away as each has its own merit – but I think there will be discussion at a high-level about how they relate and support each other.



Joseph R. Czarnecki, PMP, Senior Advisor, ESI International, works with ESI's European and global clients to leverage ESI's expertise and resources to maximize client investments in improving the performance of project management and business analyst professionals and operations. Joe has been with ESI for over a decade and during that time has played a key role in the development and refinement of a majority of ESI's courses as well as developed several highly tailored project management course suites for ESI's global clients. www.esi-intl.com

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- Albert Einstein

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