

What Kind of Project Manager Certification Do You Need?

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(Why I'm cautious with PMPs)

Although I've been studying and applying the Guide to Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok) of the Project Management Institute (PMI) since its first edition in 1996, and although for various reasons I attended twice the 35 hours' related preparation course for the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification exam, I never applied for such certification. Nevertheless, three years ago, at the age of 64, almost at the end of my forty years, very rewarding career, I submitted my qualifications and the required report on one of my last projects, sustained a long and tough interview, and finally got the Project Manager Certification according to ISO 21500 - and to the related Italian UNI 21500 and UNI 11648 - which reflects faithfully the PMBoK: as a matter of fact, representatives of both the PMI and the International Project Management Association (IPMA) were on the board who wrote the international regulation, together with the representatives of the 25 national standard unification agencies that promoted the ISO 21500.

This tardive certification of mine was more a statement of principle than a necessity: up to a few years ago very few Italian engineering companies were asking for a PMP or any other professional qualification in the field of management, looking more to the experience and the achievements of the candidates; besides, both the qualifications and the whole corpus of management's best practices and methodologies were largely unfamiliar to most of the people in the engineering industry. As a consequence, I proceeded in my manager career without certification and, at a certain point, I even started making a point of honor of this being uncertified: as a matter of fact, along the years I had seen too many people without any real management experience and competence spending a certain number of months with a PMP exam simulator; learning by hearth what's necessary to pass the multiple-choice test, and, once passed it, convincing of their capabilities some human resources' representative lay of the matter and eager only to fill-in a box in an organogram. As a result of this perverse mechanism, our market is inflated with alleged managers who blindly and acritically apply the whole PMBoK forcing their projects into the straitjacket of unnecessary or even damaging procedures - and pester and drive mad the other stakeholders!

And this is without taking in account all the people who - unfortunately especially in Italy - having managed a team of a half-score individuals, and without any particular knowledge of management's best practices and methodologies, appoint themselves Project Managers, and may procure even more serious damages to a project.

You may say that PMI reviews the curricula of the applicants, has a random check system of their declarations, and that in this way it should identify any mendacious experience statements; but, apart from the fact that these checks are statistically not frequent enough - at the least not for some specific geographic areas - they may also be ineffective: I personally know at least two cases of applicants without real management experience who, submitted to verification by PMI, managed to get through it thanks to "generous" confirmations by friends.

All these observations lend me to the conviction that a PM certification based upon a report by the applicant and his interview by an expert gives far more certainties about the effective capabilities and experience of a candidate, and this is why I finally undertook the certification process with an agency recognized by Accredia, the Italian organization for accreditation designated by the Italian

government according to the international norm ISO/IEC 17011 and the European regulation CE 765/2008: in facts, I made a point of honor of sustaining with facts and personal actions my contemplated opinion.

On the other hand, also other international organizations base their project management capabilities' certifications upon reports and interviews, such as IPMA, and this confirms my thoughts on the matter.

The PMP is useless if not dangerous, then? I wouldn't say so: on the contrary, there are various positive points to be taken into consideration. First of all, we should start from the role played by PMBoK in universally disseminating and standardizing the project management vocabulary, tools and procedures: it is undeniable that managers use the same words around the world and understand each other thanks to it. And it's also undeniable that each of us, when in doubt, opens the PMBoK and immediately finds what he is looking for. From this point of view, then, you may say that the PMP certification makes sure a company looking for a project manager that the holder understands what he's speaking about, and has a minimum agreed level of knowledge. Under this respect, a company with a vision may feel the opportunity of organizing also for the lower level executives a PMP 35 hours preparation course – in my last-but-one project, in a very multicultural and multiracial environment, we did so in order to be sure that we were all speaking the same language, and many of the attendees finally applied for the PMP exam and passed it.

Going back to the main subject, it should then be up to the company human resources' or hired headhunter's evaluator to conduct a very thoroughgoing and systematic interview to understand if the candidate is a real manager, and if he really has the relevant experience. But this could bring to a vicious circle, since often time the interviewer is not able to understand the real management capabilities of the person across the table, is pushed to fill-in as soon as possible a box in an organogram, and relays upon the PMP title as a justification for a quick and possibly ill pondered choice. That's why I am a little skeptical and very cautious about the huge number of PMPs around the world, particularly in the Middle East and in the so-called third world.

At the end of the day, in my opinion, behind the choice of a good manager there must be in any case a good interviewer who works on facts, tools and concepts universally accepted and deeply related to the market: in a way it could be either the interview by a very skilled company human resources' representative or hired headhunter's evaluator, or the interview of the expert of the certification-issuing body, i.e. IPMA or a government-recognized agency. But in any case, undoubtedly, having both interviews - private and regulation agency ones - it's better... and, either way, as an Italian and European, and as an experienced project manager, I think that the future is in certifications standardized and recognized by government agencies and regulations.

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