

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AS A PROFESSION: ARE WE THERE YET?

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers whether there is evidence that the project management industry has reached a level of sophistication to be recognised as a profession. In the paper the following definition of a profession has been adopted: ‘A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others. Inherent in this definition is the concept that the responsibility for the welfare, health and safety of the community shall take precedence over other considerations’ (Professions Australia 1997). Particular emphasis will be placed on the last paragraph of this definition. This in effect is a fiduciary relationship. A history of other recognised professional callings will be considered against what constitutes a profession. The paper continues with an investigation into the skills required by a project manager, the bodies that regulate the industry and the bodies of knowledge that set the standard.

The evidence suggests that as an activity, project management is in its infancy and is yet to satisfy the requirements of a profession. Yet individual practitioners can be considered professional in their conduct. Although some instances of professionalism occur on an *ad hoc* basis, it is not manifest in all project managers.

Due to the personal element inherent in fiduciary obligations, it is difficult to see this applying to project management relationships. Equally, the remit of the project management professional bodies will need to be expanded to nourish the fiduciary aspect of the relationship between the project manager and principal and to encourage tertiary education. The unfortunate reality is that until this occurs, project management practitioners will continue to make their own interpretation of the skills required to be considered a member of a profession.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper will consider whether it is the project management industry that can be described as a profession or an individual practitioner that exhibits certain attributes who can be described as professional. Compare other professions, such as law, medicine and more recently accounting to the formal acquisition of knowledge required to manage the elements of work. We can observe that each discipline has its own set of standard practices and regulations that have been endorsed to protect the community from malpractice or non-conformance. These vary across industry sectors and from country to country and may be formally recognised through additional study and certification against specific criteria to allow the ‘professional’ to practice their occupation. This

transferability of skills allows the individual practitioner to be considered part of an international profession. An example is in the legal profession where each country has its own laws used to govern that particular environment. Can you be a specialist contract lawyer in Australia and be able to apply the same skills learnt to a legal case in the USA? The answer is no, yet the existing skills can be adapted to suit the new requirements with the attainment of additional knowledge.

2. PROFESSIONS

To describe a profession one must understand the definition and characteristics of a profession to be able to create a framework in which to review the practice of project management.

2.1 Definition of a Profession:

To ensure a clear understanding of the nature of the debate some definitions must be established concerning the core attributes of a profession, the services offered within a profession and what is a project management practitioner. To support the Professions Australia definition of a profession, the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) states that a *Profession* is ‘a vocation or calling esp. one that involves some branch of advanced learning or science.’ *Professional services* is defined by Partlett (1985) as ‘the application of skill to the performance of a particular task or the rendering of advice; the skill springs from a body of knowledge accumulated by intellectual effort that is the product of formal training; and the performance of the tasks or the rendering of the advice is accompanied by ethical undertakings usually enunciated by a representative body of practitioners.’ And, lastly a Project Management *Practitioner* is defined in the Project Management Institutes’ Code of Conduct (2008) as ‘a person engaged in an activity that contributes to the management of a project, portfolio, or program, as part of the project management profession.’

2.2 Characteristics of a Profession:

The characteristics that define a profession (Twyford 1999) must reflect a substantial history, public service, a body of knowledge and a high level of education. One could argue that the project management industry is still in it’s infancy and therefore does not possess a substantial history when compared with the legal and medical professions. Solicitors were first organised on a professional basis with a grant of a Royal Charter to the Law Society in 1845 and Barristers self-regulated from 1501 through admission to The Bar by invitation to be a member of the four Inns of Court. The Provincial Medical and Surgical Association, founded in 1832, successfully lobbied for the establishment of The General Medical Council on 1858 in the United Kingdom. Prior to this, the Company of Surgeons was granted a Royal Charter to become the Royal College of Surgeons in 1800. It would appear that on investigation of these historical factors, that to be considered a profession a vocation must be held accountable and have the perceived fiduciary responsibility to the community in which they practice over time.

3. PROJECT MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATIONS

A characteristic of a profession is the ability of the industry to self-regulate by way of organised associations. Four project management industry associations have been selected to review throughout this paper: the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) representing Australian project management practitioners, the Association of Project Management (APM) representing the United Kingdom, the International Project Management Association (IPMA) represent the European sector and the Project Management Institute (PMI) representing global interests. All associations have both individual and corporate levels of membership. Considering the nature of a fiduciary relationship, could a corporate member meet the requirements of a profession? Or would this fact preclude professionalism? All four associations have documented historical starting points and established codes of conduct, however one could argue that they are all relatively new in terms of reflecting a substantial history.

3.1 AIPM

The Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) was formed in 1976 as the Project Managers' Forum and has been instrumental in progressing the practice of project management in Australia over the past 30 years. The AIPM's role is to improve the knowledge, skills and competence of project team members, project managers and project directors, all of whom play a key role in the achievement of business objectives, not just project objectives. AIPM also aims to ensure that those involved at other levels in an organisation and the community understand the key role of project management in today's society.

AIPM now has 7,100 members at individual and corporate level across Australia and Asia Pacific.

The AIPM publishes a Code of Conduct that states that 'Project Managers, in the pursuit of their profession, affect the quality of life for all people in society. It is therefore vital that project managers conduct their work in an ethical manner to earn and maintain the confidence of team members, colleagues, employees, employers, clients and the public' (AIPM 2008). The Code of Conduct covers four articles that provide guidelines for members with regard to maintaining high standards of personal and professional conduct and the consequences for a breach of the Code.

3.2 APM

APM was founded in May 1972 by a small group of project management pioneers. The first executive committee meeting of the new organisation was held in Stockholm. APM is now one of the largest independent professional bodies in Europe with over 15,500 individual and 450 corporate members. APM's aim is to develop and promote project management across all sectors of industry for the benefit of the public. A Code of Conduct sets out the elements of professional standards and ethical considerations which the association requires from members and relates to proper, acceptable conduct. All members are to agree in writing that they will comply with the association's code of professional conduct and are expected to exercise relevant competence in accordance with the association's professional standards and qualifications, as underpinned by the APM Body of Knowledge.

3.3 IPMA

The first project management association to be formed was in Vienna in 1965 – the IPMA evolved from a discussion among a small group of practitioners in what was then the new discipline of project management. Those individuals decided to create an organization that would allow project managers to learn, network and propose ideas. What started out as a forum for the exchange of experiences among international project managers evolved over four decades into a worldwide professional association with more than 40,000 members in almost 40 countries. A Code of Conduct is not available as the IPMA is an overarching association that encompasses a collective of other project management associations and therefore may not be considered part of the debate.

3.4 PMI

PMI was founded in 1969 by a number of individuals who understood the value of networking, sharing process information and discussing common project problems. After their first official meeting in October of that year at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, the group officially incorporated the association in Pennsylvania USA. PMI has grown to become a global advocate for project managers with more than 260,000 members in over 171 countries.

Members of the PMI abide by a Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct that identifies expectations for project management practitioners at work, at home and in service in the global community. The Code articulates the ideals to which members are to aspire as well as the behaviours that are mandatory requirements in the industry and in voluntary roles to collectively advance the integrity of project management.

4. BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND STANDARDS

Another characteristic that can identify a profession is the use of established Bodies of Knowledge and a set of Standards against which a practitioner's competency is measured. The defacto project management Body of Knowledge is the PMI's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK®). The APM also released the APM Body of Knowledge in January 2006. Recently, the PMI have added additional Bodies of Knowledge to meet the growing demand of an industry developing beyond the tactical approach to delivering goods and services. The Program Management Body of Knowledge and the Portfolio Management Body of Knowledge were released in 2006 and have yet to be aligned to any certification programs.

Standards to certify project managers as knowledgeable and/or competent have been produced by the four associations previously mentioned with the addition of another group, the Global Alliance for Project Practitioners (GAPPS), who have developed a universal two stage standard. It should be noted that educational qualifications are a separate form of recognition of ability. A qualification does not guarantee a certification.

The purpose of a body of knowledge is to delimit the intellectual parameters of a profession. The academic rigour to master the body of knowledge and the degree of skill necessary to execute it will also be a distinguishing factor between a trade and a profession. Compare dentistry (a

profession) with plumbing (a trade) both of which have clearly defined bodies of knowledge. Much of the educative process described above falls into the category of the development of trade as apposed to professional skills. The passage of time and the accumulation of skill will alleviate this objection. After all surgeons evolved from barbers.

4.1 AIPM

In the early 1990s the AIPM developed project management competency standards for the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels 4, 5 and 6. These were approved as National Standards in 1996 which were then reviewed in 2003 and a revised set of National Standards was issued in 2004. The AIPM uses these standards as the basis for their Registered Project Manager (RegPM) certification program to identify the level of competency of project managers. The candidates, under the guidance of a workplace assessor, prepare a portfolio of evidence for assessment against their chosen level of competency.

Since 2004 the project management body of knowledge and industry expectations of project management have increased substantially. As a result industry has expressed the need to upgrade the 2004 AQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 standards to meet contemporary industry needs; develop competency standards for project managers working at senior management levels and give greater prominence to personal attributes and behaviours which need to be exhibited by project managers, particularly at the higher levels. To meet these needs, the AIPM has developed new Professional Competency Standards for Project Management that has undergone public exposure with a final launch planned for July 2008.

4.2 APM

APM provides qualifications aligned with IPMA's 4 level Certification Program.

All qualifications, apart from the Certificated Project Manager qualification, are delivered through APM Accredited Training Providers. The APM offers the following four certificates and qualifications:

Introductory Certificate: for anyone looking to understand the principles of project management.

APMP (IPMA Level D): for people with up to two years' project management experience.

Practitioner Qualification (IPMA Level C): for anyone with more than three years of project management experience.

Certificated Project Manager (IPMA Level B): for project managers with extensive experience in managing complex, multi-disciplinary projects.

4.3 IPMA

The IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB) is the basis for the IPMA 4 Level certification system. It is a standard that sets out the knowledge and experience expected from the managers of projects, programmes and project portfolios. The ICB defines the technical, behavioural and contextual competence elements of project management. As an evolving profession, it is critical that project management practitioners have access to up to date information. The IPMA has four levels of certification:

IPMA Level A - Certified Projects Director

Has at least five years of experience in project portfolio management, programme management or multi-project management, of which three years in responsible leadership functions in the portfolio management of a company / organisation or a branch or in the management of important programmes.

IPMA Level B - Certified Senior Project Manager

Has at least five years of project management experience, of which three years in responsible leadership functions of complex projects

IPMA Level C - Certified Project Manager

Has at least three years of project management experience in responsible leadership functions of projects with limited complexity.

IPMA Level D - Certified Project Management Associate

Experience in the project management competence elements is not compulsory; but it is an advantage, if the candidate has applied his / her project management knowledge to some extent already.

4.4 PMI

The PMI provide a knowledge-base online test to demonstrate capability at three levels of project and program management proficiency:

Program Management Professional (PgMP)SM

PMI's Program Management Professional (PgMP) credentialing service offers PMI's first credential designed to demonstrate project and program management skills.

The Project Management Professional (PMP®) Credential

Individuals who hold PMI's PMP credential demonstrate a proficient level of project management leadership skills.

The Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM®) Credential

Designed specifically for project team members, the CAPM credential is aimed at improving overall project success by helping to ensure project management knowledge.

4.5 GAPPS

The Global Accreditation for Project Performance Standards (GAPPS) framework consists of performance based competency standards for two levels of the role of project manager. The framework provides a detailed approach to differentiating roles or levels based upon project management complexity. These roles are identified as Global Level 1 and Global Level 2 and are differentiated by the management complexity of the project. This framework is intended to be used to assess threshold competency — demonstration of the ability to do something at a standard considered acceptable in the workplace. The GAPPS framework recognises that Global Level 1 and Global Level 2 are a subset of the full range of project manager performance: entry-level project managers generally function at a level of management complexity below that required for Global Level 1 while highly complex projects may require a level of performance beyond that of a Global Level 2 project manager. A parallel standard for Program Managers is also being developed.

5. EDUCATION

5.1 Technicians

The current offering in Australia of technical skill in project management is through standardised vocational courses resulting in the award of a qualification. The course material is governed by the Department of Educational and Training (DET) and course providers must deliver material according to a curriculum established by the Vocational and Educational and Training (VET) sector. Project Management qualifications at this VET sector level are offered as Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Project Management. A Statement of Attainment can be offered if a candidate does not achieve a sufficient level of knowledge in all areas of study. Courses can be offered by government institutions, private organisations and are governed by strict regulations to meet the VET sector guidelines. Appendix 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the required outcomes of demonstrated skill attainment at these three levels. Not included in this review are undergraduate degrees in project management as none currently exist in Australia. The debate continues as to the validity of this form of technical skill attainment at a graduate level with a recent paper presented at the ICAN conference by de Valence, Best, Watt (2008).

5.2. Advanced Learning

After gaining experience, the project management practitioner can apply reflective practice to attain even higher levels of knowledge. This can be enhanced through a structured approach to reflective learning through post graduate study. Appendix 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the required outcomes of demonstrated skill attainment at the post graduate level.

Industry requires practitioners to possess problem solving skills that can adapt to change by finding, retrieving and processing knowledge. In this regard, the work of Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000) may be a useful model. The authors have developed a knowledge creation process in terms of three elements:

1. The SECI process: the conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge through Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination and Internalisation.
2. *ba*: A place where knowledge sharing, creation and utilisation can be shared.
3. Knowledge Assets: The moderation of inputs and outputs to the knowledge creation process that can be defined as experiential, conceptual, systematic and routine.

The professional associations in their activities such as conferences, journals and mentoring programs, are particularly interested in the transfer of knowledge. In this context, the creation and conversion of knowledge can be amplified through the SECI model starting with individuals ‘and expanding as it moves through communities of interaction.’ Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000, pp 12). People transfer knowledge into action using what Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998) call the ‘The Knowledge Spiral’ which is based on the SECI model.

The transfer of knowledge can also be considered in terms of mentoring or coaching. At the most basic level, the mentoring relationship is about learning. The mentor is a role model, a coach, a sounding board and a counsellor, supporting the development of his/her mentee outside the normal manager-subordinate relationship. The intention is to provide the mentee with ideas, real-life experiences and support, whether in regard to a particular situation or challenge, project, or more long-term career goals and issues. The mentor should not give definitive answers to any issues or questions, but help the mentee become aware of what options there are so they can

make the final decision. This relationship offers both parties an opportunity to reflectively learn through identifying opportunities for growth and targeted development.

Mentoring is or should be a feature of the collegiate attitude fostered by the project management professional associations detailed above. How far this is so is not immediately obvious but until it is, project managers may not be considered truly professional.

6. REGULATIONS

In addition to the previously identified characteristics of a profession (Twyford 1999) a profession must demonstrate that it is not only regulated by the representative associations but also the laws governing the country in which the practitioners undertake their business. Significant failures, involving corporations such as Enron, WorldCom, Peregrine Systems etc in the United States has required transparent reporting of projects in accordance with the Sarbanes and Oxley Act 2000.

Accountability to the community by means of insurance in addition to the legal responsibility is a requirement of any profession. Currently, project managers when practicing in certain industries, but not all, are required to have Public Indemnity insurance. Many insurers still classify anyone who calls themselves a project manager, irrespective of what they actually do, in one rating category without differentiating between a proficient project manager and others. This leads to another issue in the Australian market place – the Federal Government is yet to identify project management as a stand-alone job classification on the job census.

7. CONCLUSION

The investigation into the professional attributes of the project management industry highlight that individuals approach professional status in their conduct using the available tools, such as attaining a specific level of skill, self regulating against standards of practise, reflectively learning within a regulated environment and mentoring others in the industry. However, these activities occur on an individual *ad hoc* basis and are not undertaken across the project management industry in a collective, disciplined manner.

Without the personal elements inherent in fiduciary relationships, the introduction of high intellectual skills and mentoring to the project management relationship may not be enough to gain professional status for project managers. Equally, the remit of the project management professional bodies will need to be expanded to nourish the fiduciary aspect of the relationship between the project manager and principal, encourage tertiary education and mentoring and finally punish transgressions. No doubt some changes to the relevant rules will be needed.

The unfortunate reality is that until the industry has several major public failures, individual practitioners will continue to exhibit their own interpretation of the skills required to be considered a professional practitioner but not as a part of what is yet to be considered a profession.

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Australia Institute of Project Management (AIPM) Code of Conduct:

<http://www.aipm.com.au/html/search.cfm?Range=All&Format=Standard&Terms=code+of+conduct&search=search>

Australian Public Service Code of Conduct:

<http://www.apsc.gov.au/conduct/>

Global Association for Project Performance (GAPPS): <http://www.globalpmstandards.org/>

Global Project Management Maturity Model:

<http://www.prince2.org.uk/MaturityAssessment/PMMM.asp>

International Project Management Association (IPMA):

<http://www.ipma.ch/certification/standards/Pages/default.aspx>

Professions Australia

<http://www.professions.com.au/definitionprofession.html>

Project Management Institute (PMI) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct:

http://www.pmi.org/PDF/ap_pmicodeofethics.pdf

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APPENDIX 1: TECHNICAL SKILLS

Certificate IV

- Breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and competencies would cover a broad range of varied activities or application in a wider variety of contexts most of which are complex and non-routine. Leadership and guidance are involved when organising activities of self and others as well as contributing to technical solutions of a non-routine or contingency nature.
- Performance of a broad range of skilled applications including requirements to evaluate and analyse current practices, develop new criteria and procedures for performing current practices and provision of some leadership and guidance to others in the application and planning of the skills.
- Applications involve responsibility for, and limited organisation of, others.

Diploma

- Breadth, depth and complexity covering planning and initiation of alternative approaches to skills or knowledge applications across a broad range of technical and/or management requirements, evaluation and co-ordination.
- The self-directed application of knowledge and skills, with substantial depth in some areas where judgement is required in planning and selecting appropriate equipment, services and techniques for self and others.
- Applications involve participation in development of strategic initiatives, as well as personal responsibility and autonomy in performing complex technical operations or organising others. It may include participation in teams including teams concerned with planning and evaluation functions. Group or team co-ordination may be involved.
- The degree of emphasis on breadth as against depth of knowledge and skills may vary between qualifications granted at this level.

Advanced Diploma

- Breadth, depth and complexity involving analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation across a broad range of technical and/or management functions including development of new criteria or applications or knowledge or procedures.
- The application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts in relation to either varied or highly specific functions. Contribution to the development of a broad plan, budget or strategy is involved and accountability and responsibility for self and others in achieving the outcomes is involved.
- Applications involve significant judgement in planning, design, technical or leadership/guidance functions related to products, services, operations or procedures.
- The degree of emphasis on breadth as against depth of knowledge and skills may vary between qualifications granted at this level.

APPENDIX 2: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Graduate Certificate

- The qualification may involve broadening skills of individuals already gained in an undergraduate program, or developing vocational knowledge and skills in a new professional area.

Graduate Diploma

- Broadening skills of individuals either already gained in an undergraduate program, or developing vocational knowledge and skills in a new professional area and/or further specialisation within a systematic and coherent body of knowledge.

Masters Degree

- Mastery or overview of the relevant field of study or area of professional practice and the emphasis may range from the acquisition or enhancement of specific professional or vocational skills and knowledge, usually undertaken in a combination of coursework and research, through to the acquisition of in-depth understanding in a specific area of knowledge which is usually undertaken through research.
- Provide appropriate evidence of advanced knowledge about a specialist body of theoretical and applied topics.
- Demonstrate a high order of skill in analysis, critical evaluation and/or professional application through the planning and execution of project work or a piece of scholarship or research.
- Demonstrate creativity and flexibility in the application of knowledge and skills to new situations, to solve complex problems and to think rigorously and independently.

Doctoral Degree

- A substantial original contribution to knowledge in the form of new knowledge or significant and original adaptation, application and interpretation of existing knowledge.
- A comprehensive and searching review of the literature, experimentation, creative work with exegesis or other systematic approach or an advanced, searching and expansive critical reflection on professional theory and practice.
- Undertake an original research project, or a project(s) addressing a matter of substance concerning practice in a profession at a high level of originality and quality.
- Presentation of a substantial and well ordered dissertation, non-print thesis or portfolio, for submission to external examination against international standards.