

Seven (7) things you need to know about project management certifications

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What is a certification?

A certification is an industry award that recognizes a person's competence in a field at a certain point in time.

A certifying body conducts standardized assessment against criteria that are defined by the profession, and some offer instructional resources as optional aid to candidates.

Unlike qualifications, which are largely knowledge based, good certifications validate an individual's knowledge, experience and skills in an industry domain.

A license is a specific form of certification that is a prerequisite for participation in a certain activity.

An unrestricted motor vehicle driver's license, for example, requires participants to evidence:

- ✓ Knowledge of the road rules (through a written test)
- ✓ Experience driving for a certain period of time (usually under supervision), and
- ✓ Skill in operating a vehicle (through an independent, practical examination of starting, driving in traffic, parking and the like).



Despite the impression given by some, no project management certifications are actual licenses – there is no legal requirement to be certified to manage projects – but the same principles of certification apply.

Certification marks (logos) and the rules for their award are an internationally regulated and protected form of trademark.

How many project management certifying bodies are there?

More than you might think!

Of the 50 or more that exist around the globe, the four main international project management certifying bodies are:

- ✓ Project Management Institute (PMI)
- ✓ Institute of Project Management (the Institute)
- ✓ International Project Management Association (IPMA), and
- ✓ Axelos

Obviously, there are only so many ways you can describe yourself in this space! For the purposes of clarity, I will refer to these organizations in this article by their short names (PMI, the Institute, IPMA and Axelos).

All have been around for 20 or more years, and – with the exception of Axelos which manages the PRINCE2 certifications under license – operate exclusively in the project management space.

How do these certifications assess my knowledge?

Both PMI and Axelos publish and promote their own well-documented methodologies. They assess candidates’ knowledge of them via multiple choice quiz questions under controlled exam conditions.

Their assessments are well regarded for their rigour; however, they have been criticized for:

- ✓ demanding the rote and uncritical memorization of formulae and processes
- ✓ failing to recognize the value in other methodological approaches, and
- ✓ anecdotally reported high rates of attrition (both are quite secretive about the percentage of candidates who pass or fail their exams).

IPMA and the Institute are methodologically agnostic, which is reflected in their knowledge assessments.

Whereas the Institute offers a range of proprietary online and workshop-based education courses that integrate knowledge assessment to the required standard, they also recognize knowledge formally assessed through other college, university, certification body and corporate programs.

IPMA stands alone in not providing any methodological guidance for delivering projects, preferring instead for candidates to demonstrate knowledge in the context of the projects they deliver.

				
Project officer	CAPM	Foundation	Level D	CPO
Junior project manager	PMP	Practitioner	Level C	CPP
Senior project manager			Level B	CPM
Project director	PgMP		Level A	CPD

How do these certifications assess my experience?

Most certification bodies have a suite of vertically integrated awards that ascend in line with the experience of the project manager.

Axelos has no experience requirement for its PRINCE2 Foundation or Practitioner certifications, although these are positioned as early-career (as opposed to management) level awards.

PMI is unique in demanding more on-the-job hours of experience from high-school than four-year degree graduates. Their certification rules also seem to specifically exclude people who have not graduated high-school.

IPMA and the Institute, on the other hand, only consider on-the-job project experience in their assessments, meaning they are universally attainable without regard to a candidate's schooling.

Interestingly, the Institute is the only certification body that actually verifies candidate's experience, conducting a referee check on all applicants at the project manager level and higher. PMI and IPMA only commit to reviewing candidates' self-declared experience in their application forms.

The Institute is also the first body to have mapped different forms of military service to their project experience standards.

How do these certifications assess my skills?

It is generally accepted that skills in any domain must be practically examined.

Continuing the drivers' license analogy, this is important because even though knowledge of the road rules is essential, unless you can apply them in real-world situations you cannot be considered competent.

Similarly, a person can drive a car every day for 20 years and still be an objectively unsafe or dangerous driver – experience is a poor proxy for skills.

To give another example: doctors must complete several years of supervised residency after they graduate to ensure their skills are at the requisite standard.

For that reason, hypothetical, case-study and/or scenario-based assessments done under exam or laboratory conditions can only ever be defined as knowledge assessments.

By this criterion, PMI and Axelos do not certify the skills of their candidates.

IPMA and the Institute both conduct comprehensive, one-on-one interviews that align candidate's skills to their knowledge and experience. These interviews probe candidates' project behaviors, challenging respondents to think critically about their performance and evidence good practice.

The Institute further requires candidates to submit a written report (appropriate to their certification level) that demonstrates the application of these skills across a broad range of project management competencies.

How do these certifications support my career development?

PMI, IPMA and Axelos all require candidates to re-certify every five years.

As a condition of recertification, candidates must (at their own expense) undertake and evidence a significant volume of continuing education and/or professional development.

On-the-job delivery of projects is not accepted as evidence in this regard.

Their rules for certification also stipulate that the failure to re-certify within defined timeframes means candidates must start over, resubmitting to the application and examination process from scratch.

The Institute's certifications are lifetime awards; although, like all the certifications discussed here, they may be revoked for gross criminal or ethical misconduct.

In rejecting the formal requirement for continuing education and/or professional development, the Institute has accepted the arguments of industry that:

the after-market for these services lacks consistency and, in some circumstances, rigor, and high value (yet unrecognized) education and professional development occurs on the job through channels such as mentoring, reflection and review.

Which certification do employers prefer?

Employers use project management certification to identify and promote talent, and to ensure that people working in projects have a common language, outlook and approach.

The extent to which employers express a preference for one certification over another has, to date, largely been determined by geography. PMI monopolizes North America; Axelos dominates in Europe and the UK; IPMA is the go-to certification in India; and the Institute's certifications are esteemed across Australia and Oceania.

That said, no organization perfectly adheres to an externally defined or ‘off-the-shelf’ methodology. For example, even though PMP (by PMI) is presently the certification of choice in the USA, few companies are perfectly bound to the doctrinal approach of the PMBOK guide.

Instead they apply the good practices of their industry and the project management profession to the unique environment and contingencies of their programs and projects.

What employers ultimately want is a robust validation of certification holders’ competence as project officer, manager or director. This necessarily demands independent assessment of their knowledge, experience and skills to clearly defined and explicit standards.

				
<i>Knowledge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Experience</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Skills</i>	✗	✗	✓	✓

Experience suggests that when an employer encounters a project management certification they are unfamiliar with, they will usually investigate its rigor across those three dimensions before satisfying themselves of its suitability.

Which certification is best?

I am employed by the Institute of Project Management, so there will be no prizes awarded for guessing my preference...

Nonetheless, our philosophy is one of educational empowerment – if we expect our certification holders to be able to think critically about the projects and programs they deliver, then we expect them to think critically about the certification they choose.

I strongly encourage you to independently investigate what the best certification model is for you!

About Paul Muller: Prior to co-founding the Institute of Project Management, Paul enjoyed 15 years of senior management experience across Australia, Asia and Europe in a wide range of project driven businesses.

He currently advises a diverse community of public, private and not-for-profit organizations on management issues relating to strategy, risk, projects, operations, marketing and people.