

# The Value of Project Manager Certification

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## Introduction

*"The worth of a thing is what it will bring."*—  
Proverbs

*"Certification, degrees, and other qualifications are just hunting licenses. They do not guarantee anyone work, but give a person the right to hunt for that work."*

—Dr. David I. Cleland, Professor Emeritus,  
University of Pittsburgh, c.1986

Our goal with this paper is to assert the value of project management certification by considering who benefits from it, who provides it, and the standard upon which it is based.

Anyone giving even slight attention to project management knows that certification is a "big thing". Between 1996 and 2000, as PM certification became popular (and companies had money to spend), few people seemed to question its cost, ROI, or the basis for evaluating competence.

Today, companies are rightfully challenging these and other value factors, as are individuals, professional societies, and others who might benefit from properly certified project managers.

As the two quotes above suggest, the value of project management certification depends on the perception of its worth from different perspectives: those who are buying the skills of a competent (certified) person, and those who are paying for the "I'm certified!" credential.

At this point, it's worth reminding ourselves of the basic definitions. From *The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition*:

- Value is "An amount considered to be a suitable equivalent for something else; a fair price or return for goods or services."
- Certification is "The authentication of one's qualifications or the act of certifying."
- Certify is "To guarantee as meeting a standard."
- Standard is "A degree or level of excellence."

The next part uses these definitions to cover three factors affecting the value of project certification: the beneficiaries, the certifiers, and the standards.

## Beneficiaries of Certification

"Who benefits from project management certification?" The simple answer is an individual whose qualifications have been authenticated by an independent process, where the process is directly related to the profession.

Perhaps, a better answer would be any person or organization that receives value from project management certification. This includes, as a minimum, six groups:

- Individuals
- Organizations
- Customers
- Professional Societies
- The Project Management Community
- The Public

Let's explore the value of certification for each group.

**Individuals** value certification as a career-enhancing move; it provides goals for building on one's professional capabilities, and the opportunity to gain social and monetary recognition from employers, peers, and the professional community. For example, with certification, an individual can expect to be recognized as someone who:

- Meets professional project management standards.
- Is a stakeholder in the project management profession.
- Is positioned within their current organization for advancement and increased salary opportunities.
- Has improved access to potential employers and job opportunities.
- Can confidently demonstrate superior knowledge and competence to prospective employers.
- Commits to high standards of ethical conduct; increasingly important today.
- Should be paid better than someone who is not certified, perhaps from five to twenty percent or more (see the eWeek 3/17/2003 cover page article, Solving the Cert Puzzle).

And what about **Organizations** who need independent assessments of the staff they currently employ or plan to hire? In this case, there are at least six ways that certification can provide value; namely the organization should be able to:

- Increase its confidence that employees have a consistent understanding of their professions and are operating from one store of knowledge.
- Increase customer confidence by showing that employees meet certification requirements and are consistent in their practices.
- Use certification to differentiate itself from competitors in sales and corporate-image marketing.
- Establish certification as part of a career-development roadmap for employees.
- Use certification as a criterion for hiring, promotion, and downsizing.
- Set standards by which project management performance can be measured.

The third group of beneficiaries is **Customers**. With certified professionals serving them, customers should have greater confidence in the performance of the products, or services that they buy. Why? Because work performed by certified professionals means that:

- Services or products have been created and delivered in a consistent manner that meets professional standards.
- The qualifications of consultants or others can be confirmed through official records and references.
- The performing individual has the capability to produce goods and services based on professional standards.

The next group, **Professional Societies**, derive value from conducting certification programs through the society or by partnering with others. For them, the value of certification is in being recognized as leaders and builders of their profession.

To get and keep this recognition, professional societies are continually challenged to stay current with state-of-the-art practices. This was difficult enough when a society focused on only a specific profession or “slice” of a profession; it is even more difficult as, increasingly, companies and industries acknowledge that effective project management is key to their success.

Professional Societies that successfully respond to this challenge can reasonably expect added value to their organizations in these ways and more:

- Attracting new members and retaining current ones.
- Seeing the standards, that the organization helped to establish, being adopted by companies, industries, and even countries.
- Being recognized as an organization that aids the evolution of the project management profession.

The **Project Management Community**, our fifth group, has a need for opportunities for individual growth and professional improvement. A project management certification program enhances the stature of the profession and supports the expansion of a project management curriculum.

- The value or benefits of certification to the project management community include the following:

- Professional standards are available for improving individual performance.
- Goals may be established to support professional growth.
- Consistency in project management practices builds upon the community strengths.
- The project management body of knowledge is expanded as its community shares new knowledge.

Certification also benefits the **Public** because they receive greater value through products and services when project management is properly designed and implemented in a work environment.

The Public continually demands improvements in products and services. Project management has the capability to support those changes necessary to deliver faster, better, and less expensive products and services – when individuals and organizations work together to design project management systems and to implement those systems in a consistent manner.

Four of the value items that project management certification can deliver to the public are:

- Less expensive products and services.
- A better grade of products and services.
- Confidence that certified individuals will perform in a consistent ethical manner.
- Advances in project management systems, including processes and practices, can lead to improved delivery of products and services.

Certification leads to improved products and services at a minimum of cost while delivering benefits to many. Project management growth in design and implementation continues to advance when efforts such as certification are established.

### **Certifying Organization**

This raises a question: Who sets the certification standards by which individuals qualify to receive a specific knowledge or competence-based professional designation?

In the context of certifying that one meets established standards, an organization—acting

independent of outside influence—authenticates that someone meets the established standards of the program. This is done through rigorous testing, examining, and reviewing of a candidate's knowledge, attitude, experiences, and skills.

The match between what the consumer needs and what an organization offers in certification provides one means of measuring value. A close match between a customer's requirements for project management knowledge or competence and the qualifications of the professional designation provides significant value that can contribute to organizational effectiveness.

On the other hand, artificial standards or requirements unrelated to individual performance in a certification program detract from the value of certification. In either case, the profession needs to validate the criteria used in the certification process: I.e. must have content validity.

### **The Value of Knowledge-Based versus Performance-Based Certification**

The basic difference between these two certification approaches is that knowledge is measured against a knowledge-based standard and Performance-based certification is an evaluation of how effectively the competence is actually applied in the workplace.

Knowledge is defined in a body of knowledge and the standard is applied using a test. Performance is a broader standard that encompasses knowledge of the subject, skills (the ability to apply knowledge), and attitude.

Performance-based Competence testing may include a sample of a candidate's experience. Compared to knowledge-based certification, competence-based certification gives everyone a greater degree of assurance that a certified individual will be able to perform to the given standard.

Knowledge examination measures a candidate's understanding of the vocabulary, the body of knowledge, and some practices.

The ability to perform to an acceptable level of proficiency is assumed by many customers.

Candidates taking knowledge based certification exams depend primarily on knowledge recall. On the other hand, reliability and validity is easier to maintain in written exams

Performance-based certification, however, infers a candidate's ability to perform project management tasks at a given level. Thus the relative value of Performance-based certification is significantly greater than knowledge-based certification.

### Summary

Project management certification has significant value for individuals, organizations, customer, professional societies, the project management community, and the public. Each gains when project management programs are established and administered to assist in the professional growth of project management.

The cost to individuals and organizations is more than returned through quality workmanship, more informed decisions, and capability to deliver better, faster, less expensive products and services. Knowledge-based professional certifications provide value to the community; Performance-based professional certifications give greater confidence that the person can perform the roles assigned.

Both certifications have their place, but the Performance-based certification provides more intense assessment of the individual's ability to perform at a given level, in addition to meeting the standards for knowledge, skills, and attitude.

Certification in project management gives you the hunting license. When you look for work within your profession, what type of "hunting license" do you have? Is it a "hunting license for small game or is it big game?

The right certification lets prospective employers, customers, and peers know whether you are hunting mice, rabbit, deer, moose, bear, or elephant.

### About Our Author

Lew Ireland, Ph.D.  
Deceased, 2012  
Rest in Peace, Lew!



Lew Ireland was an Executive Project Management Consultant based in Tennessee and serving both US and international clients. He worked with clients to establish their project management systems to ensure they are supportive of the organizations' respective goals. He was experienced in all phases of project management that includes planning, scheduling, project office implementation, project maturity modeling, and project assessment.

Lew authored or co-authored project management books and articles for professional journals. He was a continual contributor to the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management*, writing short articles for our website. He served as Consulting Editor to McGraw-Hill Publishing Companies for a project management series of books.

Lew served for over 30 years in volunteer positions to advance project management. He was past President and Chair of the Project Management Institute and served in various positions within PMI®. He was recognized by PMI for his contributions by the Distinguished Contribution Award, Person of the Year, and elected a Fellow of the Institute. He was Past-President, and the first Honorary Fellow of the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management*, IPMA-USA.

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