

Really Understanding Project Management

Which is more important: having the right knowledge and experience OR having a certificate? For too many aspiring professionals, certifications often win this contest because of the attractive increases in compensation and marketability. Here are two short stories illustrating the problem.

In a recent meeting with a senior project executive of a Fortune 500 U.S. firm, he complained of the quality of the project management professionals, even those with certifications like the Project Management Professional (PMP). Poor understanding of project management fundamentals is prevalent. Candidates lack basic knowledge such as the differences between risks and issues or how to best expedite a project schedule at minimum cost. Worse, candidates show a genuine lack of meaningful experiences, such as dealing with important stakeholders and managing their expectations, communicating properly (especially in a virtual team) or how to create a well-organized project schedule.

The complaint reminded me of the challenges I faced when I was the head of global project services for the Big 4 only a few years ago. The global project services that I ran hired about a dozen project managers a year, from entry level to the most senior level, and thus, we were always interviewing. What I found was that certifications like PMP were just not enough, the candidate had to know the essentials of project management and gain real work experience. To my dismay at that time, many PMPs could not run even moderately complex projects.

You may wonder why I am raising this problem now. After all, this issue is likely to be perennial. I believe there is a greater urgency now than ever before – professionals must learn or relearn the fundamentals because the competition is becoming more global and virtual. Without a solid foundation of project management knowledge, even experienced PMPs may fail and cost themselves and their sponsoring organizations time, resources and confidence.

I just came back from the PMI China Symposium in Shanghai on September 22-23. There, on an early Sunday morning, I saw about 1,500 to 2,000 aspiring and professional project managers crowded into presentation rooms to learn. Not only were there standing room only, there were people lying on the floor between the first row and the presenter. In addition, about 25 people squeezed through a small door opening just to view the presenter. (For a full account of the PMI China Symposium, click [here](#).) This phenomenon of eager learners is replicated in every conference I have attended – in Rome (PMI EMEA Congress), in San Diego (PMI PMO Symposium), and likely in Chicago (PMI Global Conference).

So how can someone learn the project management essentials and beyond? Here are five great ways, and you can do one or more of them at the same time.

1. Read – Have you read the latest PMBOK 6.0 and Agile Practice Guide (all 900+ pages)? There are some great books out there. How about Kerzner's book on Project Management 2.0 (also available in Chinese)?
2. Ask – Attend PMI meetings, with your local chapter or larger gatherings like the [PMI Global Conference](#) in Chicago, and ask the senior project professionals there.

3. Mentor – Find a mentor at work or join a PMI Chapter and seek a mentor there. And when you become an expert, you can contribute to the profession by being a mentor yourself.
4. Practice – Volunteer at your favorite non-profit or with PMI and its chapters. Practice your project management and leadership skills, if opportunities are not there in your workplace.
5. Continuous learning – Take a college course, attend a training class, or participate in a study group. Today, with so many advancements, there are plenty of great resources online. More importantly there are excellent live-virtual courses so there is an expert on the other end who can answer your questions.

Whether you are a student aspiring to be a project manager, an entry-level professional, a practicing project manager with some gaps in knowledge, or an experienced project leader who wishes to refresh with the latest development, remember that real knowledge is beyond just certifications. A certification is a badge telling the world that you are ready. But the true knowledge and capability lie within you. Good luck and happy learning.

For a more detailed version of this article, please visit [www.pmoadvisory.com/blog/really-learn-project management](http://www.pmoadvisory.com/blog/really-learn-project-management).