

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING FORMAL CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT IN THE UK

PETER SIMON (LUCIDUS CONSULTING) AND RUTH MURRAY-WEBSTER (LUCIDUS CONSULTING)

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the difficulties experienced by the United Kingdom's Association for Project Management (APM) in implementing its new Practitioner Qualification which is mapped to IPMA Level C. Reasons why UK organisations and companies have not, as yet, taken on board the qualification and in fact seem to be reluctant to do so are explored. One such reason seems to be the prevailing custom in the UK of using knowledge based examinations to demonstrate capability and that the very different approach of the Assessment Event based Practitioner Qualification is a major barrier to its acceptance.

The authors are two members of APM's project team for the development and implementation of the qualification and the paper is based on their own experiences and observations gained throughout the life of the project.

2. BACKGROUND

Since the introduction of formal project management disciplines in the mid twentieth century there has been a continual debate as to whether project management is a profession in its own right or a discipline that all professionals can adopt in addition to their normal area of expertise. Even when project management is considered as a profession it is often seen as a second career; for example where experienced engineers become project managers or experienced systems analysts evolve into them. This implies that no one sets out to become a project manager, it just happens. As we all now know attitudes have "moved on" and an increasing number of those involved in the discipline of project management regard it as a true profession and even more as a potential first career. Today there are a number of universities in the UK offering first degrees in Project Management and many more offering Masters. This change of heart has led to the demand for readily obtainable qualifications in project management that recognise the professional status of those working within the field and the progression they are making through their profession.

The first "professional" project management qualification available in the UK was the PMI®'s PMP® certification. Although this was launched in the USA in 1984 it was not generally available in the UK until the mid 1990s. The PMP® in the UK was soon followed by the APM's own APMP (mapped to IPMA Level D) and the Office of Government Commerce's (formerly CCTA) PRINCE (later PRINCE2) qualifications. To-date many thousands of people have successfully passed these examinations; 74,000 have passed PMP® (1,200 in the UK), 8,000 have passed APMP, 48,000 have passed PRINCE2 Foundation and 23,000 have passed PRINCE2 Practitioner. These are all quite large numbers and therefore these qualifications are becoming very significant in the workplace. However, what all of these qualifications have in common is that the examination is effectively knowledge based. They test the ability of an individual to remember facts, acronyms and mathematical formulae and to repeat them, or in some case apply them, under examination conditions. Any testing of capability to "be" a project manager is based solely on the answers to written questions that involve applying knowledge either to a brief case study or short project scenarios. Unfortunately these qualifications have now become accepted as the de-facto standards for accrediting project managers and project management staff.

3. HISTORY OF THE APM'S PRACTITIONER QUALIFICATION

In 2001 the APM embarked on a project to develop a project management qualification that mapped to IPMA's Level C under the sponsorship of Sue Beavil, Head of Professional Development for APM. In order to map to the IPMA Level C the qualification needed to test both knowledge and more importantly capability and it should build on the foundational knowledge of the APMP, or equivalent knowledge foundation in project management. It was agreed that the qualification would be tested outside of the workplace and therefore true "on the job" competence could not be assessed. APM had been working with Unisys on a similar qualification based on a 2-day assessment centre since the late 1990's and it was this approach that was used as a starting point.

In September 2002 the first pilot of the new Practitioner Qualification took place and following a period of evolution during which five more pilots were run the finished product was made available to the general public in early 2003.

Where does the Practitioner Qualification fit within IPMA and with APM?

APM now has three qualifications that it can award. Both the APMP and Certificated Project Manager (CPM) have been in place for some time and the Practitioner Qualifications fits into the middle of the two.

- **APMP** = IPMA Level D: The Certificated Project Management Practitioner shall have the project management knowledge in all elements and aspects.
- **Practitioner Qualification** = IPMA Level C: The Certificated Project Management Professional shall be able to manage non-complex projects him/herself and/or to assist the manager of a complex project in all elements and aspects of project management.
- **CPM** = IPMA Level B: The Certificated Project Manager shall be able to manage complex projects him/herself.

The diagram below illustrates how the various levels of qualification link together.

Title	Capabilities	Certification Process			Validity
		Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	
Certificated Projects Director (IPMA Level A)	Competence = know ledge + experience + personal attitude	Application, curriculum vitae, self assessment references project list	Optional	Project report	3-5 years
Certificated Project Manager (IPMA Level B)			e.g. workshop, seminar	Interview	
Certificated Project Management Professional (IPMA Level C)			e.g. workshop, report		Exam
Certificated Project Management Practitioner (IPMA Level D)	Knowledge	Application, curriculum vitae, self assessment	Exam		not time limited option: time-limited

Figure 1 IPMA Four Level Certification System

Downloaded from the IPMA website.

The APM’s Practitioner Qualification

The qualification that has been developed and that is now in use can be summarised as follows:

- A 2½ day assessment event involving group work, individual written work and a one-to-one interview using a true to life case study as the context to assess capability.
- The qualification assesses a candidate’s ability to manage a small to medium non-complex project across the whole project lifecycle i.e. from Business Case to Benefits Realisation.
- Candidates are assessed by trained assessors with a ratio of 1:3 or 1:4 (assessor to candidate). The event is overseen by an APM appointed Facilitator. An assessment event will run with a minimum of 6 candidates and a maximum of 16.

- It is assumed that all those attending an assessment event have the level of knowledge needed to pass the APMP, PMP® or other equivalent qualification.
- Candidates are assessed against 30 Assessment Criteria – see Table 1 below, 7 of which are considered to be “essential”.
- Candidates are scored 1, 2, 3, or 4 (1=low – 4=high) for each assessment criteria based on the quantity of quality evidence gathered during the assessment event.
- Candidates scoring an average of 3 or more across the 30 criteria and with at least a score of 2 in the essential criteria pass automatically.
- Candidates scoring less than 2.5 across the 30 criteria fail.
- The capability of candidates scoring between 2.5 and 2.9 is further scrutinised by the assessment team and following debate, sometimes supported by a further professional interview will be either awarded a pass or fail.
- All candidates are provided with written feedback giving positive evidence and areas for improvement against each of the 30 assessment criteria.

1. Determine stakeholders and their influence and interests
2. Design the optimal project organisation
3. Analyse and understand project success criteria and business benefits
4. Analyse and understand project constraints and dependences
5. Identify project risks and assumptions
6. Identify project issues
7. Demonstrate an understanding of project context and the overall business case
8. Identify project implementation requirements
9. Demonstrate a comprehensive project management planning process
10. Apply a competent risk management process to the project
11. Apply a competent quality management process to the project
12. Demonstrate an ability to incorporate best value approaches
13. Demonstrate an awareness of generic legal and contractual issues
14. Prepare for a negotiation with a supplier of critical services for the project
15. Analyse conflict situations and apply an appropriate style to resolve the issue
16. Objectively reflect on the performance of self and other team members
17. Present information clearly and factually
18. Answer questions relevantly and succinctly
19. Optimise project plans to respond to a major change
20. Apply effective change control and configuration management
21. Balance conflicting stakeholder expectations
22. Demonstrate an ability to monitor project progress and take suitable controlling action
23. Plan and conduct a suitable post project evaluation review
24. Objectively identify lessons to be learned separating causes from effects
25. Communicate succinctly in writing
26. Lead and influence a small team
27. Work effectively as a team member
28. Communicate verbally in an appropriate way (including listening)
29. Obtain information through use of appropriate questions
30. Present compelling recommendations to project sponsor (board/steering group)

Table 1 - Practitioner Qualification Assessment Criteria

*All assessment criteria shown are important and contribute to the pass/fail decision for each candidate, however, a Practitioner Qualification will not be awarded to candidates who do not demonstrate at least a basic/partial capability (Level 2) in the assessment criteria shown in **bold**.*

4. DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN IMPLEMENTING THE QUALIFICATION

When the qualification was first launched APM anticipated a considerable level of interest, particularly from corporate members with defined career paths for their project management staff, with perhaps a few hundred candidates passing through the assessment events within the first year. This has not been the case with just over 120 people being assessed up to the end of February 2004, including those on pilots. The pass rate to date is approximately 60%. It is our belief that there are 4 main reasons why the qualification is taking some time to become accepted.

Three of these reasons relate to the ability to sell or promote the qualification to organisations, including the corporate members noted above, and the fourth relates to the difficulties encountered for individuals to pass the assessment.

i. The Practitioner Qualification is different

Traditionally in the UK project management qualifications have been awarded at the end of a training programme i.e. you study for an exam, you sit the exam and hopefully you pass having in many cases never left the classroom environment. The Practitioner Qualification is not like this. *Note: another notable exception to the tradition is the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programme that endeavours to assess competence in the workplace but has been commercially unsuccessful in the area of project management perhaps for some of the reasons that the Practitioner Qualification has been slow to take off – see below.*

Candidates who attend a Practitioner Qualification assessment event are actually taught nothing, although they will undoubtedly learn a lot about the application of project management processes from their very attendance at the event. They will also learn a lot about themselves, how they lead and work within a team and how they adapt to changing situations. As such the Practitioner Qualification is unique in the UK's world of publicly available project management qualifications – perhaps too unique. It is not possible to study intensely or cram for the event. In order to pass you must be capable of managing a project and this capability must be demonstrated through application of the theory to the case study project. Candidates who just repeat their taught knowledge without applying it to the case will not pass. To quote a well used phrase, the Practitioner Qualification is designed to “sort out the men or women from the boys or girls”. People who “talk a good game” but cannot actually play themselves do not succeed.

ii. Knowledge based qualifications are easier to pass and are the norm

Since their launch in the 1990s the most common project management qualifications of PMP[®], APMP and PRINCE2 have been marketed as a means to accredit the capability of project manager, or those working in project management, and as said earlier they have accordingly become de-facto standards. What this means, with the exception of the PMP[®], is that all someone needs to do is to attend a 5-day training course, retain what has been taught until the end of week exam (multiple choice and written questions) and with any luck 4-6 weeks later be awarded the relevant qualification. Overall pass rates are well over 50% with some training organisations boasting 100% pass rates. Note the PMP[®] requires that a candidate also demonstrates 3-5 years relevant experience based on the completion of an application form and at least 35 hours of relevant training so in part is accrediting more than knowledge of the PMI[®]'s Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK[®]).

Some might say that it is potentially all too easy and anyone with some “common-sense” and a good memory (and in PMI[®]'s case a few years experience) should be able to pass. Unfortunately the project management and wider business world appears to accept such qualifications as meeting their needs. Candidates like them because they can pass with minimal effort and once passed they have made the grade and more notably employers like them because they can get their staff accredited with minimal expenditure based on the time need to get through the examination. Taking this into account it is no surprise that when APM announced its new Practitioner Qualification that in effect puts the APMP “in its place” as a knowledge based foundation examination that there was some resistance from all those who had passed the APMP and thought that they had “made it” with no more to do to demonstrate their professional capability.

iii. The Practitioner Qualification is not a quick fix

As the Practitioner Qualification is not a training course our experience has shown that if an inexperienced project manager attends an assessment event they will most likely, and correctly, fail. Likewise if the project manager has no concept of what happens at the start of a project or at the end, i.e. they are only experienced in the detailed planning and delivery phases they will also probably fail. What this means in reality is that candidates cannot be just thrown into the event and hope that common sense will get them through. They need to either already have the direct and relevant project management experience or they need to have followed a comprehensive development programme over a period of time.

The Practitioner Qualification does not allow an organisation to send someone onto an event to learn about project management or to enhance their skill level. This is not what most organisations are used to and is undoubtedly another reason why its introduction is taking longer than anticipated.

A further issue relating to the Practitioner assessment events is that it can seem quite costly if the added value is not understood. A residential event using three assessors and an APM facilitators will be definitely be more expensive than an equivalent in duration training course.

iv. Ability to relate personal knowledge and experience to other project environments

The Practitioner Qualification assesses the ability of a candidate to manage a project across its whole lifecycle from Business Case to Benefits Realisation. As we have found out from the pilot events, and subsequent real company events, few project managers live in this world as the vast majority are delivery or implementation managers and have nothing to do with a project's Business Case or in Realising Benefits. Without either the right experience or the ability to apply their knowledge candidates will find the event very difficult and in some cases demoralising. Couple this with a case study that is deliberately outside of their normal working life and many candidates find the whole assessment process very difficult and very demanding. Back in the workplace, the message to colleagues will be that the process is tough and this may dissuade others from attending.

5. BENEFITS TO ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO USE THE QUALIFICATION

The way forward for the new Practitioner Qualification will undoubtedly require the selling of its benefits to the users. The benefits can be quantified in terms of good risk management. If an organisation assigns an unqualified project manager to a project then they are taking the risk that they are capable of managing it. Of course this risk is drastically reduced if the project manager is already working for the organisation and so has demonstrated their competence in the workplace but this is not always the case. If an organisation is hiring a new member of staff or a client is awarding a contract to a supplier to manage a project on their behalf then the situation is very different. In this situation it can clearly be seen as advantageous and less risky to use project managers who have been awarded the Practitioner Qualification and hence have demonstrated their capability to an external body. We doubt that any organisation would hire any other professional who "had the knowledge" but who couldn't demonstrate this in practice so why is this acceptable for project managers?

6. CONCLUSION

The true difference between the Practitioner Qualification and the other qualifications that have been mentioned is that it assesses capability not just knowledge. Those who pass the very rigorous process have demonstrated that they are capable and therefore the organisations that employ these people can be confident that they can actually manage a non-complex project, not just know the theory.

With the ever increasing demand from project managers and the need to get things done quicker, cheaper and better then the need for capable project managers will increase even faster. Capability can neither be taught in the classroom nor assessed by a written examination therefore the Practitioner Qualifications and those that are like it are the only logical way forward for project management qualifications.