



SOLVING THE PUZZLE

THE BACKGROUND to this discussion was concern over the future direction of qualifications in project management.

In light of recent moves to gain Chartered status and professionalise the sector, there are some key questions regarding the suitability of qualifications and about how training is delivered and assessed.

One of the issues with qualifications picked up on by the panel, was the tendency to view qualifications as an end in themselves – the feeling being that there was too much emphasis placed on passing the exam rather than learning to do the job.

Far better, suggested the panel (which represented the views of the individuals concerned and not those of the organisations), was to view qualifications as a step on the route to becoming a successful project manager, and not to become too ‘hung-up’ or on gaining the all important tick in the box.

Building on the idea of parts or pieces, the analogy of the jigsaw

puzzle was seen as a useful way of putting things into context.

With so much of Gross Domestic Product delivered through projects, there is a real need to ensure that projects are delivered more effectively.

Qualifications are one piece of that. But it doesn't work on its own. As Adrian Dooley, representing APMG, explained: “If you put a jigsaw piece on a table and then put your finger on it, it will slide around. But if you start placing the pieces together, you have a great deal more stability.”

“We need to promote this idea and note that even the most qualified project manager will not be able to deliver a project in an unsympathetic environment, if sponsors are not interested or making unrealistic demands.”

“So, yes, you need qualifications, a framework, a common currency, a better way of assessing people; but this all has to be done in the context of an organisation that understands that paying a little and getting a lot cannot be done.”

The drive for increased professionalism has inevitably turned the spotlight on project management qualifications. In response, *Project* assembled a panel of experts to discuss the main issues and map out how learning provision should evolve in future to meet the changing demands of industry and the profession.



“ We need to look at different routes to learning, whether this is modular-based or hands-on training. ”

Michelle Cooper, Thales

REAL COMPETENCE

Andrew Bragg (AB): To what extent is knowledge-based learning fulfilling the needs of assessing competence?

Lindsay Scott (LS): Project management fast-track self-study courses give you the tick in the box but it doesn't really demonstrate anything about competence levels. They just show you know how to an pass exam.

Adrian Dooley (AD): The problem is one of perception. I saw an advert recently that said, ‘Project manager required, must have two years’ experience and a qualification in a process such as PRINCE2 or Microsoft Project.’

Liz Wilson (LW): I think collectively as an industry we still have some work to do to educate employers about what qualifications say about people. It is slightly unfair to say a particular qualification, whether APMP or PRINCE2®, doesn't attest to competence if that is not what it is designed to do.

The real issue is people expecting qualifications to indicate other things they are not designed to test. But how do you communicate that to industry and find a programme of learning and qualifications that meets those expectations?

Peter Simon (PS): There are exceptions but, on the whole, the industry is naive. If you take PRINCE2 and APMP for example, it is almost comical to hear organisations saying a project

manager must be a PRINCE2 practitioner when they don't even apply the methods that relate to it. So yes, there is a big education issue to address.

LS: You have to ask why organisations are looking for PRINCE2 – is it about having a common language?

Perception

PS: PRINCE2 has its own language but there is an argument that this is causing more damage to project management than good because there is a perception that if you go on a five-day course to become a practitioner, you have a ‘licence to kill’.

AD: Often the biggest critics of PRINCE2 haven't actually read it or don't really

understand what it is all about. Unfortunately a lot of the demand for qualifications comes from HR, outside of project management, who are looking for a quick fix.

Toni Wynne (TW): Historically PRINCE2 has been the qualification of choice for the public sector and whilst this will continue to be the de facto standard, we recognise the need to support this with additional knowledge and skills. We are currently reviewing the learning and development landscape with our PPM community and Government Skills to identify gaps in learning and development offerings for all those involved in programme and project delivery at all levels of the professional community.

“ We need to build on the idea of a jigsaw and how we pull things together in a common framework. This will allow us to start looking at where the gaps exist in qualifications or in other areas that encourage people to continue with their own self-development. ”

Liz Wilson, APM



“ We need a rethink on qualifications but in doing so we need to step back and ask ourselves how qualifications can enable organisations to deliver their projects more effectively? ”

Adrian Dooley, APMG

STOPPING THE JUGGERNAUT

LS: But how are we going to stop the PRINCE2 juggernaut? It is difficult to see what you can do to reverse that. At the moment anyone can go along and do a two-day course and call him or herself a project manager. I still get people ring up and say they've done a PRINCE2 Foundation and are now looking for a job but they have no experience. That scares me!

AD: An analogy I use is that to be a rounded person you need to be literate and numerate. At the moment everyone is doing the literacy bit but nobody's doing numeracy. Do we stop the literacy juggernaut to get more people doing numeracy? No. What we need is to get them doing numeracy as well.

With PRINCE2 everybody learns process and they think process is the answer. But they haven't got the tools and techniques to underpin it.

I don't think we stop the juggernaut; we just need to find a way to latch on. Pick-up on the momentum, and use it.

AB: Is it a question of language? Is it because people are not framing knowledge-based qualifications correctly that it is misleading? If you can say what we are doing here is immensely valuable but it is only part of a

bigger picture, then that's hugely positive.

PS: It is only immensely valuable if you are using a PRINCE2 methodology. What happens is that the juggernaut is steaming along the road and people get on and off with qualifications, but these are neither use nor ornament when they go back to work because the company doesn't use PRINCE2.

AD: If you read PRINCE2 or PMBOK™, what they are promoting is a process for managing projects. It is essentially the same thing but with different wrapping. People can set too much store by PRINCE2 but at least it teaches a fundamental process.

We need to get across to the user that, yes, you need process, but you also need to look under the skin to discover where the fundamental principles can apply.

Ian Moores (IM): In my experience there is such a concentration of information in the five days, that you don't really get a chance for it to seep in so you fully understand it. If the five days could be spread out over a longer period, with learners attending on a day-release basis, this might help to see the broader picture of how to use it or apply the learning.

“ One of the key things for us in government is commercial skills or commercial nous and how we can go about developing it? I see commercial acumen as the next generation of softer skills. ”

Toni Wynne, OCG



ASSESSMENT PROCESS

AB: In terms of assessment process, is five days the preferred duration? Should it be more modular, should there be more bite-sized chunks, should it be online?

LW: I have difficulty with a qualification where the standard mode of delivery is a two, three or five-day course with an exam at end of it. You have to encourage people to embrace APM's five dimensions in terms of breadth and depth, so that people sign up to the notion of life-long learning.

PS: I totally agree with everything Liz said, but there is a commercial world out there which some of us are more tainted by than others.

LS: It has got to fit in with the reality of being a

project manager. You have to entice people back to a learning environment and acknowledge the fact that people like to learn in different ways. Another challenge is how to carry on developing ethics and professionalism throughout a career. Are these things that can be taught and assessed?

Knowledge

LW: The issue of ethics is really interesting and we have to think more about how we work with employers. We can discuss what ethics is, but how does a project manager apply that knowledge to get best benefit for a project?

One of our intentions is to review the current

qualifications and look at opportunities to develop more flexible routes into existing qualifications and at how we recognise prior learning. In other words how we build that into an assessment package so that people don't have to go back and do same thing again.

Michelle Cooper (MC): I know Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) do this. I used to belong to the CIPS and they look at previous qualifications if you are looking to do a CIPS course. They will say you've covered this module in your degree and they are quite happy to accept that. Also CIPS is modular-based with six per level whereas APMP is just one three-hour exam.

IN CONTEXT

AB: What about the issue of context in qualifications, those skills that surround the generic skills which are typical of project management?

IM: Cogent has done a lot of work around the context of qualifications. In consultation with industry we have identified four key contexts: technical competence, business improvement skills, compliance skills and functional and behavioural skills. These have been used to set the key competencies for job roles or functions within our industries.

We are currently in the process of developing a standard to set a benchmark for project managers within the nuclear industry. But these standards often have to be underpinned by competence-based qualifications in order to get industry buy-in.

LW: One of the things we need to do, in project management terms, is to start adopting a simple qualifications and credit framework. What have we got that fits the boxes and how do they relate to one another?

Also, how do we make sure we involve in discussions about the qualifications structure all of those people who are likely to use it?

We need to extend our reach beyond the usual suspects. There are lots of people who make use of project management skills who aren't part of the project management community.

AD: There is every opportunity to have two different development paths, which address different issues from different industries but converge on the same Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

IM: Sometimes you can develop a unit within a qualification so it is generic and can therefore be applied to a range of industries. The current NVQ for project

management is written in the language of engineering construction and is specific to the engineering construction industry alone. In its current form it cannot easily be used by other industries as it would be unlikely for the learner to meet the assessment criteria.

Qualifications on the QCF can be viewed by their credit and level. The level describes the complexity of the qualification and the credit tells you how long the qualification took to complete. By seeing it this way it makes it easier to compare qualifications 'like for like'.

AD: This is symptomatic of the problem. You still get people asking, should I do PRINCE2 or APMP? They are different things. One is a set of tools and techniques; one is a process. You need both of them. If you can only afford to do one – you can't afford to be a project manager. Unfortunately, it is driven by a desire to get something that ticks the box for the minimum amount of money.

PS: In a situation where qualifications have grown piecemeal, almost opportunistically, what we need to find is a way of building a framework in a sufficiently flexible way that it recognises that people are at different levels, with a particular industry bias.

AB: How do you get that flexibility when budgetary constraints force an either/or decision?

AD: Again, it is a question of education. We need to explain the whole time, cost and quality thing. If you want a rounded project manager, you can't achieve that with a two-day or three-day foundation. We need people to take project management more seriously and understand the nuances a bit more thoroughly.

Project failure

LS: If we are seeing such an increase in qualifications why are project failure rates not improving?

PS: There's a debate that I've been party to that suggests the reason projects keep failing is because as we mature we take on bigger and more complex projects. So it is complexity that is increasing and if we didn't have project management it would be even worse.

LS: Does that mean that the syllabus needs to change?

PS: Probably. It should mature and take on things like programme management, agile management and all the other things.

LS: Perhaps that is the reason why senior project managers are not being enticed back – because they are not getting anything from it.

MC: Old-school project managers who have run successful programmes generally cannot see the benefit of this type of business qualification; they see it as a tick in the box.

LW: We need to have more flexible qualifications so senior project managers can engage on where their status already sits.

There must be other things; qualifications can only be some of the answer and not all of it. There is tendency to think all the things that make a project work have to focus on the competency of the individual whereas, in fact, the organisation or project team needs to have the confidence and capability to do what needs to be done.

Not every project manager has to have the same profile skills or competencies.



“ I'd like to emphasise the need to educate employers. All interested parties have a duty of care to spell out the differences between APMP and PRINCE2 and just because you've been on a course doesn't mean you have a licence to manage a project. ”

Peter Simon, Lucidus Consulting



“ I think the issue of softer skills and how that is being addressed in any future qualifications is going to be very important. ”

Lindsay Scott, Arras People

SOFT SKILLS

LS: I think there is too much focus on the technical competencies and not enough on behavioural or contextual competencies.

LW: But how do we focus on interpersonal or 'softer' skills, without being seen to be 'dumbing' down on project management qualifications?

LS: That is not how it is perceived in the general marketplace.

PS: It is not how I perceive it either. The people side of project management and how

you express it is something we have to consider more. Under its professional development strategy APM has undertaken to come up with ways to encourage the interpersonal side of project management, which is very difficult to do in any form of standard training.

TW: Members of my team in OGC are drafting a skills strategy in response to a National Audit Office report looking at commercial skills. The key thing that comes out

of that is difficult that it is to define commercial nous and can you train it?

We are working hard to ensure our delivery professionals somehow demonstrate commercial nous and find a way of increasing capability in that area.

That is the big challenge at the moment because you can have all the processes and interpersonal skills but if don't have commercial nous, where are you?



“ We need to bring together what's already out there. In essence it is about looking at all the bits that go to into making a fully rounded project manager rather than focusing on one particular aspect of their competence. ”

Ian Moores, Cogent SSC

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Let us know your views. Email james.simons@corpnews.co.uk