

# Licensing Project Managers: Good or Bad Idea?

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Various project management organizations around the world are seriously considering "licensing" or "certifying" project managers. For example, the Chairman of the Project Management Institute ("PMI") recently announced to a PMI chapter in Sydney, Australia [summer 2001], that PMI is working towards the Project Management Professional ("PMP") as a "license". The International Project Management Association ("IPMA"), in its model, defines four levels of certification: Project Management Fachmann, or specialist, ("PMF"), Registered Project Management Professional ("PMP"), Certified Project Manager ("CPM"); and Certified Project Director ("CPD").

Does this licensing make sense? Well, the first issue is what do you mean by "licensing" or "certification"? These need to be defined. In some cases a license may mean no more than approval to do something such as fish in a certain river. In others it may require the demonstration of certain skills such as in driving a vehicle. However, when it comes to the professions, the granting of a license usually implies in the eyes of the public that the license holder has some demonstrated level of competence. By corollary, especially if legislated in the public interest, it also implies that the body granting the license has the power to withhold the license if the individual does not have that competence. And further, that if anyone holds themselves out to be, in this case, a project manager but without the requisite qualification, then they may be disciplined in some way for misrepresentation.

Aside from the problematic issue of whose lawful jurisdiction shall prevail, this is a very intrusive power to restrict practice. This may be fine for ratcheting up the value of the license, and the cost to members to secure it, but does it really benefit the business of project management? On large projects involving public safety, it would seem to make sense — provided always that the examination process does indeed ensure some degree of competency. On the much larger number of relatively smaller projects, where people are named "project manager" for no other reason than that they happen to be put in charge of a project, then it would seem highly questionable. It would mean that a large number of projects would be run without a project manager. At least the assigning of the label "project manager" implies that the person should know something and that if they don't they should go and find out!

Then there is the issue of what we mean by "competence". PMI's PMP certification is presently based on multiple choice questions and a minimum level of experience or involvement in project management. Can the certification exam test competence? Certainly. Anyone who passes the exam has clearly demonstrated competence in understanding and correctly answering multiple choice questions. A gift not given to everyone by the way. "But what does that have to do with competence in project management?" You may rightly ask!

We have defined "Competency in project management" as "The measurement of both a person's knowledge and their demonstrated capability in project management." (See

"**Competency**" in the PM Glossary Definition #D00257). In our view "demonstrated capability" can only be validated on the job, in the field. So, the answer to the last question is probably "Not a lot!"

But let us not trivialize the major underlying issue. Do we really want a predatory organization controlling our ability to seek employment, or becoming powerful enough to restrict where we work in our chosen field of project management? Do we really want to see this additional burden imposed upon us? Will this avenue really lead to better managed projects? We think not. What will lead to better managed projects is better understanding of how to manage them according to their individual area of project management application. Therefore, in our view, the subject of licensing or certification of project managers warrants much further discussion — before it's too late.

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