

Do you consider "Project Manager" a profession? – Part 1

A Blog Review by R. Max Wideman (Published September 2012)

In August, our Guests: Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton and Jeff Hodgkinson tackled the challenging question of *Should Project Managers be Professionally Licensed?* [\[insert link\]](#) and presented arguments on both sides of the question. But underlying this question is the issue of whether project management is a profession that could be licensed in the first place. This is obviously a hot topic because Oliver Lehmann started a parallel discussion on LinkedIn with the following proposition:

Do you consider "Project manager" a profession or not?

1. "Project manager" is a profession.
2. "Project manager" is no profession.
3. "Project manager" is a half-profession.
4. I don't know.

Within a month, this discussion thread had generated a lot of ink. That is, over 18,000 words in 158 replies. Oliver Lehmann, by the way, is Oliver F. Lehmann, PMP, CLI-CP 1st Trainer for Project Management, Proposal Management, Connective Leadership, Munich Area, Germany, and VP Members at PMI Munich Chapter.

We have selected what we think are the most valuable responses in terms of contributing to the discussion and we have done it in two parts under three headings:

Part 1

- Introduction
- Contributors providing general information
- Contributors who say "project management" is not a Profession

Part 2

- Contributions that appear ambivalent
- Contributors who say "project management" is a profession, and
- Conclusion and Contributors to the discussion

We have formatted the submission for web site viewing using North American spelling. Some grammatical editing has been necessary to make the extracts make sense. However, occasionally the context is lost because of compartmentalizing the extracts.

This topic has generated a lot of passion as well as a lot of heat and, as often happens in such blogs, some respondents got off topic and even combative. We have left those remarks out as not being relevant to the main thread of interest!

General Information

Trevor Nelson: I found this to be fairly interesting on the topic, from the Font of all Knowledge - Wikipedia. And while I don't hold Wikipedia to be an authority of any kind, the page/topic in question has been written and/or edited by over 600 people. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profession>

Some excerpts - Main milestones on the way to becoming a profession:

1. It became a full-time occupation;
2. The first training school was established;
3. The first university school was established;
4. The first local association was established;
5. The first national association was established;
6. The codes of professional ethics were introduced;
7. State licensing laws were established.

The first three agreed upon professions [are] law, medicine, divinity (the "learned professions"). Some subsequent professions have achieved the milestones above [e.g.] pharmacy, veterinary medicine, nursing, teaching, librarianship, optometry, social work, architecture, surveying, actuarial science, dentistry, civil engineering, accountancy, logistics.

And some further descriptors of profession; see how many apply to PMs:

- "A profession arises when any trade or occupation transforms itself through "the development of formal qualifications based upon education, apprenticeship, and examinations, the emergence of regulatory bodies with powers to admit and discipline members, and some degree of monopoly rights."
- "Professions are typically regulated by statute, with the responsibilities of enforcement delegated to respective professional bodies, whose function is to define, promote, oversee, support and regulate the affairs of its members."
- "There is considerable agreement about defining the characteristic features of a profession. They have a "professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague control... (and) code of ethics, ..."

It's interesting to note that, of all the professions listed, not one is related to business or management.

Max Wideman: Trevor, at the end of your last post you observed: "It's interesting to note that, of all the professions listed, not one is related to business or management" In Wikipedia that is. As an interesting aside, in the UK, if you are a member of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) then you are a member of the profession of "Management" by virtue CMI's UK Royal Charter. This charter is relatively recent given their some 100 years of existence. E&OE.

But I see the issue a little differently. Not whether we are professional (I would hope that all of us are) nor whether we are a "profession" (in the generic sense - anyone that undertakes a consistent and acceptable productive process may be considered as acting as a "profession") but whether we are (or should be) a **registered** profession. There are many arguments for and against such a step. On balance there are more arguments against than for, so personally, I am against such a step, largely because of the extra bureaucracy, liability and expense involved.

However, there is also the issue of what sort of **project** might we be talking about? Getting breakfast for the first time on a camping trip could be managed as a "project" but that would hardly call for procuring the services of a registered professional project manager to conduct such an enterprise. No, I think that project management is a life skill that everyone should be taught as a part of their general education!

Several decades ago, I recall that Dr. John Adams struggled with these issues [of what constitutes the elements of a profession] when we (on the Board of PMI) were contemplating the introduction of a

Do you consider "Project Manager" a profession?

certification program (now "PMP"). If I remember correctly, in his research John identified 5 key attributes of a "profession" namely:

1. A distinct Body of Knowledge
2. A training program
3. A Code of Ethics
4. A supporting organization
5. A certification program

Subsequent authors have identified more than five. For example, Alex S. Brown. PMP IPMA-C suggests nine – see <http://www.alexbrown.com/prof9.html>

So, as many have suggested, I suspect that the majority of so-called "project managers" are not members of the profession. However, that does not mean that such a "profession" does not actually exist.

Bill Duncan: . . . the real issue is this ... why does it matter?

Max Wideman: I suggest that it matters (to some people) because it is a question of status. Bill, you [also] postulate that "if profession = occupation, then there is no status in being profession." That is probably true except in the case where you compare it to those who have no occupation at all. However, in this case "occupation" should be qualified.

For example, this link <http://www.preservearticles.com/2012011220561/what-are-the-important-characteristics-of-a-profession.html> suggests that:

"The following are the common characteristics of a profession:

- (i) It demands possession of a body of specialized knowledge and extended practical training.
- (ii) It renders an essential social service.
- (iii) It demands continuous in service training of its members.
- (iv) It has a clearly defined membership of a particular group with a view to safe- guarding the interests of the profession.
- (v) It involves a code of ethics.
- (vi) It sets up its own professional organization.
- (vii) It assures its members a professional career.
- (viii) It has a truth and loyalty.
- (ix) It has a transparency of work.
- (x) It gives instantaneous results."

While members of PMI (for example) probably qualify under i; v; vi; viii, I am not so sure about the other six in the list.

Bill Duncan: Max -- there are several versions of the characteristics of a "profession." Personally, I'm not really interested in debating what those characteristics are or should be. I just think that if you ask someone, "is X a profession?" you should identify which one of those versions you are asking about so that you can get an informed answer.

Vladimir Liberzon: Max, is "Welder" a profession? I know nothing about their unique Code of Ethics and professional organization.

Max Wideman: Vladimir, I think welding is considered a trade. But that does raise the interesting question of whether "surgeon" is a trade or a profession.

Do you consider "Project Manager" a profession?

Nick Hayes: Fascinating stuff. Certainly in the UK a large proportion of the major employers regard competent project managers as important as the traditional "professionals" (accountants, lawyers, surveyors etc.), as they typically deliver added value that positively impacts the bottom line.

As a result, those corporate institutions acknowledging project management as an important professional business discipline are invariably implementing supportive frameworks to give such professional individuals recognition and status, and at the same time mapping a joined-up and visible pathway for the next generations of project management professionals.

Interestingly, there is also an undercurrent to not only recognize professional project management skills and competence, but also to acknowledge project management as a life skill at a much lower level, rather like the relationship between being able to count and being and a fully qualified accountant.

Furthermore, it is not just corporate institutions acknowledging the need for project management skills at a lower level across all aspects of their business, but as well as seeing an increasing number of full academic project management programs, we are also seeing academia recognizing the need to include basic project management knowledge on a modular basis into an increasing number of differing full academic programs.

David Hatch: Bill, Re your question: "But the real issue is this ... why does it matter?" I'm sure you know as well as I do why this issue matters.

There are a number of organizations particularly in the USA, who are making a lot of money by charging project managers for so-called 'professional qualifications' based on the very premise that project management is a profession. Tied into that is the equally strong marketing message that any project manager who does not pay for their 'professional qualification' is not a proper project manager, and should not be employed as such. Therefore, for commercial reasons and for the future independence of those of us practicing project management as a skill, rather than selling it as a product, this is a very important issue.

Istvan Agg: Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profession>) defines profession as follows: "A profession is a vocation founded upon specialized high educational training, the purpose of which is to supply objective counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain."

Oxford Dictionaries (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/profession>) defines profession as follows: "A paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification: his chosen profession of teaching a barrister by profession".

Are car mechanics, tailors, carpenters, or cooks professionals? Some go through long schooling to learn this trade, than some just learn it on the job over time. Since in many countries licensing is not required to carry out this job, learning on the job is accepted.

Project management is like a trade; one learns basic skills then becomes a "journey man" to obtain practical experience. Skill and experience together will make a good project manager. Nowadays, to demonstrate your skill many employers require you to have either a Prince2 or a PMP [certification]. Experience of course is a must.

Contributors who say PM is not a profession

Bill Duncan: [I] maintain that the answer depends on how you define "profession." If you take the simplest and broadest definition of "profession" as being something you get paid for, then of course "project manager" is a "profession." If you apply narrower definitions (e.g., specialized education, extended education, government sanctioned license), then it just as clearly isn't. But the real issue is this ... why does it matter?

Pedro Ferreira: Well, I believe that project management is somewhat different from a profession. It is more like an art. The art of creating new things from chaos, the art of keeping a team together and working in the same direction, even if everything else is falling apart. It is the art of being able to be a leader, a person that the team respects, admires and wants to follow.

Koorosh Kheirkhah: Project management is not a profession; it is a methodology used by professionals to consistently deliver on their promises.

Sophia Joseph/Tinku: A Project Manager is a professional (person) and not a profession. A Project Manager is a person who manages projects professionally.

Samir Penkar: I voted no – Project Management is not a profession. I had read a paper once that resonated with me. Can't find it now, but it was a paper by a French professor. Here was his reasoning on why project management is not a profession.

First of all a profession is something that needs rigorous study and demonstration of competence. Examples are doctors and commercial airline pilots. They undergo rigorous study on the subject and then have to prove their competence to perform their job. A project manager hardly does rigorous study on the subject and proving competence is hard. Passing a PMP exam is not hard.

Second is the question of liability. Even plumbers have liability insurance. So if your project comes in late, will you accept a lower pay?

Third, sometimes we confuse the word profession. A professional baseball player earns his living playing professional baseball. He plays professionally, does that mean that baseball is a profession? It's a game.

These points really resonated with me and I do believe that project management by itself is a skill, much like general management. I know a lot of you will disagree with this, and I have had heated discussions when I have expressed this point of view.

Mark Carolan: Great comments from all, and now I'll take a stab at it: I voted "Project manager" is not a profession. In my opinion, Project Manager is a role, just like others within an organization, e.g. Program Manager, Sales Manager, Product Manager, <department> Manager, D & C Level Management, etc. A role is to be valued and for many organizations certainly a need. One that, done well, is value added for an organization. But in the sense of other globally acknowledged professions - like doctor or lawyer - project manager doesn't quite fit the bill.

We tend to answer these questions asking ourselves if we "are professional" or "act professionally", but that is answering a question that hasn't been asked. Anyone that strives to do their best can be thought of as "acting" or "being" professional. Persons that perform well and have acceptable and transparent

Do you consider "Project Manager" a profession?

ethical values are thought of as professional at what they do, but that is not the same as being a member of a recognized profession.

There are enough doctors and lawyers with low or no ethical values and poor performance track records, but are still members of a globally recognized profession. We need to be able to differentiate between these two distinct groupings and not feel threatened by the differences. Being/acting professionally can and should be enough! The project managers I know and respect are a) professional in their work, b) professional in their ethical views and approach, and c) professional in their day to day behavior – in and out of the job. That makes them professionals (like the football player), but not members of a profession (like doctors and lawyers).

Phil Hughes: An interesting question, and some wonderful dialogue. My own thoughts are that we are not a profession in the strict sense.

If I consider the attributes of other Professions (engineers, lawyers, doctors, accountants, etc.), I do not see how we as PM's can be considered to be "professionals". In the other professions, there are stringent educational and experiential requirements that must be achieved prior to accreditation, and legal and quasi-legal frameworks with respect to responsibilities and accountabilities, codes of conduct, sanctions for mal-practice and the like. We have none of these within the PM community beyond a code of ethics and a somewhat limited policing mechanism within organizations such as PMI (I haven't personally heard of anyone being "disbarred" for project failure, poor performance or other breaches).

The above notwithstanding, the fact that we as a body strive to gain relevant education and experience, and strive to behave in a professional and ethical manner, is a credit to us all. Perhaps one day, the evolution of PM accreditations will lead to us attaining true Professional status, but we are not there yet by a long shot.

Pavan Peri: I feel that project management is more a methodology that people learn from experience than a profession. There are books, courses, certifications on project management which provide theoretical knowledge and direction on project management but just by theoretical knowledge no one can make a perfect project manager unlike finance or accounting.

Trevor Nelson: I would vote no also. As others have said, Project Manager is a role, and while we all hope to be 'professional' in our work, and most of us are in fact professional Project Managers, it's still a role. I think for a role a Profession must have a few minimum characteristics. Some of these would include a certain level of education and/or training, accountability to some sort of governing body or authorizing agency, and a responsibility to the public. I think there is a limited field of focus.

When discussing Professions, those of Doctor, Lawyer, Accountant, etc. are used as examples. So when they're mentioned, while I may not know specifically what area they focus on or practice, I know what a Doctor does, I know what a Lawyer does, I know what an Accountant does. The same is not true if you say PM. Even when talking to another PM, most of us look at the specific industry to get an idea of what they do (i.e. an aerospace PM is very different from a software PM). I think that if you have to first qualify it then it fails the test.

But I think the biggest issue is that of the entry-point. Each of the example Professions requires some education, an exam, licensing, etc. there is a build-up process. Whereas in Project Manger, the concept of the "accidental Project Manager" is almost axiomatic. If you can show up for work one day and, with no training, be deemed a PM, then it can't be considered a Profession in the traditional sense.

Do you consider "Project Manager" a profession?

Max Wideman: My humble opinion is that simply holding the title "project manager", with or without being a member of PMI and with or without being a PMP does not make you a member of a profession in the eyes of the public. And that is notwithstanding PMI's constant reference to us as a profession. Of course if you surveyed the nearly 500,000 members of PMI you could quite possibly get 4 out of 5 saying that it is a profession if, for no other reason than PMI likes to think it is and says so (a very good marketing strategy!)

However, when my friends who are not involved in project work ask me what I do (or did) for a living, and I say "I'm a project manager", they look at me quite vaguely. However if I say "I'm an engineer" that is quite acceptable and I am treated with respect. And they rarely ask "What sort"! Perhaps that is the true measure of membership in a profession – being recognized at large as someone of influence.

Unfortunately, I see PMI currently having the opposite effect. Its literature constantly associates itself with upper management and the executive suite and thus sending the message that project management is just another function of executive management. Which quite possibly, at least in the IT world, it likely is.

David Hatch: I voted No. I recognize that there are some people who consider themselves professional Project Managers, and there are organizations that promote this view in order to sell their services. But in practice 'project manager' is a role, which can be assigned to, and performed by anyone, and that sets it apart from other true professions that can only be undertaken by qualified professionals.

Mohammed Tanbouz: I do agree with all those who describe it to be a professional quality but not a profession, and I agree fully with S.J. Kiester when saying it only needs "smart human beings". I would add that it might sometimes only need a true secretary/office manager to have an excellent project manager.

Sharon Kelly: Speaking as one who used to be a project manager (with all the certification to support it!), and as one who has seen significant industry change over the past 10 years or so, in my opinion project management is a skill rather than a profession. An architect, a surveyor, (for example) these are professions, and sometimes these individuals can and do become project/program managers on relevant projects, thus utilizing their PM skill.

I should also add that given the nature of this forum i.e. Project Managers (!!), it is inevitable that the result of the survey will be biased toward the fact that Project Management is a profession! Also, I have observed that 'anyone' can say that they are a Project Manager, but the same cannot be true for the traditional professions such as surveyors, architects, doctors, lawyers etc. Thus a doctor can also become a PM, but not vice versa.

Vladimir Liberzon: I agree with Sharon. The survey does not include opinions of people that are not involved in project management themselves and thus does not show if project management profession is recognized by the society.

In Part 2 we will present:

- Contributions that appear ambivalent
- Contributors who say "project management" is a profession, and
- Conclusion and Contributors to the discussion

~~~~~