

Is "Project Manager" a profession? – Part 2

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

In Part 1 we introduced contributors who provided general information and those who say: "project manager" is not a profession.

In this Part 2, we report:

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

Contributions that appear ambivalent

Christopher Pernell: Although I do agree with most of the comments, I think that it solely depends upon the personality of the person, their particular position as a project manager in an organization and the career path that they are currently pursuing. See, that's the beauty of it all in my opinion! You don't have to put project management in a box. It is one of the most flexible fields out in the industry in relation to having expertise and probably will always be (that's why I was drawn to it in the first place, project management chose me). That's the reason why some have such a difficult time gauging and measuring the actual performance from PM to PM.

Bottom line, as a person, you can choose to pursue project management certifications and learn the application of new/different methodologies all of your life or you can choose to know just enough to perform your job in a particular organization. It all depends upon how you use the tool! So for me to say that it is "partially a profession" would be inaccurate because it totally depends upon the individual. Project management is really a beautifully unique and consistently refining craft within itself. In order to be considered a true professional in project management I believe that it requires a certain type of individual that dedicates their life to the real understanding of it all.

Although some may disagree, in my opinion quite frankly, it is more than a profession! "There Is A Life Lesson To Be Learned In Project Management!"

Samir Penkar: Christopher, I appreciate your passionate response. This is exactly the kind of response I usually get when I express my opinion on this topic. I do agree with you that it is academic whether project management is a profession or not and the textbook definition may be insufficient. I don't believe that on an individual level it matters whether you consider project management as a profession. It is academic.

Look at Social Media Professionals, most of them self proclaimed. They do amazing work, and this line of work did not even exist a few years ago. I haven't seen them engaged in such a debate. Organizations like PMI, IPMA and the likes need this positioning to promote the discipline. But at an individual level, I am excited when our project teams solve difficult problems, I am excited when our project teams provide value to our stakeholders, I am excited when we see personal growth on projects.

I know I am a minority in this debate, but look at the survey results, about 25% of the folks are saying that project management is not a profession or they are not sure. I would say do what you love, excel at doing and enjoy. Don't worry if others call it a profession or not.

James Mugwe: My take is on 50/50. Once a pal asked me "... did you go to college to learn that...?" It was an innocent question, seeing the actual project management discipline has only recently taken root, especially in my side of the world. But take this for example: I have been managing finance sector related projects pretty well, I think primarily since I am a business graduate first. I have always seen project management jobs in other disciplines, say medicine, engineering etc., and of course the basic requirement is that you should have qualified in that trade first. Then I ask myself – isn't project management generic? Why can't I run that project? What's so special about that trade I can't understand?

But the answers are right there. If you're not qualified in that discipline, you cannot manage those projects. Take accounting for example – Accountants don't belong to an industry. The profession is universal; the practitioners do not need to know much about the industry they are in. However, my half/half inclination comes from the fact that we as project managers share the same principles of trade that members of our other professions do not share. It some times amazes me how green my colleagues look when I have to institute PM tenets on projects, notwithstanding its still a social science.

Julian Niemiec: Having thought about this further, I wonder if the people that built Stone Henge, the Pyramids or massive structures across the world that we admire to this day had any qualifications. Or did they just get on with doing the job? I have come across many highly qualified people that wouldn't know the difference between a Pick or Shovel, let alone what to do with them. So maybe PM is a profession, but the world could quite easily do without us and buildings would still be built, crops still planted, babies be born and life in general would continue. All we do is make things work more smoothly. The older I get the more I realize that the ability to do a job is far more important than passing a test. Or maybe I'm just an old-fashioned, military engineer at heart?

Roz Baker: Speaking as a one-time lawyer/present project manager, I take the PMI professional ethics every bit as seriously as the law society's code of ethics. In some cases, the PMI professional ethics are even more rigorous. For example, I strive to not only be honest in my dealings with others but to seek the truth where it exists. I cannot be willfully blind to the state of affairs in which my project sits.

As a project manager, your actions can have a massive impact. The profession is not yet regulated but that may come in time. For now, prospective employers rely on certifications and professional association memberships to weed out those who don't take the profession of project management seriously enough.

Pippa Freyer: I don't care too deeply about the labels that people like to place on themselves or others, except that if you call yourself a professional, then you'd better be able to deliver professional quality services. In my book, competency trumps. However, professions usually require some kind of certification or license to practice in the place that you practice them on top of an advanced level of degree completed through formal education, such as a medical doctor, a lawyer, a veterinarian, a civil engineer, etc. and you cannot "practice" your profession without that. Since it is not legally mandated that a project management professional be certified or licensed in order to practice, I don't think project management would meet the generally accepted definition of a profession. "A profession" has a distinct meaning beyond that someone is performing something in a highly professional manner.

On a related thought, is project management an industry? I keep seeing people write about "the project management industry" as if it somehow exists independently in it's own right, and as if it has it's own product. Yet all of us exercise our project management within the context of one or more other industries, such as technology or construction for example, implying that there is usually other subject-matter expertise or specialization or context required on top of the basic PM skill set.

Gary Tonner: I thought we signed up to a code of ethics and conduct with PMI? There is a need for professional project management, just look at the mess functionals make of it. If PM cannot be a profession its promotion is one of the biggest cons in history. The same old stats come up in UK, 75% of projects end in failure. Hell they even started a Tram project in Edinburgh not knowing where the tramline was going to end! In UK there is no clue to the value of professional PM across all domains. Its a cultural thing that PMs who are engineers or work in construction are professional, PMs who move multi million £ data centres or relocate companies or bring in software development that saves lives and money are not. Crazy!

Sarah Wilson: I believe that [project management] can be both a profession and also a skill. Some people are professional project managers and that is their job - they manage projects. However there are many people out there for whom project management is a skill that they have to employ as part of their own profession. These are the people who I support – those people who quite often are just expected to get on with their projects along with their day job – and do not always have the skills or the confidence to do that (or the time of course!!)

Muselikha Bakar: I am being neutral. But let's ask the other way. What defines 'Profession', only then can we know if Project Manager falls under this definition.

John Hansen: My observation on this question is that Project Management can be either a profession or a function within an environment. Quite often, and far more often that we all might like to see, the function or tasks of the project manager are diminished from a respected place within the environment by those who populate the environment, or those who shape the environment.

In an organization that is dominated by top management who impose a strong top-down or autocratic management style of leadership, the project manager role is often stripped of authority while retaining responsibility. Very often the project manager's responsibility is simply to do things that are requested or demanded by top management, and nothing of this environment lends itself to defining the role as a profession.

Michael Gilmore: I voted that it is a half-profession because project management is a skill set. How that skill set is applied could fit into a profession or not. We use these skills in many professions, including, but not exclusive, to those whose job title is "project manager."

Contributors who say PM is a Profession

Matthew Weaver: Oliver, excellent question. From my perspective, it is a profession. I do know project managers that fit in that and the half-profession mode, where they also work as developer, QA, test, or on proposals. Will be curious to see if and who says it is not a profession.

Steven Kiester: Oliver - I voted it as a profession. True project managers, the ones with the real responsibility and that are adaptable from project to project, bring real experience and growth with each assignment, they are the real pros.

Agnès Okodombe: A Project Manager is a profession for a professional who has many skills.

Xavier Leynaud: Just look at the job offers everywhere. This is the real proof that project management is a profession.

Oliver Lehmann: Most languages are a product of consensus – they aren't managed. If there is a public consensus to call some work or workers a profession, then for me, they are.

Christopher Pernell: [To Samir Penkar, in *PM is not a profession*] I think that you refer more to the dictionary definition of what a profession is rather than to what the real world definition is of a profession. Let's try and get away from the textbooks for a minute and talk about what is actually happening in the industry. There is a much larger and more realistic perspective in relation to the technical term "Professional".

[In *PM is not a profession*, Samir Penkar stated (1):]

"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."

In relevance to your statement, you mean to tell me that understanding the different concepts, methodologies, project management software, ISO Standards and the many other elements of the project management profession does not require rigorous study? What a bogus statement! If you don't think so, then obviously you do not take project management as seriously as you should.

As far as demonstration of competence is concerned, you have to show a ton of it or else your projects will fail horribly! Yes, it is true that you may not have to go through periodical exams or prove your practical skills in a lab but that's only because project management is real time! So either you know what you are doing right off the bat or you don't and you adapt to the situation. In my opinion, that is how you demonstrate your competence, by actually applying your knowledge and consistently performing on the job.

As far as the PMP exam is concerned, I think that if you are pursuing a career in the project management industry, you do not stop at the PMP certification. You constantly and consistently challenge yourself. Rather if it means getting other PMI certifications, becoming Lean Six Sigma Certified (all the way up to Black Belt), getting a degree in Project Management (MBA) or obtaining a certification in some type of business software such as Cloud Computing (Oracle ERP, Microsoft Dynamics, etc.). It's really all about how you incorporate or integrate other knowledge areas into your project management arsenal.

[In *PM is not a profession*, Samir Penkar stated (2):]

" . . . 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."

What a contradiction! (You might want to reword your statement) Major League Baseball is an international, billion-dollar industry! I just don't understand how you do not consider being a baseball player as a profession when there are so many things in relation to the technical term of a profession such as contracts, organizations to integrate your style of play into, the vigorous hours of film analysis (learning the playbook, understanding your position on the field), the thousands of practice hours, the camps and mini-camps, the physical/mental training (weight lifting, cardio, nutrition and dieting), understanding the team core values, non-profit organizational events, etc. I can go on and on about this but I think that obviously, you are speaking on something that you do not have a full understanding of.

In conclusion, I think that it is important to also note how serious the person is about the project management profession. If you play around with it, then of course you will not necessarily consider it a profession because you have a lack of passion for the job but if you take project management seriously, then it could prove to be a life long profession.

Oliver Lehmann: Christopher, I am absolutely with you. Baseball may be a hobby. It may also be a profession. Selling may be something you do from time to time, e.g. when you sell your used car. Salesman may also be a profession. Project manager is a role that some people fill from time to time. Others have it as their profession. When a professional project manager has to fill in a form, which asks in a field what profession the person holds, I do not see any reason why the person should not fill in "Project manager". Language is not decided upon by some academics, but by common sense and by consensus of the people using it.

Geoff Reiss: Let's see. I've been involved in a wide range of projects in a wide range of industries; am a member of two professional bodies; got and helped others to gain qualifications and paid the milk bill for 40 years by doing my job. Of course it is a profession. Not the oldest profession but still a profession. As one of the Founders of the PMP Credential and a PM with 46+ years of experience I believe in the PMP conceptually but I have learned that at the end of the day your ability to "Git R Dun" is the ultimate test. Having the PMP Credential indicates you know the basics of the profession but "on the job" performance is the final exam!!

Lee Lambert: If it isn't a profession then there are more than half a million people who worked to earn a PMP Credential who have somehow misinterpreted what a Project Manager is. Of course it is a profession, and perhaps one of the most vital professions in today's fast paced, "Git R Dun" world.

Mark Laurillard: My view is that it is a profession - it is (or rather should be) undertaken by professionals. If the opposite of a 'professional' is 'an amateur,' then we may get a sense of a necessary level of skill, expertise and judgment in place as a professional. I would not like to consult an 'amateur' doctor whose 'qualifications' amounted to a brief scan through 'Surgery for Dummies.' I think that if it is not a profession yet, then we should strive to make it so, through engendering learning, knowledge and expertise that is then focused on delivering 'good' for those in need of our profession.

Tim Dalhouse: Of course it's a profession. Look on any employment website and search on Project Manager, and see what you find. Employers obviously think it's a profession, with progression in skill levels required for different projects.

Pochiraju Vlnrao: yes it is certainly a profession but it cannot be taught in colleges or universities.

Oliver Lehmann: It is taught in Universities.

Valentin Gavrilov: Best regards from Russia! We have a profession "Project manager" in Russia. It's a very interesting profession. Essentially this one is the best essence from many others. Good luck to all Project managers!

Tracy Leal: There is a job title, a pay grade, and professional career track, therefore it is a profession. I am completing a degree from an accredited PMI university. You can earn a Master of Project Management (MPM). Personally, I chose MISM with a concentration in Project Management.

Celia Singh: Project Management is a profession. It is a set of skills and attributes that are different from anything. Usually a PM is good at managing specific types of projects but the skills required are consistent.

Conclusion

So there you have it. The participants in this discussion are evidently passionate about the subject. However, they are also about evenly divided on the question: "Do you consider 'Project manager' a profession or not?"

But as Bill Duncan has pointed out, it all depends on how you view the definition of "profession". The problem appears to be in the original question. Perhaps we should be talking about "Recognized Profession" or maybe "Registered Profession", in which case the results might be clearer. And, moreover, we might have a satisfactory answer to Bill's question: "Why does it matter?"

Either way, readers who are curious should go back and read what we wrote in *Musings* seven years ago, see: *Process Groups and the Profession - Part I & 2* published in November and December, 2005. Have we really made any progress since then?

R. Max Wideman

Contributors to the discussion

Those providing General Information	Contributions that appear ambivalent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill Duncan • David Hatch • Istvan Agg • Max Wideman • Nick Hayes • Vladimir Liberzon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christopher Pernell • Gary Tonner • James Mugwe • John Hansen • Julian Niemiec • Michael Gilmore • Muselikha Bakar • Pippa Freyer • Roz Baker • Samir Penkar • Sarah Wilson
<i>Total = 6</i>	<i>Total = 11</i>

Those who say PM is not a Profession	Those who say PM is a profession
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill Duncan • David Hatch • Koorosh Kheirkhah • Mark Carolan • Max Wideman • Mohammed Tanbouz • Pavan Peri • Pedro Ferreira • Phil Hughes • Samir Penkar • Sharon Kelly • Sophia Joseph/Tinku • Trevor Nelson • Vladimir Liberzon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agnès Okodombe • Celia Singh • Christopher Pernell • Geoff Reiss • Lee Lambert • Mark Laurillard • Matthew Weaver • Oliver Lehmann • Pochiraju Vlnrao • Steven Kiester • Tim Dalhouse • Tracy Leal • Valentin Gavrilov • Xavier Leynaud
<i>Total = 14</i>	<i>Total = 14</i>