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Why PM and Technical Certification Programs May Not Translate into an Improved Project Success Rate

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The boost in project success rate that many organizations expected from their Project Management and technical certification programs has not materialized. Why? What is missing?

There are many possible roles in a project. The obvious ones include the project sponsor who pays for the project, the project manager (PM) who directs the project, and various project team members who perform project work. Many projects rely on stakeholders to be subject matter experts, and when deliverables must be integrated into ongoing operations, members of the operations staff may join the project as well. And of course, management must create an environment in which projects can succeed. All of these roles play a part in moving a project forward, but can one role be considered more important than all the rest? Do any of these roles hold the key to consistent project success?

On the basis of current trends, one might think that the PM and team roles must be of greatest importance. In recent years, many organizations have attempted to ramp up the effectiveness of their PMs through support of PM certification. For example, to date over four hundred ninety thousand PMs have obtained their PMP[®] certification, many with the support of their employer. In addition, it is increasingly common for organizations to establish their own internal system for certification of PM competence. At the same time, the classrooms of training organizations are packed with project team members sent to learn new technical skills or add to what they already know. Technical certifications are booming. Yet, there is little or no evidence that organizations are making comparable efforts to train managers, sponsors or stakeholders in their project roles. Organizations that support PM and technical certifications may do so based on the assumption that they can improve their overall project success rate simply by assigning certified PMs and technical staff to their projects. Unfortunately, available evidence suggests that this is not necessarily correct.

For example, the Standish Group CHAOS Report (1) states that the failure rate of Information Technology projects worldwide has climbed steadily from 2002 to 2012. This occurred even as the number of certified PMs increased in dramatic fashion. This does not mean that PM and technical certifications are detrimental or have no value. After all, it is well known that qualified PMs can have a substantial positive impact on project outcomes (2), and that certification can be a good indicator of PM experience and knowledge. In addition, projects that include a technical training budget have been found to be more likely to succeed (3). Rather, these data suggest that there is more to be done, i.e., that organizations should consider PM and technical certification a good first step and then take additional actions to obtain the improved project success rate they are seeking.

One potential area of improvement may lie in the type of training that organizations provide their PMs. Certification exam bootcamp courses are usually designed to help PMs “pass the test”, and are not intended to directly improve project delivery skills. As a result, PMs with prior project experience but no other formal training may not emerge from the certification experience as more effective project managers. Additional PM training is needed, and it should not be limited to introductory material. A three day course in Fundamental Project Management is useful, but that level of training cannot be expected to

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dramatically improve PM performance. Project Management is, after all, a complex topic. (Would you seek out the services of a doctor who had only completed the first year of medical school and then learned the rest on the job?)

A second area of improvement comes from the realization that success in projects depends upon a cooperative effort among three groups: management; project stakeholders, including the project sponsor; and the PM and team. Each of these groups is responsible for using those best practices that apply to their role in the project. If any of these groups fails to carry out their responsibilities, there is a decent chance that projects will fail in some manner. To understand how this can be true, consider the following fundamental project responsibilities that apply to these roles.

1. Responsibilities of Management

- **Fund the right projects at the right time.** It does not matter if a project is delivered exactly as planned if it was the wrong project to do or if it was timed poorly.
- **Create an environment that is supportive of projects.** Projects do not take place in a vacuum. Management must ensure that the organization's culture places an appropriate priority on projects relative to operational work, that rigid or broken business processes that could interfere with project activities are fixed, and that turf wars and other management mayhem are not allowed to get in the way.
- **Support a formal project approach.** Executive management has the responsibility to see that formal project processes are fully supported at all management levels. It does no good to certify PMs and then tell them "Don't waste your time planning, just get the work done." This happens more often than you might think.
- **Support the role of project sponsor.** In addition to providing budget, sponsors should be expected to define the project's business objectives, fully support proactive risk management, and ensure that sufficient planning is done to optimize long term project value.
- **Assign adequate resources to the project.** This means that the most capable staff are assigned to the highest priority projects, that an adequate number of qualified staff are assigned to the work, and that they have access to the tools and facilities they need to get their work done.

2. Responsibilities of project stakeholders

- **Participate in development of a project charter.** By the time the charter is signed, stakeholders should fully buy-in to the purpose, approach and scope of the project.
- **Participate fully in requirements development.** Requirements are essential to long term project value, and only stakeholders can decide when requirements are correct and complete.
- **Contribute to project planning efforts.** Stakeholders should provide input to the definition of scope, schedule, budget, risk and more to ensure that their unique perspective is included.
- **Fully support change control.** Project change is potentially disruptive. To minimize the impact of change, the project sponsor should sign off on the change control plan and then ensure that all other stakeholders abide by it.

3. Responsibilities of project manager and team

- **Use effective methodologies.** The PM and team should employ known best practices, tools and techniques during the conduct of project management, requirements development, testing and other essential project work.
- **Identify and involve key stakeholders.** Successful projects tend to be those where the team forms a collaborative partnership with stakeholders. This helps everyone to stay focused on meeting project milestones and quickly managing issues.
- **Keep management well informed.** Management is better able to take constructive action when the PM consistently provides them with the data necessary for informed decisions.

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The complex interdependencies among these project responsibilities can make it nearly impossible for the PM and team to carry out the work of the project if stakeholders or management are not contributing their share. This becomes even more apparent when the full range of over 200 project best practices for all project roles is considered. For this reason, an organization that focuses solely on training PMs and technical staff will likely obtain only limited results. For a more complete and consistent impact on the overall project success rate, and for consistent realization of long term project value, it is necessary to also ensure that managers and stakeholders are active and effective in their respective roles so that essential project best practices can be adopted by all groups. In addition, some level of formal organizational adoption work may be needed to ensure that the training provided is actually implemented at all levels. Middle managers and other stakeholders can be especially resistant to these kinds of changes.

In summary, while it is clear that PM and technical certifications have value, they should not be used as the sole basis for a project improvement program. Reproducible project success requires teamwork across multiple levels of the organization. Any effort to raise the project success rate must consider training for managers and stakeholders, as well as PMs and teams. As all of these groups adopt known best practices, project success can become the norm.

References:

1. *The CHAOS Report*, Standish Group
2. *The Value of Project Management*, PMI® White Paper
3. *Impact of Training on Project Success*, IDC® White Paper