

The Project Management certifications, such as PMP, CCC, RMP, SP, CCE, EVP, and many others have become widely accepted certifications in the past several years. Employers are now seeking candidates with these credentials as proven knowledge of PM methodologies and accepting them as unbiased endorsement of project management knowledge and skills. These certifications have become the professional credentials on which contemporary project team members build their careers. Companies are now increasingly searching for candidates with these qualifications. But are we, as an industry, becoming too focused on the certifications instead of applying “real world” applications and experience to situations? Are we becoming an industry of certified professionals with no true experiential knowledge?

According to PMI’s (Project Management Institute) 2005 survey, positions for project managers requiring a certification have increased 110%. Organizations have aggregated the demands on project management teams to be more meticulous about delivering projects on time and within budget. Companies who do not have PMO are beginning to demand from their employees a high level of project management sophistication and proven skill set with specific certifications. In addition, these same companies are now facing pressure from governmental agencies encouraging project employees to possess one or more of these certifications. Is having a certification proof of PM knowledge and acumen?

One major criticism of this theory is that those holding a certification prove only that they have classroom knowledge. Too often individuals and employers fall into the ideology that these certificates prove a level of proficiency, providing assurance that the project manager has the skills needed to perform the job. However, the certifications simply offer a baseline of skill sets and methodologies; these credentials do not substitute for real experience. Companies who prioritize certifications over experience are losing the knowledge gained from seasoned professionals. The over emphasis of these qualifications has led the focus of the industry to shift towards adding these certifications, rather than accumulating a broad skill base from real life project experience. Often less experienced, but certified professionals, do not have the knowledge base to be pro-active in difficult project situations. Projects suffer because these companies overlook the seasoned professional and opt to hire the candidates, who on paper, know the methodologies, but fail to adjust reality to those theories. This inevitably leads to project failure.

Another criticism of the trend towards these designations is the popular misconception that adding certifications to a resume is a guarantee of promotion, salary increase, or higher profile projects. It is this attitude that often leads to a false sense of professional security and over estimation of the candidate’s knowledge. If deliverables are not met because of inexperience, the project could fail. So why does the industry place such emphasis on these certifications when real experience provides a more solid foundation for success?

The “old school” of thought is that someone with years of project management experience has developed a solid skill set which would qualify them for any project and garner the salary they deserve. These veterans know the discipline and have the experience to be pro-active in most situations. Their experience in the field far outweighs the class room instruction.

Companies who emphasize experience rather than certifications are in a better position to achieve project success. The successful combination is the individuals who can apply reality to the academia learned from achieving their certifications. Credentials and academia that they provide is an added benefit, but does not replace job experience gained in the field. As more organizations and professionals realize that the key to success is to incorporate real life experience with academic certifications, they will see their projects achieve success.