

# WHITE PAPER



## Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

**A bold approach to professionalizing the role of project manager**

One of the main reasons for troubled or unsuccessful projects is a lack of qualified, committed project management professionals. In many organizations, employees have very little incentive to assume the position of project manager, largely due to a disconnect surrounding what the role entails. Organizations have historically recognized the technical capabilities of individuals and assumed these skills could be translated into project management expertise. Because of this, professionals who have worked for years to earn the title of senior engineer, technical specialist, or technical consultant are unwilling to exchange their current jobs for the role of project manager. The role is added to their regular job description, instead of being viewed as a legitimate function to be valued by the organization, and that requires a special set of skills. Therefore, many organizations still haven't connected the value of the project manager to the success of the organization.

A second, related reason is that poor role definition — for all the roles in a project, but especially for the project manager — places even qualified personnel into situations where they are doomed to failure by requiring them to do too much and be expert in everything.

Research reveals that while more organizations recognize the need to improve their project management initiatives, they have a difficult task in creating a corporate culture that supports the mechanisms needed to effectively deploy a project management process.

It's a recipe for disaster.

What's needed to avoid disaster is a bold approach to professionalizing the role of project manager; not only in terms of providing them with the means to acquire the needed skills and competencies, but also providing them with the opportunity to achieve senior-level positions in an organization.

The ultimate goal in using this approach is the creation of sustainable performance in managing projects. This can be accomplished by creating a well-trained, effectively positioned workforce that is capable of maximizing their potential in the various roles required in project management. The results will be manifested in higher job satisfaction, higher customer satisfaction, higher corporate morale, and improved project performance.

### STEP 1: DEFINE ROLES

To initiate a program designed to professionalize the role of the project manager, your organization needs to identify the roles that are necessary to sup-



© 2004 Professional Development Solutions, Inc. (PM College)  
All rights reserved.

*PM College specializes in project management training and professional development solutions, including a unique project manager competency assessment program.*

## Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

port the growth and sustainment of project management practices enterprise-wide. These progressively responsible roles include project team members, project management specialists, team leaders, project managers, program managers, and project executives such as portfolio managers or chief project officers.

### Project Team Members

Teams tasked with project delivery will naturally consist of numerous specialists and technologists who design the approach, perform the work, test the completed components, and bring the initiative to a conclusion. These are the people who “get the job done”: the programmers who write code, the installers who install equipment, the subcontractors who provide their deliverables, and so on.

### Project Management Specialists

In all phases of the project, specialized work must be performed to initiate, plan, execute, control, and close-out the initiative. Specialized roles like business analysts, project planners, project schedulers, project controllers, change management specialists, risk specialists, and estimators each have unique roles to fill in collecting and reporting pertinent project information. These roles actively support and enhance the capabilities of team leaders, project managers, and program managers.

### Team Leaders

The team leader position is an important transition between team member and project manager. This is where people begin to obtain their initial experience with tackling the responsibility of managing a small portion of a larger project. The team leader requires more than an awareness of the project management practices; he or she needs to be able to execute them with a level of effectiveness. Essentially, team leaders are in the learning mode while acquiring solid project management skills.

### Project Managers

The project manager position can be divided into levels (Project Manager I, Project Manager II, Senior Project Manager, for example), depending on the needs of the organization. Project Manager I might describe an individual who has successfully led three or more small teams and is now ready to lead a small, non-complex project under the supervision of a more senior project or program manager. Project Manager II might indicate someone who has led three or more small projects and is ready to assume the responsibility of leading a medium-size project of moderate complexity. An experienced Project Manager II may be asked to lead multiple moderately sized projects. A Senior Project Manager is an individual who has demonstrated competency by successfully leading a moderately sized, moderately complex project or has managed multiple projects simultaneously.

### Program Managers

Program managers rise from the ranks of senior project managers. These individuals have a track record of successfully leading complex projects. They also have the business acumen to understand the relationship of projects to their organization’s strategic business objectives. They may be responsible for managing a portfolio of related projects, including the responsibility of managing several project managers of different levels. Along with this responsibility comes resource planning, profit management, and tactical decision-making authority.

### Project Executives

Project executives include titles such as project office director, portfolio manager,

# Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

and chief project officer. They also come from the ranks of senior project managers and program managers, and use the same set of skills to effectively manage an enterprise project system.

## STEP 2: ESTABLISH PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

For each of these roles, a set of expected performance standards needs to be established. Figure 1 provides a framework for identifying the desired roles and associated competencies for a proposed career path in project management. The competencies are rated on a scale from one through five. One indicates an awareness of project management concepts and practices. Two is indicative of basic execution; the individual is in a learning mode. Three is effective execution; the individual demonstrates solid skills in the use of project management tools and techniques. Four indicates that the individual models the skills of project management at a superior level. Five indicates the individual has mastered the skills and is capable of teaching, coaching, or mentoring others effectively.

ROLE	Team Member	Team Lead	Project Manager	Program Manager	Project Office Executive
	Produces the project deliverables, performs the work	Leads 1-5 people on a segment of the project	Leads multiple teams on a small to large project	Manages multiple projects, or large complex projects	Creates and deploys enterprise wide project management practices, and enforces compliance
<b>COMPETENCIES</b>					
Initiating the project	1	2	3	5	4
Developing the project plan	1	3	4	5	4
Building the project team	1	3	4	5	5
Managing Stakeholders	1	2	4	5	5
Managing the project	1	3	4	5	4
Managing the team	1	3	4	5	4
Closing the project	1	3	4	5	4

Figure 1: This Project Management Performance Expectations Worksheet demonstrates the competency level for each position on a scale of one to five with five being the highest.

This table is a representative sample of the approach to take when identifying core skills. Each of the rows could be further dissected to identify specific skills that are considered key result areas or key performance indicators for the organization. Additionally, the level of competency can also be defined according to the needs of the organization.

## STEP 3: ASSESS COMPETENCY

Once competencies are defined, it is time to conduct an assessment of the identified project management populations. It is extremely important that a communication plan be developed and executed during this time. The purpose of this communication plan is to inform the candidates about what will be expected of them and the reason behind the assessment. It is human nature to view something like this as a way to justify an organizational realignment. The assessment process should be clearly focused on building strengths, not eliminating staff.

# Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

The first area of assessment is **knowledge**. Because the Project Management Institute’s *PMBOK® Guide* is recognized as the international standard on project management knowledge, any assessment should be geared towards this standard. The following table (Figure 2) is an example of results from a completed knowledge assessment test. On an individual basis, the candidate can see how they scored on each knowledge area, how they compared to the highest score, their percentile ranking, and how many areas they passed. For the organization, an aggregate table provides insight into the areas that need improvement for their entire population. This information is used to begin developing a targeted education and training program designed to meet those needs.

**Competency Assessment Focus Areas**

①  
 Knowledge

②  
 Behavior

③  
 Potential

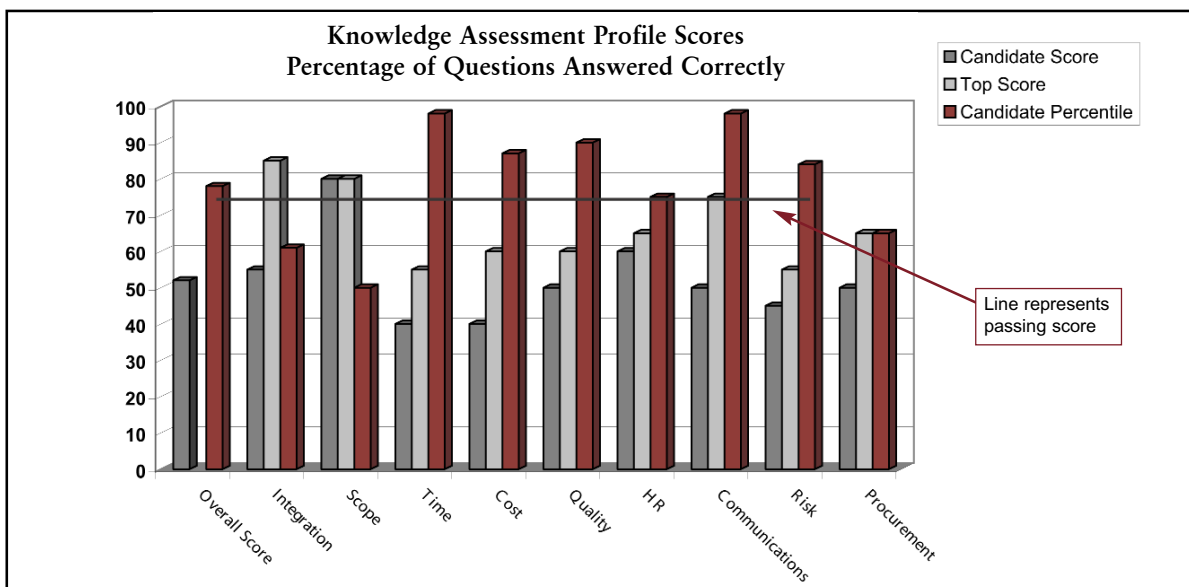


Figure 2: This chart, from a Knowledge Assessment report, shows how well an individual compares to others tested in each of the project management knowledge areas.

The second assessment area is **behavior** in the workplace. As mentioned earlier, the ideal assessment involves the candidate, as well as someone who has first-hand knowledge of the candidate’s behavior in the workplace. This person can be a peer, subordinate, supervisor, or a client. The assessment has the candidate and the rater apply scores to a number of key performance indicators across the project management process areas. There is a dual focus to this assessment: confirmation of behaviors and analysis of competency. The analysis of this assessment looks for significant gaps between the candidate and rater. These gaps are created either by the candidate rating themselves higher than the rater or the candidate rating themselves lower than the rater. When there is little or no gap found, the important thing to review is the level of agreement. Both the candidate and rater could agree on the level of performance, but in reality, that level may be less than the desired level. In that case, the organization has an opportunity for developmental actions if required. The following table (Figure 3) is an example of a behavioral assessment.

# Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

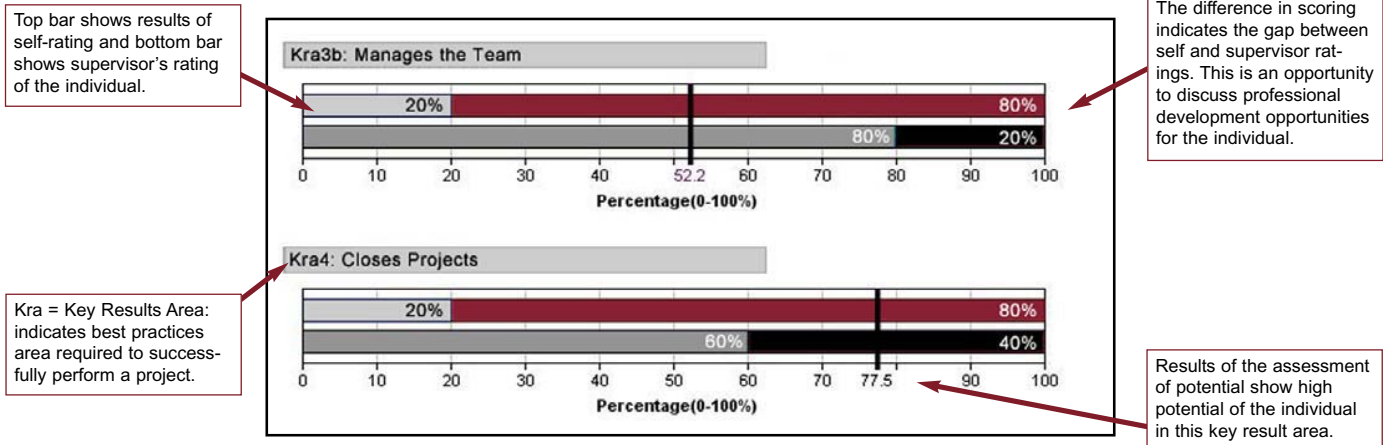


Figure 3: This chart, from a Behavioral Assessment report, shows the gap between a self-rating of a behavior and the supervisors rating. The result is used to show the potential of the individual and the need for improvement.

The final area of assessment is the most difficult and sensitive to determine: the **potential** to be successful in the stressful role of project manager. Potential is an elusive quality that can be difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, there are identifiable traits that contribute to the success of an individual in this role. Traits such as flexibility, adaptability, assertiveness, empathy, and risk taking can be measured in order to determine the strength of an individual. Because projects come in many sizes and complexities, some individuals may thrive in an environment where they have the autonomy to run small, standard projects yet struggle when they are given a larger, more complex project. For an organization to effectively manage their projects, they need to know which project managers thrive under which conditions.

The real value of these assessments is learned by aggregating the results of all three assessment areas (knowledge, behavior, and potential), and using the output reports to develop a comprehensive view of their project manager population. A possible output could be that the candidate has adequate knowledge, poor execution behaviors, and solid potential. Using the combined information, the organization can determine where the gap really exists. It may be a matter of education, adding a mentoring relationship, or providing more directed experiences to improve performance. Another possible scenario is that the candidate exhibits superior knowledge, poor performance, and low potential. Analysis of this situation may determine that the candidate may be best suited to a specific role in the project management area, such as a planner, scheduler, or business analyst rather than a project manager.

Using these assessments together allows the organization to more effectively develop and deliver targeted professional development interventions for their project management population.

## STEP 4: DEVELOP A CAREER PATH

The next step in building competency is the creation of a project management career path that shows individuals how they can rise from entry-level positions to the higher levels of the organization as a project professional. This career path helps the human resources department recruit qualified project professionals to the company.

## Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

A career path includes at least three elements in order to be valuable: experiential requirements, education/training requirements (knowledge acquisition), and documentation and tracking mechanisms.

The experiential requirements detail the types of on-the-job activities that have to be accomplished for each level in the career path. The education and training requirements detail the types of knowledge that are required for each rung on the career ladder. At the lower levels, these tend to be basic courses designed to provide exposure and practice to the rudimentary skills required of that level. The upper-level positions require more advanced strategic or tactical types of educational experiences. These may include topics that go beyond the realm of project management into business strategy, financial, or leadership opportunities. Documentation mechanisms include the attainment of certificates, degrees, or other credentials that substantiate the acquisition of the desired set of skills. Figure 4 is an example of a requirements description for a project manager.

PROJECT MANAGER TRAINING AND EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS			
Development Activities	Type	Learning Activities	Verification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Course Completions</li> <li>- Course Exams</li> <li>- Project Management Knowledge Assessment Profile (PMKAP)</li> <li>- Mentor Certification</li> <li>- Master's Certificate</li> <li>- Professional Certification</li> <li>- Appropriate Job Assignments</li> </ul>	IL	Project Management Essentials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Course completion certificates</li> <li>- Passing scores on exams</li> <li>- Associate's Certificate awarded</li> <li>- Master's Certificate awarded</li> <li>- Completed courses within 12 months</li> </ul>
	IL	Risk Management	
	IL	Contracting and Negotiation Skills for Project Managers	
	IL	Cost and Schedule Management	
	IL	Leading Project Teams	
	IL	Managing Multiple Projects	
	IL	PM Practicum	
	SP	Estimating Techniques	
	SP	Advanced Risk Techniques	
	SP	Conflict Management	
SP	Stakeholder Communication		

IL = Instructor Led; SP = Self-paced

Figure 4: Example of a project manager education and training requirements description.

To support the validity of a career path, the next step is to ensure the availability of the necessary experiential and educational opportunities. The experiential opportunities need to be coordinated with the appropriate resource manager and the human resource department in the organization. The HR department is also valuable in the development of the training program. To be effective, information collected from the knowledge, behavior, and potential assessments is necessary to create a targeted training program. The educational program should be targeted to the requirements identified in the career path and be designed to be progressive. In other words, the training requirements of team members are prerequisites for project managers and so on. The most effective approach is to identify the learning requirements for each level and aggregate across all levels to get both introductory and advanced course requirements. The following table (Figure 5) is an example of training requirements based on job level.

# Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

COURSES	PM Essentials	Risk Management	Cost & Schedule	Managing Multiple Projects	Leading Project Teams	PM Practicum
<b>LEVELS</b>						
Team Member	X					
Project Manager	X	X	X		X	X
Program Manager	X	X	X	X		
Project Office Director	X	X	X	X		

Figure 5: Example of education and training requirements by job level. Requirements at entry-levels are pre-requisites for higher levels.

## STEP 5: ESTABLISH A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Making an effort to professionalize the role of project manager is valuable to the individual, and is absolutely essential to the success of the organization. At the inception of a professional development program, the organization should develop a baseline of their current project performance level. This baseline serves as a benchmark against which they can measure their progress towards improved performance. A program like the one outlined here needs the support of the organization to carry it beyond the classroom and into the work environment. An expectation that communicates to the individuals in this professional development area that their behavior in the workplace is expected to contribute to improved performance needs to be clearly established. Therefore, measurements of performance need to go beyond the traditional assessment of the classroom experience for the learner. They need to include measures such as use of a standard methodology, knowledge of the practitioners, cost performance, schedule performance, customer satisfaction, and employee satisfaction, plus others.

The Center for Business Practices' recently completed Value of Project Management Training study reveals that organizations overwhelmingly improved in a number of areas as a result of project management training. The relationship between classroom and workplace performance is highlighted by the finding that 91% of the organizations showed a moderate to extreme improvement in the individual's on-the-job performance. This validates the importance of professional development in changing how an organization matures in the execution of projects.

## SUMMARY

Project management as a practice offers an impressive set of tools for an organization to more effectively manage their resources, both human and capital. A professional development program that incorporates the best practices of using these tools effectively contributes to improved competency. Organizations that recognize and align their resources to thrive in different types of project environments will see improvements in overall project performance. Focusing on building project manager competencies means first identifying what needs to be improved. To do this requires a comprehensive project manager competency assessment program that analyzes knowledge, behaviors, and potential. The results of this type of individual assessment will help organizations begin to harness the power of their project managers' skills and abilities and enable them to focus training where it's most needed. Matching project manager skills with the types of projects they are prepared to handle will result in more effective project execution, and subsequently better organizational performance.

# Building Project Manager Competency in Organizations

---

## References

- Covey, Steven. *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.
- Pennypacker, James. *Value of Project Management Training*. Havertown, PA: Center for Business Practices, 2004.
- A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute, 2000.

## About the Author

As Vice President and Dean of the PM College, the training arm of PM Solutions, Dr. Jimmie West, PMP, leads overall curriculum and professional development programs. Dr. West brings a wealth of experience in the area of project management both as a practitioner and as an educator. He has authored several articles and delivered presentations on project manager competency, training programs, team building, conflict management, risk management, and schedule analysis. Dr. West has taught project management courses for thousands of students in locations such as Egypt, Germany, England, Singapore, Australia, and throughout the US.

## Contributors

- Deborah Bigelow, PMP, President, PM College & Executive Vice President, PM Solutions
- Jeannette Cabanis-Brewin, Editor-in-Chief, Center for Business Practices
- J. Kent Crawford, PMP, CEO, PM Solutions
- Frances Cruz, PMP, Managing Consultant, PM Solutions
- James Pennypacker, Director, Center for Business Practices
- Mary Yanocha, ABC, Director, Marketing & Communications, PM Solutions

## About PM College®

PM Solutions' Project Management College (PM College) is dedicated to providing excellence in corporate project management training and professional development. In partnership with the prestigious Heinz School at Carnegie Mellon University, PM College offers superior course content and realistic educational approaches to create behavior change essential for project management success. Students can earn a Master's Certificate in Project Management or a specialized IT Project Management Master's Certificate awarded by the PM College and endorsed by The Heinz School of Carnegie Mellon University. PM College is recognized as a global charter Registered Education Provider (REP) by the Project Management Institute (PMI®). In partnership with Caliper International, PM College also offers a Project Manager Competency Assessment Program, helping companies determine which individual project managers have the highest potential to grow and excel. By providing organizations with the competencies needed to effectively manage programs, projects, and teams, PM College helps improve bottom line performance. For more information, visit [www.pmcollge.com](http://www.pmcollge.com).

---

PMI® is a service and trademark of the Project Management Institute which is registered in the United States and other nations. PMBOK® is a trademark of the Project Management Institute, Inc. which is registered in the United States and other nations.

