



Assessing the competent project manager

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How to assess project management competence is explored and an approach is presented that aligns project professionals to standard internationally recognised levels as well as benchmarking an organisation's population of project professionals to those in the rest of industry



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Background

The terms competency and competence are becoming increasingly used by employers, standards setting bodies and project managers in conversations around selection or development of project managers. Although it is over 25 years since the twin ideas of competency and competence frameworks first emerged, their adoption within the project management profession for various purposes continues.

Employers use competence frameworks, with varying degrees of success, mainly for recruitment, selection, training needs analysis, development planning, and appraisal. Standard setting bodies, for example the UK's Association for Project Management (APM), have developed their own competence frameworks to support the wider development of the profession. Indeed, a competence based standard is proposed by the APM in its submission to the Privy Council regarding the chartered project professional. Furthermore, the APM's Practitioner Qualification determines the capability of an individual to manage a non-complex project and is thus closely aligned to competence.

Competency and competence

Some confusion surrounds the differences between competency (plural competencies) and competence (plural competences). It is important to clarify the generally accepted usage of the terms.

Input – Competencies	Output - Competences	Outcome - Successful project delivery
Typically relate to a wide range of situations	Typically based on a work task and relate to a particular role or job	Performance
Knowledge Skills e.g. decision making ability Personality	e.g. execution of risk management e.g. maintaining stakeholder commitment	Delivered project objectives On course to achieve benefits Stakeholders satisfied
Assessed using PMA5	Assessed using PMA5	Assessed using Scored CV

'A competency is the set of behaviour patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence' -- Woodruffe¹.

'Competency: behaviours to input to a situation. Competence: a system of minimum standards, demonstrated by performance and outputs' -- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

So competencies could be considered as the underpinning knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviour that an individual needs to acquire to deliver superior performance. These may be thought of simply as inputs. In

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project management, with regard to stakeholder management for example, this could include “uses questioning effectively”, or “can describe stakeholder mapping and communication planning techniques” or “engages with and seeks the views of others”.

Competences, on the other hand, describe what people need to be able to demonstrate to perform the job to a required or specified standard. These are more akin to outputs. An example in the same area as used above, stakeholder management, would be “analyse, communicate and influence, and gain and maintain the commitment of stakeholders throughout the lifecycle of a complex project.”

Whether or not authors of competence or competency frameworks always clearly distinguish between the two is a moot point. Choosing which to use depends on what you want to achieve. If you are interested in acknowledging a project manager’s performance or competence in their job, then an outputs based competence framework will be more helpful. This will also be the natural choice for standards or qualification bodies.

Most organisations, however, will develop competency frameworks as these identify the underpinning knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours required to perform well and to match up to the organisation culture. These frameworks will be often be used for appraisal and development purposes, often with 360 degree feedback. The 360 degree feedback tool most widely used across government and the public sector is based directly on a competency framework but additionally makes a distinction between the competencies being measured and the level of competence being demonstrated, as measured by the results being achieved.

Project management competence

Research into the behaviours of successful project managers by Dainty², Wideman³, Turner⁴, Crawford⁵ and Frame⁶, show a wide range of general inter-personal and leadership competencies as being necessary. Recurring themes of competencies include behaviours such as self-control, resilience, communication, self-assurance, and those related to team leadership.

On the other hand, the outputs of the competent project manager are often expressed by standards across a number of project management topic areas. Typically, these will take the form of statements like “defines and implements a change control process and maintains records on a number of projects” or “plans and conducts an effective post project review, including lessons learned, for a major strategic programme”.

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The two challenges: how to assess and how to benchmark

Many competence frameworks exist for project management. Some published by professional bodies, such as the APM, and others developed within organisations. Many of these frameworks might leave the individual wondering how their level of competence was determined and how it matches up to that of their immediate colleagues and to those in the wider industry. There are two fundamental questions that need to be answered:

How to measure the competency or competence of a project manager?

How to benchmark that level against other external standards?

We are often asked to measure the ability, capability, competency or competence of a group of project managers ahead of either a training and development programme or a right sizing exercise.

The different ways to measure competencies include: psychometric instruments (such as OPQ, FIRO-B, WAVE, HDS), project management knowledge tests (such as APMP, PMP or PRINCE2 Practitioner), peer assessments (e.g. 360 behavioural feedback), and assessment centres. Competences can be measured in similar ways using self assessment and/or peer assessment against a competence framework (e.g. IPMA Competence Baseline or APM Competence Framework), or assessment centres (e.g. APM Practitioner Qualification).

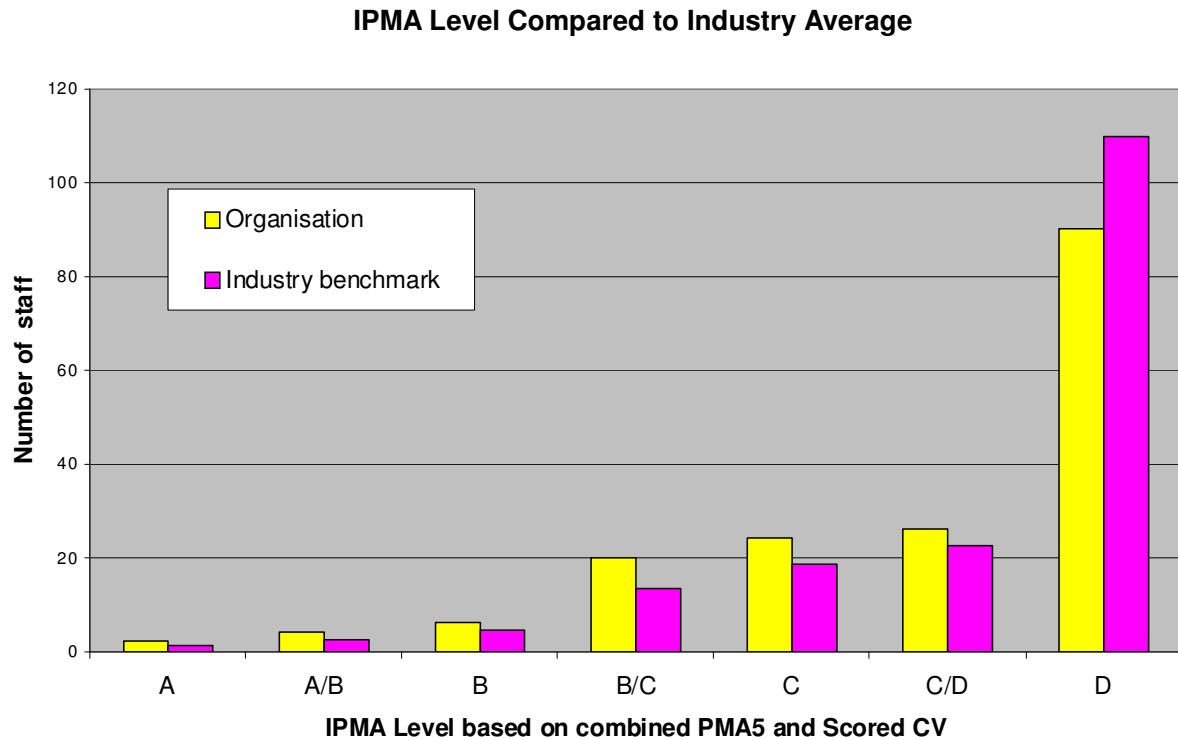
Whereas psychometric instruments have well established norms, often for the general population or managers as a total group, the competence frameworks of the project management standards bodies (e.g. IPMA and APM) are lengthy and time consuming for the project manager to complete and have largely theoretical norms. Hence, benchmarking against large project management populations when using either proprietary psychometric instruments or competence frameworks is nearly impossible.

The solution that we have developed and deployed extensively to large organisations and many thousands of project managers provides a time-effective, robust and extensively benchmarked assessment of overall project manager performance. PMA5, an online project management assessment that takes approximately 75 minutes to complete, measures project management knowledge, decision making ability and personality competencies as well 15 project management competences. In high stakes assessments, where career development decisions are being taken, we also deploy a now proven technique called Scored CV. Through a detailed structured analysis of three projects undertaken by the candidate, an indication of their overall performance is gleaned. Again, this has been completed by 1,000 project managers and thus reasonable data norms are available.

Through the deployment of these techniques within large populations of project managers, we are able to develop industry benchmarks of the proportions of project managers within each of the four IPMA levels

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(Level A- projects director to Level D - project management associate). Assessment of the project management staff within an organisation can then be summarised against the industry benchmark as shown in the figure below for an example organisation.



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Dr Andrew Delo has pioneered Provek's development and deployment with leading organisations of unique assessment tools for programme and project professionals which have benefitted clients through more effective training needs analysis and robust benchmarked capability assessment. Andrew has been managing director of Provek for the past three years and is a member of the APM Working Party setting the standards for a Chartered Project Professional

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This article was first published in Project Manager Today March 2010.