

Beyond PM Certification: Achieving PM Performance Improvement

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Summary

Stimulated by Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo's incredible paper "Project Management Credentials Compared – A Preliminary Analysis" I share some thoughts and how I ultimately came to these conclusions:

- The PM Profession should work toward creating a single set of generic, universally-acceptable PM competencies, tools, and certifications.
 - HR and training people, as well as those individuals seeking to upgrade their PM skills should (at least, for the present) ignore the certifications put forth by the PM Profession. They should focus instead on simply using the lists of competencies that underlie those certifications as inputs to their own PM performance improvement processes.
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Introduction: A Stranger in a Strange Land

The last couple of days have been intellectually turbulent, but at the same time exhilarating. After more than 25 years teaching and writing about project management, I've come to realize exactly why I've sometimes had the disturbing feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. The catalyst of this powerful, and overdue, realization has been Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo's incredible paper "[Project Management Credentials Compared – A Preliminary Analysis.](http://www.build-project-management-competency.com/download-page/)" / <http://www.build-project-management-competency.com/download-page/>

In this paper, Dr. Giammalvo undertakes a preliminary comparison of many different project management (PM) credentials available from several professional organizations that are "generally recognized around the world." These include:

"... (in alphabetical order)

- American Society for the Advancement of Project Management (asapm)
- Association for the Advancement of Cost Engineering International (AACE)
- Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM)
- International Council of Systems Engineers (INCOSE)
- OGC/APM's PRINCE2
- Project Management Institute (PMI)"

Dr. Giammalvo explains: "This list is NOT all inclusive, nor was it intended to be, but it was felt that it represents the more commonly recognized credentials in the field of project/program management." His purpose was "to see if it was feasible to produce a meaningful ratio scale against which to rank order and compare the relative standings of the various credentials."

Amazingly, after struggling with this highly-complex challenge, *Dr. Giammalvo finally was able to rank order the various PM certifications based on the amount of effort and formal degrees required to obtain them.* So, for example, he is able to show that “... PRINCE2 credentials are significantly lower than all other credentials, while at the other extreme, AACE’s top credentials, the C3PM and the CFCC scored very high.” And he is also able to defend such assertions as: “... the top ranked credentials are NOT coming from PMI, which is without question the largest and most influential of the professional organizations purporting to represent practitioners of project management, but are dominated by the much less well known organizations...”

As I continued to review Dr. Giammalvo’s findings, it hit me! I knew exactly why I’ve sometimes felt such a stranger in this strange land of PM. It is because over the years I have been denying that little voice inside me that has been quietly repeating that this PM certification and credentialing stuff is maybe beside the point – that it’s almost irrelevant. Or worse, that it sometimes appears to be designed primarily to meet the needs of those creating, bestowing, teaching, and consulting about the credentials instead of meeting the needs of those who practice project and program management. In short, I came to realize that PM certification and credentialing is not really meant to achieve true PM performance improvement. And, since PM performance improvement is what I really care about, I yawn, fidget in my seat, and sometimes even get mildly annoyed when my PM colleagues or clients begin to drone on and on about arcane subtleties and esoterica related to the various PM certification and credentialing processes.

So Why Focus on Performance Improvement?

My obsession with performance improvement comes from many years of professional practice as an instructional designer, curriculum analyst, and performance improvement professional prior to my writing PM texts and consulting in PM. In a career now exceeding three decades, I’ve completed many training needs analyses, analyzed sets of job-related competencies, developed job models and career paths, erected curriculum architectures, and created training and tools to support the acquisition of new skills by both PM and non-PM workers.

I’ve worked with a lot of change agents in organizations who were struggling to achieve organization-specific performance improvement. **And this I know for sure: At their best, external credentials and certifications shed light and provide some valuable guidance on internal training and career development needs. At their worst, they become troublesome collections of criteria that can be extremely difficult to “sync up” with internal, organization-specific performance improvement efforts and strategic initiatives.**

If the professionals who are practicing PM and advocating for more professional approaches to PM are to have real, meaningful impact in improving the real-world performance of PM as it is practiced in organizations, they must come to view HR and

training people as their prime customers. **These members of what I call “the PM Profession” must provide HR and training people with:**

- **A consistent, “shaken down,” and synthesized collection of PM competencies** that will help internal HR/training people flesh out specific PM-related job descriptions, roles, and responsibilities.
- **Tools, tools, and more tools** in the form of worksheets, templates, guidelines, protocols, and procedures **that support PM “best practices”** in different industries.
- **An end to the proliferation and duplication of PM credentials and confusing certification** practices by synthesizing **a single set of generic, universally-acceptable PM competencies, tools, and certifications.**

By providing these three items, and making them freely available, the PM Profession will become partners with organizations everywhere in helping to create true PM performance improvement.

PM is for Everyone, Not Just Professionals

Some of what is troubling to me about current PM certification and credentialing is that it is exclusionary. Those who achieve these are part of one or another select club. Yet, whether the PM Profession likes it or not, PM itself is ubiquitous and it is practiced by nearly everyone at one time or another, formally or informally. Therefore, **what is needed from the PM Profession is not a set of artificial boundaries separating the various levels of PM performers, but rather professional tools and guidance to help those tasked with PM to do a better job.**

There are two fields which can serve as powerful analogies to help illustrate how PM might be made accessible to everyone, not just a handful of selected and certified professionals:

- The practice of medicine
- The practice of physical fitness

In the field of medicine, as in PM, there are all sorts of skill-levels required of its various practitioners. For example, medical researchers seek cures and develop clinical protocols (i.e., medical “best practices”) which are implemented by highly-trained surgeons, specialists, and family doctors. Emergency medical technicians make critical interventions by applying these clinical protocols in order to keep people alive long enough to turn them over to the care of these more highly-trained specialists. At the same time, in small towns and rural communities all over the world, volunteer fire fighters and other local first responders apply emergency first aid to accident victims in the form of CPR and other easily-trainable medical procedures. And finally, ordinary citizens in their roles as parents, coaches, and scout leaders apply similar first aid to the minor wounds and medical emergencies suffered by their kids.

A similar hierarchy of practice may be found in the physical fitness field. Medical researchers scrutinize what works and what doesn't work to achieve maximum levels of fitness. They then hand off this information to physical therapists and team physicians who work with patients and athletes to apply the best practices suggested by the research. Finally, some of these physicians and physical therapists write books or articles containing nice, tight summaries (recipes, protocols, checklists, etc.) that may be applied by anyone seeking greater levels of physical fitness.

The point is, you don't need to be trained in the subtleties of cell physiology or cardio-pulmonary surgery to practice first aid, perform CPR, and save a life. Nor do you need to be a sophisticated medical researcher to design and implement your own physical fitness program. You just need to have the right tools or procedures and the confidence to apply them.

And the same is true for anybody practicing project management – even the greenest of PM newbies. They need not be able to recite all possible PM definitions and terms or unravel arcane problems of earned value analysis to achieve great results in their roles as project leaders or part-time project managers. They simply need good tools and procedures, as well as some locally-relevant training and coaching on how these should be applied. In fact, in their primary roles as proud practitioners of a particular non-PM application, they may ultimately derive considerable joy and professional satisfaction from applying *just enough PM* to help their project teams achieve high-quality results from projects undertaken in their specialties.

Better yet, some of these PM newbies and part timers may ultimately have tremendous impact on the practice of PM in their organizations by gently introducing PM “best practices” that have been “baked in” to the PM tools provided by the PM Profession. For example, while a certified PM professional may be regarded with suspicion by the practitioners of an application specialty, “one of their own” serving in a PM role might be welcomed and get professional-grade results using tools provided by the PM Profession. The result: The organization gently moves forward toward organization-wide PM performance improvement – achieved through a kind of “guerilla” or “grass roots” PM process renewal, instead of formal PM certification and credentialing.

The implications of all this are clear: **Since nearly everyone is (or sometime will be) practicing PM, the PM Profession should create and disseminate solid PM tools and procedures, then provide (or package for distribution) some step-by-step guidance in the use of these for PM newbies & part timers.**

All PM is Local

The definition of the word “project” typically includes the assumption that the outcome will be a “unique product or service...” This uniqueness stems from the special characteristics and goals of the organization undertaking the project and the unique set of circumstances in which the project team operates. In other words, **it is the specific local conditions that determine project deliverables; stakeholders and their relationships; customer/sponsor requirements; regulatory and market forces; best practices of application specialists who are on the team; and many other dimensions of the project.** Even more relevant to any discussion of PM competency is that the local organization determines whether their projects will be managed by full-time, stand-alone project managers or part-time project managers who are also doubling as application specialists/contributors. And, finally, it is the local organization that determines whether those practicing PM must meet particular requirements for formal or informal PM training or some sort of formal PM certification.

The point is this: **As anyone can plainly see, all PM is practiced locally. It is not practiced in some idealized, generic PM world. So why should we expect generic PM certifications to be welcomed or to have wide applicability in bringing about local performance improvement?** Is it any wonder that application specialists who want to increase their PM skills are put off by the many hurdles they must overcome to become “certified?” When they begin to scrutinize the certification requirements, many of these folks see that the certification criteria simply don’t ring true, nor do they seem to offer any immediate practical application in helping them solve the unique, local PM problems they face.

So PM Performance Improvement Must Be Managed Locally

It’s clear that any attempt at improving an organization’s overall PM performance must take into consideration all of the unique local dynamics discussed above. And the best way to assure that these are properly factored in is to manage PM performance improvement initiative locally.

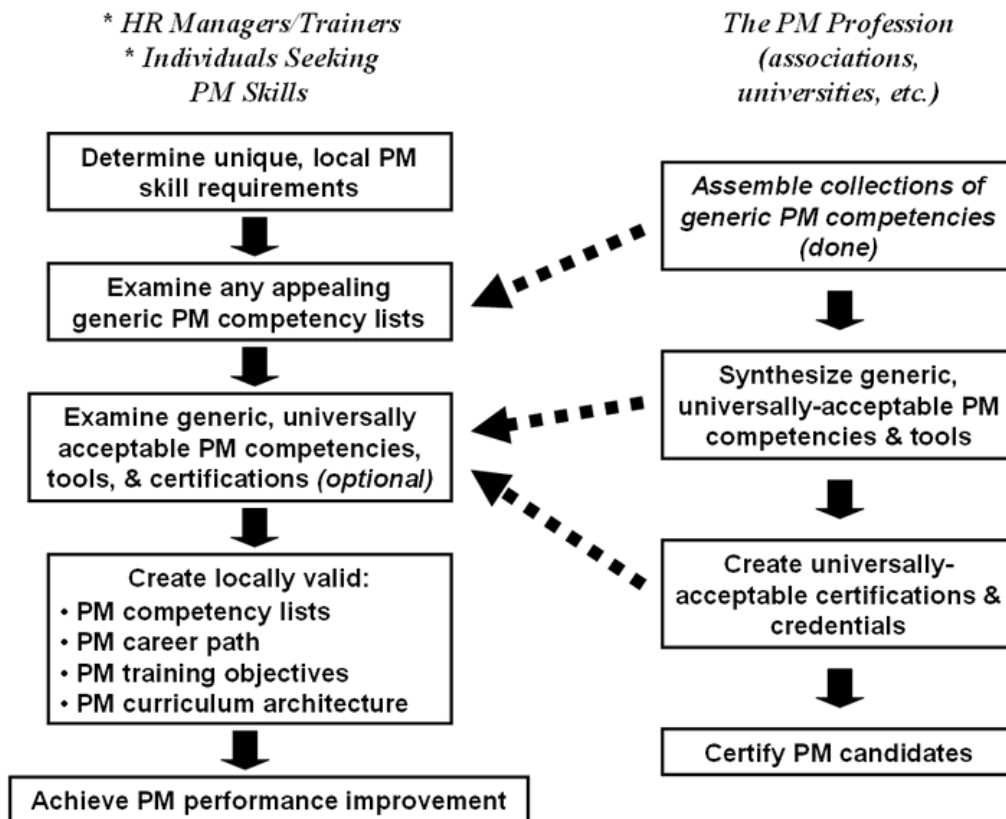
Specifically, such **local PM performance initiatives must accommodate:**

- All **career development initiatives** already in place (or planned) by HR & training people. (This includes non-PM-related initiatives.)
- The organization’s **overall (including non-PM) curriculum**, training, mentoring, and coaching infrastructure.
- All the organization’s **competency assessment mechanisms.**
- The **strategic goals** of the organization.
- **Anything else that could serve as an input or challenge** to local PM performance improvement efforts.

How to Bring About Meaningful PM Performance Improvement

So PM is everywhere, it is eventually undertaken by nearly everybody, and the improvement of PM performance must be managed locally. But how?

The diagram below illustrates how meaningful PM performance improvement can be achieved by conquering poor PM performance locally, one organization at a time. As shown, **it is the HR people, the training people, and the individuals seeking to improve their PM skills who ought to be driving the PM performance improvement process, not the PM Profession.** The former bring to the performance improvement process the “deep knowledge” of the local issues and local PM practices that ultimately make or break the effective performance of project teams. And they have a grasp of the local training, evaluation, and mentoring mechanisms that are needed to monitor and support the development of meaningful PM skills. In short, **they are best positioned to implement the organization’s PM renewal.**



PM Performance Improvement Versus PM Certification

In contrast, the PM Profession (which necessarily exists outside the local contexts of individual organizations) is shown to be properly engaged in the resolution of the

broad, generic PM issues. So what might appear to a local HR person to be fairly esoteric debates about the finer points of PM vision and values becomes, appropriately, the responsibility of the PM Profession. In turn, the outputs of the PM Profession's efforts (i.e., the thorny generic issues resolved) are used as illuminating inputs to support substantive, locally-meaningful PM performance improvement. In this way, the efforts of all those in the PM Profession who are now scrambling to describe (or capture for themselves?) the "one true" set of ideal PM skills and practices may have value far above and beyond that of mere certification of a handful of PM elites. Instead, their work can serve all organizations by helping to enhance (dare I say "professionalize?") the PM performance improvement efforts of local organizations everywhere.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Besides exorcising my personal demons related to feeling a "stranger in a strange land," **sorting through these issues has led me to the following recommendations:**

- **The PM Profession should work toward creating a single set of generic, universally-acceptable PM competencies, tools, and certifications.** After all, the PM Profession is working in the realm of the generic, as opposed to the realm of the local and specific. So there is little justification for the multiple, overlapping competency schemes and evaluation frameworks with which Dr. Giammalvo struggled. To strengthen the PM Profession's clout, it should give voice to a single, unified and consistent message.
- **HR and training people, as well as those individuals seeking to upgrade their PM skills should (at least, for the present) ignore the certifications put forth by the PM Profession. They should focus instead on simply using the lists of competencies that underlie those certifications as inputs to their own PM performance improvement processes.** In the end, such locally-inspired PM performance improvement efforts are likely to achieve more meaningful, long-term results.

Related Information and Links

So, you might be asking: "Who is this guy to be making such assertions?" Or you may simply want to investigate some of the topics discussed above a little more thoroughly. Below is a list of my related publications which provide more information and some modest evidence of my credibility on this topic:

- **["Beyond Sales Training: Designing a Learning Organization,"](#)** [PDF file]" from *In Action: Designing Training Programs*, American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), 1996 ["18 case studies from the real world of training"] ISBN 1-56286-057-7 [URL: <http://www.michaelgreer.com/beyond-sales-training.pdf>]

This book chapter describes exactly how we executed a comprehensive performance analysis to create job models, career paths, curriculum architecture, and corresponding training priorities. While the chapter documents a sales training intervention, I also used a similar approach to develop a proprietary (confidential) PM-related job model and support system for a major global corporation. ***Read this if you would like to learn specifically what's involved in the development of job models, career paths, curriculum architectures, and so on.***

- [Summary of Key Project Manager Actions and Results](http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=118) – [URL - <http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=118>]

This document (created in 1996) resulted when I worked with a team of veteran project manager reviewers to tease out 20 key PM competencies out of PMI's initial PMBOK (clearly a body of KNOWLEDGE as opposed to a set of competencies). It was the road map that helped me create my best-selling HRD Press text/tool collection, [*The Project Manager's Partner*](#).

- [The New Project Manager's Support Pyramid: A Framework for PM Training & Support](http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=205) – [URL - <http://michaelgreer.biz/?p=205>]

A web-published article. (The title says it all.)

- [Overview of my 1992 book *ID Project Management: Tools & Techniques for Instructional Designers & Developers*](http://www.michaelgreer.biz/ID-Project-Management-Book.htm) – [URL - <http://www.michaelgreer.biz/ID-Project-Management-Book.htm>]

This is the first-ever (and possibly the only) book about how to manage the process of instructional design and development.

- [My Custom Workshops](http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=55) – [URL - http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=55]

Information about the PM training sessions I've been customizing and teaching for more than 20 years. I've learned a lot of practical and profound stuff about PM from my clients by designing, redesigning and teaching these sessions. In particular, **by prepping these sessions, I've learned a great deal about the difficulties faced by training and HR people as they work to upgrade PM practices.** (See also my [*client list*](http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=27) - http://michaelgreer.biz/?page_id=27)

- (For samples of various artifacts related to the development of a custom PM job model, career path, corresponding curriculum architectures, and more, please email me at greers_pm@yahoo.com.)