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SUKAD Group

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATION MODEL

Alternative Approach To Project Management Certification

This document is a proposal about an alternative approach to project management certification. We propose a four-level model with links to industries and business sector. This proposal was presented at a GAPPS (Global Alliance for Projects Performance Standards), BUID (British University in Dubai) and SUKAD event in 2012.

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I. Part 1: The General Sections

A. Introduction

An essential factor for any professional certifications is to provide a level of comfort to the users, hiring managers, and executives that the certification holder has an edge over a non-certificate holder; or at least he or she has met certain independently verifiable criteria that we can trust.

In this white paper we will address the context and background leading us to proposing a project management certification model as an alternative approach to what exists. We use the term model since our intention is that the model should be available on an open source (Creative Commons) basis for organizations to adopt and even modify for their internal use if they see fit.

It would also be of value if an independent organization (accreditation agency) is set up to administer the various levels of the new certification model for individuals, and organizations who want their professionals to be independently assessed. This accreditation agency can also certify private organizations to administer the exam internally. Building on this concept, our proposal consists mainly of two major elements, which we will discuss in details later; these are:

1. The Certification Model – on Creative Commons basis
2. The Organization to certify individuals or organizations

It is worth noting that we could implement the first element without the second; since it is possible to implement without having to establish an accreditation agency.

B. The Context

In certain professions, such as: legal, medicine, engineering, and others the criteria for professional certifications are usually strict, require extensive education, and even verifiable working experience under the supervision of a certificate¹ holder. For examples:

- Before someone becomes a doctor she has to serve under the supervision of a professional (licensed) doctor for many years.
- Professional engineers typically requires letters from three or more professional engineers who had direct working experience with them before they can even sit for the certification exam.
- All of the above also requires four or more professional years of experience after a university degree.

We realize that project management is not a profession² and therefore, some professionals would debate that we do not need to follow the same strict rules for the professions mentioned above; like medicine, legal, or engineering. Whether we agree with these statements or disagree is not the point. The point is: if professional associations are to offer certifications than they have an ethical and professional responsibility (if not legal) to properly educate the public about value and limitations about the various certifications that they administer, in total transparency.

Many professionals and experts point out that, unfortunately, many professional associations are putting revenues over transparency and not doing a good job in properly educating the professional community.

¹ In the context of this section, certificate refer to professional certifications and “licenses”, where applicable

² Although some professional associations either claim that project management is a profession or encourage such a claim

Some associations might be better than others but we do not want to judge anyone here. The author subscribe to this opinion.

C. Background

There are many discussions on online groups that raise questions about certifications and the value of certifications in project management. The author of this paper is a frequent contributor to these groups and has also written a few articles on the subject.

There are three leading organizations that offer project management certifications globally today, namely PMI³, IPMA⁴, and the APM Group⁵. There are other organizations and even private providers that offer one sort of a project management certification or another but those organizations and their certificates are often purely commercial offerings.

In these various discussions and debates, contributors typically reflect on benefits, values, abuse, and misunderstandings surrounding these various certifications. The debates could be on the value of certification in general, or specific to a given certification or an association. Regardless where one stands on this topic, the debates could become quite vociferous (metaphorically speaking) on all sides; some would be defending; some would be arguing against; and others will be somewhat neutral.

In order not to keep this paper too abstract we will point out two examples.

1. **PRINCE2**: some organizations and many individuals have heard of PRINCE2 but they do not even know there are two certifications PRINCE2 Foundation and Practitioner. The first one does not even require **any** project management experience. Yet some do not hesitate in promoting it as a “certified project manager”.
2. **PMP**: most of the debate online is about the PMP⁶ and there are many online groups even dedicated to this certification⁷.

The PMP stands for: Project Management Professional and only requires the candidate to have three years (4500 hours) of project management experience with a college degree⁸. Many would agree that executives and hiring managers **understand** the PMP to be an *expert project manager* certification. However, two issues here:

- a. In most professions and occupation most would agree that three years of experience is only introductory and not expert level ... and
- b. A PMP certificate holder might have never managed a project (not a requirement for the certification) or even led project management tasks⁹.

D. The Basis for this Proposal

The author position and this paper hypothesis is that the professional associations are not doing a good job in proactively providing clear guidelines about the various certifications, their values and limitations, and even how they grant them or verify the candidates' qualifications. There is too much secrecy around

³ The Project Management Institute

⁴ The International Project Management Association

⁵ Association for Project Management Group

⁶ Project Management Professional

⁷ There is no question that the PMP is the most popular and globally spread with about 450,000 certificate holders in 2011

⁸ A candidate can even qualify without a college degree but requires 7500 hours instead of 4500

⁹ The requirements state that they have to have led and directed project management tasks but we know that a few have worked on projects in technical roles ONLY yet they qualified, how? A question posed to professional association more than once but no answers due to “privacy”

this subject without a clear reason justifying the secrecy. Again, some associations might be better than others but will keep the discussion general.

It is also our hypothesis that some certifications have become a commodity with many certification holders memorizing standards but do not know the basics of managing a project and do not even know what a project life span¹⁰ is or what the difference between project plan and a schedule is. It is also saddening to know that many PMP do not even know the process groups repeat in every project phase or that the PMBOK® Guide is not a methodology even though both topics are clearly stated in the PMBOK® Guide.

There is nothing wrong in the concepts of PRINCE2 Foundation, or Practitioner, or the CAPM¹¹, PMP, IPMA Level D, etc. What is often wrong is how some of these certifications are presented by the professional associations that grant them, or the chapters and service providers associated with these associations. We need to be clear and call things for what they are and not over “sell” them for revenue generations over clarity of purpose.

We need to move away from certifications as a commodity to certifications’ holders becoming capable agent of change. To achieve this, certifications, and the process of obtaining one, must be **stringent** enough in order to gain a true organizational acceptance and not just acceptance as a fashionable trend.

E. Disclaimer

Before we go further, we must stress that we are not experts in certifications and we cannot claim that the proposed model below is without gaps. What we offer here is the high-level concept and neither a detailed proposal nor full design. To accomplish the objectives of this proposal would require much more than we are capable of as an individual and has to be a collective effort with the support of a major not-for-profit organization or government entity.

¹⁰ Some prefer the term Project Life Cycle

¹¹ Certified Associate in Project Management – granted by PMI

II. Part 2: The Proposal

A. Features of the Proposed Model

Our approach and the features we seek in this proposal are:

- Certifications must be for different levels of expertise
- Lower level certificates would be mostly related to knowledge and basic experience
- Higher level certificates would require clear **demonstration** of expertise and **verification** of knowing how to apply the project management practices
- At higher level, the certifications should be linked to an industry or sector, where possible
- Depend on the certification level, there must be proper scrutiny for screening candidates and granting the certifications
- The various certifications values, limitations, and use must be clearly and unambiguously communicated
- The criteria for pre-qualification and granting the certificates must be clear and transparent
- The model should be available on an open source (Creative Commons) basis for organizations to be able to adopt it for their internal non-commercial use

B. Knowledge Base

The knowledge base for these certifications would come from any source, even from the standards of professional associations, where appropriate. What we envision is a need for blending the learning from the various associations and the standards they issue since the standards are valuable but they are incomplete and not enough to effectively manage projects. For example, PMI project management standard focuses on the project management processes, whereas the IPMA standard emphasis competence baseline, and PRINCE2 foundation is a methodology.

In other words, we would expect a certificate holder under our approach to be familiar with project management methodology, processes, and project manager competence since a blend of these and other sources are fundamentals for effective management of projects.

C. Proposed Structure

The Certification Model that we propose consists of four levels. However, these levels are not uniform across all industries and business sectors, as we will outline below.

The proposed names for the various levels, from the lower to the high end, are:

- Foundation Level
- Professional Level
- Subject Matter Expert
- Subject Master



We do realize that this structure somewhat resemble the four levels of IPMA certifications¹², and we must admit that the concept is inspired by the

¹² IPMA has four certifications called Level D, Level C, Level B, and Level A with the lowest being Level D

IPMA model but we believe that we propose here do have significant differences from IPMA and other associations, especially for the higher level certificates.

III. Part 3: The Four Levels

A. Foundation Level

1) General Description

The first level certification that we propose is knowledge base.

Many professional associations offer such a certification; such as IPMA's Level D, PMI's CAPM, and APM Group PRINCE2 Foundation. However, the certifications by each of these associations focus on their own standards instead of a more comprehensive and blended approach. For example, PMI PMBOK® Guide focuses on processes, APM Group focuses on methodology, and IPMA focuses on competence. What we propose is a blend of the three approaches.

2) Certification Focus

The focus of this certification is to verify the candidate has the necessary basic knowledge in project management principles and practices.

We can classify this certification as a "learner" certification.

3) Knowledge Base

Since this would be a basic level certification, it would not require demonstrating competence and verification of expertise; we only need demonstrating knowledge. Therefore, for this first level we can focus on processes and methods, which one can learn from general project management books and references. The knowledge base could include the standards from the various professional associations.

4) Target Audience

The target audience would be college graduates who want to work on projects or start a career in project management. Also for young people who might only have a high school or vocational degree and also wants to enhance their skills base and move into project management.

5) Pre-Qualifications Requirements

- University degree and no experience or 4 years of experience after high school
- General application

6) Obtaining the Credential

After meeting the pre-qualifications requirements, the candidates can sit for an exam. The candidate can earn this credential by passing the exam. We recommend the exam to be two or three hours and consists of multiple choice questions, true and false questions, and even a few open ended questions where the candidates has to write down the answers in their own words. We also recommend the exam to be challenging enough and simulating the real working environment with a passing score of 80 or above.

7) Maintaining the Credential

The credential holder will have this certification valid for 5 years, after which they can either go for the

higher level certificate, or re-take the exam, or earn enough learning units during the 5 year cycle. To avoid people playing games with going online to get all of their learning units just before they re-certify, we suggest instituting a policy where no more than 35% of the units can be earned in one year.

B. Professional Level

1) General Description

The next level certification is experience and competency-based.

We suggest that for this certification to be effective, we must link it to the job. Some of the existing certifications today come close to this but we do not think what exists is appropriate in term of years of experience and requirements.

2) Certification Focus

The focus of this certification is to verify the candidate has the necessary working knowledge in project management principles and practices and can demonstrate they can manage small and simple projects, or parts of larger projects. We can classify this certification as a “project manager” certification.

3) Knowledge Base

Since this would be a project manager level certification, it would require demonstrating competence along with working knowledge of the processes and methods. The learning would from general project management books and references. The knowledge base could include the standards from the various professional associations.

4) Target Audience

The target audience would be those working as project managers or professionals shifting into a project manager role.

5) Pre-Qualifications Requirements

- University degree or 4 years of experience after high school, and
- 5 years working experience in a project management role (not in technical or functional roles)
- At least one letter from a certified project manager that has direct working exposure to the candidate, such as a colleague, a client, or a subordinate
- In lieu of the previous requirements, three letters from certified project managers that know the candidate and not necessarily in direct working exposure
- A recommendation letter from the candidate supervisor or manager
- General application

6) Obtaining the Credential

After meeting the pre-qualifications requirements and verifications of the records submitted, the candidates still has two requirements to obtain the Project Manager Credential. The first one is to pass an exam and an interview/assessment by a certified assessor.

We recommend the exam to be in two parts, two to three hours each. The first part would be similar to the first certification and consists of multiple choice questions, true and false questions, and a few

open ended questions where the candidates has to write down the answers in their own words. The second part would be scenario base and case studies. We also recommend the exam to be challenging enough and simulating the real working environment.

After passing the exam, there will be at least a one hour interview led by a certified assessor. The assessor is the one who will decide if the candidate can earn the credential, even if the candidate has a good score on the exam. The candidate will have the right to appeal the assessor decision if the assessor did not grant the certification.

7) Maintaining the Credential

The credential holder will have this certification valid for 5 years, after which they can either go for the higher level certificate, or re-take the exam and interview, or earn enough learning units during the 5 year cycle. Same as before, to avoid people playing games with going online to get all of their learning units just before they re-certify, we suggest instituting a policy where no more than 35% of the units can be earned in one year.

C. Subject Matter Expert

1) General Description

The third level is advanced level certifications. We suggest that this would combine competency with **proven expertise** and not limited to exam based.

We suggest that for this certification to be effective, we should link it to the job and to an industry or sector, where possible. The reason we recommend the link to an industry or a sector since at this level there could be differences in managing projects; managing technology projects might have peculiarities that is not required for industrial or facilities projects and vice versa.

We envision there could be certification for: industrial/facilities projects, technology, software development, research and development, real estate, among others. There could be a general level certification also for business projects, such as marketing, human resources, etc.

We would envision that possibly 70% of the content could be applicable across the industries and sectors and the rest applicable to the specialty area of the credential.

2) Certification Focus

The focus of this certification is to verify the candidate has the necessary subject matter expertise in project management principles and practices and can demonstrate they can manage and lead complex projects in their chosen area. We can classify this certification as a “senior project manager” or “program manager” or “project director” certification.

3) Knowledge Base

Since this would be a project manager level certification, it would require demonstrating competence along with working knowledge of the processes and methods. The learning would come from general project management books and references and advanced topics in project management. The knowledge base could include the standards from the various professional associations.

4) Target Audience

The target audience would be senior project managers, PMO leaders, and other project management

experts.

5) Pre-Qualifications Requirements

- University degree or 4 years of experience after high school, and
- 10 years working experience in a project management role
- 5 years working as a project manager on substantial projects (not small/simple)
- At least one letter from a certified project manager that is has direct working exposure to the candidate, such as a colleague, a client, or a subordinate
- In lieu of the previous requirements, three letters from certified project managers that know the candidate and not necessarily in direct working exposure
- A recommendation letter from the candidate supervisor or manager
- General application

6) Obtaining the Credential

After meeting the pre-qualifications requirements and verifications of the records submitted, the candidates still has three requirements to obtain the Project Manager Credential. The first one is to pass an exam, the second one is interviews/assessment by certified assessors (2 of them), and the third one a visit to the candidate workplace to interview relevant people.

We recommend the exam to be similar to the project manager exam but with more advanced topics. After passing the exam, there will be at least two interviews led by certified assessors, together or independent. At least one of the assessors will visit the candidate the work place to interview colleagues, subordinates, and management about the person performance.

The assessors are the one who will decide if the candidate can earn the credential, even if the candidate has a good score on the exam.

The candidate will have the right to appeal the assessors' decision if the assessors did not grant the certification.

7) Maintaining the Credential

The credential holder will have this certification valid for 10 years as long as they earn a minimum number of units during the ten years cycle.

D. Subject Master

1) General Description

The fourth level is a 'subject master'. The holder of such certification is a leader or an authority in his/her domain. In large organizations, this could be the Chief Project Officer or equivalent; basically one of a kind. This would be the person that people come to as "the authority" on the subject matter.

With this certification, and even Subject Matter Expert, there is a business necessity to have specialization per two aspects:

- The first aspect is industry specialization: such as Subject Master Project Manager for Technology Projects or Capital Investment Projects.
- The second aspect is domain specialization: such as Subject Master in EVM or Subject Master in Risk Management

2) Certification Focus

The focus of this certification is to verify the candidate has the necessary top level expertise in project management principles and practices and can demonstrate they can manage and lead complex projects in their chosen area. These are the people who are likely to lead there area of expertise within large organizations and are likely to be speakers at events and conferences in addition to publishing at least articles and papers.

3) Knowledge Base

Since this would be an expert level certification it would require evidence and demonstrating competence at an advance level.

4) Target Audience

The target audience would be top level experts.

5) Pre-Qualifications Requirements

- University degree or 4 years of experience after high school, and
- 15 years working experience in a project management role
- 5 years working as a senior project manager on substantial projects (not small/simple), or equivalent
- Five letters from certified project managers that know the candidate and not necessarily in direct working exposure
- A recommendation letter from the candidate executive management
- Evidence of expertise in term of procedures, policies, white papers, etc. in the subject area of expertise
- General application

6) Obtaining the Credential

After meeting the pre-qualifications requirements and verifications of the records submitted, the candidates still has two requirements to obtain the credential. The first one is interviews/assessment by certified assessors (at least 2), and the second one a visit to the candidate workplace to interview relevant people.

7) Maintaining the Credential

The credential holder will have this certification valid for life as long as they earn a minimum number of units every year and they maintain a career in project management.

IV. Part 4: Implementation

A. The Proposed Model

To implement the proposed model, we need a group of volunteers with the necessary expertise to develop the details of the proposed model. This would include finalizing the criteria for the various certifications; prepare application forms, list of study references, exam questions, interview questions and criteria, passing scores, in addition to approval of the model among other numerous activities.

We also need to identify the Creative Commons guidelines to follow before we can put this model in the public domain.

Who can implement and design the model? Need a professional association, or an independent organization, or a government entity, or a university to take the lead in implementing the model, design and launch.

B. The Certification Organization

As we highlighted in Part 1, Introduction, this paper covers two elements, the first one is the model itself, which we already covered the concept. Once the model is finalized organizations can take, adopt, and adapt for their own use.

The second element is to establish an organization/association to manage the implementation of the model for two distinct functions. The first one is to certify individuals who might be working for small or even large organizations who might not have implemented such a model. The second function is for organizations who have adopted the model but want to have their employees independently assessed or to have their internal program accredited so the certification they grant would be recognized globally and not only within the organization.

As we mentioned in part 1, this second element requires forming an organization to manage and perform the duties we mentioned and more. An alternative to forming an organization might be to outsource to an organization that specializes in accreditations.

C. Conclusion

We realize that what we propose is a challenging initiative that would require support, financial and otherwise. We also realize that some will argue that we do not need another type of certification body or that there are similar certifications in the market place.

We would say that unfortunately some of what exists is starting to lose credibility, if not already lost, not to mention the possible damage to the profession. We also emphasize the need for action to reclaim project management as a highly important domain and occupation that would benefit greatly from professional certifications that are clear, transparent, and add significant value to organizational performance.

We would also say, that the structure of the certifications might resemble existing products, there are quite a few differentiating factors from what exist, especially for the higher level certifications.

We look for respectful organizations, like GAPPS, or other entities to consider such a proposal and taking the lead in implementing it. We are publishing this paper under the Creative Commons guidelines (attribute and non-commercial).

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