

The PMP - How it Ruined Project Management



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There has always been a class of worker that is paid for their labor, not for their expertise. There is a reason they were called “laborers”. The IT professional used to be part of the workforce where they were highly skilled and earned a premium for their experience. Now employers, often while employing contract IT labor through agencies, look for a few base criteria, and then differentiate only on price. The IT professional might not be digging ditches, but they are now a “laborer”.

There are several reasons for this. The first is the rise in “Certification”. As a Project Manager, I used to earn a healthy consultant’s rate while using my experience as an engineer, to implement complex technical solutions. I had to be able to communicate with the developers, architects, DBAs, Network, Operations, and I could, because I had already served my apprenticeship as a developer and Systems Engineer. I was now the Lead of a group of IT staff, themselves skilled and experienced. Then along came the PMP. About 2007/8 I noticed jobs that needed the PMP qualification. There is value for a young neophyte in Project Management in pursuing the qualification since it would help develop them as a PM. Instead, I (without a PMP) was losing out to being presented for consultant opportunities. Agencies would explain, “We love your 20 year experience, but they will throw us out if we present anyone without a PMP.” They explained that it was better to present a resource with 5 years experience and a PMP, than a 20 year veteran without a PMP. So I begrudgingly got the PMP. It wasn’t that hard, but now I faced the issue of being presented against someone who had little experience in Project Management, or Engineering, or Management. Hey -We both had the PMP so we must be equally qualified, right! And I (no surprise) am more expensive with 20 years experience than someone who has only been out of school for 5 years. I had become a commodity, and when you are an expensive commodity, you are facing a tough road.

The result in hiring cheap, inexperienced PMs has now degraded the profession. You can’t assign leadership of a complex project to a “green bean” with a PMP, so instead of hiring an experienced PM, you dumb down the job requirement. The duties of a PM have switched from someone who identifies and solves your problems, and lead solutions, to someone who can maintain the project schedule, arrange meetings, and track actions on spreadsheets. The Project Manager is now a low level functionary, so I have been struggling to give myself a more accurate title. I thought about calling myself a System Integrator, since that is often used by the Big 4 as they trundle in their high priced consultants, since the perception is that only a Big 4 company has the expertise to deliver on complex projects. Unfortunately, behind the curtain of the Senior Partner of the Big 4, is a school bus filled with

eager, intelligent newbies, who can carry your water, but don't expect them to identify and solve problems. To be fair to them, they just haven't had the advantage of experience or maturity to develop enough wisdom to know how to be insightful or versatile. In the new paradigm, if they are called 'Project Managers', what can I call myself to try and highlight the difference in quality? Project Director perhaps, a nod to the fact that I have operated at Director or VP level? Maybe "Program Manager" since there is a connotation that a Program is bigger than a project. Unfortunately, the Program manager has suffered the same degradation in responsibilities and now is responsible for managing the Methodology.

The Curse of the Methodology: Instead of having the PM work out what needs to be done and then the PM taking care of it, (all behind the scenes), there emerged methodologies (PMP or otherwise) that try to ensure that the PM follows the menu of daily activities. Don't get me wrong, a lean methodology to enforce good governance is a good thing, but on my last engagement, every project (big or small) had to lodge a minimum of 21 documents, and often as many as 40. These documents are lengthy, repetitive, and take weeks of the PM and other team members to fill out. Then they all go into the archive where they will never be read. I even heard the head of the PMO complain that they thought a step was common sense until the inexperienced PMs kept missing it, so they instead developed another document and checklist to try and generate the activity. Instead of tackling the symptom, they should be tackling the illness – inexperienced (but certified!) PMs. The most important part was that the documents were completed, not that they were read or were useful. The document load got so great, they even developed a portal to keep track of all the documents that were submitted. The documents were poor quality since everybody knew they weren't useful, so the PMO then started layering multiple signoffs for each document by individuals or committees. The number of people needed to deliver on simple projects now mushroomed, all dependent on the paperwork mill. It was not in anyone's interest to challenge this since the PMO and the governance committees were dependent on this activity for their existence at the company. Reduce the burden on the project, and you would have to let go 75% of the non-productive overhead.

And this is just my story. It could be said for all the IT profession. When you hire a developer, you look to see if they have specific experience in a particular language. They do, but when they arrive, they are only as useful as the direction you can give them, and since the PMs themselves are equally inexperienced, the product is inadequately formed. The experienced developer (who would have intuitively known and guided the Product manager what was best for the product development) is him/herself trying to differentiate on experience but losing on price to the cheapest commodity.

The solution for these problems is for hiring managers to rise up, reject the cheapest candidates presented by the vendor management system, and explain that they need experienced assistance from IT professionals. You should expect more of your IT professional and then make sure you get candidates who can meet those expectations; don't dumb down all these professions. In the end, you get what you pay for, and I'm still the cheapest insurance against failure you can get.

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