Are You A Professional?

By Trevor Nelson, *asapm* Vice President; originally published at www.projectsatwork.com

Is project management a profession? If not, should it be? And what would differentiate a professional PM from all the others managing projects? In this article, we explore what constitutes a profession, and whether project management should be considered one.

Project Management — it has been alternately described as a discipline, a career, a skillset, a subset of management, a set of processes, and a profession. But what is it really, or better yet, what should it be? In the UK, the Association of Project Management is currently pursuing Chartered status through the UK Privy Council. This is the equivalent of a license in the United States — the formal recognition of a legal profession. This has raised the long-debated question within the PM community: Is project management a profession?

Before we can answer that, we first have to discuss what a profession is. Some view a profession as something that requires both education and training; others see a profession as simply one's chosen career, while still others use the definition of "I get paid for it, therefore I'm a professional."

Currently there is no single, agreed upon definition of a profession. The closest to a *legal* definition seems to include a combination of three requirements: a) a fiduciary responsibility to the Owner/Client; b) a responsibility for the welfare or safety of either a client or the public; and c) a four-year university degree.

A fourth common element seen with these occupations is the requirement of a license to perform the work. Some of the more commonly seen careers that meet these requirements would be Attorney, Architect, Accountant, and Medical Doctor.

Given these criteria, project management as currently practiced certainly falls short of being a legal profession. There are no educational (or even training) requirements to become a Project Manager. Project managers almost always operate under the umbrella of an employer, or have a contract that defines their financial limits and responsibilities, and it's the rare instance that a project manager works on a project where the actions they take in 'managing' the project have a direct impact on the welfare of others.

Having established that project management falls short of being considered a profession in the legal sense, we then have to look at it in the business sense. Is project management a profession, a career, or just a set of processes?

Certainly project management as a discipline has its own specific processes and tools. But is that all it is? Possibly, but at a higher level, project management involves much more than tools. Project management (or any 'management') includes the managing, directing, and leading of people. This can't be done with just tools or processes; it takes additional skills and abilities. Similarly, managing projects requires decision making and strategic thought. These actions may take advantage of processes and tools, but they're not enough.

Similarly, the view that project management is simply a subset of management creates its own problems. In his doctoral thesis, author and educator Paul Giammalvo contends that project management is "hard-wired" into the psyche of all humans, and that we all undertake projects to some extent.

Later, however, he argues that project management lacks the "consistent and predictable performance" required to be considered a profession.

I would argue that the former is the cause of the latter. Taking the view that project management is something that everyone is "wired" to do removes the belief that specialized skills or training is required, which leads to project failure.

Let's look at that again. One side says it's just a subset of management, the other says it lacks "consistent and predictable" performance. Wouldn't a subset of commonly understood management practices yield "consistent and predictable" results?

Certainly, to some extent or on some level, we all do some sort of project management. The idea of the "accidental" project manager is almost axiomatic. I would even venture that the vast majority of practicing PMs in the world today are accidental PMs. The fact that it is only in recent years that universities have begun offering formal project management academic programs would seem to support this. Prior to these programs, most PMs encountered and entered the practice through another career.

The key difference between the managing of "everyday" projects and what we generally think of when speaking of a professional project manager, however, is the idea of ***management complexity***. Management complexity refers to the inherent difficulty in managing some projects over others. Unclear goals, stakeholder infighting, constrained budgets or schedules, legal or environmental issues — all contribute to the complexity of managing projects.

To help quantify some of these items, the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards[i], in its "Performance-based Competency Standards for Project Managers", introduced the Crawford-Ishikawa Factor Table (CIFTER) as a guide to rating the management complexity of individual projects. This rating system is used to differentiate between those projects that would be considered everyday projects, and those that would require a professional PM.

This idea of complexity carries over to the other professions previously mentioned. Most parents treat their children at home when sick with the flu. This doesn't make them doctors. Most adults manage their own finances, but can't be considered accountants; and anyone can file a small claims lawsuit, but that doesn't make them lawyers. It is as these things grow in complexity and require more specialized training that we move to the idea of professional.

It is this misunderstanding of management complexity that creates many of the problems we see today. Executive management takes the view that "anyone can do it", assigns "anyone", and then complains about the outcome when the project fails. Similarly, this belief is what leads to budgets being cut, durations shortened, and goals changed, with no input from the project manager.

All of these issues are what leads to the belief that not only *should* project management be seen as a profession, but in fact, for it to continue to grow and improve, it *must* be viewed as one.

By continuing to regard project management as nothing more than a subset of general management, a skillset, or a group of processes, we perpetuate the belief that "anyone can do it." Only by first introducing the concept of management complexity into the conversation, and then viewing the project managers needed to manage those projects as professionals, will we begin to see changes in the practice, both in the respect given to the practitioners, and in improvement in results by the practitioners.

About the Author

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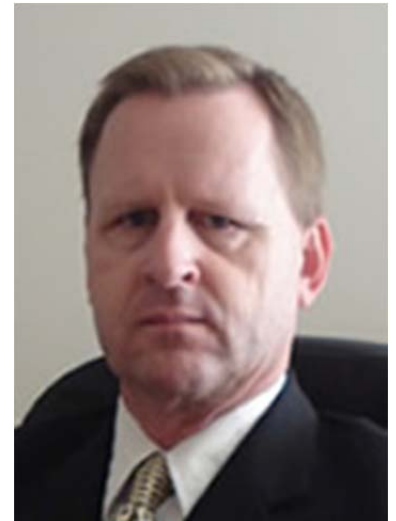
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   asapm is a founding member of GAPPS, the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards. The CIFTER is part of the standard, which can be downloaded from:www.globalpmstandards.org/main/page_project_manager_standard.html.