

# The PMP: How much value does it really offer?

**By Mark E. Mullaly, PMP**

Just how much are those three little letters worth after your name? And is it worth it to get them?

According to the last issue of *PMI Today*, there are now 45,139 Project Management Professionals (PMPs) certified by the Project Management Institute. More than 4,800 have now been certified so far this year, which means that there should be more than 50,000 of us roaming the planet by the end of this year if current trends continue. That will constitute an increase of 40,000, or 400 percent, since 1998. Clearly, a huge number of people have decided that the PMP is a worthwhile investment. And let's be frank, it is an investment—often a significant one.

I would realistically suggest that it costs upward of USD \$5,000 to get your PMP today—and that doesn't include the investment of your time. \$555 for the examination (\$405 if you're a member, but the membership is \$150). An average of \$1,500 in order to get the 35 hours of in-class instruction that are now required. Another \$432.75 for the study kit. Yet another \$2,500 for a PMP exam preparation course (which varies from frighteningly expensive to ridiculously cheap depending upon the option you choose). Add a couple of hundred hours or so of classes and study, and the PMP is a significant investment indeed. So what's the payoff? What's the return on investment? What, to put my project manager's hat on here, is the business case? Is there one?

First, a personal experience. I got my PMP in 1996 after a great deal of agonizing and stalling. A great deal of my reluctance was my innate resistance to be tested on what I did for a living. Given I'd been managing projects for something like 12 years by then, exactly what would it mean if I didn't pass? What finally drove me over the edge was that 1996 was the year that they were phasing out the old written format, and I didn't want to go through the study process again.

I've now had the PMP behind my name for six years. Has it made an appreciable difference in how I manage projects or significantly improved my ability to deliver on time, on budget, or to specification? No. Has it increased my marketability? Have I gained work as a result of having my PMP? Yes. And here lies my primary issue—there is a great gulf between the perception of the PMP and the reality of what it actually does. This gulf is getting wider, and unless PMI takes steps to address the problems, then it can only do damage in the long term.

The perception in the marketplace is that someone who holds the PMP certification must be a good, competent, qualified project manager. As the awareness of the PMP—and PMI in general—has grown, the perceived value of the PMP has also grown. If two comparably skilled project managers are being considered for a job, one who is certified and one who is not, I would give the holder of the PMP significantly greater odds of landing the job. On the face of it, none of these seem unreasonable interpretations. And yet they are—hence the danger. The PMP is not a determinant of skill, nor is it a reasonable means for determining

who the better job candidate is.

The reality is that the PMP demonstrates three things: that you have had 35 hours of classroom training, have a minimum amount of experience in project management-related work, and have passed an examination based on the PMBoK. (A rather cynical employer I spoke with suggested that it also indicates the person has actually completed something.) The PMP is only an assessment of knowledge, however—and a very narrowly defined body of knowledge at that. The exam tests you on PMI's terminology, processes, and process boundaries. What the PMP does not demonstrate is our competency as project managers or our skills in applying our competencies in real-world situations.

There is no argument that I have benefited by having the PMP. I know of at least three projects that I have won that I can definitely attribute to the fact that I hold the certification, and there are probably more that I am not aware of where it was an influencing factor. I know of dozens of colleagues who tell similar stories, and as PMI continues to promote itself and the certification to employers, this will only continue. What people think they are buying, however, is not what they are being sold. While the marketplace clearly believes the certification is a demonstration of skill, it is in reality only a measure of theoretical knowledge. Caveat emptor.

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