

A top-down view of a collaborative meeting around a wooden table. Several people are visible, working with various devices and documents. A central sheet of paper displays a grid of colorful icons representing different project management concepts. A person is using a marker to highlight one of the icons. Other items on the table include a laptop, a tablet, a smartphone, a notebook, and a coffee cup.

The value of certification for project managers

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Guidance
Paper

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1 Introduction

I have often been asked by both end learners and decision-makers whether certification is useful, mainly because the individuals involved have either not participated in embedding the PRINCE2® project management method or the organization did not fully support adopting it. Both parties end up with the same questions: was it worth the effort and the cost?

On the other hand, I have also worked with numerous organizations that not only valued certification but used it to help increase efficiency, derive higher employee satisfaction, improve communication, and become more professional in their change delivery mechanisms. This is also supported by AXELOS' *The Power of Professional Certification*¹ report, to which I will refer later.

This guidance paper will explore the value of certification for project managers, with particular reference to the PRINCE2 qualifications.

2 What is certification?

Certification is compliance to a particular standard in a specific discipline. For example, to practise as an accountant in the United Kingdom (UK), an individual must provide evidence that they have passed the required examinations with an approved examining body. Without the certificate from the examining body, the individual cannot hold certain jobs or roles within that discipline. In the UK, there is also a requirement from central and local government to provide evidence of certification when filling vacancies. This is also the case for other organizations that supply services to the public sector and need to have project managers qualified to practitioner level. That is not to say that every role requires certification; however, with roles becoming increasingly more professional and highly skilled, the requirement for certification and relevant qualifications is growing.

A certification is not just a confirmation that the individual has passed an exam: it also shows that the individual has gained a measurable level of knowledge and understanding and has learned new tools and techniques. This is something that recruiters may consider favourably if they have a choice of candidates for a role.

Finally, certification may be a legal or regulatory requirement such as within the finance and legal sectors. *The Power of Professional Certification* revealed that the top reason that decision-makers sponsor certification is compliance with organization or industry requirements (58% of respondents chose this as a reason). This is followed closely by keeping pace with changing technology (54%) and improving employee productivity (54%).

End learners' top reason for obtaining certification is building new skills (66% of respondents), followed by gaining confidence in their profession (52%) and increasing their chances of a promotion or a pay rise (48%).

These results show that it is not a question of whether certification is important, but of the value or benefit you derive from it once it has been attained.

3 Certification and upskilling

According to a 2018 report from CBI and Pearson, *Higher skilled roles rise, as skills gap grows*², more than three-quarters (79%) of businesses expect to increase the number of higher-skilled roles over the coming years. However, two-thirds (66%) fear that there will be a lack of sufficiently-skilled people to fill vacancies. The report represents 28,000 businesses and reveals that 85% of firms are expecting to maintain or increase investment in training in their workforce. UK employers currently spend £44.2 billion on training expenditure each year.

The report also revealed that:

- '62% of firms are expecting to retrain at least some employees to take up new roles [between November 2018 and 2019], with over half of those businesses identifying new technologies or new services driving the need to retrain.'
- 'Nearly nine in ten (87%) anticipate upskilling employees in their current roles during next 12 months.'
- 'The single most common driver behind upskilling is the need for employees to acquire new skills/knowledge to raise productivity (reported by 74%) followed by the introduction of new technologies or services (63%).'

In an article³ in CIO Digital Magazine, Moira Alexander cites that in November 2017 there were approximately one million project managers in the UK, and that by 2027 a further 200,000 will be needed. If 91% of these new project managers will wish to gain certification (and *The Power of Professional Certification* report identified that 91% of end learners place a higher value on certified training as opposed to non-certified training), UK employers could be investing in 182,000 certified project managers over ten years in order to keep up with the higher skills requirements.

4 Do decision-makers and end learners still value certifications?

The Power of Professional Certification report identifies that end learners or users place a high value on certification: 84% considered that certification has a positive impact on their careers and 91% of them place a higher value on certified training as opposed to non-certified training. Holding a certificate may increase the differential by between 5% and 9% when comparing salaries with those project managers who are not certified.

This confirms my findings amongst the delegates that have attended my courses: I can quite genuinely state that they all value the certificate. Their reasons may vary from a drive for self-achievement to an ambition for career advancement, whether within or outside their organizations. There will always be some who display a nonchalant attitude towards the certification, however, when I have talked to them, they want it as much as the others. I think they are merely positioning themselves for disappointment, should it arise.

I am much more concerned that so many who have attained the certification do not re-register or continue their CPD, which I suspect is more to do with the workplace environment in which they find themselves, when they may be unable to demonstrate the use of the method in its entirety or in a tailored form.

In my view, decision-makers within an organization fall into two camps: those who value certifications and those who do not. There is no middle ground. Those who value them understand that staff need to have a certain level of expertise, and this can be assessed by the certifications staff already have or new certifications that they obtain. Decision-makers will measure the progress of their staff to ensure they are developing a higher level of proficiency after obtaining a certification. The solid skillset of staff also gives an

organization more stability as well as a better chance of meeting strategic objectives and gaining the related benefits. It is within such organizations that you will find competency models like *Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model* (P3M3[®])⁴ and the Software Engineering Institute's *Capability Maturity Model* (CMM)⁵ being used to drive best practice.

Decision-makers who do not value certification usually want staff to learn within bespoke workshops based on their own framework, governance models, tools, techniques, and templates. In my experience, companies develop these over the years, loosely basing them on a certified method, such as PRINCE2. There is, of course, a huge amount of value in this type of training, but it does not give the end learner the benefits of the more encompassing best practice method. Those who do not value certification also cite the unnecessary pressure that an exam puts on the candidate and suggest that candidates focus more on passing the exam than learning about the method and its techniques. This renders the bespoke workshop far more useful and practical.

5 Amount of organizational support required

From *The Power of Professional Certification*, both decision-makers (84%) and end learners (59%) state that their organization supports and sponsors certification, although the degree of support varies from country to country.

This support comes at a cost for the organization and therefore there must be a strategic reason for investing. Nothing valuable or sustainable comes easily or quickly: to adopt and embed a method like PRINCE2 requires financial and human resources, as well as time. As US President Theodore Roosevelt said:

‘Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty’.

One of my clients is an organization with approximately 900 employees and 20 project managers. It has a portfolio of initiatives for the next three years and objectives to deliver the right level of quality for the right cost at the right time in order to keep attracting funding for growth. The organization has invested in certification courses in PRINCE2, *Managing Successful Programmes* (MSP[®]), *Management of Portfolios* (MoP[®]), *Portfolio, Programme and Project offices* (P3O[®]) and ITIL[®] for many of their employees in both product and service delivery. They have also invested in a *Programme Office* (PMO) and are looking at agile approaches to complement their traditional methods. This has taken almost two years to introduce as a transformational change programme and has the support of their entire board of directors. In my experience, this degree of planning, commitment, and investment is unusual but not unique and requires focus and determination to see it through. Once completed, it needs nurturing, maintenance, and support to ensure it survives and becomes embedded as de facto standard for working practices.

6 The most common ways end learners and decision-makers learn about new qualifications

Data gathered for *The Power of Professional Certification* report revealed that end learners in the UK use online research and social media to find out about new certifications. It is even more likely that they will do this when friends or colleagues recommend a course they have recently attended. In the same way, over two-fifths of end learners in India will search the Internet to find new certifications. Japanese end learners, on the other hand, prefer to ask their professional network or friends instead of searching online.

As for decision-makers, most learn about certification courses from corporate training providers; for example, many of the UK Central Government departments use the Civil Service Learning programme⁶. Decision-makers who do not have a corporate training provider may receive training requests directly from their staff.

New qualifications are also discovered by word-of-mouth in two specific situations:

- from someone new who joins an organization and has been previously trained in a particular method
- on a course where other delegates talk about their other certifications or where the trainer suggests other training courses for career advancement.

In my experience, people rarely discover new qualifications by reading advertisements, which are usually more relevant to those who already know about a certification and have decided to learn about it further.

7 The difference between Foundation and Practitioner levels

PRINCE2, like many other certifications, has two levels of qualification: Foundation and Practitioner. The difference between these two levels is the ability to understand the method on the one hand and the ability to apply the method to a given situation on the other.

Passing the Foundation examination requires the candidate to recall information from the PRINCE2 guide, *Managing Successful Projects with PRINCE2*⁷, and does not require any previous project management experience. This is a good way to learn the theory and it provides a sufficient introduction to the method to those in roles such as team managers, project support, and project assurance roles.

However, the Foundation learning experience does not teach a project manager how to apply the concepts to their role. Thus, the Practitioner level is important for identifying those who can apply the knowledge in practice by presenting the delegate with a fictional case study which reflects the conditions of an actual PRINCE2 project environment. It is somewhat like learning the Highway Code and having an appreciation of how to drive a vehicle (the Foundation level) and taking that additional step of having lessons to practice driving the vehicle in reality (the Practitioner level). The practice (the application of the method to the given scenario) provides the learner with situational constructs that they can then use when faced with driving on their own: learning from experience. Thus, the practitioner is able to recognize situations and apply their practical learning in the workplace.

8 The link between real-life usage of the method and the Practitioner level

There is a link between real-life experience and the Practitioner level, and it comes when adapting the method to the project during complexity modelling where the degree of governance for a project is considered alongside a number of factors, of which the experience of the project manager and the maturity of the organization are but two elements.

For those of us who understand the concept of ‘tailoring’, my next words will not only prompt a sigh but also a nod of recognition. Many organizations tend to pick and choose the elements of PRINCE2 that they wish to adopt and embed, but this will dilute or even negate the method. Other, more experienced, organizations adopt the principles and tailor the method to their circumstances. This is normally with the support of a certified programme and project management (PPM) community, providing personnel in a programme or project office (PMO), and sponsorship from very senior management. Another trend I have noticed is that these organizations tend to broaden their methods to include portfolio and programme management through certifications such as MoP and MSP in order to strengthen their change delivery methods and help embed the principles and mindset. A few of my clients have gone on to include P30 to provide the connectivity and backbone to support the other methods: to great effect, I might add.

A project manager working within this structure can now see the advantages of the Practitioner certificate being not just a ‘badge’ but part of a supportive network with connecting principles, aligned governance themes, and interlocking processes.

9 Identifying key purchasing criteria for certifications

When choosing a course provider for obtaining certification, an organization’s decision will most likely depend on its financial situation: it will either look for the cheapest provider or the most relevant or convenient, irrespective of cost. This is supported by *The Power of Professional Certification*, which shows that decision-makers’ top three criteria for purchasing certifications are:

1. a return on their investment (ROI) (63%)
2. price (53%)
3. convenient training options (42%).

The end learners’ top three criteria are:

1. applicability to the core aspects of the job (64%)
2. industry application (58%)
3. price (42%).

Price clearly plays a major part in the decisions of both the end learner and the organization. *The Power of Professional Certification*, however, indicates that allocating budget is less common than allocating days for learning. It shows that 61% of end learners were given days off for learning, whereas 53% reported being provided with a learning budget as well. This could be due to the availability of internal company training and free online courses, which the organization would prefer their staff to take. This implies that, rather than allocating spend from their own budgets, organizations are more willing to provide learning days for their staff to do distance learning or self-study.

10 The advantages and disadvantages of certification

10.1 ADVANTAGES

When everyone in the organization has a defined level of understanding in a method or set of methods, a capability grows within the PPM community in the organization. This capability allows the organization to utilize the project management resources more effectively and efficiently, and it is vital that the investment demonstrates an increase in maturity of that community. Therefore, the capabilities should be measured through the use of a maturity model such as the P3M3 which will allow tracking of the maturity of the PPM community across each of the seven disciplines within each of three main areas.

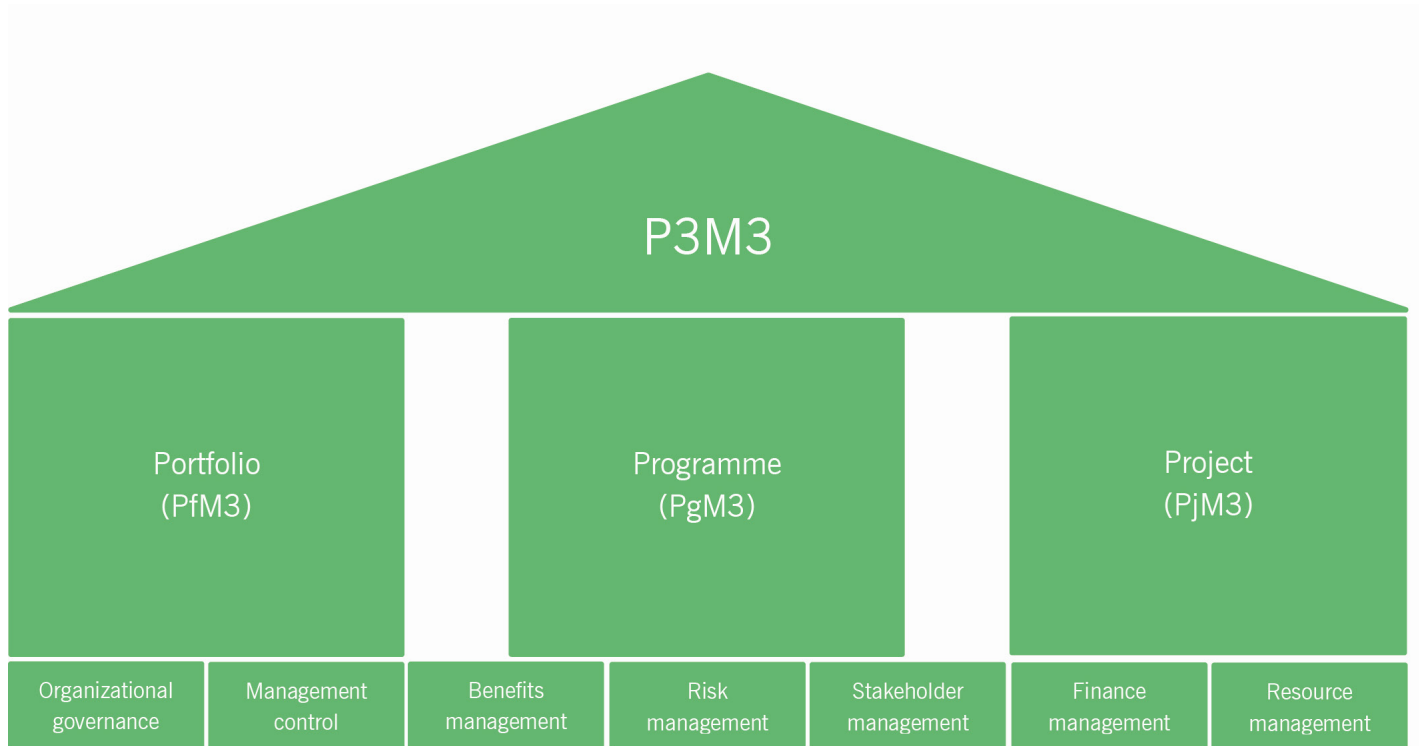


Figure 10.1 The structure of P3M3

There are five levels of maturity in the P3M3 model:

1. awareness of process
2. repeatable process
3. defined process
4. managed process
5. optimized process.

As the maturity and capabilities rise, so too does the use of the common terminology, language, information standards, processes, and quality standards that are part of the certified method. Level 2 of the P3M3 model indicates that the above are becoming repeatable, which can be seen through the re-use of components from previous projects as well as the management processes, tools, and techniques. What does this do for the organization? It improves employee efficiency (one of the top three reasons for deciding on certification in the first place) and therefore drives down the cost of project delivery.

Certification also shows that project managers understand the need for a more formalized delivery approach by learning from experience and being more predictable in the future with controlled risk-taking and effective issue management.

10.2 DISADVANTAGES

There are both financial and time costs to certification: an organization not only has to pay for training, but the project management team is also removed from their day-to-day tasks during the course (whether distance learning or classroom). Due to these cost factors, not everyone will be sent on training and, therefore, not everyone will learn the method. As a consequence, the trained individuals may be expected to train other colleagues upon their return, which can cause resentment and collaboration difficulties with those who consider their 'non-certified' method of working to be perfectly adequate. This can be alleviated somewhat by having a PRINCE2 champion identified from the qualified practitioners who is respected by the rest of the community.

The biggest problem comes when the project management team has gained the certification and is trying to embed the new skills, but senior management has not aligned with the new working practices and continues with its old habits. This will often cause conflict as there is a disconnect between best management practice and the power and influence of the senior management community. If there is a realization that senior management needs to address its own knowledge gap, it can participate in some short briefings on the certified method (although this should have been addressed prior to making the decision to adopt the method in the first place).

As a trainer and consultant, this is one of the most common grievances I hear from my delegates: they complain that they have been sent on a course but their senior colleagues have had no introduction to their roles and responsibilities in the new method. In these situations, I explain that there are short executive briefings available, but a common response is that most senior managers 'know better' and decline the invitation.

This conflict can lead to a lack of support that causes the PPM community to revert to the old ways of working. As a result, the newly attained skills will be not used and the training would have been a waste of time and money.

11 The advantages and disadvantages of non-certification

11.1 ADVANTAGES

The main advantages of not gaining certification are saving time and money on training and having no disruption to current work. Training without certification reduces the cost (almost half the decision-makers surveyed gave this as a reason) as there are no examination fees and potentially fewer days where the project managers are removed from their work. The course or workshop is more likely to be delivered on-site therefore avoiding the cost of a venue. The material can be tailored to the organization's requirements using their terminology, framework, processes, and templates, which is an advantageous option.

In addition, some organizations are cautious of providing certification, because it will add to their employees' skillset, give them a 'stepping stone' to progress in their career and make them more marketable. By removing the certification, organizations hope to retain the employees longer, thereby reducing recruitment costs and the cost of induction. However, staff may feel cheated that they are trained to a certification level but receive no official recognition. I mentioned this to a Learning and Development Manager at a company that contracted to have a PRINCE2 Foundation workshop without the exams. The manager replied that they were 'worried that the staff will leave once they get the certification'. I replied, 'then you need to incentivize them to stay!'

11.2 DISADVANTAGES

If the organization does not certify, the existing bad practices will breed even more bad habits and there will be a downward spiral in quality, increased costs, and reduced productivity. The organization will stall and project delivery failure will continue.

There are other consequences of not adopting certification. An organization may find it difficult to win bids for work where the clients are looking for a recognized level of ability, because it will not be able to provide the evidence for this through certification. Similarly, if an organization tries to achieve or retain the 'Investors in People' award, it will not be able to provide evidence of enhancing the skillset of its employees. In these scenarios, a certificate from an examining body has more authority and gravitas than a course attendance certificate.

Finally, although it seems that the cost of a non-certified course or workshop is less than that of an examined and certified course, it should not be forgotten that there are costs in preparing the bespoke material and courseware and in performing the quality reviews and sign-off to ensure it is acceptable to the organization. These costs may be significant.

12 Conclusion

This paper has shown that there is a continuing need and demand for certification, but that there are also organizations that view certification as superfluous. Some countries value qualifications and certifications more than others (for example, India, Poland, Germany, and Japan are notable for the high value they place on professional certification), which means that in certain locations people will not be accepted for jobs if they do not have the relevant credentials.

The economic climate, political uncertainty and other events will always have an impact on spending strategies and therefore determine whether it is prudent to invest in certification or a theoretically less expensive, non-certified option.

In order for there to be an acceptable return on investment for training employees in these higher skilled roles, I believe that certification must be part of the solution. As such, certification could be viewed as a 'stick and carrot' approach where the challenge of the examinations is the 'stick' which focuses the end learners on the subject matter in order not to fail in their task, and the qualification serves as the 'carrot' that the end learner receives as a reward for their hard work. Therefore, the learning and the pride is taken back into the organization, which benefits from both.

In *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*⁸, Daniel Pink sets out three key motivators for knowledge workers (in our case Project Managers):

- **Autonomy.** People like to be self-directed: to control what they do, when they do it, and with whom.

Certification in best practice will provide a framework for project managers to be able to work autonomously by adhering to the principles of PRINCE2.

- **Mastery.** People like to do things well, want to improve, and, if motivated by mastery, will see their potential as being unlimited, constantly seeking to improve their skills through learning and practice.

Certification provides a process of learning and a recognized qualification for those who have the desire for improvement and self-enhancement.

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- Purpose: people like to feel their work has meaning and may become disengaged and demotivated if they do not understand or cannot invest in the 'bigger picture'.

Certification can help build a unified workforce, operating under the same best practice methods, models, and terminology creating a project management team that has a converging vision and purpose.

13 About the author



Richard Rose started his career in the world of finance but found the more dynamic IT world a more compelling, so he transferred his skillset to a Systems Quality Assurance role at the start of a huge four-year change initiative. Thereafter, he moved into Change Control and Problem Management, Project Management, and then Programme Management, where he found his calling.

In these roles, he has become an experienced manager and consultant over thirty-seven years, with areas of expertise in Business Strategy, Change Management and Client Account Management. Richard has reported at board level for the past nineteen years and has provided valuable change management input and support to many executives and senior managers over that time.

This depth of experience in programme, project, and change management led him to become a successful Accredited Trainer in MoP[®], P3O[®], MSP[®], PRINCE2[®], AgilePM[®], and Change Management[™]. He has delivered training and consultancy to public, private, and third sectors for the past fifteen years and has gained a broad, deep view of the world of change management.

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15 About AXELOS

AXELOS is responsible for developing, enhancing and promoting a number of best practice methodologies used globally by professionals working primarily in project, programme and portfolio management, IT service management and cyber resilience.

The methodologies, including ITIL®, PRINCE2®, PRINCE2 Agile®, MSP®, and AgileSHIFT®, are adopted in more than 200 countries to improve employees' skills, knowledge and competence in order to make both individuals and organizations work more effectively.

16 Trade marks and statements

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