Navigating Professional Certifications in an Agile Environment

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The Project Management Professional (PMP) certification has long been held as the “gold standard” for project management. There are over 700,000 people worldwide with an active PMP certification, many of whom took a paid course to prepare for the exam, and all of whom are required to obtain professional development units (PDUs) to maintain their certifications. It costs between $400 and $550 just to sit for the PMP exam, exclusive of any money spent on preparatory courses. Additionally, there is a $139/year fee to keep your certification active by paying the Project Management Institute (PMI) membership fee. In 2016, PMI took in over $200,000,000 in revenue. Of course, there are extra costs associated with many of the PDUs PMP holders are required to take. Essentially, the PMP is big business for PMI and for organizations that support PMI.

So, how did we get here? PMI started as a non-profit business in 1969 to gather project management professionals from private industry and promote project management best practices. Its mission was to “foster recognition of the need for professionalism in project management; provide a forum for the free exchange of project management problems, solutions and applications; coordinate industrial and academic research efforts; develop common terminology and techniques to improve communications; provide interface between users and suppliers of hardware and software systems; and to provide guidelines for instruction and career development in the field of project management.” In 1984, PMI launched the PMP certification to easily identify qualified project managers who were trained and met the ideals developed by PMI. Over the past 30 years, as the Federal government has formally adopted more project management practices, the PMP became a requirement for many project managers to manage Federal projects and contracts. Early members of PMI were from the Federal government, which may have contributed to its rise in popularity within that space.

As the years have passed and agile has become the new standard (the PMP is primarily based on the Project Management Body of Knowledge, or PMBOK, which is modeled on a waterfall methodology), the PMP is largely out of date. It is no longer a certification for project management experts; in fact, many people with very little project management experience are obtaining the PMP because they feel it will help them break into the industry. The result is a certification that is watered down and does not necessarily help project managers “stand out in the crowd.” However, there are other options for those looking to develop and demonstrate their project management skills in the industry.
The Projects in Controlled Environments (PRINCE II), a British certification, and the Agile Certified Professional (ACP), another certification from PMI, are two certifications that may be worth considering for anyone interested in really advancing their project management skills. The PRINCE II certification is one of the early adopters of agile principles. It promotes flexibility, business case development, and exception reporting as some of the main drivers behind successful project management. The ACP is a newer certification from PMI that promotes agile principles. It is a good alternative to the PMP, particularly as agile is becoming more of a staple within the Federal government. It is also a certification that far fewer people have, which may help project management professionals differentiate themselves from the competition. For those who are willing to spend the time and the money, a master's degree in management (either a Master of Science or Master of Business Administration) would be more beneficial than any certification.

While some principles and techniques can be universally applied, there is no one right way to manage a project. As managers, we need to keep that in mind as we lead teams; experience is often the best teacher as we continuously develop and refine our skills as project management practitioners.