



Cracking the code

by Dr Andrew Delo

Following a careful analysis of over 200 project managers who have taken the APM PQ, Dr Andrew Delo of Provek reveals the DNA of the capable project manager



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Over the past few years more than 1,000 project managers have taken the APM Practitioner Qualification (PQ) which assesses the capability of a project manager against 30 technical and behavioural criteria.

From the 30 individual marks for each criteria an average score is derived and a candidate achieves a pass/fail result in regard of whether they presented sufficient evidence of capability to manage a non-complex project.

After studying the results from a significant sample of 200 project managers who have undertaken the PQ it soon became clear which criteria have the most influence on a candidate's average score. In essence the correlation analysis undertaken identifies those criteria for which good candidates will generally do well while less able candidates will generally do less well.

Most striking is the predominance of the inter-personal behaviour criteria among these ten with the top four places all occupied by inter-personal behaviour criteria. Qualities such as team leading and good communication skills are seen to be paramount in the DNA of the capable project manager. This evidence supports the widespread view held by many senior project managers and employers that soft skills have an increasingly vital role to play - which may not be surprising as projects are delivered by people.

Among the top four criteria listed, influencing a small team involves a candidate influencing the planning of a group session, suggesting ways forward, focusing the group especially when it is struggling and reviewing the group's progress. It essentially involves being prepared to take responsibility for the group's performance by being proactive, answering questions, communicating well and presenting recommendations.

However, despite evidence of the importance of inter-personal skills in the capable project manager, only nine of the 47 APM competence elements are actually behavioural focused, i.e. less than 20 per cent yet the overall findings show these to be strong indicators of the overall capability of a project manager.

Furthermore, of the 30 criteria assessed at a PQ, less than one third focus specifically on inter-personal behaviours (e.g. answering questions and presenting information), over one third are purely technical based (e.g. understanding the business case, designing a project organisation), while a further one third involve a combination of the two (applying a risk management process or managing a change), in which a technical criteria has to be demonstrated through group work.

These findings demonstrate that time should be focused (if not already done so) on softer skills alongside more recognised technical aspects which should be covered as a minimum. These include the ability to define the scope of a project; manage quality; identify stakeholders; understand the business case and design a project organisation - all listed in the top ten criteria.

In other words, the abilities of a project manager in these technical areas will also tend to differentiate the capable from the less capable and clearly, these five areas are fundamental to the delivery of successful

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projects. But they should not overshadow how well a candidate project manager demonstrates their ability to influence and communication with key stakeholders, sponsors and fellow colleagues.

Ultimately, these findings give concrete evidence to support the widely held ‘gut-feelings’ of many people in the industry that the balance between soft and hard skills needs redressing. They also provide an indication of the key areas of focus needed during the selection process, and influence the debate around assessing competence for the APM Chartered Project Professional status.

Box 1 Top ten criteria in APM Practitioner Qualification

- Lead and influence a small team
- Answer questions relevantly and succinctly
- Communicate verbally in an appropriate way (including listening)
- Present compelling recommendations to project sponsor (board/steering group)
- Define the scope of the project
- Apply a quality management process competently
- Determine stakeholders and their influence and interests
- Obtain information through use of appropriate questions
- Demonstrate an understanding of project context and the overall business case
- Design the optimal project organisation

Provek has pioneered the development and deployment with leading organisations of unique assessment tools for programme and project professionals. Andrew Delo has led assignments for a wide range of public and private sector clients in areas of assessment and training and development. For more information please contact Andrew Delo on 01635 524610, andrew.delo@provek.co.uk or visit Provek's website at www.provek.co.uk.

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