



Competence trends in project professionals

by Dr Andrew Delo

What competencies are needed at different levels for project professionals? Dr Andrew Delo, managing director, Provek, has found some interesting answers based on their assessments of some 1500 managers



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APM's petition for chartered status describes the Chartered Project Professional (ChPP) as encompassing a range of roles in the project environment. Those given the opportunity to become chartered will include project managers, programme managers, project support and project directors. Assessment of the competence of an applicant will be at the core of the application process.

We have been examining trends in the competence of different project professionals from the assessment of more than 1500 people over the past 12 months. Their competence was estimated through a one-hour online assessment. It covered four distinct areas: their self-assessed level of experience across 15 competence areas of programme and project management; their tested knowledge, determined through 50 multiple-choice-type questions drawn from the APM Body of Knowledge; their tested decision-making ability in simulated project situations; and their perception of their personality across seven dimensions by agreeing or disagreeing with 42 statements. Every participant also selected one of 11 possible project roles that most closely matched their current role (shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Project roles

Role Title	Role Purpose
A. Project team member	Works in a project team undertaking the technical work
B. Work-package manager	Leads a section working on a defined part of a project
C. Programme or project administrator	Provides a range of general administrative support and assistance to a programme or a project
D. Project planner	Establishes and maintains detailed and comprehensive project work plans for a large, complex project
E. Project coordinator or controller	Assists a project manager in managing a large project by undertaking planning, communications, reporting and controlling activities
F. Junior project manager	Manages non-complex projects with few external interfaces and leads many of the project team members directly
G. Project manager	Manages projects involving external suppliers and other organisational divisions through other managers and project team members
H. Senior project manager	Delivers, through other managers, large or complex projects end to end, involving several organisations and multiple disciplines, interfaces and suppliers
I. Programme manager	Manages a strategically important programme through a number of interrelated large projects and has responsibility for planning the benefits realization
J. Programme or project office manager	Leads a support office team providing a range of planning and reporting services and implementing consistent best practice across large projects or strategic programmes
K. Sponsor	Owns the success of the programme or project, provides leadership and ensures that it delivers value

Competence trends in project professionals

Six of these project roles are highlighted in Table 2 with their respective average scores for experience, knowledge, and decision-making. This shows a distinct trend in the average scores of each aspect of competence. All averages steadily increase with seniority for five roles: project administrator, project coordinator, project manager, senior project manager and programme manager.

Table 2: Average scores for roles

Role Title	Experience	Knowledge	Decision Ability
C. Programme or project administrator	1.2	53%	28
E. Project coordinator or controller	1.5	60%	29
G. Project manager	2.2	65%	32
H. Senior project manager	3.0	69%	33
I. Programme manager	3.5	70%	35
J. Programme or project office manager	3.1	67%	32

Experience

The simplified, broad descriptions of the competence levels used in the assessment of experience are shown in Table 3. Taking the senior project manager role, for example, the overall-average experience score of 3.0 means that the project professional has applied all aspects of a competence area on significant projects (i.e., Level 3).

Table 3: Broad descriptions of experience levels

Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Has no experience of the competence area applied to a significant project.	Has supported some aspects of the competence area on a significant project.	Has contributed to most aspects of the competence area on a significant project.	Has managed all aspects of the competence area on significant projects.	Has planned, implemented and managed the competence area for a large, complex project.	Has developed, implemented and managed the competence area for a major, strategic programme.

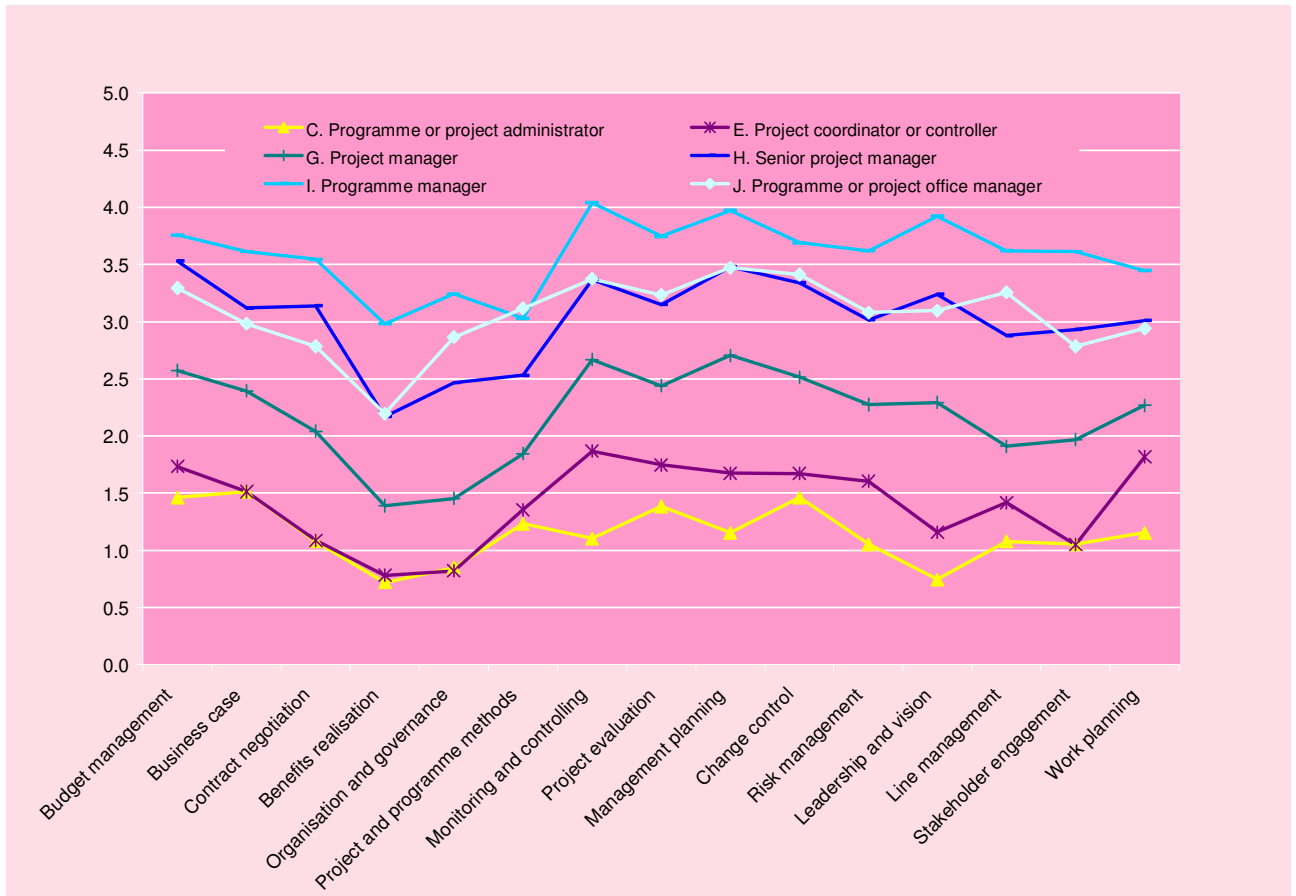
More interesting is the profile of competence-based experience which, although of different magnitude for these roles, is surprisingly similar in its shape. A breakdown of the 15 areas for these roles is shown in Figure 1.

Looking at the breakdown across the 15 competence areas (Figure 1), the key trend is that benefits realisation, organisation & governance and programme & project methods have the lowest levels of

Competence trends in project professionals

experience in most roles, except for the programme and project office manager. Again, for the senior project manager, the level of experience, on average, in these three areas is approximately mid-way between Level 2 and Level 3 (i.e., score of 2.5). Conversely, their average experience of budget management is mid-way between Level 3 and Level 4 (i.e., score of 3.5).

Figure 1: Profile of experience across 15 competence areas



Besides some slight, relative strengths seen for the programme & project office manager, the overall profile of the roles is remarkably similar. It might have been expected that the profile of the project administrator would be different in shape from that of the project manager, which, in turn, would be different from that of a programme manager, but that isn't the case.

Two points are crystal clear – although there is a distinct increase in the level of competence-based experience between the different project professional roles, there is no significant change in shape of that experience.

The slight, relative difference in the programme & project office manager roles, with a couple of raised competence areas relating to organisation & governance and programme & project methods, is to be expected. These two areas are the ones where the programme & project office manager, often working across an organisation's portfolio, will be expected to make significant contributions.

Competence trends in project professionals

Another point emerges from a separate, detailed analysis of correlation. This shows that the levels of experience chosen by individuals for each of the 15 competence areas are all significantly correlated. In other words, a low score in one competence area (e.g., budget management) tends to imply a low score in another (e.g., organisation & governance). Conversely, a high score in one competence area tends to imply that others will be high.

Knowledge

As with levels of experience, the average level of knowledge increases with the seniority of the role. The programme or project administrator has an average of 53%, which increases to 70% for the programme manager. The differences reduce between roles as the seniority increases, so the programme manager is only 1% higher than the senior project manager.

A breakdown of the knowledge of the project professionals into seven knowledge areas reveals broadly a similar pattern for each role. The only anomaly is that programme managers, on average, have slightly lower knowledge of work-planning topics than senior project managers.

Decision-making ability

The ability to decide the best way forward in project situations was measured in the assessment through five, short, project scenarios. The results show a steady increase from project administrator to programme manager (see Table 1). Reassuringly, this indicates that senior project professionals tend to make better decisions than their junior colleagues.

Personality

Seven dimensions, or indicators of personality, were examined through the online assessment: confidence, control, decision-making, engagement, flexibility, problem-solving style and resilience. While there are consistent and distinct differences between the three junior roles and the three senior roles, there are few differences between the three senior roles themselves. However, the senior roles of programme manager, senior project manager and programme & project office manager are seen to consider themselves as being more confident, more willing to take control, quicker in their decision-making, somewhat more structured and slightly more resilient.

Conclusions

Our simple one-hour online assessment provides a way for people to estimate their current competence level. Our findings in looking at data from 1500 people have a direct bearing on assessing competence in relation to the APM Chartered Project Professional (ChPP) including:

Clear trends in competence of project professionals

Each aspect of competence examined here (i.e., experience, knowledge, decision-making ability and personality indicators) shows clear trends related to the seniority of role of the project professional.

Competence trends in project professionals

Similar shape of competence regardless of project role

Analysis of each aspect of competence shows remarkably similar profiles for each role of the project professional. Similar results are seen for the breakdown of knowledge, decision-making ability and personality indicators.

Relatively few competence areas will predict overall competence

As the correlation between each of the 15 competence areas of experience is highly significant, it reduces the number of distinct competence areas required to estimate someone's overall competence reliably. For example, just 10 competence areas will give a 95% reliable estimate of someone's overall-average level of competence-based experience.

All four dimensions of competence are important

The results from the online assessment show that each of the four dimensions (experience, knowledge, decision-making ability and personality indicators) plays a role in describing the overall competence. By testing the project management knowledge and decision-making ability, a more balanced view of the project professional's competence is obtained.

Provek has pioneered the development of assessment tools and techniques. They are used by many major organisations to assess their training needs and identify high performers in the programme & project management environment. 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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