



Comparing PM Certifications: Which Is Best For You?

By Stacy Goff, IPMA Vice President, Marketing & Events

Abstract

This article will reveal new insights for many readers; you are our intended audience if you are a Project Management (PM) practitioner who intends to earn the most appropriate and meaningful PM certifications. You are also our intended audience if you are an organization decision-maker who seeks high-performing project and programme managers, including those who have earned advanced certifications. You expect these special practitioners to “make a difference” in project and business success.

We believe that the selection of a meaningful PM certification should be an easier decision than it is today. That decision depends on many factors, including the strength of the certification, and its popularity. You understand your own personal or organizational needs, but finding the comparative information needed to select the certification that best maps to those needs can be a challenge.

A wide range of organizations offer certifications in the practice of project and programme management. Some are niche offerings; some are from professions that involve PM, but specialize in other disciplines. Many certifications are enterprise or government adaptations, beginning with professional association offerings, modified to meet specific organizational needs. A few are mainstream offerings by dominant professional associations or organizations. This article is appropriate for all these PM certification offerings.

Some certifications test knowledge, others assess competence. A few assess performance; so even the assessment methods can be confusing! But for all, a few essential criteria are the key to understanding the fit of a PM certification for your needs. And what might those criteria for evaluating PM certifications be? Here are our suggestions:

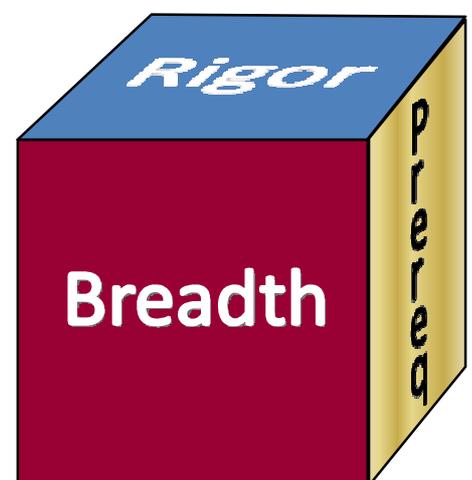
- A. Prerequisites
- B. Breadth of Coverage
- C. Rigor of Assessment

For each criterion, we will rely upon and apply the published and accepted research of others.

Introducing the Certification Effectiveness Cube

It should be clear that design choices made in the development of a certification programme, such as the intended effectiveness of the certification, are the key to its relevance to your requirements. The criteria mentioned above reflect three dimensions of any certification programme’s strength, and together, they form the three faces of a **Certification Effectiveness Cube**, shown at the right. The faces show the extent to which the certification meets the criteria we discussed above.

The Certification Effectiveness Cube illustrates the impact of these three criteria. Note that weakness in any of the three criteria can reduce the effectiveness of the certification; this is shown by the *volume* of the cube. For example, low rigor or narrow breadth of coverage—or both—produce a less-effective PM certification. Depending on your needs, that may be perfect for you. Bigger, or more powerful, is not always better.





First Criterion: Prerequisites

The first criterion considers the prerequisites for the certifications. Prerequisites help assure that a certification is targeted at the right qualified persons. For this criterion, we apply the work of Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo.^A Several years ago, Dr. Paul began a comparative analysis of PM certifications. He recently updated it (1st Quarter, 2013) based on the feedback of his readers. His analysis evaluates the level of effort needed, weighted toward meeting certification prerequisites, to earn a wide range of PM certifications. That is perfect for our purposes for this section. Paul based his analysis on two key information points:

- A Professional Engineer (PE) credential,^B using this certification as a standard for comparison, and
- Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour threshold for mastery^C

Dr. Paul evaluated over 30 PM-related certifications.^D As you see in Chart 1 below, the results include four certifications in the IPMA Four-Level Certification programme. He uses a point-and-symbol chart in his report; we use a bar chart, and we only show an extract of the certifications he discusses in his extensive study. We recommend a review of Dr. Paul's study (see the end notes for the link) for anyone who is interested in the range of available project and programme management certifications.

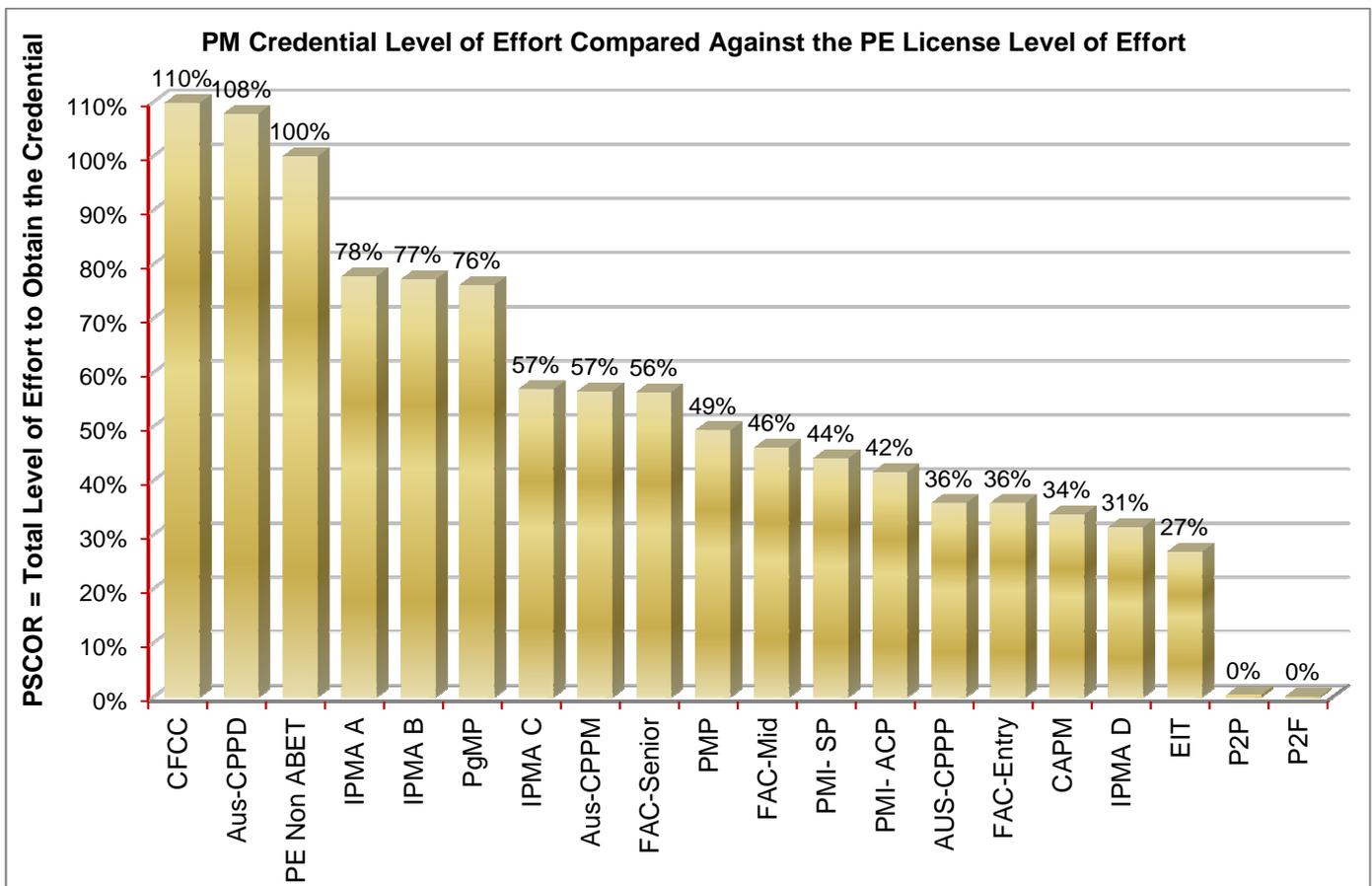


Chart 1: PM Credential Level of Effort Compared Against the PE License Level of Effort
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But why does IPMA Level D[®] rate so low? We all understand the results for the IPMA Level A, B and C certifications. They score high for their prerequisites, as true role-based, advanced PM certifications should. But Level D is a surprise! Why does it score so low in this evaluation? *Is this a mistake?*

Here is your answer: IPMA Level D, Certified Project Management Associate, is a *foundation certification* that is **intentionally accessible**^E to all who need broad working knowledge in the practice of effective project management. So it does not have the extensive prerequisites of the advanced IPMA certifications.



This is also why IPMA Level D is a great PM certification for those who are entering PM practice, for students in graduate-level programmes at Universities, *and* for those who work in PM-related practices and professions, such as architects, engineers, business development managers, proposal managers, and contract managers; i.e., it prepares you to work more effectively with project teams.

Prerequisites are important—especially when they are stringent enough to help determine if your five years of experience, for example, are of increasing responsibility and management complexity, or if they are just the same experience each year. Speaking of complexity, Dr. Paul’s model does not yet reflect the prerequisite of *management complexity* that IPMA demands for our advanced certifications. As you can see in the sample of an IPMA project complexity evaluation for one IPMA Member Association, IPMA-USA, at www.asapm.org/Cert/apm.asp,^F the prerequisite experience must be in projects of significant enough management complexity to distinguish between a Certified Senior Project Manager and a Certified Project Manager. In fact, some people holding exam-based certifications may not qualify for **either** of these levels.

Second Criterion: Breadth of Coverage

What practice base does your certification cover? Is it a methodology, like PRINCE2^{®?G}? Is it a knowledge taxonomy, like the PMBOK[®] Guide?^H Or is it a competence framework, such as the IPMA Competence Baseline? The breadth of the certification’s coverage is a key issue if you intend to demonstrate results in the areas that have the greatest impact on success. For example, we have shown for decades that the right interpersonal skills, plus the ability to work with the permanent organization, are the keys to project and business success. And yet, which PM certifications even consider these aspects of project management?

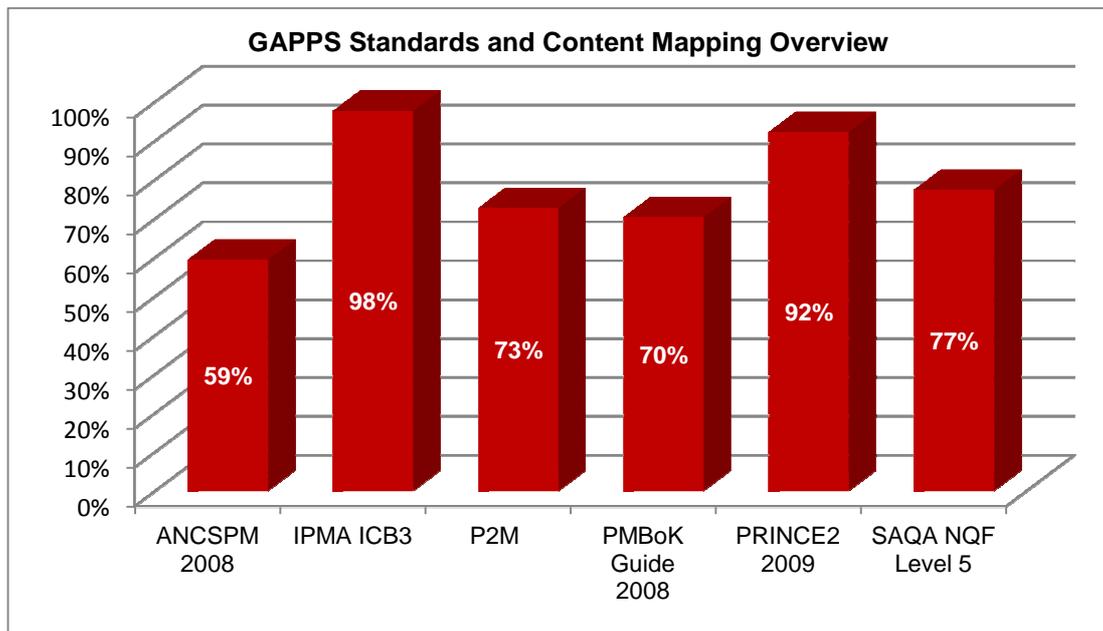


Chart 2, GAPPS Standards and Content Mapping Overview (extracted from GAPPS analysis)

Based on the work done by the volunteer members of GAPPS, the Global Alliance for Project and Programme Standards,^I Chart 2 above helps answer this coverage question. The GAPPS not-for-profit group of professional associations, corporations, and universities analyzed the breadth of coverage of a range of available project management certification standards. The details of the research, additional information about the standards mentioned above, and the detailed mapping data are available at the GAPPS website.^J

The GAPPS content mapping results above show how a handful of certification standards compare to the GAPPS standard for “full coverage” of project management topics. They show how, for example, IPMA ICB3 maps to the GAPPS elements of knowledge, competence and performance needed for successful project managers. It also shows the mapping for other PM standards.



This mapping inspired a project to evaluate ways to “Bridge” from a PRINCE2 Practitioner to an IPMA Level D certification. Other bridging projects are of interest for those seeking advanced PM certifications.

A key point: Some competences are **more important than others** in achieving project and business success. So the gap between IPMA certification models and those of other organizations may be greater than the above chart shows. For example, how important is it for your organizations, and your project teams, to demonstrate the leadership and behavioral skills needed to deliver the business results that you deserve? We have always considered these competences to be among the most-important to demonstrate, even though they can be the most difficult to develop and assess. But what are you after: Easy, or effective?

Third Criterion: Rigor of Assessment

Why is Rigor of Assessment important? Because many people can prepare for an exam, take it within two weeks (span of short-term memory), *and pass*. It is evidence of true grasp when you instead present a portfolio of evidence that documents how you have delivered results in each competence under assessment. It is even more convincing when you can demonstrate your prowess to professional assessors. They can verify that you understand how your actions, in your role, contributed to project and business success. This is a major difference between a *certification in project management* and being **certified as a project manager**.

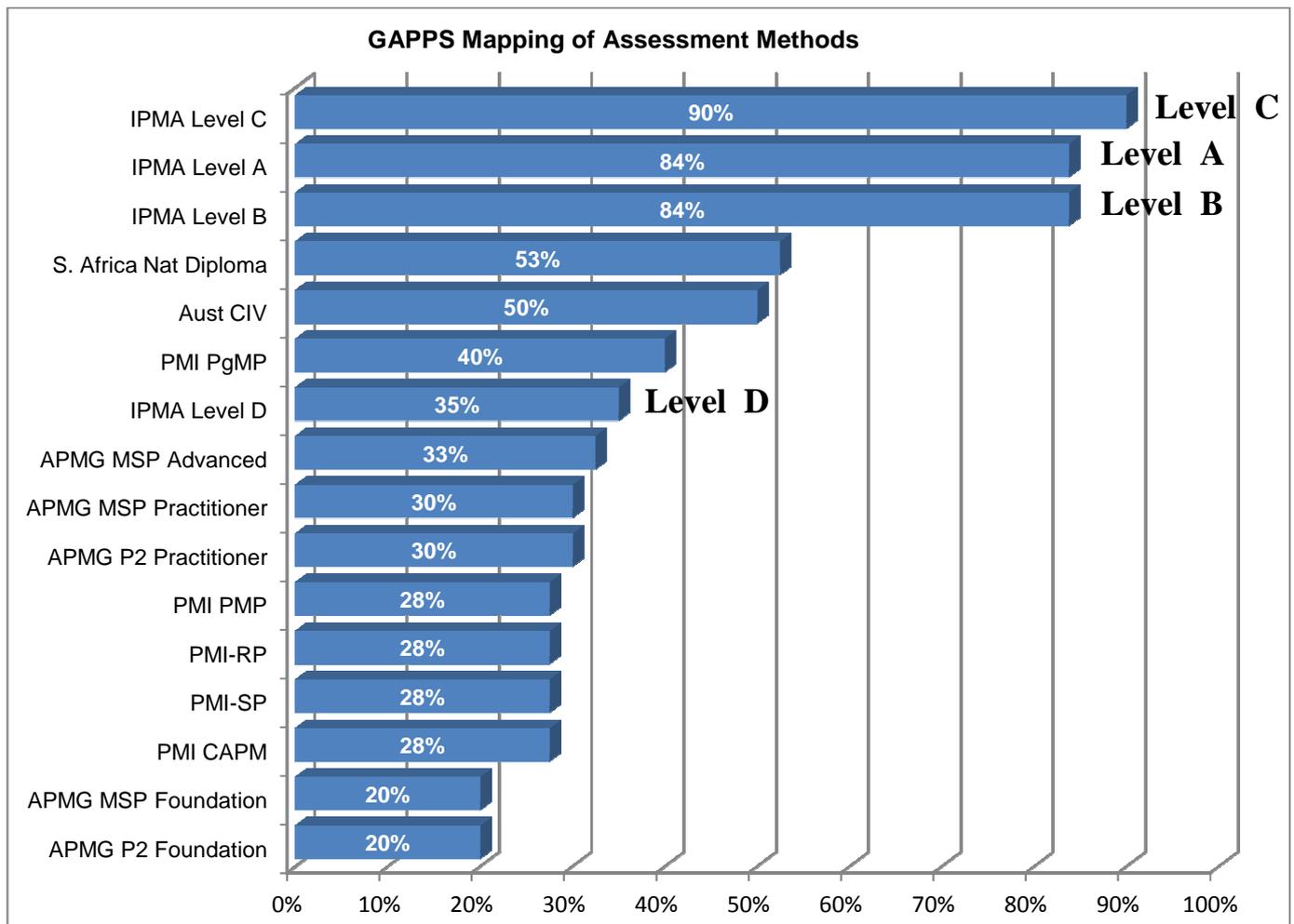


Chart 3: GAPPS Mapping of Assessment Methods for Global Project Management Certifications, Credentials and Qualifications (our graphic is based on an extract from GAPPS data)

Rigor of Assessment is a very subjective criterion, with many “moving parts.” So we searched for publicly-available, neutral-party research. This is why we use the above-cited GAPPS study, **GAPPS Mapping of Assessment Methods**.



This study analyzed the rigor in the ways each programme assesses the candidate. It compared a range of factors, across a variety of certifications, role specifications and educational programmes, including undergraduate and graduate diplomas. For an explanation of the credentials and their abbreviations, see the study details at the GAPPS website (link and explanations are in the end notes).

As our extract of the results in Chart 3 above shows, the IPMA advanced certification levels A, B and C top the list for rigor of assessment. IPMA Level D, our exam-based certification, shows a higher level of rigor than nearly all other certifications. Some have asked why IPMA Level C is above levels A and B on the chart; this is probably because of the exam for Level C, that the higher levels do not always include, in all IPMA member nations. This Level C disparity is offset by another factor not reflected in the GAPPS analysis: The earlier-mentioned Management Complexity evaluation also adds rigor by requiring demonstration of significantly higher management complexity in Level A and Level B projects.

What About Certification Popularity?

We have focused on the design of the certifications. In selecting your most appropriate project management certification, you should also consider the reasons for the certification's popularity. This criterion is based not on the attributes of the product itself, but is the result of marketing, and market positioning.

Popularity is a unique and important factor that makes some certifications more attractive in some parts of the world, and not as much in others. Popularity may affect whether a certification is even known to its perspective audiences. Popularity depends on a number of factors, including:

1. Value: Correlation to project and business results
2. First to market in a nation or region
3. Word-of-mouth and referrals
4. Visibility in the market
5. Ease of acquisition
6. Pricing

Europe's most highly-recommended PM certifications are from IPMA's 4-L-C, Four-Level Certification programme. In the USA and some other countries, it may be PMP® from Project Management Institute that is popular. Clearly, factor 2 above, *First to market*, has a clear impact for both certification systems. Europe's 4-L-C system's popularity is based mostly on the first four factors listed above. The US certification's popularity appears to be related to factors 2-6. In other regions, such as SouthEast Asia or Africa, popularity appears to be a result of a mix of the factors; and ease of acquisition and pricing may dominate in developing countries.

All of which is fine for individuals, but what do organizations seek? Most are looking for a global certification that has a firm foundation in the factors that lead to project and business success. They are also looking for the flexibility to adapt that certification to their unique industry needs, to their way of doing business, including governance methods, and to their organization's strengths, or competitive advantage. This suggests that factor one, above, the value of the certification for their needs is a key consideration.

Popularity can be misleading. In the USA, parties ranging from government agencies to recruiters to training firms and HR departments tend to promote, prefer or mandate one particular certification offering. This is despite an interesting article that appeared in the February, 2011 PM Journal. You will benefit from reading *PMP® Certification as a Core Competency: Necessary But Not Sufficient*, by Jo Ann Starkweather and Deborah H. Stevenson, PhDs at Northeastern State University, in Oklahoma.

The study team's research focused on Information Technology (IT) project managers, and the results are transferable to other areas. They compared *what IT PM Recruiters look for* with *what IT Executives really want*. The essence of their findings: Recruiters in their study tend to look for education and a PMP.

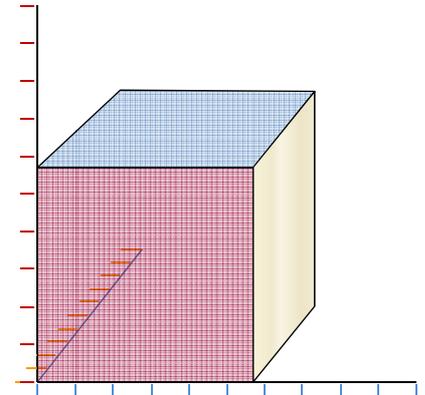


IT Executives, on the other hand, seek behavioral skills, communication skills and relevant experience. In other words, what recruiters seek is at the bottom of the IT Executives' list. The Bottom Line, according to this study: *What the study's IT Executives seek is what IPMA certifications offer.*

Revisiting the Certification Effectiveness Cube

We introduced the "Certification Effectiveness Cube" early in this article. Now that you have reviewed the criteria that define the three faces of the cube, how should you represent the results? A graphic way could be to chart each criterion on a three-dimensional axis, as shown at right. A numeric method could be to normalize each criterion to 100%, then cross-multiply them:

Prerequisites % * Breadth of Coverage % * Rigor of Assessment %:
71% * 98% * 83%, and a total score of 63% for IPMA Level B.



Note that in this analysis, we do not *weight* the criteria. For advanced certifications, some criteria might have more weight than others. It would be great if the three studies all compared more of the same certification programmes; that would make our Certification Effectiveness Cube more complete. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The information below is for the certifications that are evaluated in all three surveys.

(Scores are in %)	Prerequisite Score (Giammalvo Model)	* Breadth Score (GAPPS Model)	* Rigor Score (GAPPS Model)	= Certification Effectiveness
IPMA Level A®	78	98	84	64
IPMA Level B®	77	98	84	63
IPMA Level C®	57	98	90	50
IPMA Level D®	31	98	35	11
PMI PMP®	49	70	28	10
PMI CAPM®	34	70	28	7
PRINCE2 Practitioner	.4	92	30	n/a
PRINCE2 Foundation	.2	92	20	n/a

Based on the numeric method that we mentioned above, where we cross-multiply the scores to determine the *volume of certification effectiveness*, you can see the results above. You may prefer other ways to evaluate these scores. Note that we have not named all the certifications mentioned in this paper in the table above, but you can see the positioning IPMA's of certifications, compared to several other options.

A Caution: But here is a caution about the Certification Effectiveness Cube: No matter what their score in our evaluation, **PM certifications do not improve your knowledge or competence, they only recognize it.** Nor do certifications increase your business results from projects and programmes. The right certifications do serve as good indicators of your (or your teams') current status and career progress. Certifications can help identify areas of strengths and weaknesses; they can help in mapping a career development plan, for yourself, or for your teams. They can be one part of a performance improvement initiative, for an individual, a project team, a department, a site, or an enterprise. But they must be used correctly to assess grasp of the right topics, knowledge, skills and competences that lead to project and business results.

Summary and Conclusions

This article began with a stated intent to help you gain a few new insights. Those might include the assertion that the "best" certification for you depends on the effectiveness of the certification, and its popularity. We have emphasized that you must understand your own needs, and select the certification that maps to those needs. We know how difficult it is, with the plethora of certifications available today, to even narrow the field. But we offer the Certification Effectiveness Cube as a tool for helping you to do so.



As we have indicated, we believe there may be multiple “best certifications,” depending on your needs. But you must be wary: Some educational institutions and training companies find it to be in their own best interest to promote their preferred certifications. They may not be qualified to offer or support other certifications. This has the effect of raising the popularity of their preferred certifications. There are also learning providers that understand the difference between entry-level PM certifications, and the advanced certifications that can correlate to increased project and business success.

The popularity and volume in today’s leading PM certifications, to a great extent, **is the inverse of their Certification Effectiveness scores**. This makes sense. But there is a place for each in the market. Despite the heated social media dialogues that engage enthusiasts for their favorite PM certifications, and the websites that make assertions about the superiority of a few favored offerings, there are smarter ways to make rational decisions about your most appropriate PM certification. So we have used public information to compare, in a relatively neutral way, the most important considerations for selecting your PM certification.

Based on the efforts of Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo and of the GAPPS volunteers, you can explore their independent studies for yourself to see the areas where today’s PM certifications do the best job of meeting your needs—whether those needs are to add a credential after your name, to increase your internal credibility, to add to your career marketability, to improve the recognition of your competences, or to improve your organization’s project and programme performance. Thank you to Dr. Paul and to the GAPPS team for your useful research and comparisons, without which this article would not have been possible.

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Per4mance Coach*, is President of ProjectExperts®, a USA-based, global practice that provides Programme and Project Management coaching, consulting, tools and training. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has been a contributing member of PMI®, since 1983. He is a co-founder and President of *asapm*, IPMA-USA, the American Society for the Advancement of Project Management, and current Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association.

Goff’s interest in project and programme competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center in a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s. It continued with engagements in the 1980s and 90s helping organizations assess and improve their project and programme performance. Today, he continues his interest in individual, project team, organization, and today, national and international PM performance.



Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management coaching, consulting, and training. His insight for the needed PM Competences, and his executive overviews and practitioner trainings translate to improved project performance. In his working life, he combines his Project experience with sensitivity for the interpersonal skills areas—the human aspects of projects. The result: Measurably increased **PM Per4mance**, and business results. For more about Goff, see: <http://projectexperts.com/about-us/principals-bio-stacy-goff/>.

Trademark Acknowledgements

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References

- ^A You can learn more about Dr. Paul Giammalvo's study at his website. He has published an article explaining his rationale, with all the certification programs listed and explained, and the worksheet containing the raw data from his study. To access this work; use the two *Project Management Certifications* links near the bottom of this page: www.build-project-management-competency.com/download-page/.
- ^B In the explanation of his study, Dr. Giammalvo explains that he "selected the US "Professional Engineer" license (PE) as the benchmark of excellence, as it is a well-recognized and highly regarded professional level license to practice..."
- ^C In his study, Dr. Giammalvo also cited Malcolm Gladwell, in his book "Outliers" who made a strong case that to become "professionally competent" at anything, one had to dedicate at minimum of 10,000 hours of serious, professional level practice and progressively more challenging experience ...
- ^D We did not include all the certifications from Dr. Giammalvo's study in this chart, because they did not appear in the other studies, and they made this chart difficult to follow. Those we did include were either in covered in the other studies, or make good reference points for the range of PM certifications.
- ^E IPMA's Federation of strong national member associations allows each member nation to serve local market needs, while collaborating globally. This structure allows modification of programmes such as IPMA Level D, to meet specific local requirements. Some Member Associations, such as GPM, IPMA-Germany, offer a more rigorous IPMA Level D certification, which would score higher on the prerequisite and rigor scales used in this article.
- ^F *asapm*, the American Society for the Advancement of Project Management, is IPMA-USA. It was founded in 2001 by a group of USA "thought leaders" in project management who made major contribution to the strong growth and visibility of the discipline over the preceding 20-30 years. Its name is always shown in lower case, to reflect the fact that the organization exists to serve its members and the PM practice, rather than vice-versa. The italics intend to show forward motion, or advancement.
- ^G PRINCE2® is a universal project management methodology developed by OGC in the United Kingdom, with an increasingly popular certification program currently administered by APM Group. This admirable initiative has certified over a million practitioners in the UK, Europe, and the rest of the World, in the Foundation and Practitioner levels.
- ^H PMBOK® Guide, A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, is a knowledge taxonomy published by Project Management Institute, USA. With an initial publication in 1996, this is the foundation (together with other resources) for PMI's PMP (Project Management Professional®) certification.
- ^I From the GAPPS website, *About Us* section: "The GAPPS, the Global Alliance for Project Performance Standards, is a unique alliance of government, private industry, professional associations and training/academic institutes working together to develop globally applicable project management competency based standards, frameworks and mappings. Our standards and frameworks are intended to facilitate mutual recognition and transferability of project management qualifications." IPMA is a participating and contributing member of GAPPS. See: http://globalpmstandards.org/mgxroot/page_about_us.html.
- ^J The GAPPS website, http://globalpmstandards.org/mgxroot/page_mappings_of_global_standards.html, offers many useful resources, including the two studies used in this article. To review the details of the studies, press the Click to Download button at the link cited above. Then enter your name and email address to access the study results.