

On the Matter of Project Management Standards ¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

29 November 2020

Ref: [Pirozzi, M. \(2020\). On the Subject of PM Standards, People and Community, Letter to the Editor, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue III, March.](#)

Dear David,

This belated letter to the editor is on the subject of International Standards and their development. I may be able to add some up to date information on the current state of development of two International Standards. In his letter to the editor in February, Massimo Pirozzi referred to the development of both PMI's PMBOK and two ISO Standards and made some interesting points. In my view, both represent significant developments on how project managers will come to be perceived in the future.

My first point concerns the development of International Standards, and in particular, the revised ISO 21500 and the new ISO 21502. After considerable work, both these Standards have reached the stage where they can be released as Draft International Standards (DIS) once they have been translated into the mandatory ISO languages. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, we could have expected these to reach National Standards bodies sometime around the end of May and be released for comment immediately.

The latest version of ISO 21500 is aimed at positioning Project Management in general in the commercial, non-governmental and other organizational fields. This would then allow the original ISO 21500 to be redeveloped purely to cover the management of single projects and would be agnostic on delivery approaches so that traditional, Agile and incremental methods could be addressed.

It should be remembered that ISO Standards are intended to reduce barriers to trade, rather than provide a comprehensive "how to" manual so drafting is far from straightforward.

My second point concerns PMBOK, which has been an important practice guide since its early days back in the 1980's. The development team originally decided that the content would reflect those practices unique to project management. This resulted in a comprehensive guide but did not cover all the practices needed to successfully manage

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a project; nor did it address multiple projects. Over the years, PMBOK has been revised many times and until the 2013 version, the framework was largely unchanged although details were updated. Conceptually, PMBOK retained its original structure so that the basic premise was unchanged despite the updates. This enabled the PMP syllabus to remain stable, limiting the impact of change on existing PMP credential holders as well as new entrants. Similarly, training providers and academic institutions were able to make modest adjustments to meet new requirements.

In the last 10 years or so, it has become apparent that the world as seen by PMI and IPMA has changed. The impact of new demographics, the urgent need of industries for rapid (and cheaper) development resulted in the shift of delivery strategies to a more flexible process resulting in iterative, incremental and “agile” approaches that could not easily be accommodated in PMBOK or ICB. This situation has major implications for the Project World because it is essential for our credibility that we define a clear product that the public can see defines the boundary of what is probably best called the management of projects: this is one of the major functions of a body of knowledge (BoK). To make major changes to such a BoK risks admitting that “we” got the original concept wrong and this clearly imperils the status of project management as a profession. That PMI is making major changes to its terminology and presentational aspects such as those Massimo addresses in his letter to the editor last month. These represent a major risk to our credibility and is a courageous move.

Many observers will not see the commonalities or how various elements have transitioned into the new PMBOK; Registered Education Providers need to be convinced that the changes will not represent an inordinate cost to them as they restructure their training to enable students to tackle the revised PMP. Similarly, universities and colleges will be under pressure to adapt their curricula as they seek to ensure that academic credibility can be linked to these changes. The part played by the Global Accreditation Center (GAC) will be of strategic interest to PMI.

I believe that the fundamental issue Massimo has identified, that the ISO Standards developed by a very broad cross section of the Project World represent a “matching point”, is of very great significance. Like him, I am not much interested in the commercial aspects of certification, but the Project World needs a BoK to remain a contender for professional status. We will require a body such as PM World Journal to take care, as Massimo says, “of our project management community as a whole...[and] take care of our questions, our feelings, our needs, our expectations.”

Sincerely,

[Miles Shepherd](#)

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