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White paper

Project manager profiling: a
review of the approaches
available (Part 1)

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Louise Worsley
Design Authority
CITI Limited
Lovat Bank, Silver Street,
Newport Pagnell, Bucks, MK16 0EJ

Author

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Introduction

With project managers in short supply and increasing pressures to identify potential project staff internally within the organisation, more and more businesses are looking for reliable and predictable assessment processes. The problem is simply too many complex projects and not enough trusted, 'safe pairs of hands' available. The cost concerns are still very much in evidence, but the risks associated with non delivery are increasingly high. The wrong project manager is something that some projects simply cannot afford.

This paper examines the various tools and techniques used to assess and support the development of project managers throughout their career. The strengths and weaknesses of the approaches are reviewed in the light of our experience, and suggestions are made as to when to apply what.

Choosing the right profiling approach

In choosing the right approach to profiling, one of the first considerations is whether you want to assess the project management capability of the individual or identify the most appropriate development and support regime. The temptation is to do both – "we want to assess them, but at the same time, identify what development we should put in place to support them in the longer term". This creates a dilemma. Staff are very wary of the process of assessment and you will get different behaviours and end-results depending upon whether the process is communicated as an assessment or a development initiative.

The risks associated with 'getting it wrong' are generally perceived as higher for assessment than development profiling. Getting it wrong includes both arriving at the wrong conclusion about an individual's capability and/or the process of assessment being perceived as not credible or 'unfair'.

The strategic outcomes of development profiling - creating long-term sustainable capability – are also significant. Investment in inappropriately targeted training is expensive - it costs money, time and lost opportunity. Make the development profiling too simplistic and it will lack credibility, particularly to the more senior members of the project community

In choosing the right profiling approach, the outcomes and risks must be balanced to identify the breadth and depth of the profiling process to be implemented. The best place to start is the purpose to which the outputs of the profiling are to be put. If this is not clearly defined and agreed from the outset then the process may be inappropriate and communications are likely to be muddled or misleading. Too often profiling is doomed before it has even started due to a lack of shared understanding as to what is really intended.

Profiling for development

Development profiling is a diagnostic process which seeks to describe performance against a broad range of the competences pertinent to the role. Done well – it should identify areas of strength and weakness, giving advice and recommendations on what actions could be taken to address areas of individual weakness.

Figure 1: Development profiling example
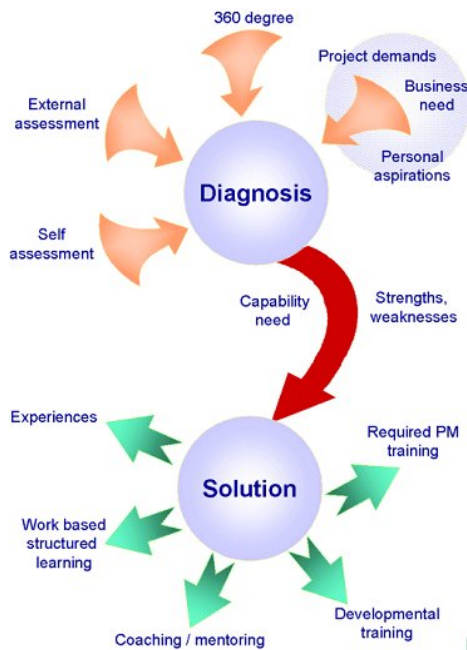
It is made up of two stages - diagnosis of the capability and feedback on the range of solutions appropriate to the career aspirations and opportunities available. Figure 1 illustrates an example approach to development profiling. Here multiple inputs are used in the diagnosis stage including self assessment, 360 degree feedback and external assessment. A range of solutions are available but ultimately these are moderated in discussions with the line manager, taking into account business need, project opportunities and personal aspirations.

In its simplest case, development profiling may only involve a self assessment questionnaire, designed to provide guidance on which course to take next – a low level form of training needs analysis. A personal coaching intervention may however be initiated with a battery of tests, interviews and on the job observation. Which approach to be taken will depend upon factors such as:

- The level of experience of the project manager – junior project managers are more likely to require knowledge and skills based training while those further up the ladder will need more complex interventions such as work-based mentoring and exposure to structured experiences

- the training and development strategy – if the immediate aim is to align staff to a limited sets of skills and knowledge training then the focus of profiling may simply be on "what course next"

- cost constraints and ease of availability of diagnosis information – 360 degree feedback can be very valuable but may be very difficult to collect, particularly in heavily matrixed organisations where project managers have multiple line managers and complex reporting lines.

One of the obvious risks in development profiling is getting the diagnosis wrong, but worse still is the risk of alienating the project community. Development profiling should motivate and invigorate all those involved. There are a number of pitfalls to be avoided:

- "How can we tell if the profiling questionnaire will give us what we need from the entire project community? It may be worth partitioning the project community by job role or experience and using different approaches for different members of the community. The more senior project managers are likely to have very different development needs and if this does not seem to be recognised in the process they may simply disengage

- "it's just a way of getting people onto training courses" – it is generally understood that development should not just be about training. If however, the immediate need is to get staff through start-up courses and workshops then this should be clearly communicated along with the indication of how richer development needs will be picked up later

- "we've done the profiling – now what?" – if the follow through from profiling is unclear or delayed then the community will not only be disenchanted but may be suspicious of the real aims of the profiling. The development framework, what support and development will be made available,

must be understood. Sometimes 'pilot' profiling is used to inform what type of development the organisation should offer. However if the development follow throughs are not supported, executed and understood by the project managers, their line managers and the senior community management community the initiative is likely to fail

- "I don't agree with the outcomes" – there will always be instances where the outcomes and development recommendations are not agreed to by the candidate. The processes for escalation must be agreed up front and transparent to all. It can take just one poor experience to undermine confidence in the overall approach.

Profiling for assessment

Where profiling is for assessment purposes, the approach will depend upon the nature of the information required. Do we want to identify who is best for this project, do we want to find out who the best project managers are, do we want to find out about our overall capability, do we want to know if we have enough capability to deliver our portfolio or do we want to decide who to recruit?

For example, profiling used for recruitment must be extensive enough to provide a 'safe' result, within costs which are acceptable given the gains to be achieved. In the past it might have been expected that this service would be performed as standard by recruitment agents. However, with the market flooded with would-be project managers, many agencies resort to filtering processes based upon keywords such as PRINCE2. An unsafe approach when you consider the problems with using what is essentially a knowledge based assessment only. Increasingly organisations are looking for additional mechanisms for understanding project manager capability. In an informal survey, CITI found that two out of three clients had implemented some form of project management specific assessment centre for would-be recruits.

Generally, the higher the perceived risk of getting it wrong, the greater the number of inputs required to the profiling process. This must be contextualised within the outcomes the organisation wants to achieve. If, for example, you are recruiting the project manager for a business critical project with a limited window of opportunity to get it right, then it is likely that an extensive assessment process will be necessary.

CITI is engaged to perform profiling to address a variety of client objectives. How risky the initiative is and what investment is acceptable varies. Figure 2.1/2.2 illustrates some of the engagements we have been involved with and how they are positioned in terms of risk/cost by the client. Assessment is generally felt to be more risky in the extreme cases, where it is being used to support re-structuring, getting it wrong, could result in expensive and damaging litigation. The investment case, what the organisation feel justified in spending on development profiling, may be large, particularly to support and 'bring-on' senior project or programme managers. The pay-back is easily achieved if it makes just one individual 'safer' in the management of the most complex of projects or programmes.
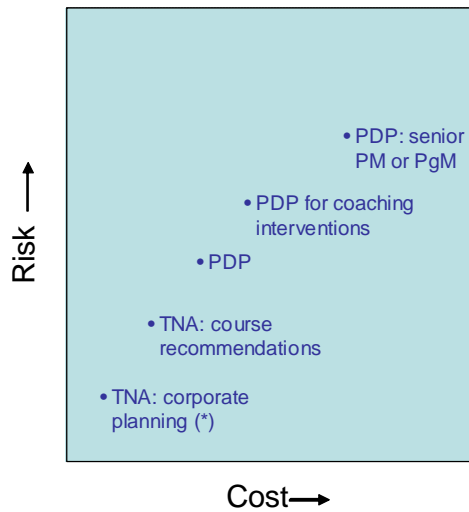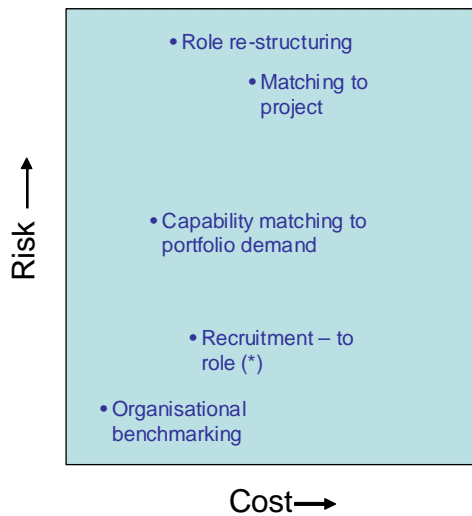
Figure 2.1: Development profiling

Figure 2.2: Assessment

Figure 2.1 (Development profiling) — axes Risk (vertical) and Cost (horizontal):
- PDP: senior PM or PgM
- PDP for coaching interventions
- PDP
- TNA: course recommendations
- TNA: corporate planning (*)

Figure 2.2 (Assessment) — axes Risk (vertical) and Cost (horizontal):
- Role re-structuring
- Matching to project
- Capability matching to portfolio demand
- Recruitment – to role (*)
- Organisational benchmarking

PDP – personal development planning

TNA – training needs analysis

(*) Sizing the training required for the total project community – not involving the provision of individual recommendations

(*) To a job role rather than for a specific project

Analysing KASE

The most comprehensive assessment approaches are based upon an assessment of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, skills and experience – often referred to as KASE analysis. CITI's assessment centre uses profiling based upon this analysis. It involves questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and case study based exercises. A sample of competency areas is examined.

These are selected on the basis of on-going research performed over some 15 years into what makes project managers successful and is therefore very specific to the project manager role. The outcomes of the profiling are expressed against a five point scale which identifies the level of complexity of projects in which the project manager is likely to perform 'safely'. In follow-up surveys with clients we have compared the results obtained with subjective evaluations of the level of competence of the project managers in post. Agreement figures are in the range of 85-90%; i.e. in 85-90% of the cases there is agreement that the rating of the project manager's capability is appropriate.

Profiling to support development planning is generally designed to encompass all the competency sets for the role. Profiling to assess individuals may be focused only on those competences which appear to correlate with overall project manager success. Where the aim is to find the right project manager for a specific project then it may also be sensible to consider the specific sources of complexity which are likely to be manifest in the project. Ultimately, combining assessment and development profiling, will always add to the costs and elapsed time. Where profiling is being used for recruitment against a job or project specification, focus is on the assessment process. Where you are recruiting against the general role of project manager then the additional costs associated with developmental profiling may be worthwhile.

Mini case study: A Government client recruits project managers against three tiers of project manager roles. They have identified competency sets for each role in terms of knowledge, experience, skills and behaviours. The recruitment process allows for both assessment and development output - even when recruiting contractors. This additional output is used to identify the risk profile for assigning the individuals to a specific project. Its also informs the project office as to what is the likely support and development required to ensure that the new project manager remains 'safe' in their role.

Profiling tools

Self assessment questionnaires

Self assessment based questionnaires are some of the easiest and least expensive to develop. A common approach is to take something like the Association for Project Management (APM) Body of knowledge and ask candidates to rate their skills on each competence against a 5 or 7 point scale.

CITI has looked at the reliability of self assessment data by comparing the individuals own assessment of their experience against an experience rating gained following an independent structured interview and case-work assessment. We have found that on average, 25% of the self assessed ratings were significantly out of line with the independent assessment. This rose to as much as 60% when the profiling was known to be for recruitment rather than development purposes.

These findings are backed up by research in a number of different domain areas. The results are always the same – self assessment invariably results in an over estimation of abilities. Interesting insights can be obtained to support development discussions and a number of our clients use this approach to support training needs analysis. However, self assessment based profiling on its own is simply not a reliable enough discriminator for recruitment or selection purposes.

Knowledge tests

The next easiest tool to implement is a knowledge test. These are usually derived from the Body of Knowledge of the Professional bodies, e.g. APM or PMI (Project Management Institute) and are often multi-choice in format because of the simplicity of marking. Although generally felt to be an overly simplistic approach to profiling more experienced project managers, CITI has found some interesting results when looking specifically at the validity of the knowledge test approach.

In 2001, CITI worked with an engineering client to investigate the validity of knowledge and self assessment based profiling. The client had administered a self assessed skills profile, using a modified version of the APM Body of Knowledge, but were concerned that the results they were getting were not as useful as they could be. We administered a test to the same group of project managers, similar in style and content to the APMP qualification. The knowledge areas tested were selected as those areas which related to the skill areas analysed in the self assessment. The results were startling. There was no correlation between the skills self assessment and the knowledge test results. Indeed, those who scored themselves highest in the skills assessment tended to score lower in the knowledge test.

There are various interpretations of this. Perhaps the self assessment skills were being exaggerated by the less capable project managers? Perhaps the knowledge of an area and the skills demonstrated

in the area are not related? Perhaps a multi-choice test is simply not sophisticated enough as a differentiator? We asked line managers in the client organisation there views on the results. Generally the feeling was that the skills assessment was bound to be a better predictor. However, when asked specifically to take subjective view on which the most competent project managers were, the results suggested that the knowledge results were at least as predictive of overall capability as the self assessment. While knowledge tests would appear to have less 'face validity' they do appear to be telling us something.

CITI's profiling statistics from the last 15 years, which include over 3000 candidates' data collected in the last three years alone, allows us to correlate knowledge results with overall capability assessment. (The findings from a recent analysis of this data are being presented at the APM Conference - 19th-20th October 2007). Of those that had been rated as the most competent project managers, just 12% of them scored poorly on the knowledge tests. This would suggest that knowledge is a reasonable indicator – or at least if the individual performs poorly on a knowledge test, then you need to look more closely at their skills profile.

However, beware - 42% of the weakest project managers also 'passed' the test. The graduate effect – where an intelligent novice will pass the test given appropriate training – is very much in evidence here. Knowledge tests are a useful indicator when looking at overall capability but are dangerous to use in isolation.

360 degree feedback

Another way of validating performance of individuals within the organisation is through the use of 360 degree feedback. This can be used, for example, to cross-check self assessment data. It has the advantage that the feedback is clearly related to the perception of performance on the job. The disadvantages relate to the various agendas that are exhibited when providing and receiving 360 degree feedback. In the case that the recipient knows who is the source of the feedback then feedback tends to be 'toned down' and can be so general as to be unhelpful.

We have found 360 degree feedback to be particularly helpful when provided alongside other diagnostic tools. These are some of the factors that need to be considered:

- If 360 degree feedback is to be used alongside other diagnostics then it must be possible to integrate the feedback from all of the analyses in a coherent way

- good communication of the initiative is vital to ensure appropriate levels of buy-in to completing the 360 degree process

- the process adopted must be able to deal with partial returns within the time-scales set for the profiling. While 100% completion of 360 degree feedback is obviously desirable – in our experience this may not be achievable. There must be an agreed position on how to deal with or interpret a 'nil' return from those requested to provide feedback

- capturing and chasing up feedback requires excellent administration. IT systems, applied sensibly, can greatly facilitate this process

- the escalation process must be designed to deal effectively with any issues which may arise as a result of the 360 degree feedback.

Mini case study: *A client had used profiling in the past, but felt that it would be very helpful to validate the results against the perceptions of the line managers, peers and team members working with the*

project managers. They had experience of 360 degree and were using it as a general management tool. They were keen that the approach should integrate with whatever existed and that it should be manageably applied to over 150 project managers. The approach implemented allowed project managers to select a number of (typically five) colleagues (seniors, peers and juniors) to respond to a series of questions about the observed behaviour and approach of the project manager being profiled. The responses were analysed using the same dimensions as a project management style questionnaire completed by the profiled project manager. The results were collated and compared. The power of the approach was illustrated, particularly for those managers who denied the outputs from the management style questionnaire analysis. In many of these cases the line manager and peer feedback corroborated the results found in the questionnaire. The feedback process was designed to deal with this 'denial' and provide routes for the project manager to explore their performance without feeling overly challenged or 'backed into a corner'.

Assessment centres

There is no substitute for objectively observing and systematically measuring how people actually perform on the ground. Through assessment centre type activities it is possible to get a more realistic view of the skills and behavioural competences exhibited by the individual.

Assessment centres typically involve the participants completing a range of exercises, which simulate the activities carried out in the target job. Various combinations of exercises, psychometric testing and interviews are used to assess specified competencies. The face validity of the approach is generally high. If one wishes to predict future job performance then it appears logical that the best way of doing this is to set the individual tasks which accurately sample those required in the job.

Design or off-the self?

Project management is a recognised job role. However, there is a common view that what makes a good project manager varies with domain area. Some organisations subscribe to the view that their project environment is different and therefore the role of project manager must be understood within the context of their organisation.

To support this, they engage assessment centre specialists to analyse the job and create organisation-specific assessment centres. There are a number of issues with this approach. The designers will typically be assessment centre specialists with little or no specific understanding of project management. They will thus depend upon organisational expertise as to what it means to be a good project manager. Ultimately this will mean that the competence model developed is limited by the organisational perspective on what is good, rather than a broader view of best practices across industry.

Our view is that project management, as a role, is very well understood and has benefited from extensive research by organisations such as APM, PMI and the International Project Management Association (IPMA). Our own research supports the view that it is neither essential nor desirable to create domain specific project manager competence profiles. In 1999, the University of Limerick analysed CITI's data on behavioural characteristics in project managers. Two sectors, financial services and telecommunications, were compared to see if there were any differences in the characteristics assessed. Overall the findings supported the view that the differences between sectors were not significant.

Assessment centre approaches such as the APM Practitioner, described previously, have been successfully used to assess project manager capability regardless of sector. CITI also uses an approach which focuses on the general project competences rather than any domain or client specific technical competences. We commend these approaches as they provide the following benefits:

- The ability to compare project management capability across diverse groups

- the identification of potential high performing project managers who can, with support, successfully move across domain areas

- fast and economic set up of the assessment approach

- the ability to flexibly combine the project manager specific output with the outputs from other managerial or technical assessments taking place in the organisation.

One of the risks that can arise is that organisations are tempted to over-use the assessment centre. They like it, the feedback is good and they have invested time and effort in setting it up. So the next logical step is to send staff who are *associated* with projects (rather than actual project managers) through the process. This might include, for example, planners, Project Support Office (PSO) staff, risk managers, general managers and individuals who have a relatively small proportion of their role associated with projects. Without extremely effective communications in place the results can be very negative, with individuals feeling as though they have 'failed'. In fact, of course, they have been assessed against competences which are simply not the major contributors to success in their role.

The APM Practitioner qualification

The APM Practitioner qualification is one of very few publicly available forms of assessment centre. It is a two and a half day event which assesses a candidate's ability to apply project management skills and techniques to a non-complex project. It is assessed against 30 criteria, demonstrating that the project manager can analyse, identify, and understand issues and information surrounding a non-complex project.

As experienced assessors on the APM Practitioner, we know that candidates on the Practitioner do feel appropriately tested and learn a lot about themselves. The credibility of the approach is high as candidates are put through exercises and tests as real to 'on the project' experience as possible. The assessment process itself is sound with assessors required to undergo rigorous training and testing prior to becoming accredited assessors.

The Practitioner is, however, primarily positioned as an assessment qualification not a development centre. While the individual gets immediate feedback there is no formal mechanism for feeding findings back into the clients' development and performance management. Once a pass is achieved the real value of the experience, the feedback and self reflective insights, are sometimes forgotten. Without intervention by the employing organisation, our estimates are that in less than 20% of cases, are development findings followed through.

To get real value, from what is a significant investment in money and time, it is vital that the organisation puts in place appropriate follow through with the project manager. The APM could perhaps also consider offering an enhanced feedback process to better support development follow-throughs, which may well require line management engagement.

Programme management as a special case

In roles such as PSO manager, planner, risk manager even general manager, there are often over-lapping competences with project managers, but there are also other competences which are far more critical to the role. These are likely to be missed or under-emphasised in an assessment centre focused on the project manager. This problem is particularly of note when assessing programme managers.

Organisations are increasingly recognising programme management as a distinct role. "Not all project managers seem to make good programme managers." However, given the relatively low number of programme managers in the organisation, they are often grouped in with their project management colleagues, or in the general management group, for development, assessment or career advancement purposes.

Competency models for programme managers are already being tested by professional bodies such as PMI and APM. However, there is much less unanimity on this role than is found when describing project managers. It is also the case that what is meant by programme management varies considerably between organisations. For this reason, while general competency models will be helpful, it may always be necessary to contextualise these to the organisation.

*Mini case study: A financial services client was keen to put in place a development centre-type approach for programme managers. They had looked at the programme manager descriptions described by processes such as MSP (Managing Successful Programmes) and by various research groups. However they were still not happy this encompassed what was meant by programme management in their organisation. They engaged specialists in the design of assessment centres to analyse the specific job competences for programme managers as **internally** defined. The concern remained that they would be assessing 'in-culture', against what they currently had, rather than best practices. CITI was engaged to inform and challenge the models produced and provide inputs on best practices in programme management across the industry. The approach of internal focus with an external validation provided additional credibility in the approach taken. It also combined together assessment centre specific expertise with the programme management understanding to ensure that the exercises and case studies were relevant and appropriately challenging.*

Realising the investment from profiling

As the professional of project management grows in significance, profiling of project managers is on the increase. To realise the investment we commend the following:

- Get all the possible interested parties in the room and ensure the purpose of the profiling is understood, agreed and consistently communicated right from the start

- don't take short cuts on the tools you need to achieve your objective. Work out the approach (and tool-set) required to meet your outcomes. If the investment looks too high then re-set your expectations on the outcomes

- if somebody says you can assess capability, define development outcomes and assess potential from a questionnaire – then they are probably misguided

- define the communication strategy and stick to it

- remember, profiling is the tip of the iceberg. Benefits are only realised by the quality of the follow through. If the follow through is too complicated or poorly executed then benefits will not be realised.

Further information about the Author

Louise Worsley, Design Authority, CITI

Louise is responsible for ensuring that every CITI product reflects best-practices in industry and academia. She has a particular interest in the profiling of project managers – having been involved with this since joining CITI in 1994. She has profiled, job-shadowed and coached more than 500 project managers and gained real insights into what makes good project managers great.

Louise is a visiting lecturer at Reading and Middlesex University in the UK and at the University of Cape Town. She is the CITI sponsor for the Middlesex University research project on project manager capability, and is currently working in South Africa, looking at how the identification of potential can be used to support the development of future generations of project managers.

Further information about CITI Limited

CITI focuses on the application of 'best practice' project and programme management tools and techniques. For nearly 20 years we have researched, practised and taught project and programme management to many of the leading organisations in the UK.

Based in Newport Pagnell - Buckinghamshire, our project and programme consultants are dedicated and passionate about developing project and programme management excellence.

In addition to our permanent consultants has a large pool of associates who are profiled, developed and accredited to the exacting standards of CITI professional project managers. These individuals manage complex projects and programmes for organisations that seek a level of professionalism and predictability that comes with professionally trained project managers. Acting as role models, they lead by example, showing how the professional project manager behaves and leaves a lasting legacy in terms of attitude and outcome.