The *vision* to stay ahead

Delivering the Training Dividend

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In this paper we investigate why investment in programme and project training appears to be wasted and offer advice on how deliver the dividend from investment.

Organisations have spent a fortune on training up their project and programme managers; in fact, it is one of the top 3 categories for training expenditure for the UK government. Extensive work has been done to improve the tools that they use and the quality of the processes, so why do some organisations seem to be naturally good at project management whist others are not?

The work in the UK using the P3M3® maturity model to assess performance has shown that there are common factors holding organisations back as they try to progress, it is these areas that need to be addressed.

The last 15 years has seen a vast increase in the number of individuals holding professional qualifications. One framework alone, PRINCE2®, now has well over a 500,000 practitioners worldwide and I am sure many other internationally recognised approaches can claim equally impressive figures, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to suggest that there are over 1,000,000 individuals with project management qualifications.

> PPM training is one of the top 3 categories of government training expenditure, but over 50% of senior managers identify it is at their major skills shortage.

It would therefore be reasonable to assume that with so many qualified project managers around, we should be driving up performance and quality of programme and project management throughout all industries. However, reports by bodies such as the National Audit Office suggest that this is not the case.

Aspire Europe's work with our partners, Outperform in the UK, to compare and analyse results of the maturity assessments undertaken using P3M3®[1], is supporting the conclusion that the investment in training is not producing great value. Some of the common characteristics we are finding within a broad range of organisations include the following:

1. Considerable investment has been made in qualification based training courses to establish benchmarks for individuals working in project management.
2. Few organisations that we have reviewed recognise project management as a career. It is seen as a skill set individuals in projects should possess, consequently, there is little evidence of a career or development path for individuals.
3. Once the qualification has been achieved, there is little evidence of skills development as there is an assumption that the qualifications themselves accredit skills, which they rarely do as they accredit knowledge.
4. There is little evidence that the theory learned on courses is being applied in the workplace.

A UK NAO report released in July 2011, after a review of the public sector, has reported that although Programme and Project Management is one of the critical skills in government, only 1% of civil servants classify themselves in that profession. Furthermore, 54% of senior staff stated that there were serious shortages in programme and project management skills, the biggest gap in skills.

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[1] Portfolio, Programme, Project Management Maturity Model, more information can be found at our website www.aspireeurope.com

Not surprising then, that Cabinet Office statistics released in 2010, showed that only 5% of Senior Civil services were PPM professionals. Bearing in mind PRINCE2® and MSP® courses are dominated by public sector people, where have they all gone?

It is important to say, that our reviews have been undertaken in large multi-functional organisations with a wide range of services and cultures. It would be helpful to reference P3M3® maturity levels at this point. Within the P3M3® model, skills and competency are a "generic attribute", meaning that it applies to all levels of maturity and within all the perspectives that are reviewed as part of an assessment and therefore has a heavy weighting on the results.

The most common is Level 2, which is characterised by hot spots of good and bad practice, some good teams some not so good, some good individuals some not so good, processes exist but not everyone is following them, I'm sure you can identify with these statements.

It is also characterised by individuals having a general layer of knowledge but no specific skills and or personal performance development.

If we consider the number of individuals that have now attended qualification courses, surely we should be seeing a higher level of maturity with so many being trained and qualified, and some effect on performance. Our findings using P3M3® suggest that training isn't leading to consistency or improvements in organisational performance or maturity.

> Most trained project managers, with the popular qualifications, will have had less than half day training in the required skills, for example, risk

Aspire Europe Ltd is not only an Accredited Consultancy Organisation; it is also an Accredited Training Organisation. We have been aware for some time that people who attended standard courses were interested in learning about programme or project management but they were more interested in gaining the qualification. With pass rates of 90% we did our best to provide this service.

The evidence from the maturity assessments since 2008 show that the knowledge gained in training courses was not being applied or translated into skills and organisational performance. People were learning project management NOT training to be project managers and the same applies to programme managers. This started to question what impact the training was having on organisations other than boosting individual CVs and increasing the churn rate of staff.

We carried out work in Scandinavia, where examinations are less time bound and appeared more focused on knowledge than memory. This led us to an initiative with an examination board called the Centre for Change Management[2] to develop vocational qualifications. These required less classroom time and the completion of an assignment to prove that the knowledge could be applied, very much in line with the competencies required from the maturity model.

This should have been a win/win for individuals and organisations. We found a very willing audience for the courses, but then noticed that the individuals on the events were not completing the

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[2] Centre for Change Management can be found at www.c4cm.co.uk

assignments to gain the qualifications. Further investigation with delegates led to a number of reasons for the failure to complete the assignments, namely:

a. Lack of individual motivation or skills to complete the assessment, they found applying the knowledge too difficult so they gave up.
b. Individuals becoming isolated and losing motivation, training delivered to teams was generating higher levels of return on assignments than when targeted at individuals.
c. Lack of support and encouragement from line managers to complete the assignment reduced motivation and when faced with a challenging task, delegates gave up.

If you then look at the popular qualifications, these are completed DURING the classroom training events, which do not require the individuals to extend their personal commitment without the support (and pressure) of their trainer and other delegates, they normally panic in harmony. These qualifications do not require the provision of evidence that the knowledge can be applied in the real world, just that they can answer a theoretical question as a memory test. Hence, it is absorbed into short term memory to enable them to pass the exam, and then seems to be forgotten.

This is not the case for professional qualifications in other sectors (law, HR, marketing) where there is often a need to have evidence of workplace competence to achieve the professional status. This is a major challenge for the programme and project management industry; there might be an accreditation system but it isn't reflecting skills or performance.

An excellent example of this was an organisation that wanted to improve programme management across a large number of areas, so they invested in 1 day events rather than the traditional approach to MSP® Foundation. They trained over 700 people in 2 years and supported this with a C4CM qualification. At the end of it the terminology and concepts were known at all levels and areas of the business AND over 150 people had achieved the vocational qualification. This provided a really good insight into the motivation to apply the programme management concepts and a useful guide for identifying "high flyers" who were serious about improving their performance. Many then went on to do more formal MSP® qualifications, but this approach provided a basic conceptual knowledge to a huge community of managers in different areas. The main flaw in this approach was that although the message was understood, there were no frameworks or tools for the staff to use when they got back to base, so some of the value and momentum was lost.

Our conclusions to date are that organisations, private and public sector, have relied far too much on generic courses. Individuals are attending with objectives that struggle to go beyond gaining a qualification and there is no evidence of organisations taking any ownership of exploiting the new found knowledge of their staff.

Concept	• Basic Principles • Scope of the topic
Knowledge	• Deeper understanding • Simple application of knowledge
Skills	• Applying knowing to complex situations • Perfecting and improving skills
Performance	• Increasing productivity • Continual improvement

This leads us to question how serious the organisations and the individuals are about improving programme and project management performance. We are training people in programme and project management theory not training them to be programme or project managers.

It is gloomy picture, there are examples of good practice out there and hopefully this advice will help you to spend your budgets more wisely and get some improved benefits and performance from the investments.

First of all, it is important to understand what you are trying to achieve from the training. The amount of people that have been sent on a PRINCE2® practitioner course to learn about project management over the years must run into tens of thousands, when in fact PRINCE2® training only covers facets of project management and the same applies to MSP® and other courses. Using our "Landscape for Success" grid will help to target the level of training appropriately.

Many of the industry standards qualifications PMI, APMG and APM, IPMA foundation and practitioner qualifications are basically targeted at the Technical Competence row, since to achieve the qualification a candidate needs to learn the book. Therefore in 3 - 5 days, a delegate will be taught the contents of the book and syndicate exercises will test some of the ideas. What is being

> The majority of programme and project management qualifications only test knowledge, not ability to use or apply it.

taught is knowledge; it assumes conceptual understanding at the start. If a delegate attends a course to find out about the subject, without any conceptual understanding, they will spend most of their time catching up. What will not be achieved from this sort of course are skills and performance as this comes from applying the knowledge in the workplace. C4CM qualifications began to test these specific areas and provided Aspire with valuable insight into the challenges that candidates faced.

> One of the best techniques for organisations to get real value from a basic course is when a team is being trained, for example, an MSP® or PRINCE2® course.
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> We recommend clients hold a workshop/meeting a week or two after the event to reflect on what they have learned and decide how to apply it to their project or programme.

One of the issues this quickly raises, is that if someone has, for example, APMP, MSP® and PRINCE2® qualifications, they will have had 15 days training and probably get an interview for most positions, however what skills would they actually possess? In terms of risk management, they will probably have spent 4 hours out of the 15 days training, of which the most productive thing will have been a flip chart with a list of risks, and maybe a dummy risk register – hardly the

baseline competence for good manager of risks. The same applies to planning, in those 15 days of training, less than 1 day will have been spent on planning, yet it is a core competency of staff involved with projects and programmes, so where should that skill come from?

In the P3M3® assessments we were seeing this coming through strongly in the ratings. Very little development (other than self-taught) was being undertaken to move from knowledge to skills, so it was hardly surprising that performance wasn't improving.

In the 'Landscape for Success' table, produced and copyrighted by Andy Murray of Outperform and Donnie McNichol; we can get a real insight into some of the issues that the maturity assessments and our experiences of developing more targeted approaches to training have highlighted.

The top axis in particular, appears to be a particularly relevant and reflects the different perspectives on how to improve performance; we can see it in everyday life. If you go to a health club, you will see people who are personally motivated and hammer away in the gym with no need for external support. There will be others who much prefer classes or team sports to give them momentum and energy, which is the team perspective and there are others who need a personal trainer to help motivate and support them. This is exactly the same as we have seen with the achievement of the C4CM vocational qualifications, some highly motivated people will do it anyway, but if there is a team working on the assignment, it is much more likely to achieve a better response, and if there is good organisational support from line managers responses will improve further.

The vertical axis provides another insight into the original question of why do some organisations perform better than others? Our view is that you need two of the three competencies in place. This provides a recipe for success and in most cases this is what we see.

	Individual perspective	Team perspective	Organisation perspective
Behavioural competence	The personal attributes required for project based working	The temporary team working together	The corporate culture for project working, e.g. matrix management
Technical competence	Project management specific techniques such as planning, estimating	Methods for managing a project, e.g. PRINCE2®	Frameworks for deploying, maintaining, and supporting methods and techniques, e.g. Body of Knowledge
Contextual competence	Domain specific knowledge such as finance, legal, HR	Methods specific to the project purpose, e.g. software development lifecycle models	Commissioning and tracking the best set of projects to achieve strategic goals

A construction or IT project manager will normally have the contextual knowledge as they will often have grown up in the sector. If they have the right behaviours tied to this contextual knowledge,

then they will probably get the job done, come hell or high water. The interesting one is Technical competence, which is the project management skills; if we add these to the mix of the other two, then their performance should improve. You only really know if you have a technically good project manager if you move them to another context, e.g. a construction manager trying to deliver an IT project, very few make this migration.

Without spending any more time on this matrix, it provides an insight into the value and limitations of training. The majority of programme and project management training is focused on the Technical Competence, the central and right hand box. In actual fact, this is only the start, but few organisations invest in improving performance in the other 7 cells, and they are just as important.

One of the best professional development plans we have seen is the MoD, where they have trained their project teams extensively, but mainly in generic qualifications. What the P3M3® assessment highlighted was that unless there are frameworks within which this new knowledge is used then the value of the training will be lost. Individuals and teams interpret and use their new knowledge in totally different ways therefore removing the value that comes from consistency. It did, however, provide all their project staff with excellent CV material!

Hopefully, these insights and examples will give you a few ideas on where and how to improve the value for money you get from training. Sadly, many organisations look for cost reductions in trainer rates when actually the realisation of the benefits will be much closer to home, with improved team and organisational context and better targeting and understanding of the training.

Below are our top seven tips on how to improve the value you can gain from your programme and project management training budget:

1. Plan professional development and decide what skills are needed - don't just buy courses because everyone else does. You should have a competency framework defined before you start.
2. Consider whether you want people to know about a topic or whether you want them to have skills as the design of the course will be significantly different and decisions on what techniques they need skills in, will be required.
3. Different qualifications reflect different competencies; our two exam boards are totally different as APMG test the knowledge of the book, whereas C4CM test the ability to apply the knowledge – both very relevant but very different.

> Another example of innovative initiatives: one of our engineering consultancy clients wanted to significantly improve the quality of project control. They sent all their project teams on the new APMG Earned Value Management qualification. This is a key technique to have embedded in their organisation. This training contributes to the left hand box, on the central line in the matrix, but as we can see, if the other elements are missing then the training may not be used even though there was a clear objective for the training.

> One of the most joined up approaches was developed by London Connect, the body that oversees the London Councils. They developed their own programme management framework based on MSP®, and then developed a range of specific courses directly related to that framework, so it had specific context and included specific techniques for users of the framework.

4. Consider little and often - a short course (1 day) has less impact on productivity in the workplace and can contribute to gradual improvement in performance.

5. Remember that programme and project technical knowledge is only one dimension on an individual's delivery and developing the right behaviours and contextual knowledge is equally important.

6. Consider training in teams - there is more chance of the knowledge being spread across the team and the team element supporting individuals to developing their skills.

7. Ensure that the organisational context is in place for the training - we have noted a totally different level of commitment and benefit from delegates attending training courses where they have a hunger for the knowledge to solve a problem.

This article has been written by Aspire Europe Ltd, Rod Sowden, Managing Director of Aspire Europe Ltd and Lead Author for MSP® and P3M3®

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