

Comparing PM Certifications: Which Is Best For You?

by Stacy Goff, USA

Prologue

This article will reveal new insights for many readers; you are our intended audience if you are:

- A Program or Project Manager (PM) who wishes to learn more about the most meaningful PM certifications;
- An organization decision-maker who may fund these certifications, and expects them to help “make a difference” in project and business success; or,
- A Human Resource manager or other key manager who intends to improve organizational performance.

We believe that the selection of a PM certification should be an easier decision than it is today. That decision depends on many factors, including the effectiveness 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 program management. Some are niche offerings; some are from professions that involve PM, but specialize in other disciplines. Some certifications are enterprise or government adaptations, beginning with professional association offerings, then modified to meet specific organizational needs. A few are mainstream offerings by dominant professional associations or other not-for-profit 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 methods can be confusing! But for all, a few essential criteria are the key to understanding the fit of a PM certification to your needs. And what might those criteria for evaluating PM certifications be? Here are our suggestions:

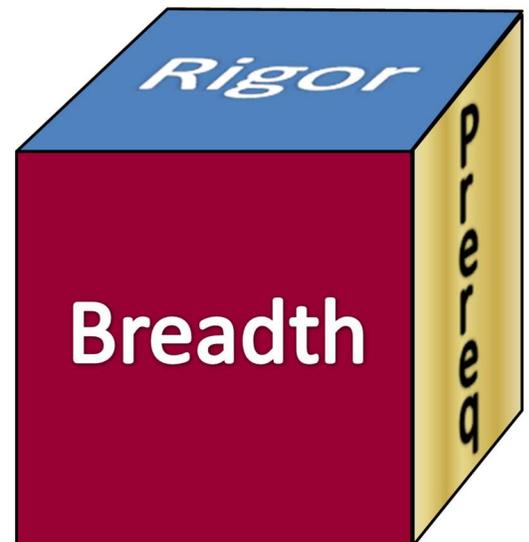
- A. Prerequisites
- B. Breadth of Coverage
- C. Rigor of Assessment

For each of these criteria, we weigh in with our perspective, while benefitting from the research of others.

Introducing the Certification Effectiveness Cube

It should be clear that design choices made in the development of a certification program, 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 program’s strength, and together, they form the three faces of a **Certification Effectiveness Cube**, shown at the right. They show the extent to which the certification meets the criteria we discussed above.

The Effectiveness Cube illustrates the impact of these three criteria. Note that weakness in any of the 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 (more effective) is not always better.



First Criterion: Prerequisites

The first criterion evaluates the prerequisites for the certifications. Prerequisites help assure that a certification is targeted at the right persons. For this criterion, we apply the work of Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo.^a Several years ago, Paul began a comparative analysis of PM certifications. Paul’s analysis evaluates the level of effort needed to earn a wide range of PM certifications. That is perfect for our purposes for this Prerequisites section. Paul based his analysis on two key information points:

- A Professional Engineer (PE in the USA) credential,^b using it as a standard for comparison, and
- Malcolm Gladwell’s 10,000 hour threshold for mastery^c

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

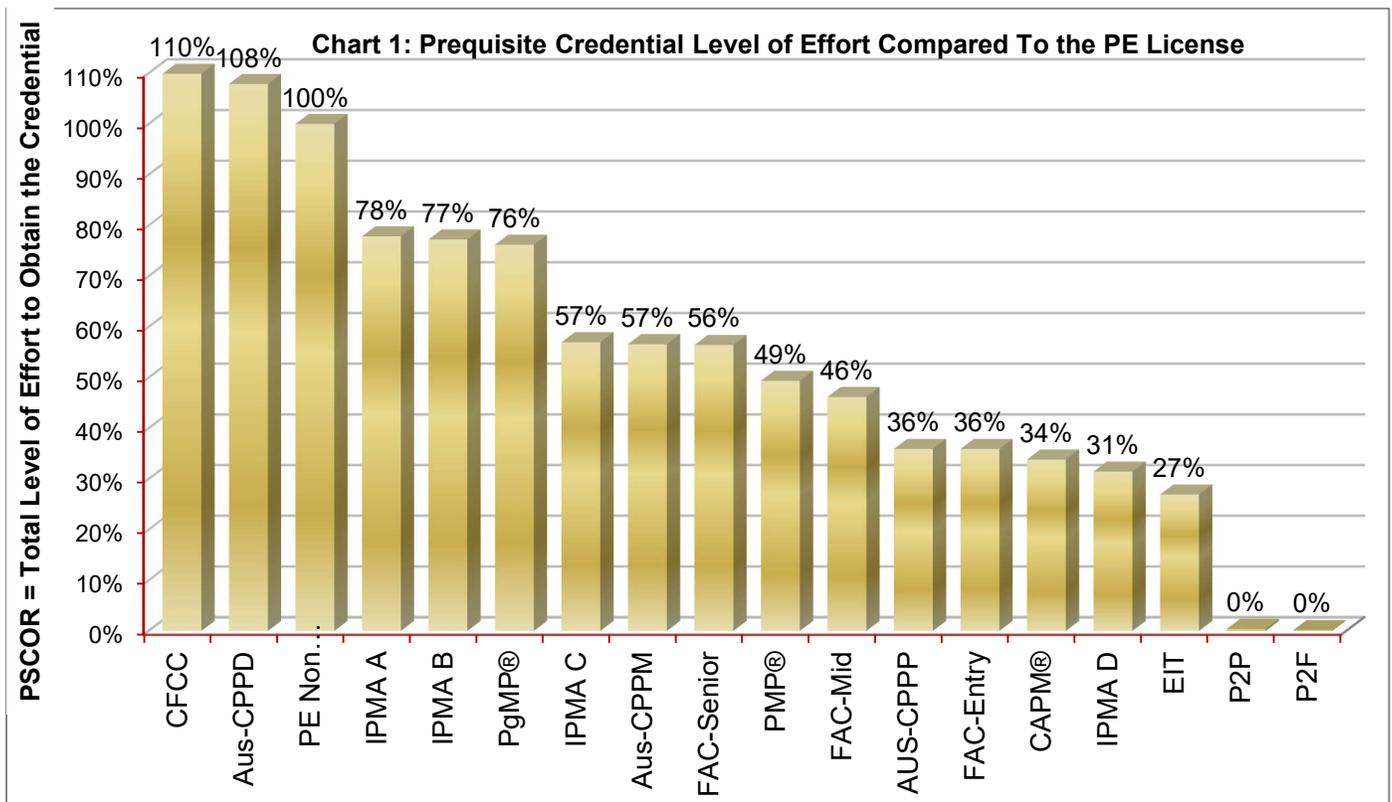


Chart 1: PM Credential Level of Effort Compared Against the PE License Level of Effort
 © Paul D. Giammalvo, 2012-2013; Creative Commons License 3.0 BY, NC, ND.

Look at the chart! What is going on with IPMA Level D®? You might understand and expect the results for 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 our 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 programs 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 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 advanced certifications. As you can see in the project complexity evaluation at <http://ipma-usa.org/certification/>,^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 who currently hold 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^{®h} Guide? 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 decadesⁱ that the right interpersonal skills, plus the ability to work effectively with the context of your organization (and vendors), are the keys to project and business success. And yet, which PM certifications even consider these aspects of project management?

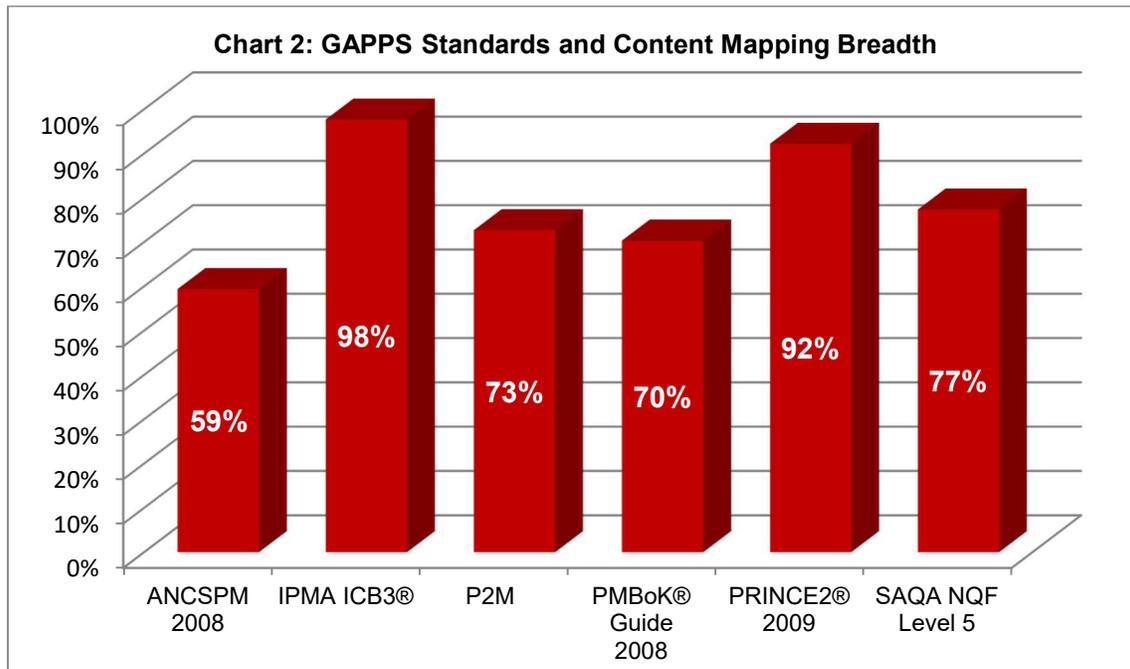


Chart 2, GAPPS Standards and Content Mapping Overview (extracted from GAPPS analysis)

Based on the work done by the volunteer members of GAPPS, the Global Alliance for the Project Professions, Chart 2 above helps answer this “breadth of coverage” question. The GAPPS not-for-profit group of professional associations, corporations, and universities analyzed the scope, or breadth of coverage of a range of available project management certification standards. The details of the research, explanation of the standards mentioned above, and the detailed mapping data are available at the GAPPS website.^j The GAPPS content mapping results in Chart 2 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 (ICB is Individual Competence Baseline; the new ICB4 will score even higher) maps to the GAPPS elements of knowledge, competence and performance needed for successful project managers. The chart also shows the mapping for other PM standards. Interestingly, this mapping inspired a project to evaluate ways to “Bridge” from a PRINCE2 Practitioner certification to an IPMA Level D certification. Other bridging projects might also be interesting 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 even 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 (before short-term memory begins to fade), *and pass*. Better evidence of true grasp is when you present a portfolio of evidence that documents that you have delivered results in each item or element 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**.

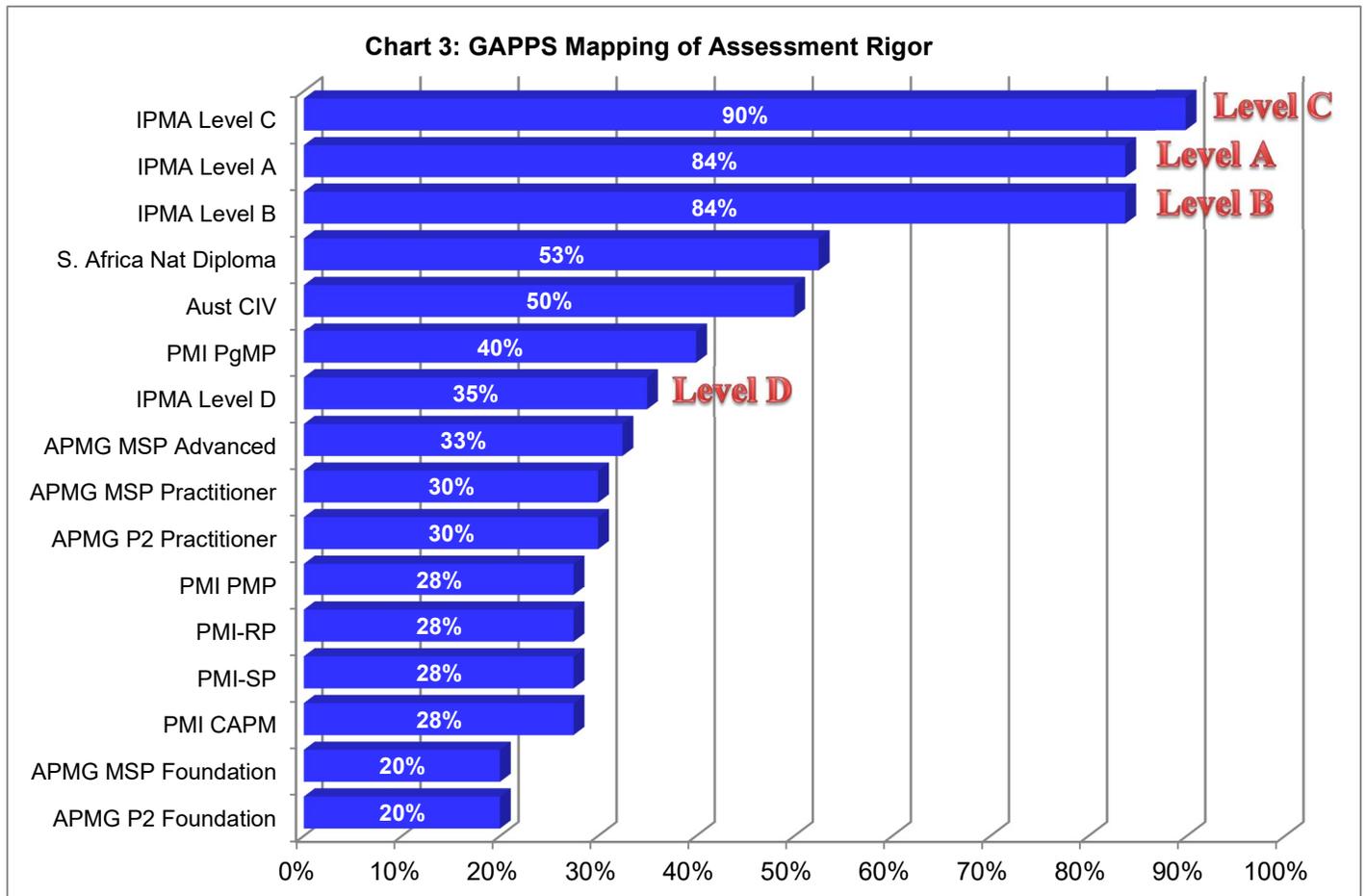


Chart 3: GAPPS Mapping of Assessment Methods for Global Project Management Certifications, Credentials and Qualifications (our graphic is based on an extract from GAPPS data)

Rigor of Assessment is a very subjective criterion, with many “moving parts.” So we searched for publicly-available, neutral-party research. As a result, we used another GAPPS study, **GAPPS Mapping of Assessment Methods**. This study analyzed the rigor in the ways each program assesses the candidate. It compared a range of factors, across a variety of certifications, role specifications and educational programs, 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-C top the list for rigor of assessment. Even IPMA Level D, our exam-based certification, shows higher 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 may not include. This offsets 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 IPMA Level A and IPMA 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 largely 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 program. In the USA and some other countries, it is often PMP® from the Project Management Institute that is popular. Clearly, factor 2 above, *First to market*, has an impact for both certification systems. Europe’s 4-L-C popularity is based mostly on the first four factors listed above. The US certification’s popularity appears to be related to most of the factors. In other parts of the world, 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 some regions.

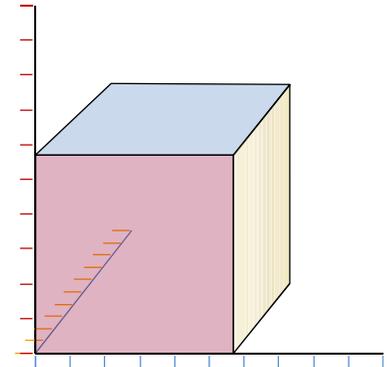
All of which is fine for individuals, but what do organization managers and executives seek? Most are looking for a global certification that has a firm foundation in the factors that lead to project and business success. They are also looking for the flexibility to adapt that certification to their 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, the value of the certification for their needs must be 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 very much benefit from reading and understanding *PMP® Certification as a Core Competency: Necessary But Not Sufficient*, by Jo Ann Starkweather and Deborah H. Stevenson, a PhD team at Northeastern State University, in Oklahoma.

The team’s research focused on Information Technology (IT) project managers, and the results are relatively transferable to other areas. They compared *what IT PM Recruiters look for* with *what IT Executives really want*. The essence of their findings: Recruiters 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. *What IT Executives seek is what IPMA certifications offer.*

Revisiting the Certification Effectiveness Cube

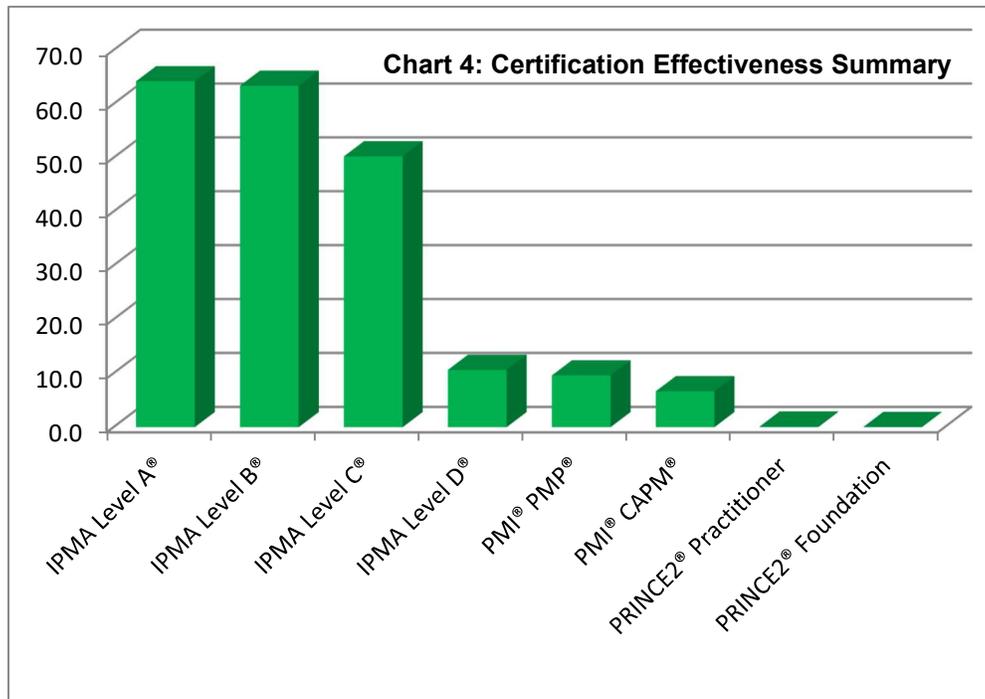
We introduced the “Certification Effectiveness Cube” early in this article. Now that you have explored the criteria that define the three faces of the cube, how should you represent the results of our analysis? A graphic way could be to chart each criterion on a three-dimensional axis, as shown at right.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



$$\text{Prerequisites \%} * \text{Breadth of Coverage \%} * \text{Rigor of Assessment \%}; \text{ or, } 77\% * 98\% * 84\%, \text{ and a total score of } 63\% \text{ for IPMA Level B.}$$

Note that in this analysis, we do not *weight* the criteria; for advanced certifications, you may prefer to weight some criteria more than others. It would be great if all three studies compared the same certification programs; that would make our Certification Effectiveness Cube more complete.

(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



Using the numeric method, we list, and then cross-multiply the scores to determine the *volume of certification effectiveness—our effectiveness cube*. You may prefer other ways to evaluate these scores. See the results in the table above.

We also offer a graphic view of the results at the left. *A reminder:* We have not analyzed all the certifications mentioned in this paper in our summary, but you can see the positioning of three popular sets of certifications in the chart, and in the table at left.

We suggest a caution about our Certification Effectiveness Cube: No matter how they score in our evaluation, **PM certifications do not improve your competence**; they only recognize it. Nor do they improve your business results. 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 map 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 know 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 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 a range of “best certifications,” depending on your needs. There are some educational institutions and training companies that find it to be in their own best interest to promote their preferred certifications. This has the effect of raising the popularity of those 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 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 a variety of PM certifications, and the websites that make assertions about the superiority of a few, there are smarter ways to make rational decisions about your PM certification. So we have used public information to compare, in a relatively neutral way, the most important considerations for PM certifications. We hope this comparison has been revealing for you.

Based on the efforts of Dr. Paul D. Giammalvo and of the GAPPS volunteers, you can explore this compilation of independent studies for yourself to see the areas where today's available 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 marketability, to improve the recognition of your competences, or to improve your performance in your chosen discipline. Thank you to Paul and to the GAPPS team for your useful research and comparisons, without which this article would not have been possible.

Epilogue

Since we originally wrote this article, many interesting developments have helped to move this topic forward. PMI is increasing the breadth of its exam-based certification, and of its recertification requirements; IPMA has produced an even-more comprehensive ICB4, Individual Competence Baseline. Professional associations and practitioners have worked together to produce new ISO Standards. Most professional PM associations are increasing their prerequisites, breadth of coverage, and rigor of assessment. And yet, it appears that, while the improvements are all beneficial to our practices, the scoring results will not change much—because all certifications are improving at a similar pace. The big win is this: We should expect to see more successful projects, and increased rates of business success—our overall objective in writing this paper in the first place.

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Performance Coach*, has coached and inspired tens of thousands of project and program managers, and hundreds of organizations, on five continents, for over forty years. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has also been a strong contributor to professional organizations such as IPMA® and PMI® since 1983.

He is a co-founder and past-president of IPMA-USA, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In September, 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow.

Goff's interest in project competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center for a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s. It continued with international engagements during the 1980s and 90s as he helped organizations assess and improve their project and program performance. Today, he coaches, speaks and performs keynote speeches at major project-related events. And, he continues to pursue his interest in individual, project team, organization, and 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 delivery of effective training 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.

In his papers, presentations, workshops or in consulting, he combines his project experience with strategic linkage for all projects and programs. His insights and experience have provided competitive advantage for his clients for over 40 years. His business result: measurably increased **PM Performance**.

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References

There are many undefined acronyms and certification abbreviations in this article's charts. We urge you to use the links below to visit the sites of those who performed these studies. Just understanding the acronyms will not help you as much as understanding the purposes and results of each study.

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- ^a You can learn more about Dr. Paul Giammalvo's efforts at his organization's website. The article we used is no longer available, but a slideshow with a summary of his positions can be found at <https://build-project-management-competency.com/ptmc-training-standards-and-specifications/>.
- ^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, who in his book "Outliers" made a strong case that to become "professionally competent" at anything, one had to dedicate a 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 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 Member Associations helps each member nation to serve local market needs, while collaborating globally. This structure allows fine-tuning of programs 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 much higher on the prerequisite and rigor scales used in this article.
- ^f IPMA-USA (originally named asapm, American Society for the Advancement of Project Management) is the USA member association of IPMA. It was founded in 2001 by a group of USA "thought leaders" in project management who made major global contributions to the strong growth and visibility of the discipline over the preceding 20-30 years.
- ^g PRINCE2 is a universal project management methodology developed by OGC in the United Kingdom, with an increasingly popular certification program administered by APM Group. This initiative has certified over a million practitioners in the UK, Europe, and elsewhere, 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 Switching roles, here the "we" refers to the author, and our 48 years of professional experience, including 32+ years of global PPM consulting and training.
- ^j The GAPPS website, <https://pmprofessions.org/> (the Global Alliance for the Project Professions), offers many useful resources, including two of the studies used in this article.