

Project Management is Becoming More Professional

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I am a big fan of professionalism, and I am delighted to see that project management, my profession of choice for over forty years, has taken another step forward. I can see how this step can directly benefit many project managers and their projects.

The US Federal Government just passed the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act (PMIAA). Note that the use of the term program management in the federal government is not unlike the term project management in the business world. This legislation¹ creates, for the first time, a formal job series and career path for program managers in non-Department of Defense agencies in the US federal government. It calls for, among other things, the development of a standards-based model for program management, the establishment of a Program Management Policy Council, and the creation of a Program Manager Improvement Officer position in each agency; assessment and reporting responsibilities are included as well.

The main reason I can see this undertaking in a positive light is because I have personally been involved in efforts, somewhat smaller in scope, akin to this one. And, each of those efforts produced strikingly positive results, for the project managers involved, as well as for the project outcomes upon which organizational missions were dependent. As an employee, I led the CIA's efforts to mature project and program management, helped to develop and implement the US federal government's Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers, co-authored a study of the impact of that certification, and helped the Department of Veterans Affairs, as the largest civilian government agency, to create and implement their FAC-P/PM aligned efforts to mature their project and program management workforce. In my opinion, each of these undertakings had much in common with where PMIAA is likely to take us, and, hopefully, it will take us there with equally positive results.

Let's take a look at the Central Intelligence Agency where I spent 30+ years employed as a project manager; that agency was an early adopter of project management. Much of the latter half of my career there was spent helping, and sometimes leading, internal efforts to further professionalize project management. I headed one of those efforts that resulted in agency-wide project management standards, competencies, training, and certification; PMIAA seems pointed in a similar direction. Measurements over time of the impact within the CIA were quite positive; 86% of the participating project managers reported learning skills applicable to their jobs, and the pre- and post-employee assessments identified a gain of a full point, on a five-point scale, from "need some help" in performing project management responsibilities, to "can do well." It would have been

¹ A copy of the legislation is available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1550>

instructive, had the data been available, to see how the impact² of improved CIA employee skills on project outcomes compared to the 20% and more gains in industry.

Fortunately, the CIA was not the only civilian federal agency making notable strides in project management at that time. During the mid-2000s the Federal Acquisition Institute, whose mission³ is to foster a high performing, qualified civilian acquisition workforce, surveyed a number of agencies with notable project management performance. FAI used those results in 2007 as the basis for the competency-based Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM) to establish general education, training, and experience requirements for those acquisition professionals. I had the pleasure of participating in the creation of that new federal standard, in conducting a government-wide study of its impact, and in helping the Department of Veterans Affairs, as the largest civilian government agency, develop and implement their FAC-P/PM aligned efforts to mature their project and program management workforce. A government-wide study of the FAC-P/PM, which I co-authored, found that implementation progress seemed furthest along in agencies where positive project management and training attitudes already existed and was sporadic in other agencies. The report for that study included recommendations to assess program performance using outcome-based measures, provide agencies with additional implementation guidance, and develop a collaborative inter-agency implementation community.

I am pleased, when I read the PMIAA legislation, to find requirements so similar to the study recommendations. I am even more pleased that these requirements carry the full weight of a legislative action officially signed into law. Lastly, I am thankful at the role the Project Management Institute played in helping to bring about this legislation. If this legislation has an impact similar to what I have personally seen and experienced with like efforts, then more agency missions will be advanced by more successful projects, thanks to the efforts of more capable project managers.

About the Author: Michael O'Brochta, PMI-ACP, PMP, is a retired CIA project manager who currently works as President of Zozer Inc., a project management consulting company, and volunteers as Chair of the Project Management Institute's Ethics Member Advisory Group.

² Pulse of the Profession 2016 industry surveys by PMI have found that project outcomes improved by 20% and more when organizations invested in project management training, career paths, and processes;

<https://www.pmi.org/learning/thought-leadership/pulse>

³ The Federal Acquisition Institute is located within the General Services Administration and receives policy direction from the Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy, which is part of the Office of Management and Budget.