



IPMA ICB 4.0 — A global standard for project, programme and portfolio management competences

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Abstract

This paper reports on a four year development project of making the IPMA Individual Competence Baseline (ICB) version 4 — the first global standard for individual project, programme and portfolio management (3PM) competences. The paper further shows: the project phases, steps undertaken and the challenges throughout the development process. The main novelty of the new ICB4 can be found in the set of 29 general competencies which can be applied to project, programme and portfolio environments. The 29 competences are further broken down into Key Competence Indicators to fit each of the project, programme and portfolio environments.

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1. Introduction

The IPMA Individual Competence Baseline, version 4 (ICB4), was launched as part of the IPMA 50th anniversary, during the 28th IPMA World Congress in Panama, in October 2015. It took more than 4 years to develop and achieve consensus amongst 60 national member associations. Nowadays the majorities of the standards are oriented on procedures and processes such as PRINCE2 and MSP by Axelos, PMBoK by PMI. Very few standards are competency-based and specify the competences needed for good performance of people in project environments. Even though there is a vast spectrum of literature written on PM standards (Morris, 2013; Svejvig and Andersen, 2015; vom Brocke and Lippe, 2015), very few standards deal with the competence development of an individual working in the

project, programme or portfolio environment (Eslerod and Huemann, 2013).

Standards can be descriptive or prescriptive. They represent a consensual norm which explains how certain activities lead to a desired result (ISO, 2004). Furthermore, a standard is a document, established by consensus and approved by a recognized body, which provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context (PMI, 2015).

The process-oriented standards (e.g. PRINCE2) mainly prescribe procedures and methods while competence-oriented standards present a wide spectrum of knowledge, skills and abilities that one needs for a successful performance. A process-based standard ensures that company's have a universal approach in managing projects so they can repeatedly achieve consistent results. A competence-based standard would ensure organizations possess people which can perform tasks in project, programmes and portfolios. This shows that these two types of standards should not be perceived as similar or

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opposed to each other, but as complementary — one focusing on the processes and procedures and one on the people.

2. Creating a global 3PM standard

Although IPMA has regularly updated the ICB — this time IPMA set out to achieve a paradigm shift and set a baseline for individuals working in all three project oriented environments, i.e. projects, programmes and portfolios (3PM). The project started in 2010 and took two phases until the final document was drafted. Phase 1 lasted for the first two and a half years. A large quantity of information was collected and a preliminary consensus on the rough standard configuration was achieved. The approach of the Phase 1 was to gather more than a hundred people representing about 60 national member associations, IPMA officers and external PM professionals and try to get to the ultimate overview on the mastery in project management. During Phase 2, the team of 12 took the guidelines delivered by Phase 1 and started to draft the final document. The content was developed through three sub-phases, each followed by surveying member associations and external experienced practitioners in the 3PM field in order to validate the content, but also get more closely to the most important stakeholders, i.e. IPMA Member Associations.

The development of ICB4 took a largely qualitative approach, based on the collective opinion of experienced practitioners as to what project personnel need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be considered competent. The development team employed the method of phenomenography to interpret through the elicitation of examples what individual workers conceive of as work (Partington et al., 2005). Even though ICB3 explained the IPMA Certification system, ICB4 omitted the certification component, with IPMA favoring independence from the certification and instead created a standard that could be used by multiple audiences. During this consensus driven process, IPMA relied heavily on volunteers and committed project management subject matter experts, where the team completely changed the initial success criteria and business objectives. Thus in the end IPMA turned from specific clients or internal IPMA certification process, and focused instead on the users of individual 3PM competences.

3. The new competence elements of the ICB 4.0

The concept of competence remains one of the most diffuse terms in the organizational and occupational literature (Robotham and Jubb, 1996). Although it is over 30 years since that the idea of competency emerged, its adoption within the project management profession for various purposes continues. Crawford (2001) provides a detailed examination of the primary research on project management competence that commenced from 1970s to 2000s. Morris et al. (2006) went step further and explain the role of knowledge in defining role descriptions. Crawford (2005) defined “competency” in three different classifications: input competencies, personal competencies, and output competencies. Input competencies refers to

the knowledge and skills that a person brings to a project, output competencies is related to “demonstrable” performance which can be exhibited in the workplace, and personal competencies are core attributes of a person which capable him/her to execute a job. Therefore a competence of individuals derives from their possessing a set of attributes (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes), and proof of good performance. IPMA took a similar approach and defined a competence as the application of knowledge, skills and abilities in order to achieve the desired results” (IPMA, 2006). A competent person, therefore, is one who possesses the attributes (the input and personal competencies) necessary for job performance (the output competencies).

ICB4 competences are represented by the three competence areas: People, Practice and Perspective (Fig. 1). The 46 competences of ICB3 have now been reduced into 29. The ICB4 has maintained the Eye of Competence from the former version ICB3. However, the ‘eyes’ are now split into three parts representing each of the three competence areas: People (10 elements), Practice (14 elements) and Perspective elements (5 elements). Each competence element is presented by definition, purpose and description and lists the general knowledge and skills one needs to demonstrate in order to master that competence element. The elements are further broken down into key competence indicators which differ by project, programme and portfolio domain, which leads to a total of 134 indicators for PM, 124 indicators for programme and 105 indicators for portfolio management. The indicators are presented by description and measures which are used to assess the output performance.

ICB4 does not detail the competences required for specific roles (e.g. project manager or risk specialist), but rather in terms of what is required in each of the project, program or portfolio management domains. The rationale is that the roles and the role titles vary greatly by language, by industry and organization. Therefore, these do not refer to any particular setting (i.e. projects, programmes or portfolios) but see them all as ‘initiatives’. CEs contain lists of knowledge and skills required

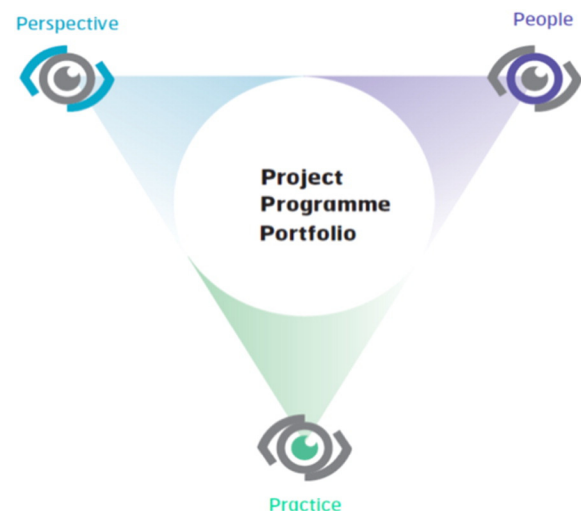


Fig. 1. Three eyes of competence of the ICB4.

to master the CE and measures as proof of performance. The each of the CEs is then further defined by Key Competence Indicators (KCI).

4. The novelties brought by the new version

IPMA has positioned itself to be the first in the market to offer a global baseline of 3PM competencies which is not necessarily connected with the IPMA certification system. Thus ICB4 does not compete with process-based standards and certification systems, but rather focuses on the personal development of the people involved in the 3PM world. Therefore with the version 4, its targeted users are not just IPMA affiliated managers wanting to get certified, but rather constituents like universities, consultancy companies, HR departments etc. The individuals (and their superiors) can thus decide what generic and specific competences they need to further develop in their respective 3PM environment.

ICB4 thus becomes complementary to the other processes based standards as it mostly focuses on the individual and his or her ability to apply certain performance, rather than on activities, processes and techniques prescribed by them. Therefore people working in the 3PM environment and in the personal development discipline will need to acknowledge both sides of the medal: on one side the processes, methodologies, tools and techniques – supported by the process based standards – and on the other, competencies to successfully apply these to the betterment of the project, programme and portfolio results.

ICB 4, has been developed to become the global standard for individual competences in project, programme, and portfolio management environments and complementary to the world's renewed process based PM standards. IPMA's goal was to enrich and improve the individual's inventory of the 3PM competences that, if fully realized, represent complete mastery of the Project Management (or management by projects, programmes and portfolios) discipline. This standard is intended to support the growth of individuals, and also of organizations in developing their personnel. It is crucial to understand that the ICB4 is not a 'how-to' guide or a 'cook book' for project management. Therefore, it does not present the steps involved in project management, but rather is intended to be a companion document to other global, processes' and methodology's based, standards.

Finally, although IPMA has tried to capture the 3PM story holistically, we acknowledge that each theory or model might not be successful to any setting (Koskela and Howell, 2002; Melgrati and Damiani, 2002). The field is just far too vast, occupying almost every industry and human behavior. Furthermore, creating new standards by consensus is a difficult process, where it is arguable as to whether there is any such thing as a "best" solution. Rather as Crawford and Pollack (2008) suggest, standards that reach the marketplace are often the product of lengthy political negotiation and act as accommodated positions between the different professional associations.

Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors and the IPMA.

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