

# Senior management perceptions of project management competence

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## Abstract

As more organisations adopt project management approaches and the demand for project managers grows, there is increasing interest in the competence of project managers and in standards for development and assessment of project management competence. Project management standards are being used extensively throughout the world in training and development, professional certification programmes and corporate project management methodologies on the assumption that there is a positive relationship between standards and effective workplace performance. However, there has been no empirical research reported that supports or indeed questions this assumption. This paper reports on research that explores the relationship between performance against standards and the effectiveness of project management performance in the workplace, as perceived by senior managers. Results suggest that there is no statistically significant relationship between performance against the widely used standards in their entirety, and senior management perceptions of effectiveness of workplace performance. Results suggest different perceptions and expectations of project management competence between project managers and their supervisors, senior management.

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## 1. Introduction

Project management has emerged as a field of practice that is being used increasingly by organisations to achieve their business goals. As organisations define more of their activities as projects, the demand for project managers grows, and there is increasing interest in project management competence. Competence of project management personnel is important as they are seen as having a major impact on project performance and therefore on business performance [1–4] (Fig. 1). As one senior manager says: “*The key to project success is to pick the right project manager*” [5].

Concern for project management competence has led to the development of standards for project management knowledge and practice that are used for assess-

ment, development and certification. Development of such standards has been largely qualitative, 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 assumption behind the development and use of project management standards is that the standards describe the requirement for effective performance of project management in the workplace and that those who meet the standards will therefore perform, or be perceived to perform, more effectively than those whose performance does not satisfy the standards.

Recognising that no research had been reported that validated or even questioned this assumption of a positive relationship between performance against standards, as a measure of project management competence, and perceptions of effective workplace performance, research was undertaken, using empirical methods, to explore validity of these assumptions. This paper reports

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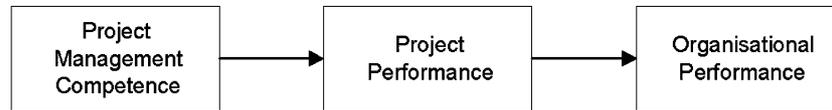


Fig. 1. Relationship between project management competence and organisational performance.

on the results of this research which suggest that there are differences in views of project managers and senior managers concerning those aspects of project management competence that distinguish the “right” project manager.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Rationale for research

Review of the literature indicated that although some research has been conducted into the use of the performance based competency standards in management development [6] and in terms of the impact of management standards [7] on management practices [8], there has been no research conducted to identify whether performance against the standards relates positively to perceived performance in the workplace.

In project management, there has been research conducted [9–14] to identify aspects of competence which are characteristic of effective or high performing project managers. Such research is primarily based on the opinions of project management practitioners. Research and publication in project management has tended to focus on review of practical experience and literature, with relatively few papers drawing on empirical data and even fewer theoretical and model based contributions [15].

Although there has been some validation of the relationship between identified competencies and effective performance in the work of some researchers [11], this work has focused on behavioural or personal competencies in a particular role and environment, and these competencies are not covered by the standards used in assessment and certification of project managers.

The research reported in this paper used empirical research methods to question the assumptions or espoused theories [16,17] of project management practitioners, embedded in project management standards. Results suggest that there is a difference between the knowledge and practices valued by project management practitioners and those valued by senior managers.

### 2.2. An integrated model of project management competence

In exploring the relationship between assessment of project management competence and perceptions of performance in the workplace, it is first necessary to define

the term ‘competence’ and its derivatives and then to break the concept of competence down into component parts that can be measured against standards as a basis for analysis.

Competence was once a simple term, with dictionary definitions such as “*power, ability or capacity (to do, for a task etc.)*” [18] and “*due qualification or capacity, adequacy or sufficiency*” to do a task [19]. However, as Robotham and Jubb [20] state, “*the concept of competence*” has developed “*different meanings, and it remains one of the most diffuse terms in the organizational and occupational literature.*”

Two streams of initiatives, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, were the primary catalysts in the rise of interest and the wealth of rhetoric [21] surrounding the concept of competence from the mid to late 1980s onwards. The competency model, or attribute based competency approach has been most prevalent in the United States, while the competency standards, or demonstrable performance approach has formed the basis for national qualifications frameworks in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

The work of McClelland and McBer in the United States, beginning in the 1970s and reported by Boyatzis in the early 1980s [22] established what may be referred to as the competency model, or attribute based approach. Followers of this approach define a competency as an “*underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation*” [23]. Five competency characteristics were defined by Spencer and Spencer [23]. Two of these competency characteristics, namely knowledge, the information a person has in specific content areas; and skill, the ability to perform a certain physical or mental task, are considered to be surface competencies and the most readily developed and assessed through training and experience. Three core personality characteristics, motives, traits and self-concept, are considered difficult to assess and develop.

The following framework (Fig. 2) was developed, to bring together or reconcile the *competency model* or attribute based and *competency standards* (performance based) approaches to competence described above and provide a basis for identifying and measuring aspects of competence against standards.

This model recognises that competence is not a single construct. According to Heywood et al. [24], competence can be inferred from attributes, which include

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