PMBOK® Guide, Third Edition – Is more really better?
A Review by R. Max Wideman – Part 1
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Executive Summary

The Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge is the Project Management Institute's flagship document upon which is based its accreditation, certification, and training programs. It underpins a major part of the Institute's products and marketing. The existence of a documented body of knowledge in project management is also the foundation of its success in recent years and a credible and supportable update is therefore critical to the Institute's continued success. So this review has been undertaken from the perspective of the potential reaction from experienced project managers, and the credibility and lucidity with which the latest update can be presented to students of project management.

In this review we have found much that we liked, but also areas that could and should be improved. We present it in three parts: Part 1 takes a broader view of the document providing a *General Introduction* and a description of the *Guide Structure* followed by *What we liked*, the *Downside, and Missed Opportunities* that should be of serious concern. Part 2 provides more detail with respect to Sections I and II contained within the document. It too is divided into *What we liked* and the *Downside*. Part 3 deals similarly with Section III. For purposes of brevity, this Executive Summary touches only on the highlights.

What we liked
- This version is more readable than its predecessor and is more consistent in the manner of presentation.
- Almost all section and subsection headings are defined in the Guide's Glossary.
- The Glossary has been carefully edited for consistency of language and relevance to the text. That is, it is specific to the Guide and its philosophy.

Downside
- The Guide takes a complex systems view of project management and includes a process flow diagram for each knowledge area. Not everyone will be comfortable with this form of presentation and the diagrams appear to be overly complex and do not necessarily reflect "most projects most of the time".[1]
- The number of processes has been increased and several of them have been changed and/or relabeled. Further, their content has been significantly revised from the previous version of the Guide representing a wholesale change that may or may not be justified
- Of the knowledge areas, the distinction between the "Core Processes", i.e. scope, quality, time and cost, and the "Facilitating Processes", i.e. risk, human resources, procurement and communications, identified in the 2000 Guide, has been removed. This is regrettable because these groups are two quite different types of essential project management activities.

Missed Opportunities
- The update teams and their leaders appear to have overlooked the fundamental importance of a properly structured project life span (project life cycle) essential for executive corporate control.
- Instead, major focus has been placed on the newly defined Project Management Process Groups,

placing them in a separate Section described as "The Standard for Project Management of a Project". Unfortunately the labeling of these Process Groups in previous editions of the Guide has created great confusion in the market place, because they have been mistaken for the project life span. We think that these project management process groups have much in common with standard operational management control so that re-labeling could have gone a long way to remove the misinterpretation.

- The subject of project scope management has been improved but still results in misunderstanding and inconsistency in the Guide.
- The knowledge area chapters could have been reordered into their logical evolution in the project life span, thus giving the subject of project quality management its proper structure and visibility in the management of projects.

These and other matters are described in the presentations that follow. In our view, the document requires significant attention before being adopted as the latest project management standard. As an aside, it is our view that when a model for regular use becomes too complex or too uncertain to be comprehended by those for whom it is designed, i.e. the average project manager, then it is time to change it. For promulgation as a "standard" such as this, all processes should be simple, reliable and defensible. Anything less could not only damage the reputation of the Guide and the Institute's reputation but even the discipline of project management itself.

General Introduction

The Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, now in its third edition, is the Project Management Institute's ("PMI") flagship document. On it is based PMI's very successful Project Management Professional ("PMP") certification program and associated training and accreditation programs. This Guide has been developed by a large group of PMI volunteer members, in this latest case well over 200, who have an interest in this aspect of PMI's activities. It is issued as an American National Standard.

Notwithstanding, PMI is careful to note that while "it administers the process and establishes rules to promote fairness in the development of consensus, it does not write the document and it does not independently test, evaluate, or verify the accuracy or completeness of any information or the soundness of any judgments contained in its standards and guideline publications."[2] And further, wisely disclaims any liability for "use of application, or reliance on this document."[3] In short, buyer beware!

The previous edition was issued in 2000, and this latest effort has clearly involved a substantial number of volunteer hours. The result has produced a doubling of the number of pages from around 200 to nearly 400. The question is: Does that represent an improvement and does it make sense? The answer is, of course, that there is good stuff and not-so-good stuff, but there are also some serious disappointments. Others may not agree exactly with our findings, but if this leads to constructive discussions and an improved document, everyone will benefit.

In the following pages we will first take an overall perspective and subsequently examine the individual sections in more detail.

Guide Structure

Like its 2000 predecessor, the Guide is divided into sections now consisting of five as follows: The

Project Management Framework; The Standard for Project Management of a Project; The Project Management Knowledge Areas; Appendices; and Glossary. Each section consists of one or more chapters. The second section has taken the previous Project Management Processes chapter and singled out these processes for special attention. As before, the largest section is The Project Management Knowledge Areas, which retain the same chapter numbering and, like its predecessor, the Guide is heavily systems-based following an input-process-output pattern.

"The primary purpose of the *PMBOK® Guide* is to identify that subset of the Project Management Body of Knowledge that is generally recognized as good practice . . . [and] . . . means that the knowledge and practices described are applicable to most projects most of the time, and that there is widespread consensus about their value and usefulness."[4] However, the text is presented in language that suggests a description of current practices, i.e. what *is* done, rather than as a standard conveying to members what *should* be done.

Given that information technology (IT) and administrative type project people now form a majority group within PMI, it would not be surprising to learn that a majority of these same people were also represented on the Guide's contributing team. In any case, the reader of previous versions will observe a significant tilt towards these areas of project management application in both concepts and language. Reflecting this, a flow diagram has been provided at the beginning of each knowledge area chapter.

IT people, and business analysts in particular, will be especially comfortable with this form of representation, even though each diagram carefully notes that "Not all process interactions and data flow among the processes are shown". Another indicator is the introduction of the term "assets", or more particularly "Organizational Process Assets". This is defined in the Glossary as including "formal and informal plans, policies, procedures, and guidelines. The process assets also include the organizations' knowledge bases such as lessons learned and historical information."[5] In other words, it denotes the supporting paperwork.

The question is, will project managers in fields other than IT be comfortable with these types of innovation? As one reviewer has observed: "An attitude that project management is a set of skills misses the point of overall top-down responsibility, as well as individual responsibility all the way down."

What we liked

In this latest Guide we feel that its authors have made the document much more readable with plenty of really good illustrative text with more detail. However, it also means far more to read. They have also made a sincere attempt to "normalize" the text especially amongst the nine knowledge area chapters. This means that there is more uniformity in approach, clarity in use of terminology, and consistency in presentation, even if that is not necessarily true of the content.

In support of this, the authors have completely rewritten the Glossary to reflect the same approach and to define all of the Guide's labels attached to every numbered article in the text. This clarity and consistency significantly improves the reader's ability to understand the import of all the process labels especially those that have been introduced or changed. That means that the Glossary is now specific to the Guide, rather than general, so perhaps this will remove at least some of the controversy over terminology that presently exists in the project management marketplace.

Someone, somewhere, has done a good job of editing a difficult document! In it there is much to be

welcomed, but there are also disappointments.

Downside

With the complicated systems view now adopted throughout the document, one has to ask whether this format is still suitable as a basis for project management learning, and/or as a general project management standard. Since most outputs reappear as inputs elsewhere, and the descriptions reappear accordingly, this leads to extra verbiage and the danger of conflicting information. A similar problem exists with outputs having the same name but generated from different sets of inputs.

While the Guide's authors have added good illustrative examples making the document more readable, it is not at all clear from the text as presented, the difference between the practice being presented for PMP certification learning and that for illustration only. Students of the subject, and their trainers for that matter, will have difficulty filtering out the illustrative content from the serious stuff that they must memorize for the PMP certification exam. The text should be presented so that the difference between content-for-learning and content-for-illustration is abundantly clear.

The question has also been raised whether, with double the number of pages of the previous version, will it take that much longer to study for the Project Management Professional certification exam? There should be no question that the Guide is a "knowledge" document and not a prescription for running a project. Nevertheless a legitimate question is: Does it help anyone to run a project? Perhaps it is time to rethink the approach.

In a previous section we referenced the flow diagrams added to each of the knowledge area chapters. Each specifically states: "Note: Not all process interactions and data flow among the processes are shown."[6] Will this not leave students of the subject in some doubt? Who will answer the question: "What 'process interactions and data flow among the processes' are missing?" The content of some of the flow diagrams also appear to be open to question. We provide a couple of examples under Section III in Part 3 of our review.

Interestingly, the authors have dropped the statement "Project management is an emerging profession" from the Guide's "Purpose". So presumably since 2000 and in their view, the project management profession has now arrived. Whether or not the Guide itself has finally arrived is another matter. The new Guide is more "process heavy" than its predecessor and one wonders if, in chasing all these processes, there will ever be any time left to do any actual project work!

For example, in the 2000 edition there were 39 project management processes. In this 2004 version "seven processes have been added, thirteen renamed, and two deleted for a net gain of five processes"[7] for a new total of 44. By our calculation, that's a total change of over 50%. If all these processes complete with inputs, techniques and outputs, can be so readily shuffled and changed, then how can we be sure that what we now see documented as a standard is truly fundamental to the project management discipline? To be frank, we hadn't noticed these changes developing in practice over the past four years.

The 2000 version made the tacit assumption that each output is generated by only one process resulting from only one set of inputs. Further, with but one exception, each output that is not an end item is an input to a succeeding process. In other words, the whole represented substantial systems logic. This is not the case with the 2004 version where some outputs reappear as outputs from other processes with different inputs. Indeed, outputs from succeeding processes also appear as inputs to preceding processes.

We will explore this in greater depth in Part 2 of our review.

From Appendix A we learn that "The terms 'Facilitating Processes' and 'Core Processes' are no longer used. These terms have been eliminated to ensure that all project management processes in the Project Management Process Groups have the same level of importance".[8] We should not be losing sight of the fact that the core processes ARE different from the facilitating processes. The former represent targets or constraints, i.e. *what* is to be achieved, while the latter represent the mechanics, i.e. *how* it is to be achieved. Therefore, you cannot facilitate until you know what your core processes are producing.

Missed opportunities

And speaking of "project life cycle", if it is possible to revise the labels of so many "standard" processes, isn't it about time that we got rid of the word "cycle" that means endless repetition? The term "project life cycle" is used to refer to the time span of a project, but time is linear and there is no way we can change that. Therefore, "Project Life Span" (PLS) would be much better terminology. We'll use the latter in our following discussion.

Perhaps the single biggest disappointment is in the failure of the Guide's authors to recognize and advocate for the proper deployment of the project life span technique. According to the Center for Research in the Management of Projects, University of Manchester, UK, the importance of this life span process and its influence on the management of the project cannot be over emphasized. This relatively short-term life-to-death environment and the consequences that flow, is probably the only thing that uniquely distinguishes projects from non-projects.[9] A properly formulated PLS, with appropriate "gates" between the major phases, is the vehicle for the sponsor or the executive management of the performing organization to exercise control over the whole project management process. Many project failures can be directly attributed to a lack of a sound PLS process.

If anything needed re-labeling it is the set of five project management process groups. We delve in detail into this misleading state of affairs in our comments under Section II in Part 2 of our review. While the authors have tried hard to clarify this difficult concept, the result is questionable.

And while we are talking about wholesale change, it is high time that the knowledge area chapters were re-ordered into their logical sequence. This sequence was carefully considered, justified, and correctly presented in the 1987 version of the Project Management Body of Knowledge. For those who no longer have access to this document you can read the justification in my latest book: *A Management Framework for Project, Program and Portfolio Integration*.[10]

Unfortunately, the logic of the sequence was lost on the developers of the subsequent 1996 version and, it seems, ever since. The current version makes great play of "organizational process assets (updates)" that, according to the Glossary includes "lessons learned", since it appears as an output of the work of each knowledge area. The credibility of the Guide is challenged when it fails to apply its own recommendation.

The authors have made a serious attempt to clarify the controversial topic of the term "scope". This is good, but the result is not quite conclusive and is not consistently reflected in the other knowledge areas. Again, we discuss this in more detail under Section III of Part 2 of our review.

The importance of quality is once again underplayed, both by its position in the sequence of knowledge

area chapters and its treatment of the term "grade". "Grade" gets only a single passing mention in the document and that is in chapter 8 dedicated to Project Quality Management.[11] We may therefore infer that what is intended here is "Quality grade". Like the three other "core" knowledge area variables, project quality management requires a "baseline" as a basis-for-comparison, i.e. "conformance to requirements". This quality management baseline is the quality grade. Note that "grade", i.e. quality grade baseline, is not mentioned in Chapter 5, Project Scope Management.

The fact is, quality ultimately transcends all else, whether in terms of performance, productivity, or final product. However, a remarkable number of people in the project management industry don't seem to have latched onto that. Who will remember that last year's project was late and over budget? That's all lost in last year's financial statements. It is the quality of the product that endures throughout its life.

One may legitimately question to what extent the Guide's update-team were charged with researching previous Institute documents and current project management texts, given the paucity of references[12] for a document of this importance. It is also a matter for regret that none of the expertise of the senior members of the Institute, its Fellows, was available to the Standards Program Member Advisory Group during the development of this latest version of the Guide.[13] It is possible that soliciting their collective review could have made a difference and some of these disappointments might have been averted.

To be continued

In Parts 2 and 3 of this review we will look in more detail at the Sections within the Guide.

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[1] *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Third Edition, Project Management Institute, PA, 2004, p3
[2] Ibid p-i
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid p3
[5] Ibid p365
[6] Ibid. For example, Figure 6-2, p126
[7] Ibid p302
[8] Ibid
[9] Section 60 *Life Cycle Design and Management, CRMP Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Centre for Research in the Management of Projects, UK: University of Manchester, 1999
[10] A Management Framework for Project, Program and Portfolio Integration (see http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/framework_book/intro.htm for details) pp35-37
[11] *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Third Edition, Project Management Institute, PA, 2004, p180
[12] Ibid pp345-346
[13] Ibid p326