

# Project Manager and Program Manager

## What's the Difference?

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**P**roject manager or program manager—what's the difference between the roles? Many organizations are asking themselves this question, and the answer often varies significantly, even within the same organization. In some circumstances, the titles denote a difference in seniority or compensation. In others, it implies a significant difference in scope of responsibilities and organizational impact. And sometimes, there is no meaningful difference at all outside of traditional naming conventions within an organization.

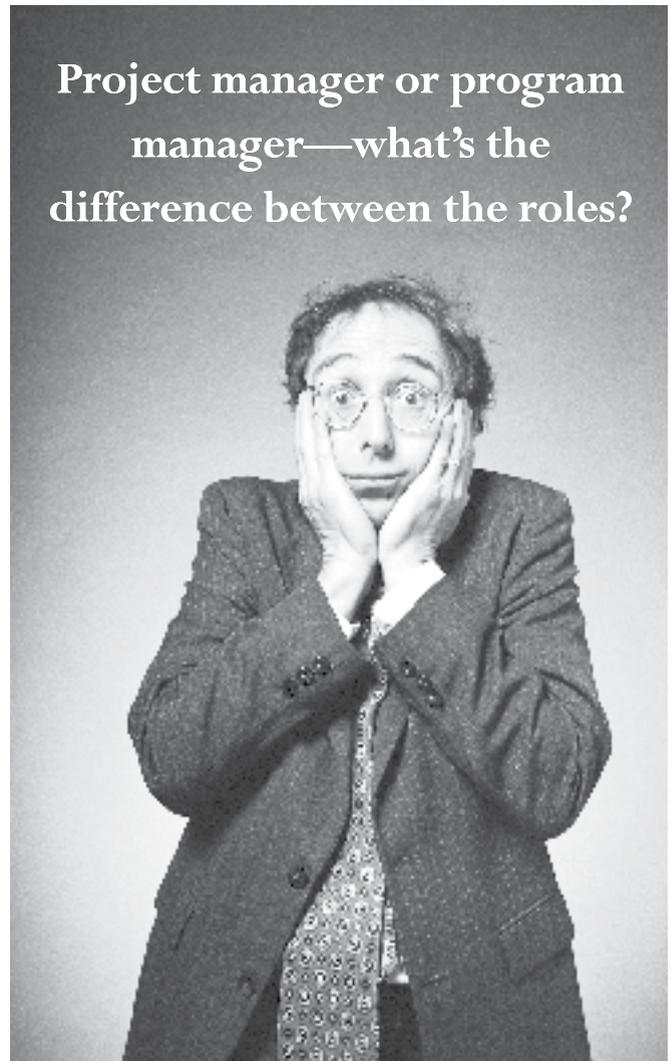
Why does identifying the differences between the roles matter? Because it is important to be able to identify unique responsibilities and important characteristics of any job. Clear role definitions are important in setting the appropriate expectations for individuals in these or any roles. People need to know the definition of their roles and what their duties involve in order to perform their jobs successfully. They need to know how to move toward the next level in their careers. If an organization does not have a clear view of these expectations, there is no way to communicate them to its employees. An employee without clear expectations lacks direction, and that makes it very difficult for organizations to train and develop employees to the competencies that fuel high performance.

Why is it particularly important to understand the differences between these specific roles? Program manager is a role that many project managers aspire to; it is like an über-project manager, often handling the most strategic and important programs for an organization. By outlining the similarities and differences between the roles, we hope to enable individuals to better understand and plan their own careers or the careers of their team members.

For the purposes of this article, these similarities and differences are loosely organized by job focus, challenges, and key capabilities.

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### Differences in Job Focus

The job focus of the project manager is both narrower and deeper than that of the program manager. Project managers are responsible for the project, the project team, and the outcomes the team is working on. Program managers have a greater breadth of responsibilities, oversee multiple project teams, and are held accountable for the overall outcome of the program. There may be numerous projects that feed into a program, and the program manager

## Differences in the Job Focus of Project and Program Managers

PROJECT MANAGER	PROGRAM MANAGER
<i>Narrow Span of Control</i>	<i>Wide Span of Control</i>
<i>Depth</i>	<i>Breadth</i>
<i>Micro</i>	<i>Macro</i>
<i>Project Management</i>	<i>Portfolio Management</i>
<i>Execution &amp; Implementation</i>	<i>Tools, Systems &amp; Processes</i>

must monitor them all and understand how each contributes to the success of the program.

Project managers are responsible for a deep level of technical knowledge about their projects. Often, the success of their projects depends upon their attention to technical details. Program managers may have the same level of technical knowledge, but they are responsible for understanding a wider variety of issues and appreciating the most salient of those issues and the impact they may have on other projects or the program as a whole. In order to be successful in the role, a program manager must often resist the instinct to dive deep into technical details and instead strive to see the projects from a more holistic perspective. While a project manager is focused on completing deliverables and hitting milestones on time, a program manager needs to know how slipping on one deadline impacts other projects and milestones as well as what risks that creates for the program.

Project managers are responsible for the execution and implementation of processes and the use of standard or-

ganizational systems and tools. The role of the program manager is to work with the organization to establish what these standards should be and to oversee the development of the tools and systems to effectively and efficiently manage projects.

### Differences in Job Challenges

Given the differences in job responsibilities and focus, it stands to reason that the challenges project and program managers face in the accomplishment of their jobs are also different.

Project managers face difficulties adhering to processes and using systems that are designed to meet organizational needs. For legitimate reasons, these processes and systems are often developed to support a variety of projects and meet the needs of the business, not the needs of any specific individual. It is the project manager's challenge to interpret generic or overarching guidelines,

### Job Challenges Faced by Project and Program Managers

PROJECT MANAGER	PROGRAM MANAGER
<i>Process Compliance</i>	<i>Process Development</i>
<i>Cross-Functional</i>	<i>Cross-Business/Enterprise</i>
<i>Time Management and People Coordination</i>	<i>Orchestration and People Management</i>
<i>Project Completion on Time, on Budget, and to Expectations</i>	<i>Return-on-Investment and Value Delivery</i>
<i>Conflicting Project Requirements</i>	<i>Competing Business Strategies and Objectives</i>

**By outlining the similarities and differences between the roles, we hope to enable individuals to better understand and plan their own careers or the careers of their team members.**



## Recognizing program and project manager differences can help organizations enhance the impact of their selection processes, training and development efforts, and performance management systems.

processes, and systems in order to leverage those items effectively in a specific project. For the program manager, the challenge is not only to develop systems and tools that can be reasonably applied to a variety of projects, but also to ensure the disciplined application of standard practices and procedures across linked projects that all relate to one organizational program. These challenges involve understanding the perspectives of various groups and meeting diverse and sometimes contradictory needs at a level beyond that of a project manager.

Project managers tend to work cross-functionally, whereas program managers are more likely to work with stakeholders across the entire organization. They both face challenges in spanning boundaries and must work to meet the needs of multiple constituents, but the magnitude is greater for the program manager. Often, project managers oversee projects that serve several internal and external customers. For example, if the project is the implementation of software to track human resource transactions, the project manager faces the challenge of working with information technology representatives, human resources employees, and perhaps accounting and finance specialists. Following along the same lines, the program manager may be charged with the implementation of an enter-

### Top Competencies Per Role

PROJECT MANAGER	PROGRAM MANAGER
<i>Analytical Thinking</i>	<i>Systematic Thinking</i>
<i>Communication Skills</i>	<i>Interpersonal Astuteness</i>
<i>Business Orientation</i>	<i>Results/Goal Orientation</i>
<i>Results/Goal Orientation</i>	<i>Influence</i>
<i>Influence</i>	<i>Team Building/Management</i>
<i>Team Building/Management</i>	<i>Strategic Thinking</i>
<i>Customer Focus</i>	<i>Making Tough Decisions</i>

prise-wide system to track employees and all information related to them from hire to retirement. The program manager is then dealing with customers in other functions as well, often across several business units. In this scenario, the project manager is most likely to interact with subject matter experts, line managers, and other project managers, while the program manager is influencing those at higher leadership levels.

### Benchmark Analysis of Competencies

Competencies are defined as the skills, attributes, and capabilities that characterize high performers. A competency model is the collection of competencies designated to a specific job role or organizational level. We performed studies for a variety of organizations to help them determine what the key competencies are for individuals in both project manager and program manager positions. Competency models developed in partnership with our clients were examined to determine the core capabilities needed to be successful in each of these roles as well as the important differences between them.

Our benchmark analysis incorporated competencies for 16 distinct project and program manager roles across 13 organizations specializing in technology, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, retail, financial services, aerospace, information technology services, and utilities, as well as from the federal government.

In order to suitably compare the most critical capabilities across different roles and organizations, we created a common language of concepts intended to cover a number of different competency names and titles. For example, *Focus on the Customer* in one competency model and *Builds Strong Customer Relationships* in another both fall under the umbrella of *Customer Focus* in our list.

It is important to note that some benchmark competency models also have a greater amount of subtlety and detail than others. In other words, some client models have several competencies that fall under the same concept while others only have one. For example, one project manager competency model includes both *Manage Complex Activities* and *Time Management*. For the sake of the analysis, both of these competencies are counted as one vote for the concept *Planning and Organizing*.

There are important parallels across the roles. For example, *Results/Goal Orientation* is important to both for obvious reasons. *Team Building/Management* is also found on both lists. People in each job must manage their teams—generally in an informal capacity—to set expectations and ensure resources are being effectively executed.

Influence is also an important competency for both roles, though it may be leveraged in different ways. Project man-

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Teleworking—using the Internet, home telephone, and even private fax machines to work from home or an alternative location—is getting more and more recognition from senior policy makers. After all, it’s not just a way to cut down on energy and water costs or to reduce emissions from vehicles.

“A telecommute program would allow employees to work from home when they, or their family members, get sick. Periodic transit strikes, bad weather, traffic incidents, and increased security due to terrorism threats at transportation hubs might also prompt employers to think about setting up a telecommute program,” said John Edwards, chairman and founder of the Telework Coalition, in the Winter 2006 *It All Adds Up* newsletter.

The U.S. Senate recognizes the benefits of teleworking. In November 2007, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee voted to make it easier for federal employees to telework by passing a bill that would allow all federal employees eligible to telework, excepting those who work in intelligence, those who work with sensitive information, and those whose job requires a physical presence. This is a step beyond the previous telework policy, which stated that only those granted supervisory approval could telework. In 2006, the Office of Personnel Management reported that only 111,549 federal employees out of 1.8 million teleworked. That number will hopefully continue to grow.

“I have a 90-mile commute, so it is a long one. But teleworking on an ad hoc basis does save a great deal of time and gas. That time saved is recaptured doing work,” said Paul Ryan, the Defense Technical Information Center administrator. DTIC offers all of its employees the option to telework on a regularly recurring basis or an ad hoc basis, and about 70 percent of the center’s workforce teleworks.

### **Change is A-Comin’**

It’s not going to happen overnight, but change is coming for DoD. Growing energy dependence is risky for department operations, as President Bush pointed out, and there need to be better energy practices. Also, environmentally friendly techniques such as telework can help protect the department from lost productivity resulting from terrorist attacks. Recent policies and orders demonstrate that better accountability for the department’s environmental practices will benefit the department.

Ultimately, there’s just one Planet Earth. Just as the warfighter defends our country, DoD can defend our planet.

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agers are likely to influence *down* or *across* to motivate others to meet deadlines, complete deliverables, or provide information and expertise. Program managers have a greater need to influence *up* in order to gain buy-in at program inception and secure the resources necessary for successful implementation.

As for the differences, the number one competency for each role is telling. Project managers use *Analytical Thinking* to evaluate issues, adjust plans, and solve problems as the project progresses. Program managers, however, must maintain a broader view. They use *Systematic Thinking* to track the interconnections across projects and recognize issues or conflicts that will put milestones at risk.

Program managers also need to understand the impact their programs will have on other areas of the business. Their focus on strategic thinking and the overall business processes differs from that of a project manager, whose customer focus is directed on the short-term needs of internal or external customers.

In terms of the differences in competencies between the two roles, we should note that the program manager is likely to have been a project manager at some point in time and has already developed the skills and competencies required for success in that role. Also, the goal here is to discuss the most important professional competencies for each role. There are certainly other relevant functional and technical skills. That is, just because communication skills are not listed among the most important competencies for program managers, it’s not to imply the skill isn’t useful. However, our data show that communication skills do not differentiate the high performer from the average performer as much as the competencies on our list.

### **What Does It All Mean?**

Although there are similarities between project managers and program managers, there are fundamental differences as well. Recognizing these differences can help organizations enhance the impact of their selection processes, training and development efforts, and performance management systems. Recognizing and articulating the differences in a clear and compelling way will lead to greater productivity and business results.

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