

The PMBOK Guide - A Great Resource, but not a Methodology

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Well, it's that time again. A new release of the PMBOK has been unleashed. When this type of "event" colors your daily life, it is undeniable proof that you really are as uncool as your 13-year-old insists you are. I suppose it's not unlike other disciplines in which people specialize. But, really, one can hardly be considered a party "sparkler" when your conversations frequently involve comparing favorite chapter and verse of the PMBOK.

It's always a bit frenzied when the PMBOK gets refreshed. You can sort of hear the buzz of excitement in the project management community. (It doesn't take much.) Of course, it generates work for some of us, as well, which is always a good thing. The content changes are not necessarily titillating, but noteworthy. Take this 4th Edition, released at the end of December, for example. It certainly isn't any harder to read than the last version. More attention has been drawn to identifying and influencing stakeholders, for example. That's a good thing. And the idea of requirements makes its debut in this version, finally giving project managers a talking point for addressing the relationship between project management work and that of the business analyst. That's a good thing, as well.

With everyone all atwitter about this latest release, there is no shortage of articles about the PMBOK. What's of particular interest to me, however, is that in addition to all the noise about what's changed and what hasn't is the persistent, occasional reference to it as a methodology! This is somewhat surprising given that the PMBOK has been around for over 20 years. More importantly, however, not only is it confusing to think of the PMBOK as a methodology, but it completely undermines its value.

It's my perspective that the PMBOK is less intimidating and has a wider audience than it used to. With over 320,000 PMPs on the planet, most project professionals have at least seen it or have a copy floating around their offices. However, I still get students who grumble (or who have been grumbled to) about the utility of the PMBOK. "No one can do all this stuff," is typically what I hear (or something along those lines). It's as though it's not worth using since failure is the inevitable outcome of trying to implement all 42 processes and innumerable inputs, tools, and outputs. Why set yourself up for failure?

Well, of course no one does all that stuff. It's not a methodology! Only when the PMBOK is understood for what it's intended, that is, to be a collection of best practices with processes selected and scaled appropriately as decided by the project management team, does it have real value. Anyone who reads it with the intention of getting a "how to" lesson on project management is going to be disappointed as well as frustrated. The fact that it's organized by knowledge area in and of itself would serve to confuse if one were to think that those things were organized as some sort of instruction set.

PMI is very clear about the intention of the standard and they state it repeatedly throughout the document, starting with the bold print on page 3:

“This does not mean that the knowledge, skills, and processes described should always be applied uniformly on all projects. For any given project, the project manager, in collaboration with the project team, is always responsible for determining which processes are appropriate, and the appropriate degree of rigor for each process.” (*PMBOK Guide, 4th Edition, page 38*)

Clearly, each project is going to apply *whichever* of these processes and tools and techniques that make sense and scale them to project and organizational need. That’s our call as to what that looks like according to project and organizational need. With this understanding of the intention of the PMBOK, it feels a lot less like a 459 page albatross that we have no real hope of actually *doing*, and a lot more like the tool that it is, a reference of the best practices that work *most* of the time on *most* projects. After all, per page 39, most of us recognize that there’s more than one way to manage a project. The PMBOK just provides us with the whole bag of tricks from which we get to choose.

Now *that’s* a book to keep handy.

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