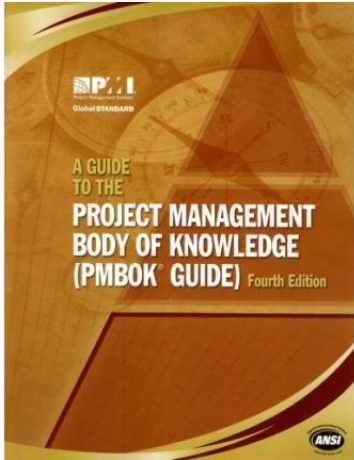


PM World Today Book Review



Book Title: *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fourth Edition*
Authors: Project Management Institute (PMI)
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Reviewer: John C. 'Buck' Field, MBA, PMP
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The Biggest and Best Official PM Standard to Date

The Project Management Institute's (PMI) "A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, Fourth Edition" (PMBOK® Guide), released in January 2009, is the latest edition of the most popular project management standard in the world, and is certain to define foundations of the discipline for the next few years. By several metrics, this revision is the largest overhaul of PM doctrine in history. Readers familiar with the 3rd edition will be repeatedly struck by the feeling this is a critical turning point, that the project management (PM) field is growing in size and complexity at an accelerating pace – a diversification similar to that in information technology (IT) – as greater PM knowledge and expertise is utilized in feedback loops advancing and expanding the PM domain. Of critical importance for new project managers is this edition's inheritance of the mantle for Project Management Professional (PMP) certification content. To their credit, the Guide's development team members maintained earlier PMBOK® focus on building the value and professionalism of the standard, improving the chances for successfully accomplishing project objectives, but added many welcome changes, up to and including a redefinition of project management itself.

The most immediately recognizable changes from the 3rd Edition are in size and presentation of material. The increased bulk of about 80 additional pages results from additional new material and in spite of reduced margins, elimination of some text and illustrations, and streamlining to reduce repetition. A priority developing this edition was the elimination of conflicts between the PMBOK® Guide and other standards; a resolution achieved in part through replacing detailed specifics with more general guidance but more often, the experience and knowledge from nearly an army of contributors was utilized for adding new and

greater detail. Providing unambiguous distinctions between previously confusing concepts, such as PM planning documents and project documents, this level of detail strengthens the lexicon and conceptual & definitional links between terms, at the risk of a steeper learning curve. This cross-standard compatibility opens opportunities for more feedback-based improvements from other standards and for experienced academics and practitioners to build upon the PMBOK® Guide's general foundation to untapped application areas. The number of concepts within the PM knowledge environment is now growing in a way similar to that IT transformation about 25 years ago, when an enthusiast could know all the current topics, issues, organizations, and even the products. Like that explosive diversification of knowledge a generation ago, this transformation of our discipline results from increasing education, competence, and experience managing projects, broader PM application to new areas, and greater depth of research by more people and organizations. Decentralized specialization will inevitably follow as this trend continues.

This massive revision, with its increased size and complexity has also affected the audience for the standard; in fact, the audience reference in Chapter 1 has been removed entirely. Whereas the previous edition defined itself as a reference for "anyone interested in the profession", this is a document *for* the members of our profession, and even within this community it's accessibility is much less than that of past versions, and with a detailed overview we see why, beginning with its structure.

The new PMBOK® Guide is divided into 70 pages of introductory and process information, preceding nearly 300 pages of core knowledge area material. The last 100 pages document references and appendices for the standard. Academics and practitioners will find their respective jobs easier in some respects as the distinctions between processes, process groups, and phases of a project are better clarified. Covering a new, greater volume of more detailed material than the already "challenging" benchmark will be another matter, especially where semester schedules or organization implementation dates are inviolable.

The PMI revision team for this edition removed process flow diagrams, replacing them with well thought out data flow diagrams illustrating upstream processes' documents and other inputs to the current process as well as outflows to downstream processes. These schematics are overlaid on a shaded area representing the current process' knowledge area, intelligently omitting process group membership. These diagrams are often complex, but unusually effective for orienting a group of activities within context, provided a basic understanding of the concepts behind the diagram elements. Before discussing more of the content changes, a review of the context for the development team's revision will be helpful.

PMI likely did not consult philosophers of science when deciding to make the major standards more consistent, but as Karl Popper described, *consistency* is one defining feature of stable conceptual structures. In revising the Third Edition guide, the first objective given the team was to ensure this version did not “conflict with any other PMI standards.” This will lead to establishing a more common lexicon for PM, PM maturity, work breakdown structures, earned value and other standards. Providing greater consistency, PMI is evolving a stronger backbone for standards development: the core language and concepts. This enables broader application and better integration with other standards. Subsequent growth and evolution of our discipline’s knowledge will blossom and diversify in familiar treelike structures with which cognition & PM researchers will no doubt have a field day. Looking forward, we should expect not only exciting future changes by projects implemented with guidance from the new standard, but explosions of interest in the ability to create new *kinds* of change with this Guide, and new abilities to improve its revision, especially those relating to better communications between revision development teams and other stakeholders. With these environmental factors, let’s examine the content of the new PMBOK® Guide.

Having worked on the previous definition of ‘project management’, I approached this edition’s new “Section 1.3 What is Project Management?” with more than a little skepticism. The changes are, I discovered, a great start and they have dramatic implications for practical, real world application and academic theory. For example: it is occasionally the responsibility of the PM to advocate project termination prior to successful delivery of the result due to problems that push the project effort beyond the cost, risk, or other constraints. Revisions of this section better accommodate this need, and show a broader sense of balance, better focus and increasing maturity of the standard. The expanded answer to “What is Project Management?” also better illustrates our field’s dual nature of art and science. The soft skills used in balancing competing demands and constraints within a community of stakeholders is an art, while the disciplined application of “hard” scientific techniques in PM yields solutions and technologies that some consider the primary benefit of science itself. I suspect we obtain greater value when tools and techniques of scientific investigation, (for example, many PMBOK processes relating to risk and quality), enable us to perceive the existence of problems that would have remained otherwise hidden – perhaps until after disaster repeatedly struck. Recognizing new situations in which to ask questions is where our knowledge most dramatically improves. The increasing amount of material in this edition highlights the cost to develop cognitive skills in new areas while the value of succeeding is demonstrated in the strength of the material presented.

Chapter 3 well demonstrates the double-edged nature of these evolutionary advances for the PMBOK® Guide: the introduction to processes begins with an expanded explanation of the relevance of the “process” concept, followed by a

definition and explaining “organizational process assets”, (perhaps addressing criticisms of earlier editions characterizing the term as “meaningless”). Integrated glossing like this adds precision and clarity at the cost of adding complexity. Having authored and presented detailed training on the 3rd Edition, I wonder what effects these changes will have on trainer-learner communications. The addition of complexity that makes the concept of “process” more precisely defined may impede the novice from achieving a basic grasp, although it may be that this increased detail will transform time that would otherwise have been spent in confused anxiety, wrestling to understand the function and attributes of the concept. We might hope students and practitioners may now have better clarity more quickly, with time and experience providing the answers. It seems reasonable that the CAPM certification will take on more importance as the PMP bar is significantly raised.

One common problem for PM's has been distinguishing project management plan documents from project documents, leading to confused, tail-chasing questions about planning a plan for the plan, and “How do we plan that?” The 4th edition addresses this by clearly identifying documents used for aiding the project manager, contrasting those used for aiding the project. Streamlining efforts accompanied much of the added detail and clarifying additions, reducing redundancy where repetition seemed of little value. We see this combination especially in Chapters 4 and 10, as described in Appendix A, which I recommend to 3rd Edition experts as a good place to start. The inclusion of justifications for the changes is a welcome insight into the development process, aiding better understanding and fuller interaction with the concepts in the text as well as the ideas and decisions of the development team. As we interact with these ideas, some are accepted easily, while we tend to reject others, especially if they seem to conflict with methods or ideas to which we are attached.

I must preface my comments here with this caveat: the 4th Edition PMBOK® Guide is relatively new, and I've not completed the inevitable, obsessively-detailed analysis that accompanies preparation of new training material, so the honeymoon is still on...and despite enthusiastic endorsement for this edition, a couple of concerns with it remain; such as the closed, proprietary nature of the standard.

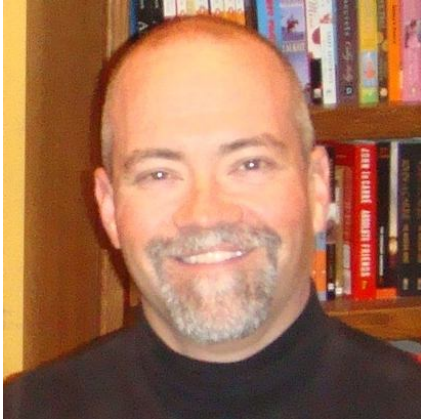
If, as I believe, we all benefit from the broadest possible access of individuals to knowledge and education about PM, the opportunity to freely download a soft copy of the standard should be available to anyone, regardless of their ability to pay. Enforcing what is to many an insurmountable membership or hardcopy cost obstacle, (over \$100 here in Patagonia), may bear reappraisal. In a similar spirit of community support and educational equality aligned with professional ethics, some of the Guide's focus on projects' maximization of profit may be softened in favor of greater emphasis on the ability of project management and individual PM's to contribute value.

In summary, "*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) Fourth Edition*" is the best version ever, period. Working through its dense bulk demands substantial effort and commitment, but one that is repaid handsomely not only with its deep coverage of project management, but compatibility with related PMI standards, stronger conceptual definitions and the structural advantages it has for future expansion of project management.

Highest recommendation!

For more information, visit

<http://www.pmi.org/Marketplace/Pages/ProductDetail.aspx?GMProduct=00100035801>

About the Reviewer:

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Currently living in Chile, Buck Field has been a member of the Project Management Institute since 2001, serving PMI since 2002 as a contributor to the PMBOK® Guide and the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. He co-authored the first official

Project Management Professional training program in China, created the California Department of Transportation's project management glossary, and currently researches project management of revolutionary paradigms in scientific research with the hope of supporting development of technology for faster than light transport.

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