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The PMI-ACP® Exam: A First Look

Written for ASPE-SDLC by Chris Knotts, PMP



*The skills we teach drive
real project success.*

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It's been a month since the first PMI-ACP pilot exams were rolled out pursuant to PMI's new Agile certification, and a number of our expert instructors were among the first to take it. Based on that experience, we thought we'd outline a few observations you might be interested in as you prepare to take your own PMI-ACP certification exam.

The exam is straightforward, the questions make sense and are in tune with the Agile universe.

This should be a confidence booster for you. On one hand, you have no business pursuing the PMI-ACP certification if you're not really into Agile. On the other hand, if you do have experience with Agile, then you can count on the exam being in tune with what the Agile community regards as being relevant methodology.

The exam is focused on Agile in general; it isn't heavily tied to Agile with a project management flavor.

One might expect an Agile certification from PMI to drive practitioners towards a practice viewed through a project management lens. It appears that this isn't the case, and we think that's a good thing. Although we at ASPE teach many useful classes on Agile project management, the first round of pilot exams our instructors have passed indicate that the certification really deals with the entire universe of Agile practice. We've observed questions dealing with conventional PM tools like earned value and estimating, but only as they relate to Agile practices.

As in other PMI certifications, the exam writers employ a "multiple right answer" strategy.

As with other PMI certification exams, they like to present answers with more than one answer that's technically correct. The key here is to understand that PMI adopts core overarching principles about the disciplines upon which they're testing. They grade based on the idea that one answer will most fit their overall principles on the discipline better than others. Therefore, recognizing that more than one answer may be correct, PMI will be looking for a "best" answer based on their core philosophy.

When reviewing your Agile library, some of the books on the PMI-ACP reading list (and a couple that aren't on it) are particularly helpful.

Our initial experience with the exam combined with a bit of research leads us to make these suggestions regarding the most useful books for preparing for your exam. Keep in mind that to date the exam and the certification are in pilot status, so tweaks from PMI are inevitable. However, they seem to have put a lot of thought into the “body of knowledge,” and we wouldn’t expect drastic changes...for now. The real next step will be if and when PMI releases an official body of knowledge relating to Agile, and what status it will have as a global standard. In the meantime, here are the must-reads (or re-reads):

- ***User Stories Applied*** - by Mike Cohn
- ***Agile Project Management with Scrum*** - by Ken Schwaber
- ***Art of Agile Development*** - by James Shore
- ***The Software Project Manager's Bridge to Agility*** - by Michele Sliger and Stacia Broderick

Some have observed that these books are key reads, although they’re not on the list:

- ***Succeeding with Agile*** - by Mike Cohn
- ***Lean Software Development: An Agile Toolkit*** - Mary and Tom Poppendieck

It’s helpful to understand the provenance of PMI’s Agile certification.

Now, having observed that the exam is focused on Agile in general, it’s still useful to remember that conventional *PMBOK® Guide* methodology bears more common ground in principle with Agile methods than many have thought in the past. This is no time to be puritanical. If you take a broad view of both the *PMBOK® Guide* and the general (if as yet unofficial) body of knowledge on Agile, we can’t deny that both are mostly an intelligent bundling of methods that have proven track records and results. Although sophisticated, these methods are based on common sense and pragmatism. Therefore it’s natural that we have overlap between the two arenas. Now, remembering that the ACP is sharply focused on Agile, PMI has initially shown a tendency to remain loyal to existing principles which are compatible with the new certification.

Keeping your eye on the high-level philosophy adopted by the exam writers will help you choose the best answer even when 1) there is more than one correct answer, or 2) you just don’t know the correct answer. Specifically, here are a few key principles originally described in the *PMBOK® Guide* which we judge to be some of the most helpful driving principles behind the new certification. Keep these principles in the back of your mind as you prepare for the exam:

- **PMI principle: Emphasis on communication.** The Agile principle framed here is high visibility. In our PMP preparation course, we emphasize in the first hour of class that project managers spend a majority of his or her time driving communication. This frames the focus on high visibility in the Agile team. The overarching idea in both cases is that processes, people, and projects as a whole will tend to self-organize and crowd

out error when all agents involved have a complete picture of a given situation. On the exam, we observed a particular amount of focus on user stories.

- **PMI principle: Lessons learned/rolling wave planning.** This is the fundamental Agile principle of continuous improvement. In the PMBOK, much emphasis is given to the idea that lessons will be learned in real time as the project progresses. If a lesson learned in real time is counter to a process or a plan that is in currently in place, it is vital to put forth the mental and institutional effort to revise the current process so it aligns with the new wisdom gained by lessons learned. This is entirely concurrent with the iterative nature of Agile projects. The entire purpose of the iterative process is to get to meaningful release points at which lessons can be revealed and incorporated into the next push in the Agile project.
- **PMI principle: Bundling interrelated tools from across all sectors of a discipline into a functional body of knowledge.** Although there is not (yet) a formal “Agile Body of Knowledge” sponsored by PMI, a look at the *PMBOK® Guide* reminds us that PMI’s approach to these disciplines is not one of invention. Rather, it is a gathering and packaging of relevant principles, tools, and processes already in existence that they seek to package. The upshot of this observation for an ACP exam-taker is that all the Agile flavors are there. There’s a lot of attention given to Scrum in particular, but there are questions on Lean, XP, and Kanban as well. If you live only in just one, beef up a bit on the others.

In conclusion, we strongly applaud your decision to pursue the PMI-ACP certification. We believe the certification does a good job of bringing Agile methodologies under a certification umbrella, and even more important is the fact that the time is right for this unification. Agile is an organic, open, evolving set of methods. However, it’s also looking more and more like history will look back on the word “Agile” as the unifying cry of a development process revolution – the turning point when something old was abandoned and something better was adopted. Already we’re seeing Agile getting picked up in the broader project environment – not just software development. Infrastructure, logistics, manufacturing, and construction are all beginning to adopt Agile methods. There will be a need for credibility and unity as this transition continues to take place, and PMI is seeking to drive both with its new credential.

If you seek more information on the PMI-ACP certification, how to obtain it, or how to get trained on Agile practices in general, feel free to contact us:

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