

Character Strengths & Project Managers A Study

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Dedicated to my father Rick Kelly, July 19th, 1930 – September 10th, 2000

And to Project Managers everywhere – Carriers of the Project Flame

“It will take the linking of arms of kindred spirits into an endless chain of advocates in order to tilt humanity towards its better nature”

Neal Mayerson, chairman, VIA Institute on Character

With special thanks to the hundreds of project managers who participated in this study, and the thousands of people who have participated enthusiastically in learning about the core of their personality – Character Strengths

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Summary

This paper is an exploration of which character strengths show up most often for project managers and how those strengths rankings compare with others in the wider population¹. We also look at strengths that are less commonly reported as high strengths for project managers. Finally, we look at the alignment of project managers' top strengths to seven research-based team roles.

This paper presents 5 key findings:

1. **Project Managers surveyed² have strengths profile characteristics in common with the world:** Project managers have four strengths that are most likely to be at the top of their profile and four more likely to be at the bottom, and these are consistent with the general population. These strengths are:

High
Honesty
Fairness
Kindness
Judgment

Lesser
Self-Regulation
Humility
Spirituality
Zest

2. **Project Managers surveyed have strengths that are more prominent than the rest of the world:** Project managers have four strengths that stand out as HIGH strengths compared to the rest of the population. These strengths are:
 - a. **Honesty** – More than **60%** of project managers report Honesty as a top five strength. This is an even higher percentage than for the general population.
 - a. **Perseverance** - Nearly **25%** of project managers report Perseverance as a top five strength.
 - b. **Prudence** – Project managers rank Prudence **6 places higher** on average than the rest of the population.
 - b. **Teamwork** - Nearly **double the proportion of project managers** as general population report **Teamwork** as a top five strength.
3. **Project Managers surveyed have strengths that are less prominent than the rest of the world:** There are two strengths that project managers rank LOWER than the general population. These strengths are:
 - a. **Social Intelligence** – only **26 respondents out of the sample of 461** reported social intelligence as a top five (signature) strength. Social Intelligence is ranked lower, scored lower and is 3 times less likely to

¹ Analysis of the character strengths of project managers in relation to two models of “Virtue” categories was inconclusive so is not included in the summary.

² See Appendix C for breakdown of respondents’ locations. Further research is needed to confirm that these results apply to project managers across all domains and geographic locations.

be reported it as a signature strength This is significant for our role as the main communicator on a project.

- b. ***Spirituality*** – already a low ranked strength in the population, project managers are likely to score and rank Spirituality lower than others.
4. **Project Managers surveyed have two behavioral team roles³ most closely aligned with their signature strengths:** There are two team roles that may be most likely to be motivating roles for project managers based on their signature strengths. These roles are:
 - a. ***Information Gatherer***
 - b. ***Idea Creator***
5. **Project Managers surveyed have two behavioral team roles least closely aligned with their signature strengths:** There are two somewhat surprising team roles that are least aligned with project managers based on their signature strengths. These roles are:
 - a. ***Influencer***
 - b. ***Energizer***

The reason for this study is that a common question, from people who know that I am both a character strengths⁴ practitioner and a long-time project manager, is “what are the best strengths for project managers to have as their top strengths?”

It is understandable that there is a drive to seek out a perfect character strengths profile that will ensure a good fit wherever we go and whomever we work alongside. What I have found over my time working with character strengths and teams on projects, and research backs me up, is that it is less important which strengths we have at the top of our profiles that matters. The most important consideration is how we choose to use our top strengths and how and when we engage our middle and lesser strengths⁵.

While a perfect profile for any role does not exist, it is still useful to study potential patterns that exist in the profiles of the project management community. Patterns influence behavior, learning, and assumptions and may contribute to the success – or otherwise – of project managers, their teams and their projects.

³ Ruch, W., Gander, F., Platt, T. & Hofmann, J. (2016): *Team Roles: Their relationships to character strengths and job satisfaction*, Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI:[10.1080/17439760.2016.1257051](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1257051)

⁴ By character strengths I am referring to the VIA Character Strengths Classification of 24 universally recognized and admired strengths identified in Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C.: New York

⁵ I explore this more in my book Pearce, R. (2018). *Be a project motivator: unlock the secrets of strengths-based project management*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

What this means for us as project managers

Our top strengths of Honesty, Perseverance, Prudence and Teamwork can be tremendous assets on a project. Who would not see plain speaking, determination to see things through in the face of challenge, the ability to plan at the big picture and the detail level as positive traits? Similarly, the inclination to work with others and take on the team goals as our own are generally seen as positive traits. Nevertheless, there can be dark sides to our upsides. An excess of any of these strengths can get in the way of good decision-making and reinforce biases. A concentration of strengths can contribute to the culture of a team in both positive and negative ways.

There are distinct benefits to learning to optimize our use of our top strengths and to balance them with mindful use of other strengths in our toolbox.

Conversely, there is a wealth of research⁶ that shows that social intelligence and emotional intelligence are key contributors to success, innovation, and team health. Humans are built to connect, and if project managers – even some of them – struggle with the strength that most supports this connection, it behooves us to look at ways to bolster this strength or to mindfully blend our other strengths to bridge the gap.

Fortunately, it is possible to develop a strength, collaborate with others to leverage their strengths, and to blend other strengths to create other pathways to the same result. Also, focusing on character strengths – our own and the strengths of others – presents a simple and accessible way to build social intelligence and connection.⁷

Why Character Strengths matter:

Understanding which strengths show up more strongly and less strongly for us as project managers provides us with insights into how we may:

1. Impact the culture of our team by valuing some strengths over others.
2. Face conflicts because of strengths clashes or encounter group think because of strengths overlaps.
3. Identify strengths that we want to work on and develop.
4. Consider how our strengths affect our communications, interactions, fact seeking and decision-making.

⁶ See for example: Ebrahimipour, H, et al. “The Study of Relationship Between Social Intelligence and Organizational Performance (Case Study: Ardabil Regional Water Company’s Managers).” *International Journal of Organizational Leadership*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 1–10., doi:10.33844/ijol.2013.60352.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201407/what-is-social-intelligence-why-does-it-matter>

Goleman, D. *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships*. Bantam Books, 2007.

⁷ See Pearce, R. (2018). *Be a project motivator: unlock the secrets of strengths-based project management*.

Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. for ideas on how project managers can use character strengths to build teams.

5. See how some roles are a more natural fit for us within a team and how others may leave us depleted and uninspired.
6. In the future we can explore whether individual project managers are more naturally drawn to one or more phases of a project over another based on their character strengths profile. For example, people high in prudence, curiosity, creativity, humility and perspective may be drawn to the initiation and planning stages of a project but feel increased stress during execution. Those higher in hope, perseverance and teamwork may gravitate to the execution phase but be frustrated during planning.

Why this study?

Reviewing all twenty-four strengths (see appendix A), there do not appear to be any strengths that would be disadvantageous to a project manager although it is not hard to see that inappropriate use – too much or too little – of any of the strengths might cause problems.

Indeed, experience and research show that the key indicators of success with character strengths are:

- Knowing, growing, and showing your own strengths – which may be called ***strengths mindfulness***.
- Seeing, cultivating, and applying the strengths of others – which may be called ***strengths spotting and calling***.
- Exploring new ways to apply our strengths to get the biggest result from our best attributes – which may be called ***strengths broadening***.

To assist in exploring whether there is anything different about a project managers' profile than the general population, there are two comparison groups used in the report. The first is a sample of 634,934 US takers of the survey. Their average results are used to compare rankings and raw⁸ scores for each of the strengths to the rankings and scores given by project managers.⁹

The second comparison sample is of more than 4286 people who took the survey and whose signature (top 5) strengths were identified. This sample is used to compare the incidence of particular signature strengths being reported between the comparison group and the group of project managers¹⁰.

⁸ Raw scores are calculated by summing the score for each person in the group for that strength. They are “raw” because they are not adjusted to take account of the way that different people self-report. For example, some respondents will rarely or never use the extremes of the scale – strongly agree or strongly disagree – meaning that all their raw scores will be between 4.0 and 2.0. For others, there is a tendency to hold preferences strongly which can lead to more scores at the extremes.

⁹ McGrath, R.E. (2014): *Character strengths in 75 nations: An update*, The Journal of Positive Psychology, Dedicated to furthering research and promoting good practice.

¹⁰ McGrath, R.E. (2017). *Technical Report: The VIA Assessment Suite for Adults: Development and initial evaluation*. Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

I. Introduction

A discussion of project manager traits seems especially pertinent now as the Project Management Institute (PMI) plans to roll out changes to the Project Management Professional (PMP) exam. These changes were scheduled to roll out in mid-2020, but during the writing of this paper implementation was delayed.

The framework for the exam that was published in 2015 was the five domains of¹¹:

- Initiating (13%)
- Planning (24%)
- Executing (31%)
- Monitoring and Controlling (25%)
- Closing (7%)

The proposed new framework for 2020 and beyond^{12,13} is:

- People (42%)
- Process (50%)
- Business Environment (8%)

With the increased and specific focus on people, which comprises fourteen tasks, including team building, conflict management, stakeholder collaboration and mentoring, understanding the positive personality traits of character strengths becomes relevant to the practice of project management but also the certification process¹⁴.

The Project Management Institute opens their description of project managers thus:

“They are organized, passionate and goal-oriented who understand what projects have in common, and their strategic role in how organizations succeed, learn and change. [Prudence, Judgment, Perspective, Perseverance, Zest, Hope]¹⁵

*Project managers are **change agents**: they make project goals their own and use their skills and expertise [Prudence, Judgment, Perspective] to inspire a sense of shared purpose [Leadership, Hope, Social Intelligence, Teamwork] within the project team. They enjoy the organized adrenaline of new challenges and the responsibility of driving business results.*

¹¹ Retrieved from: <https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/certifications/project-management-professional-exam-outline.pdf>

¹² Retrieved from: <https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/certifications/pmp-examination-content-outline-july-2020.pdf>.

¹³ At the time of writing the implementation of this change has been delayed based on feedback from members.

¹⁴ Other models of project management practice certification are included in the appendix for comparison.

¹⁵ Strengths listed in blue are suggested by the author as strengths that align with the described role of the project manager.

*They work well under pressure and are **comfortable with change and complexity in dynamic environments**. [Self-regulation, Judgment, Perspective, Leadership] They can shift readily between the "big picture" and the small-but-crucial details, knowing when to concentrate on each. [Perspective, Prudence, Social Intelligence] Project managers cultivate the **people skills** [Social Intelligence, Teamwork, Kindness, Leadership] needed to develop trust and communication among all of a project's stakeholders: its sponsors, those who will make use of the project's results, those who command the resources needed, and the project team members."¹⁶*

Looking at the description of a project manager above, and based on conversations with many project managers at conferences, workshops and in workplaces, it might be expected that certain strengths would be prominent in our profiles.

Reflecting on stop strengths with others in many settings, some that have been called out as useful or even essential for project managers¹⁷ are:

Hope – to keep people positive about outcomes and engaged in projects for the long haul.

Judgment – Analytical, examining things from all sides, not jumping to conclusions and weighing the evidence before making a decision

Perspective – Taking the big picture view, giving wise advice, helping others make sense of the world, learning from mistakes

Prudence – wisely cautious, conscientious and make a plan, don't take undue risks

Social Intelligence – paying close attention to social nuances and the emotions of others, having insights into what makes people tick, knowing what to say and do in a social situation¹⁸

Others that are mentioned by project managers that I meet as possible supporting strengths are **Humor** – being playful and making people laugh and smile – **Perseverance** – keeping going with a goal in mind, overcoming obstacles - and **Zest** – enthusiastic, energetic and activated.

Since the early 2000's the VIA institute on Character has been collecting data on our character strengths. Using the VIA Character Strengths Survey, they have collected responses from over 7,500,000¹⁹ people worldwide on what makes us tick. Evidence-based, peer-reviewed, and used in a wide variety of contexts from school

¹⁶ <https://www.pmi.org/about/learn-about-pmi/who-are-project-managers>

¹⁷ This is anecdotal based on many conversations with project managers about strengths that are desirable. Specific research to identify the top strengths of effective project managers has not yet been conducted. This list is offered to provoke consideration and discussion going forward.

¹⁸ One participant in a workshop suggested that social intelligence was a negative trait for a project manager because being overly sensitive to others could distract from completing the project and meeting deliverables.

¹⁹ <https://www.viacharacter.org/about>

to work, parenting and relationships to people facing depression and anxiety, the VIA Character Strengths Survey offers an interesting, readily accessible tool for exploring the positive aspects of our personality and, beyond that, the culture of the teams and workplaces in which we operate.

For several years now, I have been curious to see what patterns there are – if any – in the character strengths manifested by project managers. Are there strengths that consistently show up ranked higher – or lower – in project managers than for others? I have been a project manager myself for over 25 years, and as my understanding of teams, organizational culture, and personal strengths has grown, I have come to better appreciate the ways in which my character strengths have contributed to my development as a project manager and my interaction with colleagues. For example, as someone high in appreciation of beauty and excellence, I find I am comfortable highlighting the contributions of others and acknowledging their skill. As someone high in fairness, I am motivated to include the voices and views of as many people as possible.

As a result of my curiosity about the character strengths of my fellow project managers, I have been asking people to take the free survey and share their results with me. I am grateful to all those who have been willing to go on this journey of exploration with me. More than a year ago, I shared results of preliminary surveys completed by project managers who I had met online, at conferences, and in workshops. Those initial results seemed to point to some areas in which we rank strengths higher than others – and some areas where we rank them lower. However, those initial results were based on a relatively small sample and it was not possible to verify that all the responses were, in fact from project managers. Consequently, with a larger sample of verified project managers, the results in several cases have changed.

This paper is a review of the results of a much larger study – 461 surveys – taken by people whose role as a project manager has, as far as possible, been verified.

Caveats:

1. This paper focuses on aggregated results, and averages gleaned from the responses. The intent is to help consider the opportunities for project managers to hone their strengths use to become more effective. However, mixed into those averages there are of course outliers. As you will see, Social Intelligence is a strength that on average we rank lower than other people. Even so, there are responses included in the sample that show that some project managers rank social intelligence very high. Some even have this strength as a top strength or "signature" strength meaning that it is a strength that they are likely to bring to every domain of life and to use most if not all the time. It is even likely that these people are known for this strength. All this is to say we should not expect to use a broad brush to wash over the fact that there are some of us hold each of the strengths very dear.

2. The results reported here indicate certain patterns and strengths concentrations across the sample of 461 people. However, if when the results of smaller sub-groups of this overall group are examined, they may show other more localized concentrations of strengths.
For example, the overall group of 461 does not show up particularly strongly in Forgiveness, ranking this strength 19 compared to the US ranking of 17 and having an average raw score of 3.71 compared to the US average raw score of 3.8²⁰, and yet it ranked very highly in one group of project managers attending a workshop I was leading. In that particular group it ranked as an overall signature strength for the group.²¹ This is further demonstration of the potential pitfalls of applying averages from a large group to smaller teams. It only serves to emphasize how a team culture may come partly from a concentration of strengths.

Some useful character strengths facts:

1. There are 24 character strengths per the 2004 Character Strengths & Virtues publication.
2. We all have the capacity to express and experience each of the strengths to some degree.
3. The strengths are the ones that are universally regarded as worthy independent of geographic location, religion, culture, language and so on. Thus, some strengths that some expect to be listed – such as ambition or drive – are not included because not every culture sees them as virtuous and desirable.
4. Character strengths are easily recognizable.
5. Character strengths are positive aspects of our personality²².
6. A person's strengths profile tends to be relatively stable over time. However, it can change as a result of major life experiences (positive or negative) **and** through deliberate practice.

This last point is of particular significance in relation to the results shared here. If project managers do not like the results, it is possible to change them! Project

²⁰ McGrath, R.E. (2014): *Character strengths in 75 nations: An update*, The Journal of Positive Psychology, Dedicated to furthering research and promoting good practice.

²¹ One of the things that we explore in each group that I work with is the culture of the group. Concentrations of signature strengths create a team or organizational culture and it can be useful to consider the impact on the team or organizational performance of such concentrations – for both the “in-group” of people who share that character strength as a high strength, and for the “out-group” of people for whom the strength does not rank high. Building a team profile of signature strengths is a very useful first step to understanding the team culture. This particular group discovered that their focus on forgiveness, while useful in avoiding blaming and shaming when things go wrong can also result in a failure to complete root cause analyses and doom the group to repeat the same mistakes.

²² McGrath, R., Hall-Simmonds, A. & Goldberg, L. (2017). *Are Measures of Character and Personality Distinct? Evidence From Observed-Score and True-Score Analyses*. Assessment. DOI: 10.1177/1073191117738047
For a contrary opinion see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/curious/201810/making-sense-character-strengths> by Todd Kashdan.

managers can learn to use their lower strengths more and their top strengths optimally.

A brief introduction to signature strengths

In the world of character strengths, we each have some strengths that are more core to our everyday existence, than the others. These strengths, which are generally the top ranked strengths in our profile, are known as signature strengths. They meet the criteria of the 3 E's.

1. *Essential* – they are the essence of who we are
2. *Effortless* – we manifest these strengths with ease and often without much apparent thought.
3. *Energizing* – we feel good when we are using our strengths. We feel authentic and true to ourselves.

While some people have 7 or more signature strengths, a good working number is 5. So, for the purposes of this paper, when I refer to signature strengths, I am referring to the strengths ranked 1 – 5 in an individual's profile. You will see that in one place, I have made a comparison to the top 6. This is for the purpose of demonstrating that the results do not change significantly when we add in an extra strength.

Method:

461 project managers (verified by a combination of job title, certification and self-identification) took the VIA Character Strengths Survey²³ ("VIA Survey") over a period of approximately two years. During that time the questions contained in the VIA Survey were not changed.

Comparisons were made based on both average ranking and average raw scores²⁴ as well as by analyzing the concentration of project manager signature strengths in comparison to the reference sample used in the VIA Technical Report²⁵.

It is important to consider this is a high-level study of the strengths of project managers. There is no suggestion in this paper that character strengths are predictors of project manager effectiveness. Tying strengths to effectiveness requires additional data and research.

Comparisons are made to the average results for 634,934 US respondents²⁶. This is because 381 of the project manager responses were from the US or did not provide

²³ All respondents took the VIA-120 survey. This survey has been updated and replaced by the VIA-IS-R as of mid-2019. In particular, the new version of the survey has improved measures for the strengths of Spirituality and Leadership. Any new takers of the survey will be taking the VIA-IS-R.

²⁴ Answers to the survey are scored using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 = very much like me, 4 = somewhat like me, 3 = neither like nor not like me, 2 = somewhat unlike me 1 = very much unlike me.

²⁵ McGrath, R.E. (2017). *Technical Report: The VIA Assessment Suite for Adults: Development and initial evaluation*. Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

²⁶ *Character Strengths in 75 nations: An update p2*

their country of origin. Research shows that worldwide results are highly correlated with the US strengths scores and rankings²⁷. Using a general population as a comparison is also assumed to be a fair representation of the people we work with.²⁸

The results were compared in three ways to general VIA Survey results.

1. General ranking of each strength compared to the general ranking for US respondents^{29,30}
2. Average raw score for each strength compared with average US raw scores
3. How often each character strength was identified as a signature strength (for the purposes of this study defined as top 5 strengths AND top 6 strengths)³¹

²⁷ *Character strengths in 75 nations*, P3

²⁸ There is no way to exclude project managers from the large sample which affects the results comparisons.

²⁹ *Character strengths in 75 nations* P4

³⁰ *Character strengths in 75 nations* concludes that ranking differences between the US and other countries is not significant. The report also highlights that there is a bias in their data which reflects education level and internet access. However, for the purposes of our discussion the bias is not overly concerning as the same attributes are likely to be true for our sample of project managers.

³¹ The VIA sample was 4286. See McGrath, R.E. (2017). *Technical Report: The VIA Assessment Suite for Adults: Development and initial evaluation*. Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

II. Survey Results Reveal Opportunities for Project Managers

i. Overview of Project Manager Strengths Compared with US population

The table below provides a general overview of project managers scores and rankings compared to the US population.

Figure 1 How project managers score and rank character strengths

Strengths ordered by PM Average Raw Score	PM Ave Score	US Ave Score	Diff as %age of US score	Strengths ordered by PM Average Ranking	PM average rank
Honesty Score	4.41	4.03	9.3%	Honesty Rank	5.4
Judgment Score	4.28	4.01	6.8%	Fairness Rank	6.9
Fairness Score	4.24	4.03	5.2%	Judgment Rank	7.6
Kindness Score	4.10	4.01	2.3%	Kindness Rank	9.6
Perseverance Score	3.98	3.72	6.9%	Love Rank	10.6
Leadership Score	3.94	3.81	3.4%	Perseverance Rank	11.0
Love Score	3.91	3.97	-1.4%	Teamwork Rank	11.0
Teamwork Score	3.90	3.78	3.2%	Curiosity Rank	11.7
Curiosity Score	3.86	3.99	-3.2%	Humor Rank	12.0
Humor Score	3.85	3.9	-1.2%	Gratitude Rank	12.0
Gratitude Score	3.83	3.99	-4.0%	Leadership Rank	12.1
Love of Learning Score	3.82	3.79	0.7%	Creativity Rank	12.7
Perspective Score	3.80	3.84	-1.1%	Love of Learning Rank	12.8
Hope Score	3.76	3.73	0.9%	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence Rank	13.0
Creativity Score	3.75	3.77	-0.5%	Prudence Rank	13.0
Prudence Score	3.72	3.54	5.1%	Hope Rank	13.2
Forgiveness Score	3.72	3.63	2.4%	Forgiveness Rank	13.2
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence Score	3.67	3.76	-2.3%	Perspective Rank	14.0
Social Intelligence Score	3.64	3.83	-4.8%	Bravery Rank	14.3
Bravery Score	3.58	3.71	-3.5%	Social Intelligence Rank	15.6
Humility Score	3.56	3.47	2.7%	Humility Rank	16.1
Zest Score	3.56	3.64	-2.1%	Zest Rank	16.7
Self-Regulation Score	3.27	3.36	-2.7%	Spirituality Rank	17.1
Spirituality Score	3.20	3.58	-10.5%	Self-Regulation Rank	18.5
Score Spread	1.21	0.45			

Note: This is the only place in this paper where we use the average of the strengths rankings rather than using scores to create the rankings. The purpose of this exploration of the average rankings is to identify strengths clusters (highlighted in shades of blue) – groups of strengths that rank close together – and to highlight strengths “standouts” – individual strengths that rank significantly differently from the strengths around them (highlighted in yellow). For example, Social intelligence and Self-regulation as lower strengths, and Honesty, Fairness, Judgment and Kindness as top strengths.

The table highlights some interesting findings:

1. There is no significant difference in the ordering of the strengths of project managers based on average scores vs average strength rank³².
2. The spread of raw scores is almost three times larger for project managers than it is for the population at large suggesting a significant spread between the highest scoring strengths and the lowest for project managers. In the wider population the raw scores are more tightly grouped.
3. Four of the top strengths for project managers – Honesty, Fairness, Judgment, and Kindness - coincide with those for the larger population but project managers score three of those four strengths – Honesty, Judgment, and Fairness - significantly higher than the overall population.
4. The first three strengths also rank significantly higher in project managers on average than the other 21 strengths.
5. There are several groups of strengths that do not rank very differently to each other (these are marked in groups by the blue color coding.) For example, the difference in average ranking for Love, Perseverance and Teamwork is small, similarly for Curiosity, Humor, Gratitude and Leadership – there is little difference between an average ranking of 11.7 and 12.1.
6. The average ranking of Social Intelligence at 15 as well as its lower average score suggest that this is a middle ranked or lesser strength for most project managers, and this is borne out by the much lower percentage of project managers (5.64%) than the rest of the world (16.2%) reporting it as a signature strength (see section I-ii below).
7. Prudence and Perseverance seem to be special strengths for project managers based on:

³² At first look, this may seem like a truism. However, it is possible to get different results particularly as the sample size increases. See table below for example:

Averaging raw scores and averaging rankings can produce different results. Ties are separated by an algorithm built into the character strengths survey that takes account of the spread of raw scores across the questions related to each measure.

Strength	PM 1 Score	PM 1 Rank	PM 2 Score	PM 2 Rank	PM 3 Score	PM 3 Rank	Ave. rank	Ave. score	Ranking based on Ave. score
Honesty	4.2	1	4	1	3.8	3	2	4.0	1
Curiosity	4	2	3.8	2	4	2	2	3.9	3
Bravery	3.8	3	3.8	3	4.4	1	2	4.0	2
Prudence	3.6	4	3.6	4	3.6	5	4	3.6	4
Perseverance	3.4	5	3.6	5	3.8	4	5	3.6	5

- a. Average project manager rankings of Prudence - 13 and Perseverance - 11.
- b. Strengths order based on average raw scores of 17 (compared with 22 in the US) and 5 (compared with 17 in the US).
- c. Higher average raw scores – higher in project managers by 5.1% and 6.9% respectively.

There is further analysis of average raw scores and average strength ranking in later sections.

ii. Strengths as signature strengths and lesser strengths

One way to make the comparison between groups is to look at how frequently project managers report each strength as a signature strength compared with VIA Survey respondents overall.

Without access to data for which strengths are *most* commonly reported as lesser strengths, the strengths *least* often reported as signature strengths are used as a proxy for that number. This appears to be a reasonable approach as the least often reported signature strengths are aligned with the lowest ranked strengths from the previous sample.

Figure 2 Comparison of signature strengths between US and Project Managers

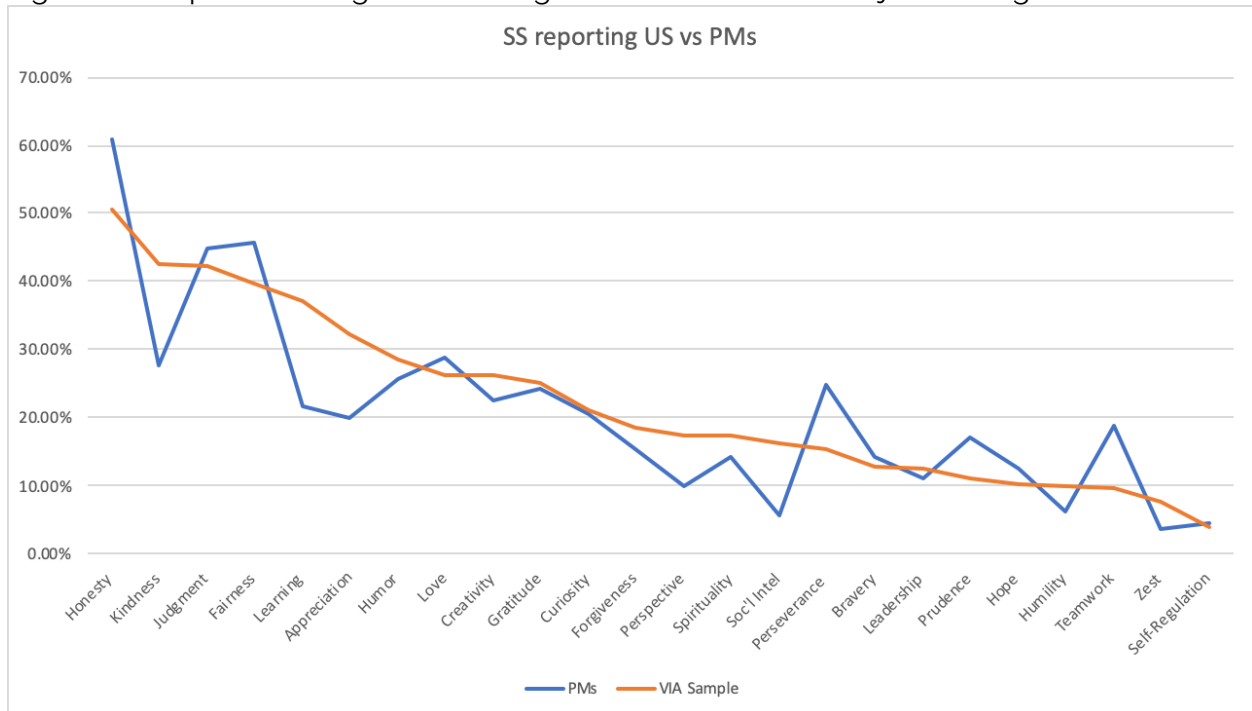


Figure 3 Table representation of Figure 2

	PM Score	US Score	Diff		PM Score	US Score	Diff
Honesty	61%	50.6%	10.4%	Perspective	9.8%	17.4%	-7.6
Kindness	27.8%	42.5%	-14.7%	Spirituality	14.3%	17.3%	-3%
Judgment	44.9%	42.3%	2.6%	Social Intel	5.6%	16.2%	-10.6%
Fairness	45.6%	39.8%	5.8%	Perseverance	24.7%	15.2%	9.5%
Learning	21.7%	37.2%	-15.5%	Bravery	14.3%	12.7%	1.6%
Appreciation	20%	32.3%	-12.3%	Leadership	11.1%	12.5%	1.4%
Humor	25.6%	28.4%	-2.8%	Prudence	16.9%	11.1%	5.8%
Love	28.9%	26.2%	2.7%	Hope	12.4%	10.2%	2.2%
Creativity	22.6%	26.2%	-3.6%	Humility	6.3%	9.8%	-3.5%
Gratitude	24.3%	25.2%	-0.9%	Teamwork	18.9%	9.6%	9.3%
Curiosity	20.4%	21.0%	-0.6%	Zest	3.7%	7.6%	-3.9%
Forgiveness	15.2%	18.4%	-3.2%	Self-Regulation	4.3%	3.8%	0.5%

These results highlight why Honesty is reported as a special strength for project managers even though the general population also ranks it number 1. As the table shows, 61% (281 people out of 461) of the project managers in the sample report Honesty as a top five strength compared with 50.6% (already a significant proportion) of the US population. This means project managers are 20% more likely to report Honesty as a top five strength³³.

Project managers are 50% more likely to report Prudence and over 60% more likely to report Perseverance as a top five strength. These two strengths also seem to be candidates for being special strengths for project managers. These two strengths appear to be very much in line with the work of most project managers as they are the planning strength and the keep going strength respectively.

Only 2/3 the proportion of project managers compared with the general U.S. population report Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Kindness, and Love of Learning as signature strengths. Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence has not been found to significantly relate to work performance or to the sense of work being a calling^{34 35}. Love of Learning is a strength that has been identified that is required

³³ This is interesting in light of research into the strengths of top executives which showed that honesty was the biggest differentiator in terms of performance: Sosik, J. J., Gentry, W. A., & Chun, J. A. (2012). The value of virtue in the upper echelons: A multisource examination of executive character strengths and performance. *Leadership Quarterly*, 23, 367-382.

³⁴ See for example: Gorjian, N. (2006). Virtue of transcendence in relation to work orientation, job satisfaction and turnover cognitions. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 67(2-B), 1190.

³⁵ See for example: Money, K., Hillenbrand, C., & Camara, N. D. (2008). Putting positive psychology to work in organizations. *Journal of General Management*, 34 (2), 21-26.

in the workplace and at the same time is often used more than individuals are comfortable with³⁶.

Approximately 1/3 the number of project managers report Social Intelligence as a top five strength (26 people instead of the expected 75).

Project managers are nearly twice as likely to report Teamwork as a top five strength as the US population.

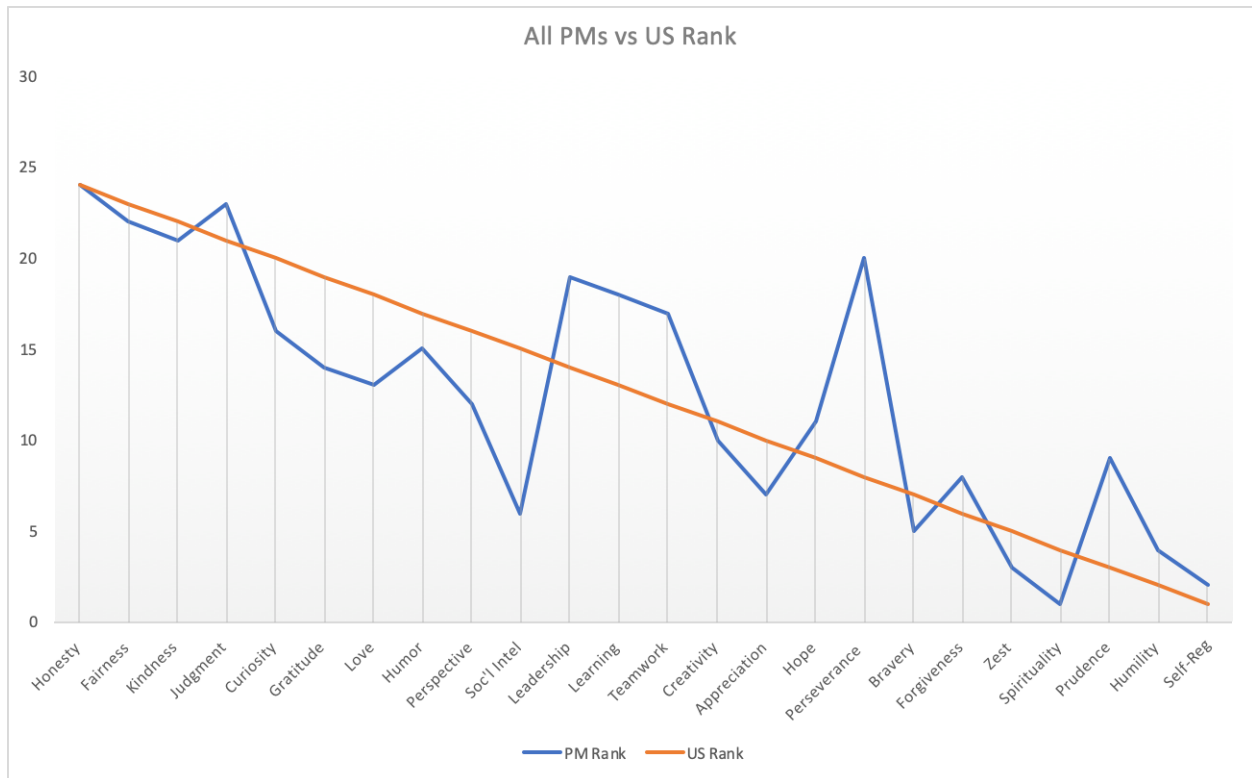
iii. Overall ranking of strengths within a profile

Comparing the overall ranking of strengths between project managers and the overall US population there are some similarities and some striking differences. In this table the strengths are ranked based on the raw scores. This means that the graph and table below list the strengths in order from highest to lowest of the average raw score for each strength.

The analysis in section I-i included a look at the average ranking of each strength by project manager independent of raw score. See earlier footnote for explanation.

Figure 4 Comparison of PM Character Strengths rankings to general US population - US ranked from highest to lowest

³⁶ See for example: Money, K., Hillenbrand, C., & Camara, N. D. (2008). Putting positive psychology to work in organizations. *Journal of General Management*, 34 (2), 21-26.



The graph shows that the top of the project manager profile is very similar to that of the US population overall with strengths of Honesty, Fairness, Kindness and Judgment at or close to the top of the average profile for both groups. What is most interesting is how the project manager profile *differs* from the comparison sample.

The graph also suggests that project managers rank strengths of Social Intelligence, Spirituality, and possibly Perspective, Gratitude, and Curiosity lower than the US population.

Conversely, the strengths of Perseverance, Prudence, Leadership, Love of Learning³⁷, and Teamwork appear to be potential sources of strength for project managers.

Figure 5 Table representation of figure 4

	PM Rank	US Rank	Diff		PM Rank	US Rank	Diff
Honesty	1	1	0	Teamwork	8	13	5*
Fairness	3	2	-1	Creativity	15	14	-1
Kindness	4	3	-1	Appreciation	18	15	-3
Judgment	2	4	2	Hope	14	16	2
Curiosity	9	5	-4	Perseverance	5	17	12
Gratitude	11	6	-5	Bravery	20	18	-2

³⁷ In the signature strengths analysis, Love of Learning had shown up as a less frequently reported top strength.

	PM Rank	US Rank	Diff		PM Rank	US Rank	Diff
Love	12	7	-5	Forgiveness	17	19	2
Humor	10	8	-2	Zest	22	20	-2
Perspective	13	9	-4	Spirituality	24	21	-3
Social Intel	19	10	-9	Prudence	16	22	6
Leadership	6	11	5	Humility	21	23	2
Learning	7	12	5	Self-Reg	23	24	1

*Positive differences despite lower numbers are because lower numbers represent a higher rank. I.e. 8 is higher ranked by 5 than 13

iv. Measuring Raw Scores

As mentioned in the introduction, the raw scores are the measure of how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the statements relating to each measure of the strengths. To some degree the scores are a reflection of the way in which the respondent tends to answer surveys. We cannot reliably compare scores between individuals, but once we average out the scores across the sample, there is utility in comparing averages between populations. By comparing the average raw scores of the sample of project managers with the average raw scores of the US population, we have another way to assess the relative importance of each of the strengths for the project manager sample.

The raw scores are calculated based on the average of each individual response based on the Likert scores. Thus, an average raw score of 4.2 means the strength is valued more across the group than a strength that scores 3.8 for example.

Although the ranking based on raw scores is consistent with the straight forward ranking shown previously, the top strengths of Honesty, Judgment and possibly Fairness, as well as Perseverance and Prudence stand out as high scoring strengths for project managers.

By this measure Spirituality stands out as low scoring strength with Social Intelligence showing the next highest difference.

49.7% of project managers responding to the survey report Social Intelligence as like them or very like them. Conversely, 50.3% of respondents do not report Social Intelligence as like them.^{38 39}

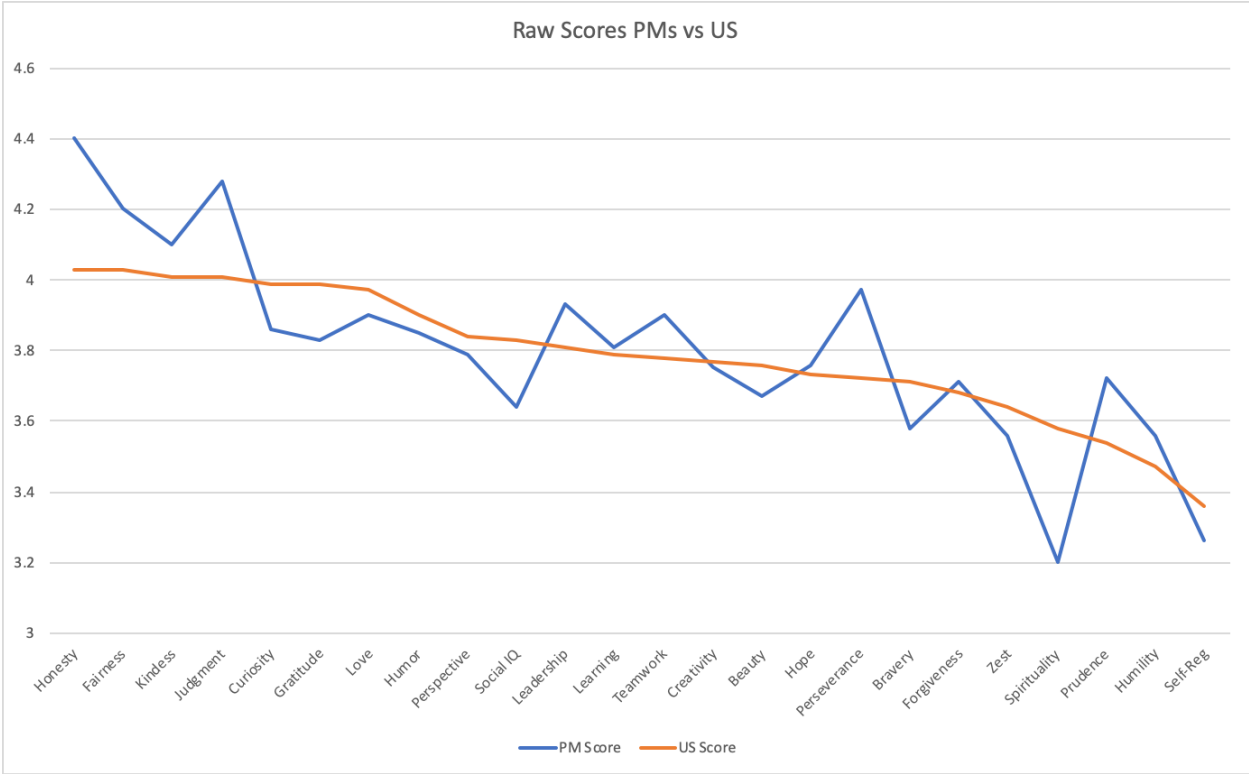
This suggests that project managers tend to divide evenly between those who do see the strength as like them and those that don't, and yet despite the 49.3% who

³⁸ Very unlike them/Unlike them (13.9%)³⁸.Neither Like them nor Not Like them (36.4%)

³⁹ Scores between 2.8 and 3.6 were included in the Neither Like nor Unlike count. Scores below 2.8 were included in the Unlike/Very Unlike category. Scores of 3.8 and above we counted in the Like/Very Like category

report this strength as like them/very like them, only 26 respondents (less 5.6%) report Social Intelligence as a signature strength.

Figure 6 Comparison of US and PM data based on average raw score calculations



As a follow up study, it would be interesting to test the hypothesis that higher Social Intelligence is a differentiator for effective project managers.

Based on average raw scores, Perspective does not appear to score significantly lower than in the US population as a whole. In the previous (small sample, one measure) study, Perspective had been reported as a strength that is lower for project managers than others. This result is not supported by the new results.

As previously, the figure below presents these results in table form.

Figure 7 Table representation of Figure 6

	PM Score	US Score	Diff		PM Score	US Score	Diff
Honesty	4.4	4.03	0.37	Teamwork	3.9	3.78	0.12
Fairness	4.2	4.03	0.17	Creativity	3.75	3.77	-0.02
Kindness	4.1	4.01	0.09	Beauty	3.67	3.76	-0.09
Judgment	4.28	4.01	0.27	Hope	3.76	3.73	0.03
Curiosity	3.86	3.99	-0.13	Perseverance	3.97	3.72	0.25
Gratitude	3.83	3.99	-0.16	Bravery	3.58	3.71	-0.13
Love	3.9	3.97	-0.07	Forgiveness	3.71	3.68	0.03
Humor	3.85	3.9	-0.05	Zest	3.56	3.64	-0.08



	PM Score	US Score	Diff		PM Score	US Score	Diff
Perspective	3.79	3.84	-0.05	Spirituality	3.2	3.58	-0.38
Social IQ	3.64	3.83	-0.19	Prudence	3.72	3.54	0.18
Leadership	3.93	3.81	0.12	Humility	3.56	3.47	0.09
Learning	3.81	3.79	0.02	Self-Reg	3.26	3.36	-0.1

v. Combining the measures

Figure 8 High strengths for Project Managers

Outliers by Signature Strengths	Diff PM - US 5 strengths	Diff PM - US 6 strengths	Outliers by Ranking	Diff PM - US	Outliers by Raw Score	Diff PM-US
Honesty	10.3%	17.3%	Perseverance	12	Honesty	0.37
Perseverance	9.5%	15.4%	Prudence	6	Judgment	0.27
Teamwork	9.3%	15.8%	Leadership	5	Perseverance	0.25
Prudence	5.9%	9.3%	Learning	5	Prudence	0.18
Fairness	5.8%	16.2%	Teamwork	5	Fairness	0.17
			Honesty*	0		

**I have included Honesty in the ranking list because it is ranked top by both groups and based on the other measures is potentially very significant for PMs.*

Figure 9 Low strengths for Project Managers

Outliers by Signature Strengths	Diff PM - US 5 strengths	Diff PM - US 6 strengths	Outliers by Ranking	Diff PM - US	Outliers by Raw Score	Diff PM-US
Social Intelligence	-10.5%	-8.58%	Social Intelligence	-9	Social Intelligence	-0.19
Kindness	-14.7%	-6.89%	Gratitude	-5	Spirituality	-0.38
Learning	-15.5%	-12.46%	Love	-5		
Spirituality	-3.0%	-1%	Spirituality	-3		
Appreciation	-12.4%	-7.2%				

Dark green – significant difference/difference recorded across all three measures.

Light green – some difference/difference recorded across all three measure measures.

Orange – small differences that may be of interest/only recorded in two measures

No shading – only significant in the one measure

The two tables above show the most significant strengths differences between project managers and the general population by each measure – strengths ranking, strengths scoring, and the percentage of people reporting the strength as a signature strength.

In the high strengths for project managers table, Honesty and Perseverance show up as high strengths by all three measures, Prudence by two of the measures (ranking and scoring) and to a lesser degree by the third, and two strengths –

Teamwork and Fairness – show up as high strengths in only two measures (ranks and Signature strength reporting and Raw score and Signature strengths reporting respectively).

For project managers low strengths, Social Intelligence and Spirituality are the only two strengths that show up lower by all three measures.

Rather than adopt just one measure for determining the significance of the results, the differences in character strengths ranking, raw scores and percentage of respondents reporting the strengths as a signature strength are combined to identify those strengths that seem to be particularly significant – high or low - for project managers.

III. Summary of high and low strengths for project managers

The outlier top strengths for project managers – those that stand out from the crowd – are:

Honesty
Perseverance
Prudence
Teamwork

The outlier low strengths for project managers – again those that stand out from the crowd as being less prevalent – are:

Social Intelligence
Spirituality

These results are explored further below.

IV. Our highest strengths

As mentioned at the start of this paper, these results are the averages of 461 respondents and as much as averages reveal they also obscure some of the outlier results. For example, on average the sample of project managers ranks Honesty as the top strength just like the US population. This may suggest that Honesty is not a special strength for project managers and yet when the raw score differences and the percentage of project managers who have Honesty as a signature strength are taken into account, this is in fact a very prominent and prevalent strength for project managers as a group.

Based on the analysis above it appears that the following strengths are the most significant differentiators of project managers based on all three measures:

- I. **Honesty** – “You are a person of high integrity and authenticity; You tell the truth, even when it hurts; You present yourself to others in a sincere way; You take responsibility for your actions.”
- II. **Perseverance** – “You keep going and going when you have a goal in mind; You attempt to overcome all obstacles; You finish what you start.”

Other strengths that have the potential to be differentiators based on at least two measures are:

- III. **Prudence** – “You are wisely cautious; You are planful and conscientious; You are careful not to take undue risks or do things you might later regret.”
- IV. **Teamwork** – “You are a collaborative and participative member on groups and teams; you are loyal to your group; you feel a strong sense of duty to your group; you always do your share.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ All definitions from *Technical Report: The VIA Assessment Suite for Adults: Development and initial evaluation*. P63, 64

i. Pros and cons of these strengths as project managers

There is probably no one in the world who would argue against the value of honesty as a strength. For project managers there are particular benefits in Honesty – particularly when we see that Judgment tends to be another top strength for project managers, with nearly 45% of project managers reporting Judgment as a signature strength.

Honesty, Prudence, and Judgment are key for evaluating new information, discovering solutions to issues, openly confronting challenges and clearly communicating where we are in a project. During decision-making processes, Honesty, Judgment, and Teamwork are key elements in moving forward and getting to key decisions. (See the later section on team roles for further exploration.)

Some risks exist with these higher strengths. For example, Perseverance, when overused, can cause us to continue down a path when it would be prudent to change course – this includes continuing with projects that are no longer meeting the original purpose or for which the need has changed. Perseverance can cause us to succumb to the sunk cost fallacy and continue pouring good effort and resources after bad, largely because of the investment already committed.

The table below suggests ways in which these strengths can aid and also obstruct project progress.

Figure 10 Project Manager High Ranked Strengths

Strength	Opportunity	Risk
Honesty	Open exploration of issues and challenges on the project. Open assessment of ways to improve the project. When combined with Judgment and Prudence, is a great strength to support effective decision making.	Being too blunt, not tempering and tailoring the message when communicating to stakeholders may cause friction. Brutal honesty may make others uncomfortable and undermine team spirit. May be too quick to share an opinion before gathering the evidence to support the opinion. Potentially relevant biases False Consensus Effect Reactive devaluation Restraint bias
Perseverance	Not daunted by setbacks and obstacles. Focusing on finding practical ways forward rather than getting stuck with a no can do attitude. Able to keep the team	May not pick up on signals that a project is in trouble or needs to change course. May be reluctant to escalate concerns.

Strength	Opportunity	Risk
	looking forward and the eye on the goal.	<p>Potentially relevant biases Sunk Cost Fallacy Status quo bias Anchoring effect Loss aversion</p>
Prudence	Aids in careful planning, supports the team in creating realistic plans that have been validated and sanity checked. Always has an eye on progress against plan and for opportunities to improve the plan.	<p>May get stuck in analysis of the way forward rather than getting started. May be too cautious and wait longer than necessary to get started on execution. May also spend too much time in planning and re-planning during the project, disrupting the team's rhythm. Can become too much of a micro-manager.</p> <p>Potentially relevant biases Loss aversion Zero-sum heuristic</p>
Teamwork	Helps to bind the team together and leverage the contributions of others. Loyal to the team and the goals of the team. Puts team success ahead of personal glory.	<p>May be reluctant to make decisions or take steps without consulting the rest of the team.</p> <p>Potentially relevant biases Band wagon effect Risk compensation (Pelzman effect) Social comparison bias Social desirability bias</p>



V. Our Lower ranked strengths

From the earliest survey results, the results have pointed to Social Intelligence being a strength that is not so common for project managers. When discussing the strengths with groups of project managers at conferences and workplaces, they are often heard to say that while Social Intelligence seems like a strength that would be of great benefit to a project manager, they question how widespread it is as a high strength in our practitioners.

Based on the three-prong analysis of strengths shared above, the results of the larger group are consistent with the earlier results. On average we *rank* Social Intelligence lower than our colleagues, on average we *score* it lower than colleagues and it is *less likely to be a signature strength* for project managers than for others.

In earlier results, the second strength that appeared to rank lower for project managers was Perspective, but that result is not borne out by the larger study. In these latest results, spirituality appears to be a lower strength. Although project managers are only slightly less likely to rank Spirituality as a top strength, this result is not contradictory because a very low percentage of the population at large rank Spirituality as a high strength.⁴¹

Gratitude is another strength we rank lower, but it is not significantly less likely to show up as a signature strength. Conversely Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence does not rank significantly lower but is much less likely to appear as a signature strength in this group of project managers.

The generally lesser ranked strengths of greatest interest are therefore:

1. **Social Intelligence** – You pay close attention to the social nuances and the emotions of others; You have good insight into what makes others “tick”; You seem to know what to say and do in any social occasion.
2. **Spirituality** – You hold a set of beliefs, whether religious or not, about how your life is part of something bigger and more meaningful; Those beliefs shape your behavior and provide a sense of comfort, understanding and purpose.

⁴¹ One of the recent changes to the VIA survey has been to change the questions related to the Character Strength of Spirituality to focus less on religious practice and more on broader concepts of meaning and purpose, and a sense of something bigger than us. This has changed the relative ranking of this strength in the new survey.

Figure 11 Project Manager Low Ranked Strengths

Strength	Opportunity	Risk
Social Intelligence	Increased social intelligence is likely to raise the effectiveness of communication, increase the sense of connection between the team and the project manager, and help build better relationships. Project managers can use character strengths as a pathway to greater social intelligence.	Low social intelligence may result in time wasted through less effective communication, tensions on the team due to a sense that the project managers is not reading cues or understanding the dynamics of the team.
Spirituality	Increasing this strength could help build the sense of connection between the team and the goals of projects and create a sense of shared purpose.	Being low in spirituality is quite common across the entire population. Having a project manager low in spirituality may not create a significant risk for the majority of the team but could results in an out-group of those who do rank spirituality high.

i. Expanding on the implications of the lesser strengths for project managers

Social Intelligence – this is a key strength relating to effective communication and connecting with teams. With lower Social Intelligence we are faced with greater challenges in understanding the motives and needs of team members and stakeholders. An example of this is in deciding the best media for communicating project status and news. Social intelligence helps us to effectively tailor our communications, picking up on who needs high level information and who needs more detail; how to communicate obstacles and issues without raising a red flag, as well as how to share difficult news. Social Intelligence also contributes to our ability to engage with colleagues effectively during planning and execution, to read our colleagues and to pick up on unspoken cues about topics that may impact the project. These may range from unspoken concerns, unrevealed obstacles, delays and setbacks to more personal situations that result in distractions. Social intelligence also helps us to pick up on interpersonal and professional conflicts.

Spirituality – while on the face of it, this strength may not seem to have much to do with project management, results from the first study I did on the role of the project manager show that stakeholders expect project managers to keep the big picture in view and help to keep people connected to that vision. The strength of Spirituality helps with that sense of connection to a purpose bigger than the individual or the team.

A brief mention of Gratitude and Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence – These two strengths are included because they show up less often as signature strengths



for project managers meaning they are not go-to strengths. The two strengths are considered together because in the context of the workplace they can be closely related. Lower levels of gratitude and appreciation can result in less positive feedback, a reluctance to create feedforward opportunities, less recognition of performance and contributions from team members and stakeholders.

VI. Other ways to view the data

The primary focus of this paper is on discovering what strengths project managers tend to rank higher – and lower – than the rest of the population. The following concepts of virtues and team roles are offered as other ways of exploring our strengths and as points for further consideration.

In teams, it can be useful to begin an exploration of the team culture on the basis of virtues – starting high level and then digging more deeply into the strengths that may result in in-groups and out groups through strengths concentrations, and over- and underuse of certain strengths within the team.

i. Virtues

The first concept associated with character strengths is Virtues⁴². There are two virtue models. The first model, conceptualized by the original creators of the VIA Classification, Doctors Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, based on characteristics valued by philosophers and theologians across time is the 6-Virtue model⁴³. This comprises the virtues of:

Wisdom	Justice
Courage	Temperance
Humanity	Transcendence

Analyzing the project manager signature strengths based on these virtue classifications, the results are as follows:

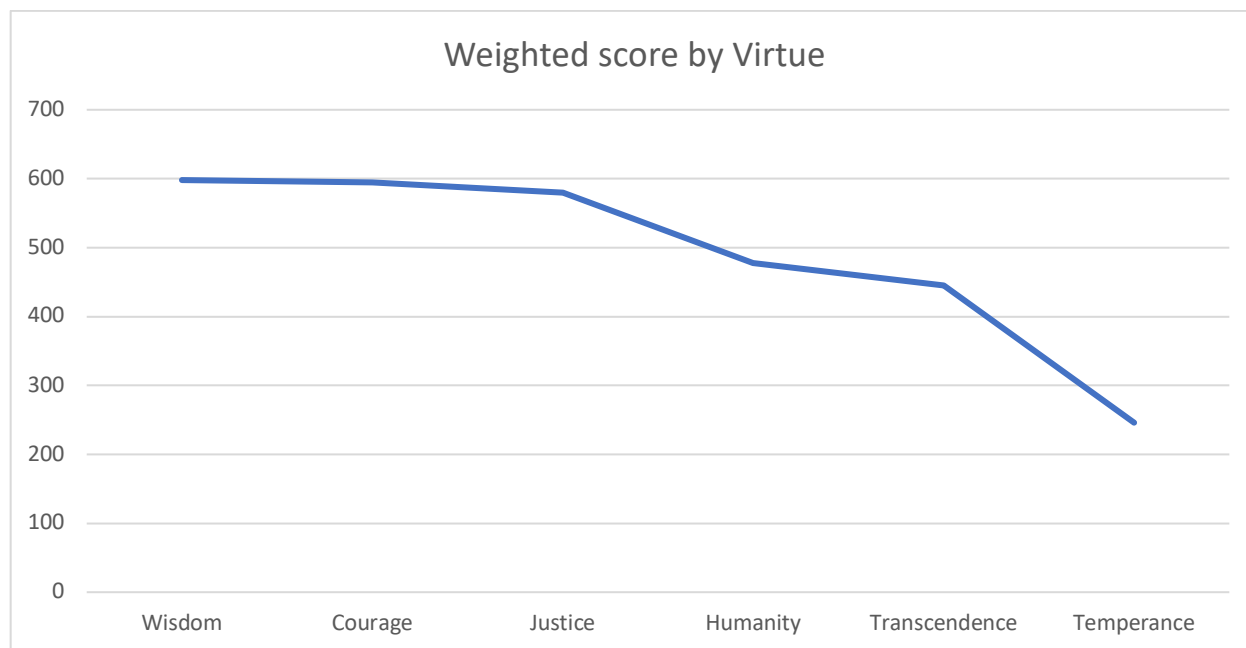
With Wisdom, Courage, and Justice ranked top three and very close in weighted scores⁴⁴, project managers have a concentration of strengths that support reasoning, planning, strategizing, problem solving and keeping the project moving forward in the face of challenges. With the interpersonal virtue of Justice, project managers tend to display strengths that are team and group oriented more than one-to-one relationship oriented.

⁴² These six virtues were proposed in the original work Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: a handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C.: New York. Further analysis and exploration of the six Virtue model are provided in the paper Ruch, W., & Proyer, R. T. (2015). Mapping strengths into virtues: the relation of the 24 VIA-strengths to six ubiquitous virtues. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00460>. A three virtue model of Caring, Self-Control and Inquisitiveness is proposed by research from Robert E. McGrath. See for example McGrath, R. E. & Walker, D. I. (2016): Factor structure of character strengths in youth: Consistency across ages and measures, *Journal of Moral Education*, DOI: 10.1080/03057240.2016.1213709

⁴³ Niemiec, R. M., & McGrath, R. E. (2019). *The power of character strengths: appreciate and ignite your positive personality*. Cincinnati, OH: VIA Institute on Character.

⁴⁴ All virtues were calculated to an equivalent based on 5 strengths. For example, the Justice total was divided by 3 a multiplied by 5 giving $(348/3) \times 5 = 580$. The same adjustment was made for the three-virtue model, adjusting all virtue scores to account for seven strengths.

Figure 12 Graph of weighted signature strengths totals by virtue



Results in tabular form below:

Figure 13 Table representation of Figure 11

	Character Strengths	Relevance to PMs	Cumulative total of PM Signature Strengths	Weighted scoring	Rank
Wisdom – strengths that help you gather and use knowledge	Creativity Curiosity Judgment Love of Learning Perspective	Ability to assimilate knowledge and understanding and apply it to a project to make adjustments and inform decisions	550	598	1
Courage – strengths that help you exercise your will and face adversity	Bravery Honesty Perseverance Zest	Willingness to confront challenges, have difficult conversations and challenge the status quo.	478	595	2
Justice – strengths that help you in community or group-based situations	Fairness Leadership Teamwork	Ability to create a safe environment, build team spirit and connection.	348	580	3

	Character Strengths	Relevance to PMs	Cumulative total of PM Signature Strengths	Weighted scoring	Rank
Humanity – strengths that help you in one-to-one relationships	Kindness Love Social Intelligence	Ability to connect one-to-one with stakeholders and team-members	287	478	4
Transcendence – strengths that help you connect to the larger universe and provide meaning	Appreciation Gratitude Hope Humor Spirituality	Ability to see and express recognition for superior effort. Keeping the big picture and connecting the project to the larger organizational goals.	445	445	5
Temperance – strengths that help you manage habits and protect against excess	Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-regulation	Ability to manage emotions and reactions to project changes and conflict. Ability to focus on moving past obstacles and mistakes and avoid the “blame game”. Moving forward with a plan	197	246	6

It is useful to consider how these tendencies support and may obstruct teams. Of course, just as important as the overall tendencies of the sample of project managers are the specific values, motivations, and behaviors of the individual project manager assigned to a project. Once we start to examine individual project managers, the bigger question is what their strengths ranking is, and how that affects their behavior and interaction on the specific team within which they work.

This is why a one size project manager’s “perfect character strengths profile” does not exist. A project manager who is highly effective in one team and whose top strengths integrate well with that team may find themselves on the outside in another team because of that team’s particular strengths culture.

As a comparison, there is the three Virtue model. In this model, only eighteen strengths are strongly and consistently correlated with each of the three virtues.

- Caring
- Inquisitiveness
- Self-control

For project managers, the results are as follows:



Figure 14 Project Manager strengths aligned to the three-virtue model of Caring, Inquisitiveness and Self-control

Virtue	Character strengths	Relevance to PMs	Cumulative total	Weighted score	Ranking
Caring	Fairness Forgiveness Gratitude Kindness Leadership Love Teamwork	Building teams, connecting with others, creating a positive work environment	791	791	2
Inquisitiveness	Bravery Creativity Curiosity Love of Learning Perspective Social Intelligence	Seeking out information, challenging biases, discovering better options and new pathways	435	508	3
Self-control	Honesty Judgment Perseverance Prudence Self-regulation	Evaluative and informed decision making rather than reactive. Working with a plan rather than arbitrary.	722	1011	1

These results seem to somewhat contradict the six-virtue model where Temperance – the self-control virtue in that model – was ranked lowest whereas Self-control as defined in the three -virtue model is ranked highest for project managers. The connection and positive environment building virtue of Caring – similar to Justice and Humanity combined - is still a strong virtue for project managers based on this model, and it is Inquisitiveness that comes in third. This result again seems to contradict the results of the first model where Wisdom and Courage were ranked top.

The reason for the discrepancy is that the original 6-virtue model was a conceptual model only – that is the authors of the original text on Character Strengths and Virtues explored the possibility of the strengths being grouped into Virtues recognized throughout philosophy and theology. Unlike the signature strengths themselves, the 6-virtue model was not researched but was compiled based on assumptions based on the logical alignment of strengths to each virtue. The 3-virtue model is based on new research which has validated the unique alignment of 18 of the 24 character strengths to each of the three virtues.

Despite the difference of the two models, looking at the virtues through either model can be a very useful tool for exploring the culture of a team and coming to understand and appreciate the implications of strengths concentrations and



strengths omissions. It is a way to approach the strengths and team culture from a top down perspective, starting with a high-level view of strengths concentrations and gaps and then drilling into the detail of the strengths themselves.

ii. Team Roles⁴⁵

Our final consideration of project manager strengths is in relation to seven standardized team roles⁴⁶. Previously seven team roles had been proposed. They are: Idea Creator, Information Gatherer, Decision Maker, Influencer, Energizer, Implementer, and Relationship Manager.

Recent research has confirmed that these seven essential roles align with the structure of organizational teams. Further, the research has begun to explore the alignment of character strengths to seven identified team roles – with interesting results.

This look at project managers is preliminary and is based on aggregated data. Therefore, the results are suggestive of some patterns, but further analysis is needed to confirm these results. They are offered as a further discussion point.

From the PMI description of a project manager reproduced at the beginning, the roles that project managers appear most likely to be most aligned with are:

- Implementer
- Energizer
- Influencer
- Relationship Manager

The results available for the 461 project managers require further analysis to determine how the combination and order of their strengths aligns to the roles laid out above.

As a rough benchmark, we can look at the aggregated results and see what patterns emerge. This method treats the aggregated results as representative of the individuals within the group – it is as though we are creating one individual's profile from all the results combined.

Clearly there are several limitations to this approach. Some of these are outlined in the Limitations of the Study section at the end of this paper.

This preliminary look at team role alignment is therefore intended as a way to open up discussion and even to start considering whether some project managers are more comfortable with one or two phases of a project in particular, rather than the

⁴⁵ Figure reproduced from Pearce, R. (2018). *Be a project motivator: unlock the secrets of strengths-based project management*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

⁴⁶ Ruch, W., Gander, F., Platt, T. & Hofmann, J. (2016): *Team Roles: Their relationships to character strengths and job satisfaction*, Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI:[10.1080/17439760.2016.1257051](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1257051)

whole project lifecycle. Anecdotal evidence⁴⁷ suggests that project managers gravitate to particular phases of the project, with project managers feeling much more comfortable at the project initiation and planning stages, and others much more comfortable focusing on implementation/execution.

In a future study we hope to be able to analyze the results of individual project managers in relation to the matching of their strengths to team roles and provide more insight.

The results suggest that there may be an alignment with Information Gatherer and Idea Creator and a moderate alignment with the roles of Relationship Manager, Decision Maker, and Implementer. The top two ranked roles are a surprise when compared to expectations. Some of these differences between expectation and result may explain some of the challenges to successful project outcomes and warrant further research.⁴⁸

Information Gatherer is the role that across larger populations is the least correlated with job satisfaction⁴⁹. It is interesting to see this show up as a top role for a project manager. This may be because project managers must gather much data and input from others during the planning of a project.

The roles our strengths seem least aligned with are Influencer, and Energizer. The lower ranking of Influencer may come as a surprise to some people as one of the key features often cited for a project manager is their ability to use influence to get others on board and motivated to complete projects. This discrepancy is strongly tied to our lower ranking of Social Intelligence than others. Similarly, the lower ranking of Energizer may suggest that project managers may find it difficult to maintain the momentum of the team when they face challenges. This may also be related to our lower Social Intelligence.

This work on team roles and the project manager is an area worthy of more study.

There are specific strengths that are strongly aligned with each of the roles, although all 24 strengths factor into each of the roles to some degree. The relationship of highly correlated strengths and roles is presented in figure 13 below.

⁴⁷ Gathered in discussions at project manager conferences, guest lectures and webinars.

⁴⁸ ALLE LLC, Project Manager Effectiveness Survey, (2016) available at <https://projectmotivator.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/PM-Effectiveness-Survey-Results-021719.pdf>

⁴⁹ Ruch, W., Gander, F., Platt, T. & Hofmann, J. (2016): *Team Roles: Their relationships to character strengths and job satisfaction*, Journal of Positive Psychology, P7

Figure 15 Team Role descriptions

Team Role Definitions	
Idea Creators	enjoy generating ideas to solve problems and facilitate growth. They innovate, reframe, renew, revolutionize. Whether dealing with simple daily issues or big strategic challenges, the “idea creators” are essential to the future of any business.
Information Gatherers	enjoy learning about best practices, new market trends, vendors, competitors, market forces, and finance. They like sharing what they learn in writing or presentations.
Decision Makers	are energized by analyzing information from various perspectives, weighing evidence, applying logic, and choosing a fruitful course of action.
Implementers	execute decisions. They are the “doers,” the ones who manufacture, market, sell, and deliver. Those who get things done are the backbone of every organization.
Influencers	are full of hope and enthusiasm, relishing the challenge of convincing others. They are essential to weather opposition and rejection as they continuously work to persuade customers, bankers, investors, and shareholders that the enterprise has value.
Energizers	are naturally dynamic. They’re like power plants, humming briskly through obstacles, rarely burning out, quarter to quarter and year to year. They infect others with the energy and enthusiasm to persevere.
Relationship Managers	are especially well suited to build networks of people, resolve conflicts, and motivate and encourage people. They are good listeners with caring hearts, sympathetic ears, and practical advice. Such relationship-managers are essential to any business.

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Figure 16 Graph of Roles by total PM signature strengths for highly correlated strengths

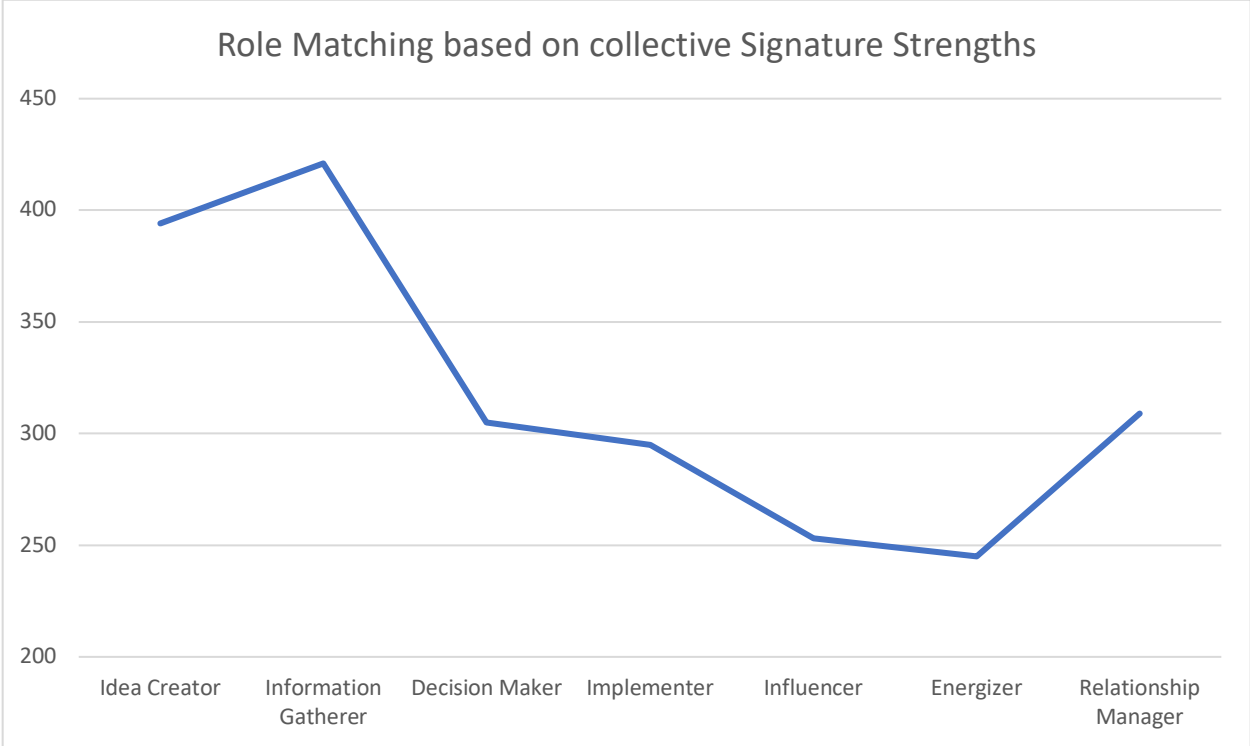


Figure 17 table representation of project manager signature strengths by role for highly correlated strengths

Role	Strengths	PM Score	Rank based on Signature Strengths
Idea Creator	Creativity, Zest, Curiosity, Hope, Gratitude	394	2
Information Gatherer	Self-regulation, <i>Prudence</i> , <i>Teamwork</i> , Humility, Judgment	421	1
Decision Maker	Zest, Hope, Bravery, <i>Perseverance</i> , Leadership	305	4
Implementer	Zest, <i>Perseverance</i> , <i>Teamwork</i> , Hope, Self-Regulation	295	5
Influencer	Zest, Hope, Bravery, Social Intelligence, <i>Teamwork</i>	253	6
Energizer	Zest, Hope, Social Intelligence, Curiosity, Leadership	245	7
Relationship Manager	Kindness, Leadership, Social Intelligence, <i>Teamwork</i> , Zest	309	3

Green – highest project manager role alignment, Orange – lowest project manager role alignment, Yellow – high project manager role alignment



VII. Conclusion

The results of the comparisons suggest that there are some significant differences between project managers and the general population in terms of strengths that are more or less likely to show up high for the project manager.

Understanding that this is the case, and realizing how the project manager can influence the culture of a team is the start of re-evaluating how to engage with a new team, appreciate the strengths of team members, protect against the existence of in-groups (those with similar top strengths) and out-groups (those with top strengths that few others in the team share and appreciate to the same degree).

Similarly, considering team roles, there are opportunities to consider whether all project managers are equally energized and engaged in all phases of the project. There may be opportunities for establishing specialists in prediction (initiation and planning) and other specialists in delivery (execution). We may also be able to identify project managers who are generalists. These role matching considerations also extend to the team as a whole, and project managers can start to consider not only which strengths team members have as top strengths, but also which of the team roles they seem to gravitate to.

The straight forwardness of the character strengths definitions, their universality, the support of extensive character strengths research in the workplace and the ease of accessibility to the survey makes the VIA Character Strengths survey a great tool for project managers who want to understand their motivation and the motivation of the team and stakeholders around them, and to get more out of their project contributors.

VIII. Opportunities for further study

1. An analysis of the relationship between Social Intelligence ranking and project manager effectiveness.
2. An analysis of overuse of top strengths and underuse of other strengths and the relationship to project manager effectiveness.
3. A follow up study using the new VIA survey VIA-IS-IP which has now replaced the VIA-120 used for this study, would be an opportunity to reevaluate some of the strengths for which the measures have changed – such as leadership and spirituality.
4. Combining an analysis of the VIA character strengths of project managers with an assessment of project manager effectiveness. For example, are the best project managers those with higher social intelligence?
5. A deeper look at Virtues and their relationship to project managers and teams.
6. Further analysis of the character strengths of project managers, the seven team roles and the efficacy and enthusiasm of project managers for the different phases of a project might suggest sub-specialties for project managers. For example, some project managers are more motivated and energized by the planning and initiation phases of projects, while others are more motivated by implementation.

IX. Limitations of the Study

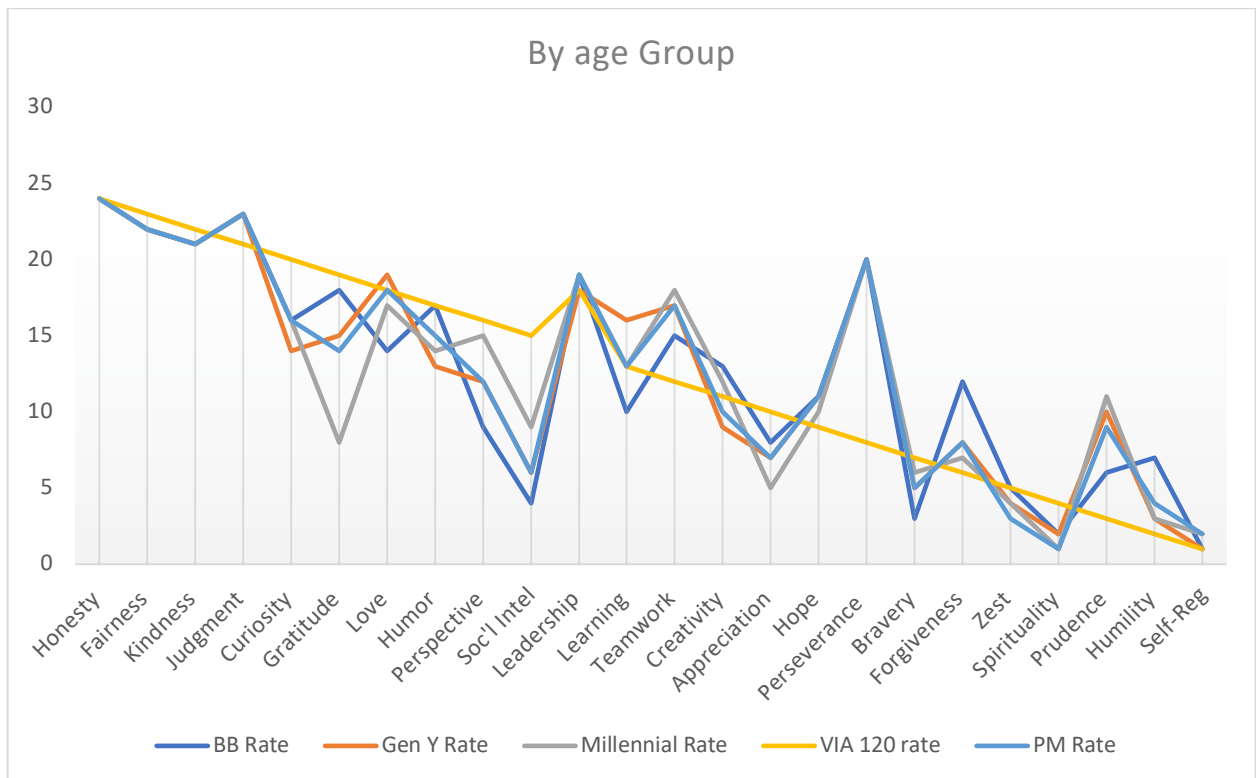
1. Although there is high confidence that the respondents are indeed project managers, there is no measure of industry concentration. For example, there could be a concentration of IT project managers, rather than healthcare, government or construction project managers which might be expected to influence the ranking of the various strengths.
2. The majority of responses came from North America (Canada 29, USA 254). In future study, we would like to ensure greater diversity.
3. The two samples that are used for comparison purposes to the general population probably include some project managers. There is no way to exclude them from the sample. This may overstate the degree to which the results between the groups are similar, but it is anticipated that this means any difference between project managers and non-project managers is larger than is reported here.
4. All the analysis is based on self-reported scores.⁵⁰ However, there is ample evidence that the VIA survey is sufficiently consistent and reliable to meet

⁵⁰ McGrath, R. E., & Wallace, N. (2019). Cross-validation of the VIA inventory of strengths-revised and its short forms. Manuscript submitted for publication.

psychometric standards and is there for adequate for the purposes of this paper.

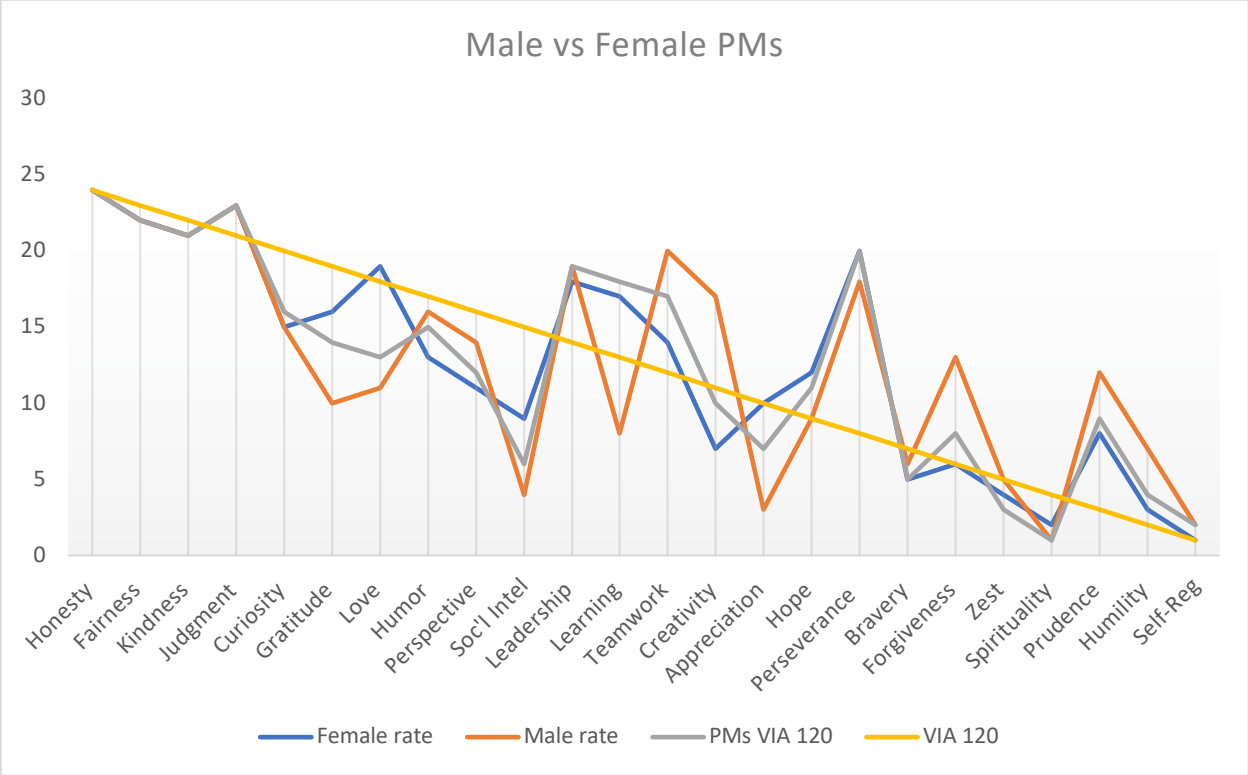
- Age bias – the project manager sample contains 128 baby boomers, 242 Gen-X and 91 Millennials based on year of birth. AS the graph below shows, there is very little difference in the groups by age with to standout exceptions – baby boomers appear to express more forgiveness than the other two age groups, and Millennials rank Gratitude lower than the other age groups.

Figure 18 Project Manager strengths by age group



- Gender bias – of the 461 respondents, 310 identify as female, 148 as male and 3 as other. Popular myth would tend to suggest that this distribution would make so-called softer strengths such as love, kindness and social intelligence more prevalent. As the results show, this is not the case. What the results do indicate is that Males rank prudence and forgiveness as slightly higher, and rank gratitude and appreciation lower than Females. We do see that Females rank Social Intelligence slightly higher than Males, but still significantly below the larger US sample.

Figure 19 Male vs Female strengths results



7. Relationship of character strengths and virtues to project manager effectiveness – there is no assessment of the competence or success rate of the project managers in the sample. This analysis therefore does not predict whether a particular project manager’s character strengths profile will make them especially suited to the role they occupy in their organization.
8. In the team roles section, the signature strengths results of the entire group have been analyzed as though they represent the typical project manager. In a future study, we hope to generate the role matching for multiple project managers and then analyze to see whether there are patterns in the matching results.
9. The role matching section takes account of signature strengths reported. It does not take account of the rest of each respondent’s profile. In generating role matching analysis, VIA uses the entire profile in their algorithm.
10. The role matching analysis does not take into account the degree to which the signature strengths are reported concurrently. For example, as a group it appears, we are drawn to Information Gatherer – this aligns with the following strengths - Self-regulation, *Prudence*, *Teamwork*, Humility, Judgment. As a group we are higher than the US population in Prudence and Teamwork and are also high in Judgment. However, the analysis of the team roles does not take account of whether these three strengths tend to coincide in individuals or whether the three strengths are distributed – one person is high in Teamwork, one in Judgment, and one in Prudence. The first result –



coincidence of the most significant strengths – suggests that this analysis is accurate. The second result – dispersion of the most significant strengths – would make this analysis untrue. A quick check shows that 24 (5%) people have Teamwork and Judgment as signature strengths. These are just two of the strengths related to the role of Information Gatherer.

Considering two of the strengths strongly correlated to the role of Idea Creator – Creativity and Curiosity – 68 respondents (14.7%) report both of these as signature strengths.

Further analysis of the coincidence of strengths and the relationship to project managers' role alignment is required to fully validate and expand on these results.

X. Appendix A: The 24 VIA Character Strengths



VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtue of Wisdom



Creativity
Original, adaptive, ingenuity, seeing and doing things in different ways



Curiosity
Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience



Judgment
Critical thinking, thinking through all sides, not jumping to conclusions



Love of Learning
Mastering new skills & topics, systematically adding to knowledge



Perspective
Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view

Virtue of Courage



Bravery
Valor, not shrinking from threat or challenge, facing fears, speaking up for what's right



Perseverance
Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles



Honesty
Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity



Zest
Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigor, energy, not doing things half-heartedly

Virtue of Humanity



Love
Both loving and being loved, valuing close relations with others, genuine warmth



Kindness
Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others



Social Intelligence
Aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and others, knows what makes others tick



Teamwork
Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, contributing to a group effort



Fairness
Adhering to principles of justice, not allowing feelings to bias decisions about others



Leadership
Organizing group activities to get things done, positively influencing others

Virtue of Temperance



Forgiveness
Mercy, accepting others' shortcomings, giving people a second chance, letting go of hurt



Humility
Modesty, letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves



Prudence
Careful about one's choices, cautious, not taking undue risks



Self-Regulation
Self-control, disciplined, managing impulses, emotions, and vices

Virtue of Transcendence



Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence
Awe and wonder for beauty, admiration for skill and moral greatness



Gratitude
Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed



Hope
Optimism, positive future-mindedness, expecting the best & working to achieve it



Humor
Playfulness, bringing smiles to others, lighthearted – seeing the lighter side



Spirituality
Connecting with the sacred, purpose, meaning, faith, religiousness

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XI Appendix B: Other Project Management Certification Models

Components bolded are the areas where personality analysis appears most relevant.

IPM OPEN⁵¹ Project Management Model⁵²

Project Initiation

Project Planning

Project Delivery and Close

Project Initiation - Project Frameworks, **Project Stakeholders**, Choosing the Right Project, **Project Communication**

Project Planning - Requirements Analysis, Project Scheduling, Managing Project Risk, Other Project Plans

Project Delivery and Close - **Managing Project Teams, Leading Projects, Managing Project Change**, Closing Projects

IPMA Project Excellence Model⁵³

This three-pronged approach contains

People & Purpose

Processes and Resources

Project Results

Within these three components are contained:

People & Process – **Leadership & Values, Objectives and Strategy, Project Team, Partners and Suppliers**

Processes & Resources

Project Results – **Customer satisfaction, project team satisfaction, other stakeholder satisfaction**, project results and impact on the environment

⁵¹ Retrieved from: <https://open.institute.pm/>

⁵² IPM does not follow a particular project management methodology but integrates the practice of project management with many of the standard models of project management. It is a practice based certification.

⁵³ Retrieved from: <https://www.projectengineer.net/the-ipma-project-excellence-model/>

XI. Appendix C: Sample Geographic Breakdown

Country	Number
Argentina	2
Australia	2
Austria	1
Barbados	1
Brazil	2
Canada	29
China	1
Denmark	1
Egypt	1
Finland	1
France	5
Germany	1
India	2
Indonesia	1
Iran	1
Italy	3
Latvia	1
Mexico	1
NZ	1
Portugal	1
Romania	2
Serbia	1
Singapore	1
South Africa	2
Spain	1
Sweden	3
Switzerland	1
Ukraine	1
UK	9
US	254
Venezuela	1
Unknown	127
Total	461

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