Scrum Master vs project manager: what is the difference?

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Both roles care about delivery, so they are often confused or merged. They rest on different ideas of control. A project manager is usually accountable for delivering an agreed scope on time and on budget. A Scrum Master is accountable for how well the team works, while the team plans its own work and the Product Owner decides what is built.

TL;DR The short version

- A project manager is usually accountable for scope, schedule and budget; a Scrum Master for the team's effectiveness.
- A project manager often assigns and tracks tasks, while a Scrum Master does not assign work.
- One person can do both in a small organisation, but it creates tension; larger programmes often keep both roles.

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Side by side

- **Focus:** the project manager focuses on scope, schedule, budget and risk; the Scrum Master on team effectiveness and the Scrum framework.
- **Authority:** a project manager often assigns tasks and tracks them; a Scrum Master does not assign work.
- **Planning:** a project manager usually builds and owns the plan; in Scrum, the Developers plan the Sprint and the Product Owner orders the backlog.
- **Success:** for a project manager, delivery against the baseline; for a Scrum Master, a team that delivers valuable increments and keeps improving.
- **Lifespan:** a project ends; a Scrum Team usually stays together on a product.

Where they overlap

Both remove obstacles, manage stakeholders and keep work visible. Both need to understand dependencies and risk. See the risk register and scope creep and change control.

Can one person do both?

Sometimes, especially in small organisations, but it creates tension. A person who is held to a fixed date tends to start assigning work, which undercuts the team’s self-management. If you must combine them, be explicit about which hat you are wearing in each conversation.

In larger programmes

Many organisations keep project or programme managers for cross-team coordination, budgets and contracts, and Scrum Masters inside the teams. That works when the programme level sets goals and dates and leaves the "how" to the teams. See agile vs waterfall vs hybrid.

Which suits you?

- Enjoy plans, budgets, contracts and coordinating many parties? Project management.
- Enjoy coaching, facilitation and helping a team improve itself? Scrum Master.
- Enjoy both in a technical setting? Look at the technical project manager role.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber, K. and Sutherland, J. (2020). The Scrum Guide. scrumguides.org.
2. IICTP. TPBOK, Engineering Governance & Agile Delivery. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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