Chapter 1

The Driver

*S*ome certifications are created in response to an event, such as a lawsuit or the loss of a major customer. Others are implemented to gain a competitive advantage or to prevent employee disputes by helping managers make better personnel decisions. Many certification programs are the result of external pressures on organizations to ensure that their people perform to standard. It's important to be clear and in agreement on just what the driver is, because the driver is the platform on which everything else is based. The driver shapes the program's design and determines the requirements candidates must satisfy to earn the credential. The design, in turn, determines what the program will cost to implement and maintain. The driver also provides the criteria against which the program will be evaluated and updated. Agreement on the driver should result in three outputs: (1) a clear goal statement, (2) the measures that will be used to judge the effectiveness of the program, and (3) agreement on the target audience and stakeholders.

One of your first tasks in designing a certification program, then, is to find out whether there is a valid driver—a problem worth solving—for it and if a certification program or another type of credential is indeed the appropriate solution. Based on that information, you can design the credential so that it will fulfill stakeholder expectations. Once the program is designed, you can plan how it will be managed, marketed, and implemented so that it will continue to add value to the organization.

WHY ORGANIZATIONS CERTIFY

In the past, most certifications were developed by professional societies and certifying boards to protect the safety, health, and welfare of the public. This is still a main driver for many professional societies, such as credentials offered by the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, the American Board of Industrial Hygiene, and the Board of Certification in Professional

Ergonomics.[1] Today, in addition to protecting the public, professional associations develop certifications to attract members, to help certificants be competitive in the marketplace, to encourage participation in their educational programs, to pressure academic institutions to tailor programs for their constituents, to counter regulatory pressures for licensure that may restrict practice, and to drive universal standards. However, some certifications are created just because there is a market for them—that is, there are enough people who will seek the designation that it becomes profitable for an organization to offer it. Indeed, the driver behind most certifications is economic, whether this fact is stated or not.

Corporations' rationale for credentialing is different from that of professional societies. Corporations implement certifications to demonstrate due diligence to stakeholders, to promote continuous improvement, to increase productivity, and to maintain employee skills and knowledge. Businesses want to leverage their investments in research and development and in training and technology, and they want to reduce or avoid unnecessary costs. As a result, more organizations are turning to certification programs as a way to help them compete for and retain competent staff; establish uniform performance standards so they can rapidly deploy workers; outsource work to capable contractors and third-party providers; raise the level of core competencies across the organization; apply a multi-disciplined approach to solving complex problems; better integrate products, supply chains, and processes; and comply with local and international regulations. The following paragraphs discuss these goals in greater detail.

Protecting the Public

Protecting the public is still a primary reason organizations affiliated with the healthcare and medical fields either offer or require certifications, for example:

- The province of Ontario, Canada, certifies approximately 80,000 servers of alcohol annually through its Smart Serve Ontario program, established jointly by the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario and the hospitality industry in that province. The goals are to reduce accidents due to over-consumption of alcohol and reduce servers' liability through responsible alcohol service.

- The National Restaurant Association's Education Foundation offers a similar credential called ServSafe Alcohol® for servers and bartenders in the United States and another credential called the ServSafe® Food Protection Manager Certification for workers in restaurants, cafeterias, and other food service providers.

- Health Communication, Inc., offers the TIPS (Training for Intervention ProcedureS) certification. This organization trains servers, sellers, and consumers of alcohol on how to prevent intoxication, drunk driving, and underage drinking.

All three of these organizations provide training to promote responsible service, sale, and consumption of alcohol. Their certifications require passing a test for which the questions were derived from a job/task analysis. The evidence of effectiveness will depend on the number of incidents of "over" service that resulted in accidents or incidents that threatened people's safety; the number of lawsuits establishments were able to counter because of the certifications, the impact on liability insurance premiums, and the confidence level of the insurance industry and Ontario the Gaming and Alcohol Commission.

Reinforcing Professional Stature and Promoting Universal Standards

Medical boards and associations are particularly interested in promoting universal standards as a way to establish the legitimacy of a medical specialty.

- The American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery[2] (ABOMS), certifies oral and maxillofacial surgeons. It is recognized by the American Dental Association, Council on Dental Education and Licensure, as one of the nine dental specialty certifying boards. The legitimacy of its certification is acknowledged by many hospital staff, medical licensing and accrediting agencies, and third party insurers. The Mission of the American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery is to help set the standards for the confluence of education, training, and experience for the specialty of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery to assure the public of an acceptable level of attainment by those who are "Board Certified." To this end the Board's mission includes examination and certification of candidates, and recertification of Diplomates. The program's effectiveness measures include the number of dentists seeking and successfully earning the certification; the number of dentists who maintain the credential; the number of hospitals, licensing boards, and accrediting agencies recognizing the credential; the impact on liability insurance premiums; the continued confidence of the American Dental Association and the Council on Dental Education and Licensure.

- The Board of Registered Polysomnographic Technologists, Inc.[3] (BRPT), certifies technicians who work in sleep disorder clinics. The BRPT

administers the Registered Polysomnographic Technologist (RPSGT) and the Certified Polysomnographic Technician (CPSGT) exams. This is a newly evolving field, and educational programs are beginning to address the need for competence in multiple disciplines related to the study of sleep disorders, specifically respiratory care and neurodiagnostics. The board wants the professionals who conduct sleep disorder studies and the clinics that hire them to understand the legitimate need for cross-discipline training. The board also wants to distinguish professionals who are qualified to conduct sleep disorder studies from professionals trained only in a single discipline. The BRPT fosters ethical practices and requires the continued competence of those who successfully complete the RPSGT and the CPSGT exams. Its vision is to set the professional standard worldwide for the credentialing of technologists and technicians in the field of sleep medicine. The program's effectiveness measures include the number of hospitals and clinics that recognize the credential and give preferential treatment when hiring to technicians with the certification.

Preparing People for Jobs Requiring Competence in Multiple Disciplines

A major driver behind the increase in credentialing is the growing complexity of jobs. It is a rare job that has been untouched by advances in technology, specifically electronics and computing. Jobs have also become increasingly complex due to changes in legislation and local codes, advances in science, and the adoption of quality principles, specifically self-directed teams, the focus on streamlining work processes, and being data driven. One consequence is employers' demand for multi-skilled workers because many jobs require people to be competent in more than one area or knowledgeable about more than one discipline (due partly to an increasing need for an interdisciplinary approach to solving problems in business). Therefore, for many employees, companies are requiring either cross-training or additional training in new areas. In addition, organizations are providing new development pathways to certify people whose jobs require these multi-disciplined competencies.

Here are some examples:

- A major research facility hires scientists and engineers to manage complex research projects on behalf of the defense industry. It has found that as projects become more complex the scientists' and engineers' ability to bring the project in on time and within budget fails. It decided to develop

a program to certify its scientists and engineers in the management of what they classify as Type II and Type III projects. Type II projects are characterized as quasi-experimental in that the task is to test out a hypothesis that may require modifying procedures. Type III projects are described as ones for which the goal is clear but the procedures are lacking and need to be developed. The certification program's effectiveness measures are the frequency Type II and Type III projects are carried out within the given timeframe and budget, and either answer the research question or establish a set of procedures that can be replicated for future projects.

- A manufacturer of equipment for the defense and nuclear industries decided to certify its buyers at two levels, tactical and strategic. The drivers behind the decision to certify were the increasing complexity of the supply chain and the recognition that buying decisions affected the efficiency and integrity of the supply chain; the increase in costs due to products not meeting specifications; the need for buyers to better manage risks and assess suppliers' ability to withstand environmental and political threats; and the desire for buyers to be commodity experts so they are better able to take advantage of market variables. The program's effectiveness is measured in cost savings, product quality; supplier consistency; and management confidence.

Protecting Jobs and Enhancing Professional Stature

Another driver is pressure on associations to prevent job loss due to encroachment of other disciplines because the required skills cross disciplines or to ensure the competency of members. For example:

- The National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) joined with the Center for Environmental Innovation in Roofing (Center) to form Roof Integrated Solar Energy, Inc. (RISE) to evaluate and certify solar roofing professionals. RISE certifies roofers who manage the installation of roof-mounted photovoltaic (PV) systems, also known as rooftop solar energy systems. The driver behind the credential is to ensure roofing contractors and workers maintain a key role in roof-mounted PV installations. When roof-mounted solar energy systems were introduced in the marketplace, building owners typically contracted with electricians or solar integrators to do the installation. Over time it was shown that these installers—being unfamiliar with roof system technologies and applications—were damaging roof systems, voiding warranties, and causing roof leaks. Building owners

were suffering significant consequences from having unqualified personnel working on their roofs. NRCA also noted that a few states had already adopted legislation requiring licensed electricians to do this work. In response, NRCA decided to develop a certification and a training curriculum. The NRCA's position was that, given a proposed rooftop photovoltaic system design, the solar roof professional will apply essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to advise estimators, contractors, and sales professionals, and plan, coordinate, and supervise the installation of a low-slope or steep-slope rooftop photovoltaic system that complies with applicable codes, standards, and regulatory requirements; maintains the weatherproofing abilities of the integrated roof system; and meets customers' needs. The program's effectiveness will be measured by the number of roof-mounted PV projects overseen by RISE Certified Solar Roofing Professionals (CSRPs) and the number of manufacturers that recommend customers use RISE CSRPs.

• The International Association for Lighting Designers (IALD) decided to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of developing a certification program for architectural lighting designers. A major impetus behind the study was the introduction of a law by a state that would restrict the practice of lighting design to registered architects. The legislation as written would have negatively impacted architectural, theatrical, and landscape lighting designers. These groups, through their professional associations, united to prevent the legislation. An outcome was IALD decided to be proactive and take the lead in the development of a certification that recognizes practitioners whose designs meet clients' requirements, demonstrate design principles, are environmentally sound, enhance people's well-being, are integrated into the architecture, and are innovative. The goals are to establish architectural lighting design as a distinct profession, protect jobs, discourage licensure, and attract members. The program's effectiveness, should it prove to be feasible, will be measured by the number of architectural lighting designers seeking and achieving the credential, the number of allied associations that endorse the program, and the number of government agencies recognizing the credential.

Improving Business Processes

Integrating products, supply chains, and processes is a very sophisticated cost-management strategy. It gives organizations better control over their supply chains, distribution channels, and internal processes, but it requires a more complex set of competencies among organization personnel. Specifically, it requires expertise in relationship management, process design, activity-

based costing, and measurement. It also requires a different approach to problem solving. Managers still have to apply algorithms to diagnose problems, but they must also look at situations more holistically, noting in particular the impact on internal and external relationships. They have to facilitate the use of cross-functional teams in the redesigning processes and develop measurement systems that track and quantify improvements. They also have to develop incentives that support better cost management through integration. For example:

- An international retail chain contracts with suppliers all over the world. Its product managers are expected to work with their supply chain members to identify and eliminate inefficient processes, unnecessary requirements, and excess capacity. The managers are assessed on their ability to maintain and influence business relationships through a sophisticated combination of incentives and their ability to develop and consistently implement interventions that improve the performance of their supply chains. Managers who achieve these outcomes are certified.

In addition to jobs becoming more complex, organizations are recognizing the importance of standard processes to shorten work cycle time and avoid costs due to rework.

Here are some examples:

- A large pharmaceutical certifies document analysts. The goal is to reduce the time it takes to obtain Federal Drug Agency (FDA) approval for new drugs. One of the major contributors to cycle time is documentation errors. The program's effectiveness will be measured in how frequently the company's drugs are first to market, the cycle time required for government approval, and the costs associated with fulfilling the documentation requirements.
- A market research firm certifies its sales force in its product line. The company sells a suite of sophisticated market research products. The goal is to retain clients and increase sales by assuring the sales force has the product knowledge required to more accurately determine customer requirements and match the best product to those requirements. The program's effectiveness will be measured in number of customer complaints, customer retention, sales cycle time, and cost of sales.

- A manufacturer of precision measurement devices certifies its customers in how to calibrate and operate the instruments. It found that customer errors in the calibration and operation of the instruments resulted in increased customer complaints and service calls. The program's effectiveness is measured in terms of customer loyalty (do they buy more and buy faster) and the cost of service.

Establishing Professional Credibility and Influencing Academic Curricula

The increasing complexity of work has also resulted in the development of new professions. Some fields of work, such as managing amusement parks and attractions, have been around for centuries. What is new is the growing sophistication of the field and the demand for formal education programs, for example:

- The International Association for Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) has developed a three-level certification for managers of attractions. The goals are to bring legitimacy to the field of attractions management, give members a way to assess their skills and be recognized, encourage colleges and universities to establish curricula and degrees for the field, and attract members.

Establishing Uniform Performance Standards

Uniform standards enable organizations to hire capable workers and more rapidly deploy people to different work sites locally, nationally, and internationally. Common job descriptions, hiring criteria, and training are not enough to assure that staff will possess the same level of competency or can perform to the same standard throughout a national or multinational company. When employees are relocated, whether from southern to northern California or from Germany to Portugal, they often encounter differences in work processes and equipment, tolerance for error, customers' performance expectations, available support and technology, and management expectations between the two locations. These differences affect their ability to perform their tasks; therefore, companies are using certifications to establish common standards and work practices across work sites and even countries. For example:

- ABB (formerly Asea, Brown, Bovari) is a Swedish-Swiss conglomerate of approximately one thousand companies in high-risk and high-tech industries, such as high-speed trains, nuclear power, and pulp and paper manufacturing. The driver behind its certification program is its need to quickly deploy workers anywhere in the world. Its certification is designed to create uniform performance standards that reduce differences in the performance among people doing the same tasks in different locations around the globe; to gain the confidence of product managers by proving that employees can properly sell, service, and maintain products; and to demonstrate to customers that ABB is seriously committed to continually raising the quality of its people.

- A firm that manufacturers HVAC (heating, ventilation, and cooling) systems has to quickly deploy technical and professional staff nationally and internationally. Its certifications are designed to ensure that staff can perform tasks to the same level of proficiency no matter where they are assigned.

Protecting the Brand Name

To control costs, organizations outsource tasks to outside individuals and firms. They may even outsource key functions such as billing and collections, purchasing, and human resources. At the same time, companies are relying on third parties—independent distributers and dealers—to sell and service their products, to provide field and customer support, and to operate the aftermarket business, such as repairs, upgrades, and add-on features. The performance of the contractor or third party reflects directly on the brand image of the company and affects its customer relations. As a result, companies are certifying their contractors and third parties or requiring them to put a quality system in place that includes earning an external credential. For example:

- A manufacturer of high-end industrial and construction equipment sells its products through 350 dealers and distributors throughout the world. The approximate 70,000 technicians who work for those dealers and distributors are expected to service and repair a vast array of equipment. The challenge is that older equipment requires proficiency in diagnosing machines that use hydraulics and less sophisticated power systems. Newer equipment uses sophisticated electronics. Customers want to minimize the time equipment is out of service, and it is the technicians' job to keep

equipment up and running. Unfortunately, equipment breakdowns are blamed on the manufacturer, not on normal wear and tear or operator error. To protect its brand name, the manufacturer decided to develop a curriculum and certification for technicians. The curriculum is organized around product families, such as construction and marine. The certification has four levels, with each level requiring increasing technical knowledge and greater diagnostic skills. The program's effectiveness is measured in customer complaints, the sale of parts, a reduction of in-warranty repairs, and technicians' productivity measured in time at task compared to standard.

Raising the Level of Core Competencies

Organizations have discovered that people in different positions and at different levels fulfill many similar roles and perform many similar tasks, such as managing teams, building project plans, and formulating business cases. Similar roles and tasks require the same core competencies, such as good communication skills, leadership ability, and knowledge of planning. The lack of such competencies limits people's ability to perform common roles effectively, which has a negative impact on productivity and costs. Certification is being used to specify job requirements, identify skill gaps, and develop individual performance improvement plans. For example:

- A major credit card company certifies its customer service representatives, corporate account managers, and service managers. Training people for these jobs is a costly process. The certifications are used to recognize those who have achieve a certification level of competence and are a requirement for promotion. The program's driver was the need to identify people who perform and are capable of moving into positions of greater responsibility.

- A large manufacturer certifies its information services (IS) personnel. The initial driver was to satisfy internal customers' demand for qualified staff to service the company's computing infrastructure. The program assures management that the company's IS staff are as qualified as outside contractors certified by Microsoft. The program also allows management to track the skill mix, proficiency levels, and training gaps in the company's IS staff.

- A manufacturer of HVAC systems determined that project management skills were needed by people throughout the organization and that the lack

of competency in this area negatively affects cost containment and customer satisfaction. It now certifies people to serve as project leaders.

- A pharmaceutical firm is certifying its professional employees, who are expected to diagnose team effectiveness, identify barriers to performance, design innovative solutions, and successfully implement those solutions.

In each of these examples, organizations have chosen certification as a way to respond to internal and external pressures. Some certifications are designed to assure people have the required skills to perform a job. Other programs are designed to influence educational curricula. Still others are meant to influence customers' buying behavior.

SUCCESS MEASURES

If the goal is to protect the public, or workers, or customers, then the success measures should have something to do with the number and magnitude of incidents that harmed people, the environment, or some asset, whether that be property or brand image. To identify what will be used as evidence, a certification program is effective. Ask: What evidence are we seeing now that makes us believe we have a problem worth solving? Is this the same evidence we will want to use to measure the degree of added value from certification? The more specific you are, the easier it will be to measure the effectiveness of the program. This subject is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 on The Business Case and in Chapter 10 on Evaluation.

WHO TO INVOLVE

The Players

A number of players are involved in the creation of credentials. Traditionally, various groups set standards used to define the body of knowledge on which tasks, jobs, and professional disciplines are based. Other groups provide education and training based on those standards. Still other groups assess people's knowledge and ability to apply the standards. In the past, these roles were discrete; however, today they are merging. For example, assessment of knowledge or competency was once separate from development. Today, however, professional societies provide education, define the standards, provide education for those standards, and certify whether people meet the standards. Therefore, a byproduct or output of agreeing on the problem certification is to solve is agreement on the different audiences whose support is essential for the success of the program, specifically the target audience and the stakeholders. The following paragraphs discuss these groups in detail.

Target Audience

These are the people to be certified, the candidates. They have a vested interest in what will be required of them to be certified and what is available to help them satisfy the requirements. They may work at the same or different sites and perform the same or different jobs, depending on the driver behind the certification. For example, some certifications are designed for a narrowly defined group who perform a discrete set of tasks such as product installation, inventory analysis, customer service, or emergency medical assistance. In this case the certifications are usually based on the target audience meeting standards unique to the task. Other certifications are for people who serve in different roles yet require the same level of competence in core tasks, such as team leaders, supervisors, and customer and sales support. When this is the case, the certifications are usually based on people meeting a common set of standards, such as leadership, meeting management, interpersonal skills, communication, and product knowledge.

The target audience may work in the same building, at external customers' sites, from their cars, or even for different employers. They may work independently or as part of a team. It is important to fully define the target audience in terms of why they would want to be certified (especially if the credential is voluntary), what they already know, what they can do, other credentials they may have, and their work conditions. It is equally important to define the size of the target audience and where they are located. You use this information to identify incentives necessary for them to support certification, how to best reward them once they attain the credential, and what to require of the candidates, such as training, having an external credential or minimum experience, or passing a test.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are those individuals or groups who have a vested interest in ensuring that the certification's standards or results are appropriate. They are often the key decision-makers because they determine whether or not a program is implemented. Because stakeholders are the ones who will define success for the certification program, it is important to identify and define them. Ask such questions as: Who are the stakeholders? How many are there? Where are they located? What role must they play for the program to be successful? You will also want to identify the incentives for stakeholders' support for the certification. You will use this information to prove a need for the program and to further define the requirements. Stakeholders include program and candidate sponsors; customers and consumers; supervisors;

providers of educational and training programs; the public and regulatory agencies; human resource staff, legal personnel, and internal auditors; and internal or contracted support personnel, such as administrative and information technology staff. The following paragraphs discuss these different types of stakeholders in detail.

Program sponsors are those individuals or departments that will fund the certification effort. Consequently, they usually have the greatest economic stake in the program. They have to see a clear link between the certification program and the business or societal need behind it. There may be multiple sponsors, depending on the size and scope of the program. For example, one sponsor might fund a feasibility study and the design and development phases, whereas the cost of implementing and maintaining the program might be borne by a different sponsor. Sponsors' expectations concerning the use of their investment help determine how costs are recovered (through departmental chargebacks or fees) and what the baseline economic measures for the program as a whole are.

Applicant or candidate sponsors are those individuals who approve applicants and perhaps shepherd them through the process. They may also serve as mentors or coaches. This type of sponsor is more likely found in corporate certification programs. Their role is to assure candidates have the supervisors' and organization's support required to get funding for training, time off from work to meet with mentors, and coaching in preparation for the assessment.

Customers and consumers, whether internal or external, are the groups that depend on the competency of the target audience. For example, when the target audience performs one phase of a larger process (such as sales), the internal customers are those groups that perform the next phases of the process (such as billing, shipping, and installation). If the target audience is supervisors, then the customers are the people who report to those supervisors, as well as the supervisors' bosses. There is almost always more than one set of customers for a certification program, and each has a different set of expectations concerning the target audience. Customer buy-in is essential for the long-term success of any certification program; therefore, it may be necessary to first define a set of shared expectations among the program's customers before designing the program. You use information from customers and consumers to help set expectations for the certification program, define its standards, and identify potential areas of resistance to it.

Supervisors should have a vested interest in the competency of the workforce they oversee. Thus, they generally have a great deal of influence over the implementation and final standards of a certification program. Supervisors must support and reward the behaviors and outcomes the certification is

designed to achieve. Some programs even require supervisors to become certified themselves, so they are qualified to judge other people's performance. Knowing the number of supervisors involved, what their expectations are of the target audience, and to what degree they agree on what competence is will help you set standards they will support. It is also important to create ways to reward or recognize supervisors who hire certified people or support their employees' earning the certification.

Providers of educational and training programs are the groups that offer the education and training required to achieve the credential. Some may even administer and manage the program. They include universities, community colleges, private schools, vendors of training programs, professional and trade associations, and internal training departments. You want to know what role they will play, how supportive they are of the standards, and to what degree their programs impart the expected knowledge and build the desired skills. You use this information along with a profile of the target audience to identify which programs to use and whether or not the programs should be modified.

The public and regulatory agencies are concerned with public health and safety, so organizations that claim their certifications are designed to protect the health and safety of the public should in some way incorporate the voices of the vested agencies. Naturally, the public has an interest in the technical competency of the groups or individuals being certified. It also has other expectations, however, such as being kept informed and being treated in a respectful manner. Regulatory agencies are interested in the target audience's technical competence, in how the certifying organization will define and measure that competence, and in how its methods will correlate with accident prevention and threats to public safety and health. You will use information about what the public and regulators expect to develop the standards for the certification.

Human resources staff, legal personnel, and internal auditors want a voice in the design and implementation of any internal certification program, since they have to deal with employee relations, lawsuits, and compliance issues. Internal auditors emulate the process they expect external auditors to follow, so they can uncover and correct problems in advance of formal compliance reviews. Therefore, you want to know who the auditors are, what criteria they use to judge compliance, and what they expect of the certification. Consider how you will involve human resources (HR) staff, legal personnel, and your internal auditors when developing the certification's standards.

Internal or contracted support staff, such as administrative and information technology, are the people who will design and manage the program's database. For example, records should be maintained documenting what each

member of the target audience has done to satisfy the standards, who has been certified, and when each person should be recertified. Computer software used for general training may be used for certification programs as well. Similarly, an HR data tracking system may be used to support the recordkeeping requirements of the certification program. Computer systems are also used to administer tests, to register candidates for training and testing sessions, and even to deliver training and testing online. You use information about your program's target audience and standards to define your need for support staff.

Following are examples of the stakeholders of various programs I've observed:

- At ABB, every employee who supports one or more products—such as engineering, sales, service, and training staff—is a member of the target audience. The main customers are the product managers. The training department is a stakeholder because it must provide programs for all employees, since the required skills and knowledge are not available from any other source. The supervisors are stakeholders because they do the actual assessments. The information systems (IS) department is a stakeholder because it supports the worldwide intranet, where all employees can access their certification status and find out what is required of them. The manager of the certification program includes the target audience, the product manager, a supervisor, and someone from training to set performance standards and develop the assessment criteria.

- A manufacturer certifies its maintenance crews and team leaders. The main customers are the plant manager and production schedulers. Shift supervisors have to judge the competency of crews and team leaders. The training department manages the certification, administers the assessment, and provides courses to upgrade skills. The IS group created the database to track the certification status of crews and team leaders. The auditing department monitors compliance with policy. All of these stakeholders influence the success of the certification.

BENEFITS OF CERTIFICATION

A well-designed certification program meets the needs of the public, the organization that maintains it, the target audience, and the stakeholders. The public benefits when people perform work in ways that protect consumers, workers, and the environment. The certifying organization benefits when the program fulfills its mandate, whether that be to deliver qualified people,

to improve performance, or to satisfy an expectation of customers or the public. The target audience benefits when it has a credential that distinguishes it from others in the workforce. Stakeholders benefit when the credential satisfies specific needs for prudent operations and competent workers. You should identify not only the expectations of the certifying organization and all the vested parties but also what they see as the potential benefits. Knowing this will help you build a business case for supporting the credential and help you evaluate the program's effectiveness.

MISSTEPS AND OVERSIGHTS

When organizations begin developing a certification program, they frequently make one or more of three mistakes:

1. *They fail to identify the business driver.* This is a crippling error, because understanding a driver behind a program is what enables you to measure its effectiveness and to identify what has to be in place to produce the expected results.

2. *They fail to appreciate the level of discipline required of the organization.* Organizations often fail to realize that certification programs require greater discipline on the part of the certifying organization than they do from the people being certified. Before you can certify that someone possesses a particular set of competencies or can execute a procedure to a certain standard, the stakeholders have to agree on those competencies or that standard. A major portion of a certification program manager's job is to secure agreement among stakeholders on the goals and standards of certification. Another important task is to identify what organizational support systems have to be in place for a program to be effective. For example, if certification is intended to confirm that people know a particular set of rules and can perform their tasks according to those rules, then the organization should reward compliance with the rules. A lot of factors interfere with people's ability to perform their jobs well. Most of those factors are within the control of the organization and are not due to deficiencies in people's skills and knowledge.

3. *They fail to establish reasonable expectations.* Another oversight is the failure to establish reasonable expectations among *all* of the stakeholders concerning what the program can and cannot accomplish. Therefore, before going forward, make sure that the stakeholders agree with the stated reasons for the program and that you understand what each stakeholder hopes to accomplish. The public, in particular, might interpret or assign meaning to the credential beyond what it is designed to

accomplish. Over time these expectations can become what I call "public promises." For example, public promises happen when

- Sponsors who are asked to fund a certification expect a return on their investment

- Managers assume that certified employees perform better than non-certified employees, with little or no support from them

- Candidates come to believe that attaining a credential will result in job advancement or help them compete in the marketplace

- Consumers are led to believe that work performed by someone who is certified is better than work performed by someone who is not.

These expectations may be either reasonable or unrealistic. It is easy to understand how customers could assume that people who are certified are better skilled at what they do than those who are not and that their work meets higher standards. Unfortunately, the design of a particular certification may not support these assumptions. For example, training departments may promote certifications simply so they can require people to attend courses, rather than to help the organization identify and eliminate actual barriers to performance. Professional societies may promote certifications to get additional revenues from application fees and the sale of training manuals, rather than to promote standards that protect public safety and welfare. There is nothing wrong with wanting people to enroll in training or buy publications; however, you have to be sensitive to the possibility that people may assign greater value to a certification program than it can deliver, and any organization that offers a certification cannot ignore the fact that it has made promises, either directly or indirectly.

My brother wanted to hire a technical writer to generate documentation covering equipment specifications and work procedures. One of the people who applied for the contract attached his business card, which read "Certified Document Specialist." My brother concluded that this man had subjected himself to some degree of professional scrutiny, that he took pride in what he did, and that his work complied with professional standards. The certified document specialist got the contract, and the quality of his work met my brother's expectations.

TIPS

Here are some tips to help you and your team avoid some of the pitfalls other organizations have experienced:

1. *Define the customers.* Take the time to carefully identify exactly who the target audience's customers are. If you are designing an internal certification, find out where the target audience falls on the organization's value chain or the part it plays in the process of producing the organization's products and services. Pay attention to the people who are upstream and downstream of the target audience's place in the organization. These customers have expectations. They have modified their work processes to accommodate the target audience's current capability. Improving the target audience's capability will impact what and how others do their work. Knowing the impact will help you anticipate whether others will champion the certification program or put up barriers to implementing it.

2. *Educate the team.* Learn everything you can about how to design and implement a certification program. Find out what others have done, why they did it that way, and how well their program is working. Consider becoming a member of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) formerly known as the National Organization for Competency Assurance or another organization whose members administer certification programs.

3. *Set standards for the process.* Just as you would for any major project, develop a set of standards for how you and your team will operate. For example, how will you define consensus? How will you resolve disputes within the team and between key stakeholders? Create a vision and mission for the project. Periodically check to see how well you are living up to the vision and accomplishing your mission.

ON THE WEB

TOOL 1.1. GUIDELINES FOR AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

Here are some guidelines to help you lay the groundwork for an effective program:

A. Put together a three- to five-member cross-functional team. Together answer the following questions:

- What is the driver behind the certification? What problem are you trying to solve?

- What do you hope the certification will accomplish?

- What might happen if you do nothing?

- What evidence, both initially and over time, will demonstrate that the program is accomplishing what was promised?

B. What do you know about the target audience (their number, their responsibilities, their position in the organization, and so on)?

- How will becoming certified affect the target audience?
- What kinds of decisions will be made on the basis of their becoming or not becoming certified?
- What criteria are currently being used to select and evaluate them?
- Why do you think certifying this group will add value or solve the problem?
- What evidence will the certification program team want to show that the certification program has somehow positively affected the target audience, the stakeholders, and the organization?

C. Who are the other stakeholders?

- How many stakeholders are involved?
- Where are they located?
- How will they benefit if the certification is successful?
- How will they be affected if it is not successful?
- What role do you want them to play?
- How do they have to change for the program to be successful?
- Who would be an effective, credible representative of each stakeholder?

D. Meet with the stakeholders and find out:

- Whether they share your understanding of the problem
- What they expect the program to accomplish
- How they envision certification better enabling the target audience to do their jobs
- Their views on other possible effects of the program, such as forcing managers to agree on a common set of standards, providing additional training or developmental opportunities, and so on
- How willing they are to change and to live up to their commitments to make the program successful
- Which issues they agree on and where they disagree

E. Prepare a short presentation on certification programs that paints a larger picture of what they do, what makes them effective, what other organizations are doing and why, and what you hope to accomplish through your program.

SUMMARY

When you start the process of certifying any group, you set in motion a whole series of events that may have some unexpected fallout. The organization will have to define and agree on its expectations and its commitment to rewarding and supporting the desired behaviors and outcomes. If you want to certify people so you can deploy them as needed, then you will have to gain supervisory support for a common set of procedures and performance measures across the organization. If you want people to more accurately represent and service your products, then, besides certifying their knowledge and skills, you will have to provide them with accurate information in a timely manner. One of the more powerful outcomes from the process of developing and implementing a certification program is the pressure it will place on the organization to align its human resource systems (that is, its selection, placement, and promotion criteria). Another unanticipated outcome is that the process will reveal just how capable (or incapable) supervisors are at recognizing and reinforcing competent performance.

During the design process, identify what the organization has to do or change to fully realize the desired outcomes of the program. For example, certifications cannot compensate for inadequate educational and training systems, incompetent or uncaring supervisors, insufficient equipment, poorly designed information systems, or inappropriate criteria for merit rewards. However, if well designed, a certification program will raise everyone's awareness of relevant deficiencies, whether in academic programs, organizational leadership, or the design of work processes. The ultimate goal of every internal certification should be to support human performance by aligning industry standards, organizational HR systems, and management practices. The ultimate goals of external certifications offered by professional associations or their credentialing boards are to protect the health and safety of the public and to enhance the stature of the professions they represent.

It is important to remember that with certifications come public promises; that is, certifications raise expectations. Sometimes those expectations are warranted; other times they are not. Once you determine why you want to certify a group of people, be sure to consider what others might conclude about your program and about the people you certify.

ON THE WEB

TOOL 1.2. CHECKLIST FOR CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

Here is a checklist you can use to evaluate your certification program.

Y/N

A. There is a clear statement of the goal or purpose of the certification. ☐

B. There is a list or description of the evidence used to support the argument for certification. ☐

C. There is a description of who will benefit from the program and how. ☐

D. There is a description of the target audience, including who is eligible, the number of potential candidates, where they are located, and why they should care about being certified. ☐

E. There is a description of the stakeholders, noting their expectations (both of the program and of the people who will be certified), how they will benefit from the program, and what role they will play in the design and implementation. ☐

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Hale, J. A., *The Performance Consultant's Fieldbook: Tools and Techniques for Improving Organizations and People* (2nd ed.). (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2009). This book contains practical information about what affects human performance and ways to improve it. The section on interventions is especially helpful when considering certification.

Knapp, J., Anderson, L., and Wild, C. (Eds.), *Certification: The ICE Handbook* (2nd ed.) (Washington, DC: Institute for Credentialing Excellence, 2010). The Institute for Credentialing Excellence was formerly known as the National Organization for Competence Assurance (NOCA). The first Handbook was published in 1996. This edition is available both in hard copy and electronically. This book describes the criteria for voluntary certification. It also describes the criteria that independent nongovernment credentialing agents must satisfy to have their programs accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Lenn, M. P., and Campos, L. (Eds.), *Globalization of the Professions and the Quality Imperative: Professional Accreditation, Certification, and Licensure* (Madison, WI: Magna Publications, 1997). This book presents a series of articles explaining how trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1993) and the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS, 1994) have encouraged "the development of common educational standards, mutual recognition, and the liberalization of processes by which professionals are allowed to practice. Among nations whose education and regulatory systems vary significantly, it falls to educators and professional accrediting agencies to establish review procedures that will ensure the quality of professionals licensed to practice" (p. 2).

1. In the first edition of the book the work of the Illinois Occupational Skill Standards and Credentialing Council (IOSSCC) was mentioned. The National Skills Standards Council was created to promote the identification and definition of skills and standards for growing occupations in the United States. The Illinois Occupational Skills Standards Act established the Illinois Occupational Skill Standards and Credentialing Council (IOSSCC) in 1992. Illinois was one of three states engaged in identifying and developing skill standards for occupations that offer strong employment and earnings opportunities. (The other two states were Indiana and Texas.) The IOSSCC had three major functions: to recognize and develop skills standards and credentialing systems, to market and promote the application of these systems in the private sector, and to work with state councils and agencies to promote the application of standards and credentials in all approved and funded workforce development programs. What is noteworthy about the IOSSCC's work was that it required the standards developed by industry sub-councils to be sufficiently detailed to support the development of educational and training curricula and assessment. The standards were to be used by third parties to certify graduates of these educational programs. The IOSSCC worked with fourteen industry sub-councils to develop and market industry-recognized skill standards. The work of the IOSSCC ended with a change in state leadership. Before it ended it had thirty-one Endorsed Skill Standards books, 125 occupational areas, and had an additional twenty skill standards projects in various stages of development. You can access the standards at www.ioes.org/illearningstand.php.

2. To learn more about the Board of Registered Polysomnographic Technologists (BPRT), go to info@BRPT.org.

3. To learn more about the American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery (ABOMS), go to www.aboms.org.