



myths of certifi

By Jamie Mulkey and Jennifer Naughton

and promotes professional competencies.

If you look up the word *myth* in a dictionary, you'll find one definition that describes it as "a fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology." In the case of professional certification programs, many myths or beliefs have come to be accepted as truths. Those so-called truths affect the way certification programs currently are designed, developed, managed, and used. Not that any of those myths are bad, but they can be misleading.

Certification: a definition

Before answering the question of why people certify, let's define the term *certification*. Certification is the practice of qualifying an individual to perform in a job or occupation, based on a minimum set of standards. That means a professional body or organization has come together to set standards concerning what an individual should be able to know, do, and be in a given field. That organization has also created a measurement tool to sample that performance.

According to Jim Olsen, vice president and chief measurement scientist for Alpine Media, "Certification programs are a standard way of distinguishing between qualified and unqualified individuals, companies, and institutions."

Certification is typically created for two reasons: It protects the public from incompetent practitioners and promotes the professional competencies of an association's membership.

When visiting the doctor, you want to make sure she is diagnosing your medical problem correctly and

prescribing the right course of actions to treat the problem. No one wants a doctor who provides medical treatment unless it has been verified and documented that this individual has the skills and knowledge of a true medical professional. At the same time, to be recognized as part of the physician community is somewhat prestigious. It distinguishes an individual as someone who has been through a number of years of education, training, and rigor in order to serve the community.

In a way, a balancing act exists for those seeking certification. It's the delicate balance between protecting the public and providing prestige for the profession.

What certification is not

Certificate and *certification* are two terms that are often used interchangeably, though they are separate and distinct. Certification programs typically have predetermined standardized criteria on which participants are measured, usually through testing or assessment. The designation that results indicates the individual has met those standards or criteria.

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Alternatively, certificate programs tend to focus on a narrower range of topics, typically resulting in a document signifying completion of a learning experience, such as a workshop or a course. To determine which is which, ask yourself, Is the focus on job competency or the completion of learning experience?

Certification: a delicate balance

Certification provides the right balance of prestige and protection. Individuals become certified because it adds to their credibility as a professional. It provides greater opportunities for employment, promotion, and increased earning potential. In addition, certification may be required for them to perform in a given job.

Organizations request certification from employees for a number of reasons. Primarily, organizations want to validate that their workforce is qualified. A rigorous testing process, such as professional certification, helps to accomplish that. Let's look at an example:

A customer calls the ABC Intelligent Network Company with a system network problem. A trained individual, with two to three years of experience, is sent to the customer site to solve the problem. Eight hours later, the problem still isn't fixed. Network cards, controllers, and disk drives have all been replaced at considerable expense; still, no solution. The customer is irate. He's losing tens of thousands of dollars for each hour the network is down. How could the organization have been assured it was sending a competent individual to solve this problem?

Certification has become the mantra for many organizations that want to ensure that the individuals in their organization are competent to perform in a given job role.

Hit or myth?

What, then, are the greatest myths about certification? Use the following list to help you decide if professional certification is right for your organization.

Myth 1: Certification is an "easy sell" to the organization.

In our collective experiences, we've seen the need for certification programs both driven from the top and up through the bottom of the organization.

When driven from the top, you'll often find that a vice president somewhere in the organization gets a "bright idea" and decides that employees need to become certified. The first questions to ask are "Why certification?" and "What problem are you trying to solve with certification?" The answers could be any number of the following:

- reduce loss of revenue/profits due to poor job performance
- decrease inconsistent work product results
- accelerate the need for employees to achieve high, consistent standards
- verify employees have the skills and knowledge for which they are trained
- create a best-in-class organization.

If those are the reasons to embark on certification, they are good ones and further investigation to "build versus buy" certification should be studied. (More on that later.)

When driven from the bottom, can high level management support be realized? The same needs mentioned above for certification apply. In any case, you'll need to provide some return-on-investment for management evaluation:

- anecdotal loss evidence of poor job performance
- productivity gains as a result of implementing a certification program
- successful results from other companies that have implemented certification programs.

One last recommendation, Paul Jones, senior measurement scientist with Thomson Prometric, suggests that he "has not seen a successful start-up program without an evangelist behind it. Some articulate 'idea person' needs to light the fire to get the program going."

Myth 2: A certification test doesn't really need to be validated.

To be considered a true certification program, a testing program needs to follow guidelines to be considered legally defensible. In essence, it means that a professional organization has done due diligence in creating a qualification process that

- measures true knowledge and skill on the job
- supports the program with training and information so that candidates can adequately prepare for a test
- sustains the program by providing ongoing education and testing to keep the profession current.

Those processes should hold up in a court of law should a candidate contest the validity of the tests or program.

As a customer of certification, you'll want to do your homework and make sure the certifications you're recommending use a legally defensible process for designing, developing, and delivering their certification program.

Myth 3: Certification is for high-tech environments.

Although the need for information technology certifications in business today is obvious, a variety of industry environments share that need. Whether they build it themselves or rely on industry standard certifications, many organizations find certification to be a competitive differentiator.

According to Prometric's Jones, "most any professional organization can and does consider [offering] certification. This is particularly true if competitive organizations begin adopting certification."

Play by the Rules

In a paper, "Legal Considerations for a Certification Program," Daniel V. Blair, strategy and business planning manager for Hewlett-Packard's Certified Professional Program, suggested that 10 areas for legal defensibility should be considered when reviewing a certification program.

Test validity evidence. Does the certification show that the test items accurately reflect the job domain and are measurable? In other words, are you measuring what you intended to measure?

Test reliability evidence. Does the certification program show that results of testing are consistent for achievers and nonachievers of the test?

Opportunity to learn evidence. Have candidates been provided with an opportunity to take courseware, read materials, or have access to other learning experiences that will help them prepare to take the test?

Adequate test taker notification. Have candidates been made aware of when and where the test is available?

Avoidance of bias evidence. Has the certification test shown the test is free from bias, such as gender or race?

Cut score setting. What evidence exists that shows a valid psychometric process for setting a test's passing score has been determined?

Management of contractors in the testing process. What evidence exists to show that contractors have been managed appropriately in the test development process?

Use of experts to monitor test development. Has the test developer used subject matter experts to assist in the design and development of the test?

Provisions for test, retest, and grievance processes. How accessible is the test? What is the policy for retaking a test? And what processes exist should a candidate want to register a complaint regarding the test?

Test/retest remediation documentation. What training or documents exist that allow a candidate to prepare to take an exam a subsequent time?

Vicki L. Flaherty, certified senior consultant with IBM's Business Consulting Services, agrees: "Certification exists for IT companies, including telecommunication companies, and for professional associations in a broad range of industries." She cites several examples:

- Manufacturing—APICS
www.apics.org
- Automotive—ASE (Automotive Service Excellence)
www.asecert.org
- Financial planning—CFP (Certified Financial Planner)
www.cfp.net
- Government agencies—NSSB (National Skills Standards Board)
www.nssb.org

Another way certification is used by organizations is to protect their best interests and measure organizational progress. Prometric's Jones comments that "companies with intellectual property are interested in certification when the mastery of that IP is tied to customer satisfaction, profits, competitiveness, and public safety."

In fact, many organizations recognized as ASTD BEST Award winners use certification as a measurement tool for their employees. The recent results suggest that many of those organizations use certification as an alignment strategy with their corporate goals and objectives.

Myth 4: An organization should always build its own certification program.

When does it make sense to build your own certification versus looking to existing professional certifications to qualify your workforce? You'll want to answer a few questions before you make that decision:

Is there an existing certification program that qualifies a particular community in your organization for the skills you need? For example, if you need to verify that your salesforce has the right selling skills, can you find a generic sales certification that tests those skills? Don't reinvent the wheel. If an ex-

isting program provides the necessary skills, use it.

Is there an existing program that you can use as a prerequisite to an internal certification program? Let's say you use a generic sales certification to verify sales skills, but you also need to verify a sales rep's knowledge of your organization's products and services. The generic sales certification could be used as a precursor or prerequisite to the product specific certification. Then, product specific certification could be developed from within your organization.

How resource-rich is your organization? Do you have the right resources to design, develop, and maintain an internal certification program? Or do you have the funding to outsource those tasks? If not, an outside certification may be your best bet. All program administration is handled by another organization. All your organization needs to do is have employees follow the process set by the outside program.

Ultimately, you'll need to weigh the pros and cons of external versus internal. If you decide to develop a certification program in-house, IBM's Flaherty suggests that you "establish the business case (or market demand) for your program before investing, follow an industry-accepted test development process (so you end up measuring what you intended), and don't underestimate the value of careful up-front planning."

Myth 5: Individuals in the organization who fail to become certified are out of a job.

Certainly other factors are worth considering besides certification when looking at an individual's job performance. Certification may be one measure of individual competence, but it doesn't tell the whole story of an individual's performance. For example, how else is the employee evaluated? Does she work well with others? Does she show good results in her work? Is she innovative in solving problems?

Certification is only one dimension of a multidimensional performance appraisal system and should never be considered as the sole measure of individual job competence.

Myth 6: If I certify my workforce, they'll leave to go to another job.

One might think that once someone is trained and certified, he'll move to the highest bidder and go to another company. Research in this area suggests the opposite; employers who pay attention to their employees through continuous personal improvement, such as training and certification, are more likely to see employees staying with that company.

Myth 7: You don't need to keep your certification program secure.

Sure—if you don't care who gets certified. Certification is about keeping people out. It's a qualification process that identifies those who can perform and those who can't. Whether you're managing your own certification program or relying on another professional certification program, you should consider several aspects of security:

Test design and development. What precautions are taken by the organization to ensure that trustworthy individuals and secure processes are involved in the design and development of the certification tests? Are participants required to sign nondisclosure agreements before participating in exam development? What processes are being used to secure test items as they are written? Who has access and manages all the items once they are written?

Data management. Where is test and candidate data housed? Who has access to that data? What processes are used to reconcile test and candidate data?

Test delivery. Are tests delivered in a proctored envi-

ronment? Are there written procedures for administering those tests? What procedures exist when a security breach occurs?

Security planning. Is there an individual in the organization who manages test security? What documentation has been created to communicate and manage security for the certification program? What processes are followed for redevelopment should a significant test breach occur?

Myth 8: Certification programs mean big money.

Credentialing is an expensive business. Anyone who tries to convince you otherwise is being optimistic. A common misconception is that the number one reason sponsoring organizations build certification programs is to create a cash cow.

As certification programs mature, it is possible for them to become profitable and even lucrative. However, the majority continue to operate at an expense or barely break-even level for many years after start-up. Successful sponsoring organizations treat certification programs as long-term commitments and investments, and don't embark on them solely for financial reasons.

The costs of developing a certification program are usually heavy on the front end. Building the supporting infrastructure, such as setting up a governance board, securing appropriate legal counsel, and setting up a system to answer customer inquiries and process transactions, can be a daunting task and can carry a hefty price tag.

The good news is that costs vary. Factors that impact cost include program magnitude, candidate volume and fees, record keeping requirements, assessment type and complexity, and validation requirements. The bottom line is that there are choices and tradeoffs that can be explored to contain costs.

Myth 9: Certification is not a business.

Because the costs for starting and operating a certification program can be substantial, engaging in business and market research and planning before committing resources is essential. Conducting market research and understanding the competitive environment and market are best practices to ensure that there's sufficient demand and a business case for a program.

As testimony, Alpine's Jim Olsen recalls working on a certification program that had 100 examinees per year: "Minimal efforts were given to marketing and distribution of the certification. Although a very good test was developed with solid subject matter expertise, the certification waned since there was no communication or marketing push for the program."

Though that mindset is changing, many organizations that sponsor certification either blindly go into it thinking it's the "right thing to do" or "if we build it, they will come." Time and again, that type of thinking proves itself to be false. The most technically sound and well-designed program can easily die if not marketed effectively. In many ways, certification needs to be viewed like a product. Although many programs are associated with not-for-profit organizations, they need to be structured and run like a business in order to thrive.

Myth 10: It's too hard to justify ROI for certification.

It can be difficult to show ROI, but not impossible. Many organizations fall short when it comes to looking at the impact certification has had on them. According to Olsen, "Many organizations justify their certification program on the basis of what other similar or competitive organizations are doing. They want to jump on the certification bandwagon versus using empirical data to show results."

Creating an effective certification will mean up-front work on your part to determine what measures you can use to show a certification program's viability. For example, if your certification program deals with customer support, can you measure number of parts used, time spent on a repair, and number of re-repairs per customer?

After reviewing ASTD's BEST Award winners, we learned that many of those organizations were effective in showing ROI by aligning certification with the business strategies set by the organization.

By addressing the issues, an organization can set the correct expectations about what a certification will and won't do. Whether they are internally grown or externally leveraged, the organization using certification programs will need to answer these questions: Why certification? What problem are we trying to solve? And perhaps most important, can certification contribute to the bottom line of the organization? **TD**

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