

Performance-Based Certification

How to Design a Valid, Defensible, Cost-Effective Program

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Chapter 1: The Driver

The driver is the impetus behind an organization's decision to become involved in certification. Some certifications are created in response to an event, like 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 to do with the certification program will be 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 revised.

One of your first tasks in designing a certification program, then, is to find out if there is a valid driver—a problem worth solving—for it and if a certification program is indeed the appropriate solution. Based on that information, you can design the certification program 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

The main driver behind organizations' either adopting an external certification or developing their own is to protect the safety, health, and welfare of their workers or the public. Examples of external certifications include those offered by the Board of Certified Safety Professionals, the American Board of Industrial Hygiene, and the Board of Certification in Professional Ergonomics. Both external and internal certifications force organizations to be more disciplined in confirming that their people have or can get the knowledge and skills required to do their jobs safely, efficiently, and effectively. Other reasons organizations implement certification programs are to enhance the stature of a role or position, to promote continuous improvement, to increase productivity, and to maintain employee skills and knowledge.

These reasons focus attention on recognizing people's accomplishments and improving organizations' work processes. Some certifications are created 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. Businesses want to leverage their investments in research and development and in training and technology, and they want to reduce or avoid unnecessary costs. Recently, many companies have sought to protect and enhance their investments in redesigning processes, outsourcing noncore functions, expanding globally, and automating tasks to increase productivity. 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 multidisciplinary 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.

Attracting and Retaining Staff

To help organizations attract and retain competent workers, certifications are being designed to identify qualified job candidates, to promote career development, and to recognize employee achievement. Businesses are looking to educational institutions and industry associations to better define and develop technical job competencies and workplace social skills among potential job candidates, and certification helps businesses identify candidates that have acquired these attributes. Businesses and organizations are also investing considerable amounts to develop and maintain technical and professional staff themselves, and certifications are one way to leverage that investment. Consider these examples:

- Amway, a firm based in Michigan, certifies trainers employed by affiliates in forty-nine countries. The certification is designed to help the affiliates attract and retain trainers and to ensure that the trainers they hire meet performance standards for product knowledge, product merchandising, and delivery of training.
- To support employee retention, an automobile manufacturer certifies its dealers' technicians and sales staff and its own production crews.
- The Illinois Occupational Skill Standards and Credentialing Council (IOSSCC) was created to develop standards that can be used by private and public educational institutions to develop the workforce and make it more employable. The standards are used by third parties to certify graduates of these educational programs. The IOSSCC works with fourteen industry subcouncils to develop and market industry-recognized skill standards.¹

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 ensure 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:

- Asea, Brown, Bovari (ABB) is a Swedish-Swiss conglomerate of over one thousand companies. The driver behind its certification program is its need to quickly deploy workers anywhere in the world. Its certification is designed to create uniform standards that reduce differences in 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 the customer that ABB is seriously committed to continually raising the quality of its people.
- A firm that manufactures 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.

Facilitating Outsourcing

To control costs, many organizations outsource tasks to outside individuals and firms. Many companies outsource even key functions such as billing and collections, purchasing, and human resources. (The work may or may not be performed off-site: increasingly, "outsourcing" means hiring independent contractors to perform work on-site.) At the same time, companies are relying on third parties-independent distributors and dealers-to sell and service their products, to provide field and customer support, and to operate the aftermarket business (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 qualifying their contractors and third parties or requiring them to put a quality system in place that includes earning an external credential. For example:

- ARAMARK, a large multinational firm, is hired by other organizations to manage their facilities. ARAMARK is getting its facility managers certified by the International Facility Management Association to demonstrate its commitment to ensuring the capability of its staff.
- Enerpac, a manufacturer of hydraulic pumps, relies on a network of independent service centers to service and repair its pumps. Enerpac wants to certify the service centers and their technicians to make sure its network is capable of servicing its products.
- A manufacturer of doors, windows, and other home improvement products wants the independent contractors who install their products to be certified. Improper installation results in leaks, which leads to customer demands for replacements from the manufacturer. The American Architectural Manufacturers Association is developing a certification program for the company so it can certify contractors competent to install its products.

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 a 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 achieved a certain level of competence and are a requirement for promotion. The program's driver was the need to identify people who perform well 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 computer infrastructure. The program assures management that the company's IS staff are as qualified as outside contractors certified by Novell and 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.

- An automobile manufacturer certifies supervisors and team leaders who have acquired specified management, interpersonal, and leadership skills.
- An international pharmaceutical company certifies its scientists, engineers, and administrative staff in computer applications such as word processing because they prepare the documentation required for governmental approval of new drugs.
- The external certifications offered by software companies like Microsoft and Novell and by hardware manufacturers are being used by organizations to ensure minimum capability among staff and contractors.

Creating Multidisciplined Jobs

Today, 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 multidisciplined competencies. For example:

- The Board of Registered Polysomnographic Technologists, Inc., certifies technicians who work in sleep disorder clinics. This is a newly evolving field, and currently available educational programs do not 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 Association for Worksite Health Promotion represents people who manage on-site company fitness centers that have exercise equipment, gymnasiums, swimming pools, and locker rooms and offer change-of-lifestyle programs such as smoking cessation courses and fitness counseling. Employers want people with abilities beyond facility management to manage these types of centers. They are looking for individuals with degrees in health and fitness and skills in management and marketing. The association is designing a certification that reflects this multidisciplined set of competencies.

Integrating Products, Supply Chains, and 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 redesign, 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 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 that achieve these outcomes are certified.

- An automobile manufacturer is designing a certification program to shift its purchasing personnel's perception of their work from "buying parts" to "managing supply chains."
- A pharmaceutical firm is certifying its professional staff to diagnose team effectiveness, identify barriers to performance, design innovative solutions, and successfully implement those solutions.

Complying with Local and International Regulations

Both government and industry impose regulations on companies and other organizations, and companies must comply with them if they want to sell products or provide services, locally or internationally. For example, being certified by the International Standards Organization (ISO) is a requirement for many companies to compete internationally. Firms must qualify their employees and suppliers for ISO certification by some means such as training, experience, or testing. Organizations are experimenting with certifications to help them comply with ISO, local government, and internal regulations. For example:

- Florida's Small Business Development Centers require certification for all of their business analysts. The driver behind this certification requirement was qualification for federal funding from the Small Business Administration (SBA) and matching funds from the state.
- The National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) was set up to develop a certification program and create model statutory guidelines for interior designers, since their work affects public health and safety. Interior designers are regulated in twenty-one states. Those states use the NCIDQ exam to test interior designers' ability to specify products and design interiors that meet local fire and safety codes and comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The American Society for Interior Design (ASID) and the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) require members to be NCIDQ certified before they can be designated "professional" members. The inference is that NCIDQ certification distinguishes interior designers from interior decorators as more qualified and capable of performing more duties. The drivers behind the related design societies' support for the NCIDQ certification were to establish one set of standards for the profession, to increase employment opportunities for interior designers, and to build consumer demand for interior designers' services.

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

Who to Involve

Two groups are key to successfully designing and implementing an effective certification program: 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. Obviously, they have a vested interest in decisions about certification requirements and about what will be made available to help them satisfy those requirements. Candidates for a particular certification 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. Such certifications are usually based on the target audience's 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 staff. When this is the case, the certifications are usually based on candidates' meeting a common set of standards in areas such as leadership, meeting management skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and product knowledge.

The target audience for a certification may all 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 will use this information to identify incentives necessary for them to support certification, determine how to best reward them once they attain the credential, and decide just what to require of candidates (such as training, an external credential or minimum experience, or passing a test).

Stakeholders

The 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 key decision makers, persons who determine whether or not a program gets implemented. Because the 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 stakeholder support for the certification. You will use this information to prove a need for the program and to further define the requirements. Stakeholders include sponsors; customers and consumers; supervisors; providers of educational and training programs; the public and regulatory agencies; human resources 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.

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 costs 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.

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 (like sales), the internal customers are those groups that perform the next phases of the process (like 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 will 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 will be qualified to judge other people's performance. Knowing the number of supervisors involved, what their expectations are for 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' becoming certified.

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 knowledge and build skills. You will 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 its voice. 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 staff, are the ones 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 they should be recertified. Computer software used for general training is sometimes used for certification programs as well. Some organizations use HR data tracking systems for certification programs. Computer systems are also used to administer tests, to register candidates for training and testing sessions, and even to deliver training and testing on-line. You will 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 that 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 six thousand employees, since the required skills and knowledge are not available from any other source. The supervisors are stakeholders because they do the actual assessment. 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.
- An automobile 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 the crews and team leaders. The training department manages the certification, administers the assessment, and provides courses to upgrade skills. The IS department 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.
- NCIDQ's stakeholders are the associations that provide professional development programs for interior designers, state licensing boards who want designers to be more knowledgeable about fire and safety codes, colleges and universities with interior design programs, manufacturers of furniture and finishes who want designers to recommend their products, and the consumers who rely on designers to create functional and esthetically pleasing interiors.

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 their 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 three mistakes:

1. They fail to identify the business driver. This is a crippling error, because understanding the 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 a 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. There are a lot of factors that interfere with people's ability to perform their job 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 noncertified 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 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 courses 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 or 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 that capability may affect them positively or negatively. Depending on what the impact will be, they might either 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 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.

Guidelines

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

- If 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 job
- 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 get 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 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 profession 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.

Checklist

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

YES NO

- A. There is a clear statement of the goal or purpose of the certification.
- B. There is a description of who will benefit from the program and how. YES NO
- C. 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.
- D. 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

Browning, A. H., Bugbee, A. C., Jr., and Mullins, M. A. (eds.). *Certification: A NOCA Handbook* (Washington, DC: National Organization for Competency Assurance, 1996). This book describes the criteria for voluntary certification. It also describes the criteria that independent nongovernmental 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).

Note

1. 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 is one of three states engaged in identifying and developing skill standards for occupations that offer strong local employment and earnings opportunities. (The other two states are Indiana and Texas.) What is noteworthy about the IOSSCC's work is that it requires standards developed by industry subcouncils to be sufficiently detailed to support the development of educational and training curricula and assessment. The IOSSCC has 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.