



## How Do We Decide If Certification Is Right For Our Organization?

The decision to offer a certification program should not be made lightly. Certification programs can be expensive and present legal risks. You should investigate the idea carefully and consider the following in making your decision.

### 1. Determine Why Certification Is Being Considered For Your Organization.

Your first step is to explore why certification is even being considered. Who or what instigated the certification program discussion? Is it really wanted and/or needed by members (perhaps shown through a needs assessment) or is it simply a pet project of a few leaders? To see if certification may be right for your organization, you should determine what the program goals might be. In other words, what would your organization be trying to accomplish through a certification program? A task force of your Board could tackle this issue. Here are possible goals:

- Protect the health, safety, or welfare of consumers
- Self-regulate the industry
- Identify and promote a professional role
- Recognize individuals with experience and expertise
- Enhance career mobility of individuals
- Enhance the marketability of individuals
- Enhance public image of individuals
- Increase visibility of individuals
- Position individuals in specialized markets
- Provide a professional growth opportunity for individuals
- Provide performance standards for individuals

You should then prioritize your goals and determine if they are consistent with your organization's mission. If not, you've got a problem – your mission, of course, should drive all of your programs. If they are, then proceed to the next step: weigh the opportunities versus obstacles.

### 2. Weigh Opportunities Vs. Obstacles

Certification programs can offer opportunities for associations, including:

- Visibility for the field
- Public relations for the field
- Protection of public/consumers
- Self-regulation of the field
- Standards of performance for members
- Career aspirations for members



There are also potential obstacles, including:

- Legal liability
- Resource-intensive
- Difficult to assess real demand for certification
- Rifts with competing programs of other associations
- Member resistance to change (accept the need for certification)
- Member perception of the certification as a threat
- Barrier created between certified/not certified

You should consider which opportunities might be significant for your organization and if obstacles are insurmountable.

### 3. Conduct Feasibility Analysis

You will next want to determine if a certification program is viable by conducting market research and conducting an organizational assessment.

*Market Research.* You should conduct market research to assess member demand (minimally) and employer demand and consumer demand (ideally). You should also assess what competition exists and what opportunities are available for collaboration with other organizations.

In your market research, it will be tempting to simply ask in a member needs assessment, "Would you be interested in applying for certification in \_\_\_\_\_?" However, this will almost always yield inflated results! This question might give you some preliminary indication about interest, but do realize its limitations. A better way to gauge realistic interest is to first draft potential specifics of a program – such as the goals, eligibility criteria, testing requirements, benefits, and cost. Provide this information to your target group and then ask if they would be eligible and if they would likely apply for the certification in the next 3 years. Sure, this is more work, but your thoroughness will benefit you in the end.

If there is a competitive program already successfully established in the market by another organization, do not be so vain to assume your certification would be "better." The first in the market always has an advantage, no matter what. That's not to say that yours may not be successful, but be cautious and ensure your program is unique.

*Organizational Assessment.* You will want to investigate:

- Does your organization have the staff to support a certification program or are you willing to add staff?
- Does your organization have the funds available to initiate and maintain a certification? The initial research alone usually costs \$100,000 plus.
- Do you have full support of the leadership and senior staff?
- Where could the program reside in the organizational structure?
- What impact might it have on other programs or products of your organization?



### 4. Apply a Decision Checklist

Taking all of these steps into consideration, then, you could make your decision whether or not to initiate a certification program based on your answers to these key questions:

- Are the program goals consistent with the organization's mission?
- Are the opportunities the certification presents significant?
- Are the obstacles the certification presents surmountable?
- Is the market research data supportive?
- Does the organization have the financial and staff resources available to create and support the program?

Of course, this short article can only cover the basics; there's more to it! For more information, contact:

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