Rethinking Traditional Certification

Originally posted to www.alwaysdoneitthatway.com on June 21st, 2006

For many fields, it may be time to rethink the traditional model of professional certification in order to meet the needs of the changing workplace environment and workers.

Say I'm considering changing careers and am interested in your profession. I Google the field and click to your website to investigate what I need to do. First, I discover I need a bachelor's degree. Alright, I've got that. Oh, wait, it needs to be in x or y. Mine's in z. Strike 1. And, it needs to be from a university accredited by your association. Although mine is a regionally accredited college, it's not on your short list. Strike 2. Oh, I need 7 years of experience before I can get the credential anyway. That seems like forever. Strike 3. I decide to check out the Occupational Outlook Handbook and discover the crazy part: the certification is *voluntary*. All this and I don't even need it? Plus, there's no state regulation of the industry. Back to Google. What's this? A university certificate program offered online…a corporate certification program… another association's intensive training program…lots of appealing options that fit my needs.

You're thinking, okay, so we have eligibility requirements, but they are all necessary to ensure the quality and meaning of the credential. That will be true for some professions, but definitely not all. Consider if yours are *really* necessary or if there could be alternate pathways. Is an academic degree necessary or could some combination of training and work experience substitute? Does the academic degree have to be discipline-specific or could additional training substitute? Do you have any requirements that serve as artificial barriers to earning certification? Is there really any evidence an individual not meeting the requirements is any less qualified than those that do?

Now, consider the projection that Millennials (those currently entering the workplace) will engage in an average of six careers in their professional life. Yes, that's careers, not jobs. Now, in that light, consider again the traditional model of certification. How many Millennials are going to be willing to go to a college you deem acceptable to get a degree you deem acceptable just to get a credential that is voluntary? What about those who already have a base degree and are in the workforce? Does your certification have enough value in the market to drive an individual to basically start over? Are you confident you can sustain that value positioning for the next 10 year? Or 20?

I'm not suggesting that standards be watered down. But, at minimum, credentialing bodies need to take a hard look at what artificial barriers they can remove. And, in some cases, the whole certification model may need to change.

The half-life of knowledge in many fields is decreasing rapidly, and fields are becoming more specialized. It may well be the current model of certification just won't work for your field anymore. As one possibility, just-in-time credentialing may be a more viable model in the new marketplace.

Consider the just-in-time model occurring in parts of the IT industry. A new technology solution emerges so you: Get real life work experience. Take a comprehensive training program, IF you need it. Take a performance-based test to prove your competence. Earn a certification. Gain a new skill set and a resume-enhancer to position yourself better in the job market. A new technology solution emerges and the cycle begins again…and again…and again.

This model is already proven successful in the IT industry. Maybe there's something to be learned here for your field. Or maybe an entirely new model needs to emerge. One thing is certain: you cannot assume that the traditional model of certification is going to meet future needs. It may not be already.

For more information, contact:
Mickie S. Rops, CAE   Mickie S. Rops & Associates, Inc.
P: 317-810-0013 M: 913-972-3937
W: **www.msrops.com**   E: **mickie@msrops.com**