
Does Your Certification Program Require an Extreme Makeover?

Trends and issues suggest certification policies and practices may need to be reviewed. In fact, they may need an extreme makeover.

More and more organizations and occupations have either adopted certification programs or are in the process of developing them. There are many reasons to have a certification program (see side bar). Associations should resist the urge, however, to establish a certification program because they see it as a potential non-dues revenue generator – the development and maintenance of a high quality and respected program can be costly.

A non traditional type of certification is emerging. In the information technology area, companies and organizations offer hundreds of certification programs. If the certification does not meet traditional standards, however, it may diminish the value of all professional certification programs. As a result, some believe the terms "certified" and "certification" are not being used properly, thus the need to promote the quality of association certification standards to demonstrate the differences between their own programs and those with lower standards.

The terms "certification" and "certified" have value. This is evidenced by an increasing group of individuals looking for certification to assist with career growth. Certification indicates that an individual has met a standard and is capable.

Fewer professional associations are being legislated as self-regulating and able to perform a licensing function. Some groups are trying to become self-regulating and governed by a private statute without the licensing function, while others are seeking only right-to-title legislation. The majority of certification programs are not enshrined in legislation and the designation initials are normally trademarked.

Historically, professional associations within Canada have played a dynamic role in ensuring the public users of various professional services receive consistent service, quality and competency from members of their professions. It is a safe assumption this will continue. Certification is not new. Medical credentialing practices have been in place since the 13th century. What has been constant is the fact that improvements are made on a regular basis. They are usually initiated after a number of issues are identified which could threaten or, alternatively, provide opportunities for the certifying association. Keeping a certification program up-to-date requires an awareness of the issues.

Given changing factors such as legislative issues, changing competencies, technology, liability, methods of examination, public perception, member interest, member satisfaction and various other certification policies and practices, how do you think your certification program measures up? Take a look at the following issues and determine if your certification program needs an extreme makeover or simply a touch up.

Issues to Consider

- Not all certification criteria are the same. Certification criteria change based on certification program maturity, markets and perception. Some certification standards relate to:
 - completion of courses only;
 - a minimum number of years experience only;
 - a combination of the above;
 - a competency based approach; and
 - maintenance of certification requirement.
- Certification criteria can be set nationally and provincially. Responsibilities may vary and so may the criteria. One province may not have a certification program, yet members of that province may want certification. A province may only be able to certify members in their jurisdiction.
- Provincial differences in certification may create mobility challenges for members of related associations.
- Certification may be a requirement in one province and not another.
- A number of association certification programs may be competing for overriding authority to regulate or certify members in certain practice or service areas.
- Actual or perceived intrusion by other associations into disputed practice territory is creating competition. Addressing competition requires the use of scarce resources to promote distinction and improve market share of the contested territory.
- Changes in the economy, advances in technology, the general complexity of communications, knowledge and specialization are changing the scope of practices.
- The desire for a more specific customized or specialized focus is resulting in association fragmentation and new related certifications – the result is marketplace confusion.
- Some segments of certified members are looking for an additional designation to recognize a perceived specialty area.
- Some associations have a division in the membership; those who support a certification program, and those who feel threatened by the prospect of having their existing level of competency evaluated.
- Developing and maintaining a suitable set of competency standards for an association with a large number of segments and specialties can be challenging.
- Canada's population is relatively small, and the numbers on a national or provincial certification basis may not generate enough revenue to maintain the desired quality and credibility.
- Certification may be perceived as excluding others and the public may not believe it is necessary if it will not meet public demand.
- It may be difficult to provide equal access to the required training and evaluation for the certification program.
- New types of degrees, diplomas and certificates can deliver comparable or better education and members want to know what value-added is provided by the certification program.

- Not all certification is receiving the desired profile, nor is recognition measured on a regular basis.
- Strategic alliances with learning partners linked to the certification program need to be strengthened.
- A Maintenance of Certification requirement, if it exists, may not be meaningful to members and it may not be complied with.
- Standards of Ethical Conduct subscribed to by those certified may need updating to reflect legislative or marketplace situations.
- The exam process and related content may need updating to ensure relevance and competency is validated.
- Some individuals may want the designation but may not want to be members of the association.

If one or more of these issues exist, you may want to start documenting the situation to prepare for some type of continuous improvement activity.

Students in the Association Management Education Program discussions on certification often zero in on the issue of credibility. Credibility is key. There is consensus that certification must produce individuals who provide a consistent level of service, quality and competence, so both employers and the public will consider certification as adding value to the profession.

If the public does not perceive certified individuals as providing a value-added role to their professions, promotional efforts and expenditures by associations will not reach their intended objectives and credibility will eventually be lost.

The perceived role of associations with respect to their support of individual members also helps to establish the credibility of a profession.

Continuing education programs are also important to ensure that certified members are able to maintain and update their knowledge levels in order to continue to provide a consistent level of service quality to the public. Members must also perceive a certain degree of value in becoming a certified member. If an acceptable payback on investment is not realized by becoming certified, there is little incentive for future members to participate in certification. Associations must also take the initiative to educate their members about the benefits of investing in certification.

A certification program is a professional association's most valuable asset. The program requires strategic planning as well as day-to-day attention. Without constant attention it may become outdated and perhaps hurt the association overall. As a certification program matures it is critical to invest in improvements. After all, associations have many different stakeholders and each will demand a quality, timely and relevant programs.

In addition to looking at the issues that may exist in your association, you may want to ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Has your certification criteria (i.e. competency standards) been vetted with employers and other related stakeholders?
- Are the public or potential users of certified members aware of the certification and do they have trust and confidence in the criteria?
- Does the quality of your certification program reflect the quality of your association?
- Is your certification program aligned with your organization's strategic direction?
- Does your examination process measure performance based on the competencies required?
- Is your certification program open to potential legal challenges and do you have the right insurance coverage?
- Has your certification program earned respect from those who have participated and were successful in obtaining the designation?
- Does your certification program comply with legislation and can it be defended in the event of a legal challenge?
- Have you analyzed examination results and related factors to ensure the model and process is appropriate?
- Are you clear on the benefits you expect certification will provide to the association, your members and the public?
- Are you marketing your certification program effectively?
- Have you identified all of the stakeholders affected by your certification program and do you understand their needs and concerns?

Professional certification is receiving more attention. The environment in which we work is constantly changing. As a result, a required check-up on certification activities is needed. Perhaps the Standards of Ethical Conduct need updating or the Maintenance of Certification requires adjustment to reflect new competencies and new technological support. An association needs a team that will perform the necessary due diligence to ensure what needs to be done actually gets done.

I am not able to address all the related issues in this column, but I hope I have developed awareness of the fact that it may be time to strike that Certification Task Force and look at a possible makeover.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issues, and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com

SIDEBAR:

Reasons Certification Programs are Established

- To encourage members of a profession to achieve high standards and deliver quality services

- To enhance the prestige or image of a profession
- To improve public perception of a profession
- To protect the public from incompetent individuals
- To protect employers by providing them with a means of comparing potential candidates
- To preempt external governmental regulations and/or legislative actions
- To enable an association to reduce the costs of recruitment and generate revenue by attracting members who are seeking to gain their certification
- To increase the status and compensation of members