

Choosing the Right Credential

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Credentials can help advance an individual's career through their ability to benchmark professional expertise; show adherence to professionalism, behavioral standards, and ethical guidelines; and prove receipt of comprehensive training. But choosing the right credential can be a complicated and frustrating process. There may be many competing credentials that appear to be very similar. Or it can be difficult to tell if a credential is worth the time and money it will take to obtain it—some credentials may not have the standing or “name-brand” recognition necessary to further your career goals, some may not be accepted in certain circles (or by certain employers), and some, part of fraudulent money-making schemes, may not be worth the paper they are printed on.

Organizations grant credentials for a variety of reasons: to set and enforce standards for practitioner qualifications and conduct, to protect consumers from unqualified practitioners, to provide a way for members to indicate affiliation with the organization, to raise the visibility and credibility of the organization, and even to make money for the organization.

To ensure that time and money aren't wasted pursuing worthless credentials, it is important for individuals to thoroughly research the available credentialing options, as well as to clarify why they want a credential. Before attempting any credential, individuals should ask the following questions:

1. Why Do I Want A Credential?

Generally, there are three main reasons why people want credentials: a) they want to indicate professional affiliations (increase prestige or clarify roles and skills to others), b) they want to increase their expertise (get more training), or c) they want to substantiate their current levels of expertise (obtain or increase legitimacy or increase marketability).

There are three types of credentials: licenses, certifications, and accreditations. The type of credential you pursue depends on your motivations for seeking a credential.

Licenses are fairly straightforward—they are generally required by law and the credentialing entity (usually a government agency, commission, or board) is specified in the law. Certain occupations, such as plumber and doctor, require a license in order to perform that type of work, though the licensing requirements can vary from state to state. The need for a license as well as how to obtain it will be obvious and generally there is not much confusion associated with this type of credential.

Accreditation is conferred by a professional association or peer group and validates existing expertise, usually through documentation of experience (field hours) and current education and training (no training is attached to an accreditation because it presupposes that you already have training).

Certification is conferred through completion of a program of study (such as a college degree program or a professional development seminar).

In terms of status, accreditation is generally considered the stronger credential because anyone can take a class and earn a certificate. Accreditation is considered more prestigious than certification because individuals have to be able to demonstrate years of experience or particular expertise to earn the credential. In essence, peers are declaring the credential holder a subject-matter expert when they confer an accreditation, which marks the holder as an important member of that professional community.

In terms of marketability, certification is generally considered the stronger credential because such a program is recognized by most employers: even if the employer has never heard of the particular

credential, the fact that the holder has attended training gives the credential weight in the marketplace.

There are also blended programs (accredited certificates), which are conferred upon the completion of both a training program and an accreditation process documenting experience and training. This type of credential is considered the strongest all-around because it combines the best elements of both types – marketability and status, training and peer review.

If you are seeking a credential in order to increase your expertise (especially if you lack experience), you should pursue a certification. If you already have a lot of training or experience and want to increase your marketability (to negotiate a raise or promotion, or to change positions), you should pursue an accreditation. If you want a bit of both, pursue an accredited certification. In addition, if you are seeking a credential to increase your marketability, find out which credential is required or preferred by the employers you are targeting. If you are seeking a credential to earn peer recognition for your existing experience, find out which credential most professional associations in your field support, and talk to other professionals in your field to find out which credential is the most respected.

Finally, remember that there are some instances where education is valued over experience and vice versa. If you are applying for or work in a job where the employer wants a college degree regardless of years of experience, then a certification will probably help you more. On the other hand, if you are dealing with an employer that gives more weight to experience or reduces the formal educational requirements for those with more experience, then an accreditation will probably help you the most.

2. What Expertise Am I Trying to Credential?

Credentials can vary in comprehensiveness from highly specialized, focusing on one occupational or job competency (such as interview coaching or resume writing), to generalized, focusing on broad career field competencies (such as career development or counseling).

When pursuing a credential, it is important to have a specific goal in mind—do you want to focus on a particular skill, or do you want to focus on broad, transferable skills? Do you need a credential specific to a particular occupation (such as high school guidance counselor or job developer), a particular setting within a career field (such as the public sector or higher education), or all jobs in the field (general career development)? Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, you may need several credentials. Individuals who provide across the board career services may need a generalized career development credential in addition to several specialized ones, such as coaching, resume writing, and job development.

There are some broad credentials that have “add-on” professional specialties, endorsements, or sub-designations. In these instances, the credential holder must obtain the general, base credential first, and then can obtain additional endorsements or professional designations in specialty areas. These credentials combine general and specialty credentials in to one, which streamlines the credentialing process and minimizes bureaucracy and re-certification procedures. However, the process for earning the specialty endorsement may not be as comprehensive as the process to earn a separate stand-alone credential covering the same competency. In addition, professional endorsements are often used by an organization as a fund-raiser; beware credentials that spawn too many sub-endorsements, or that lack a rigorous process for obtaining endorsements.

3. How Does the Credentialing Organization Measure Competency?

In general, there are three ways credentialing entities can measure the applicant’s competency: a) self-certification (through methods such as self-evaluations or self-documentation of field hours), peer certification (through methods such as submission of a portfolio, letters of reference, or an interview), and c) testing.

Testing is obviously the strongest method – it provides objective and concrete measurement of the applicant’s mastery of the competency. Peer certification, which is the second best option, can range from a sign-off on an employment verification form, to a letter of recommendation, to a trainer or mentor’s sign-off that the individual has mastered the material or met the identified standards. Self-certification, which generally relies on the honor system as well as a subjective, rather than objective, evaluation, is the weakest system of measurement that can be used.

4. How Often is Competency Measured?

Some credentials, once granted, are good for life (such as a college degree). Some competencies don’t change much over time (such as basic addition and subtraction). In these instances, there is not much need to re-measure competency; once the concept is mastered, it is mastered for life.

Some credentials must be renewed every so often (usually every 3-5 years), generally through a re-credentialing process that includes documentation of continuing education hours or re-testing. Some competencies change over time (such as science and fashion design). In these instances, the credential loses value over time as the holder’s knowledge becomes more outdated. In order to maintain the value of the credential, the credentialing entity requires credential holders to be recertified in order to demonstrate that their expertise is up-to-date.

Credentialing entities can also use the re-certification process to ensure adherence to the professional conduct standards and ethical guidelines that it sets; the organization can refuse to renew the credential of individuals who violate these standards. Organizations that grant credentials for life without renewal requirements often lack a means of enforcing the associated professional standards.

While a re-certification requirement can be a strength for a credential, it should also be noted that re-certification usually involves the payment of a fee, and some organizations use this process simply as a fund-raiser rather than as a professional benefit to credential holders. Individuals should be wary of any credential that requires payment of an “annual maintenance fee,” that requires frequent re-certification in competency areas that don’t change much over time, or that requires frequent re-certification without a rigorous process for documenting continuing education. These could indicate that the credential is little more than a fund-raiser for the organization, rather than a legitimate credential.

The right credential can help advance an individual’s career by attesting to the holder’s high level of expertise and professional. By conducting thorough research in to a credential before pursuing it, individuals can be sure of choosing the right one.

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