

# Certification

*It's a retention strategy.*



by Judith A. Hale

LEADERS ARE EXPERIMENTING with new ways to develop and retain capable people. They know that being competitive depends on their people doing their jobs well, and yet they are faced with the challenges of replacing an aging workforce on the brink of retirement with limited qualified candidates, keeping sales and service personnel current on increasingly sophisticated products and changing regulations, and offsetting shrinking margins due to lower-cost competitors.

Two experimental solutions are outsourcing and certification. Leaders outsource non-core functions to lower costs by reducing headcount, focusing on their strengths, and avoiding long-term financial commitments—such as retirement benefits and healthcare costs; however, to work effectively, outsourcing requires higher skills and vendor and program management. It's not a good solution for jobs wherein employees create and make use of the company's product and market intelligence. For such hard-to-replace jobs, companies are looking to certification.

## Who Is Certifying and Why?

Certification is being implemented by organizations whose people: 1) use and interpret complex data, such as electronic, scientific, financial, and market data; or 2) sell, install, calibrate, and service suites of products, or products that have to interface or integrate with multi-generational-technologies.

Companies that grow through mergers and acquisitions are also using certification to cross-train the old and the newly acquired workers quickly. The assessment is used to accurately identify skill deficiencies so people receive only the training they require. Other companies implementing certification are manufacturers that depend on dealerships and distributors to sell and support their products. These companies must help their distribution channels develop and assess workers' abilities.

Analyzing complex data, integrating legacy systems with new products,

relying on after-market partners, and growing through mergers are not mutually exclusive as companies that have to interpret complex data also grow through acquisitions and rely on after-market partners. Whatever the driver, the goals are to protect brand image and to retain or increase profit margins.

Good certifications involve assessments that accurately identify skill and knowledge deficiencies to shorten the time it takes to develop people's proficiency, minimize the cost of training by concentrating only on areas of need, and help distinguish a company from its competition. Even companies that rely on professional and industry certifications, such as accounting and engineering, must implement their own programs to assure the workforce can use their systems and processes and support their product mix.

Certifications require a more disciplined management system to be effective. For example, performance requires more than skills and knowledge. It requires accurate and timely information, well-designed processes, efficient systems, sufficient resources, and appropriate incentives. Without these elements, people's ability and incentive to do a job well is compromised. The appreciation for all that is required for a worker to be effective is one reason companies are rejecting the traditional model of certification and implementing a performance model.

The traditional model of certification involves taking training and passing a test. However, experience, training, and testing do not guarantee performance on-the-job. What companies need is a program that addresses barriers to performance as well as measure how well people can do a task in the work setting.

## Performance-based Assessment

There are two types of performance-based assessments. The first is a simulation that uses scenarios or examples of real data or product specifications. People are asked to analyze the information and select the best response

among a series of plausible choices. This assessment more safely tests problem-solving skills before the worker interacts with the actual customer or steps foot on the production floor.

The second type puts the responsibility on the supervisor to observe employees in customer or team interactions and judge employees' job outputs whether it is a report, a physical product, or an analysis of data. This requires well-defined performance measures, standardized checklists, and implementation protocols that assure fairness and validity.

At the same time organizations are building certifications, workers, too, are earning credentials from vendors and professional associations. In the computer



industry, manufacturers and vendors offer certifications that customers require as part of the hiring criteria. Professional societies and trade associations are also offering certifications. Many are based on tests of a common body of required knowledge. However, some are adopting performance tests. One example is a performance-

and competency-based credential—Certified Performance Technologist (CPT)—offered by the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) for the learning and performance professional. This certification relies on attestations by the practitioner's employer that the person's work was of value (performance) and an assessment by trained reviewers of the practitioners' work description (competency). The ISPI credential was developed in response to customers wanting to better identify capable practitioners, and the standards were developed by customers, not by practitioners and academics.

If your company is considering developing a certification, ask what the company expects to be different as a result, what business problem it is trying to solve, and how will success be determined? Use this information to design the credential and to measure its effectiveness. If the certification uses an assessment instrument or process, consider making that assessment as similar to the work and work setting as possible. Identify the people who rely on the work being executed well and incorporate their expectations in the criteria. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Develop a certification.