

How important is formal certification?



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Due to the nature of my work and my network, I'm frequently approached for career advice by budding entrepreneurs, folks in-between jobs, those contemplating a change or those simply hoping to advance within their organization.

A question that often comes up during these conversations is my thoughts regarding the value of formal certification for a specific skill set that the individual possesses (e.g., Lean, Six Sigma, project management, etc.). My typical answer is it depends.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should preface my comments by clarifying that the last official "certification" that I received from a third party was a bachelor's degree in engineering from Iowa State University more than 36 years ago. That was vital to getting my foot in the door with my first employer.

Once inside, however, my growth was undeterred by lack of certifications, and was instead driven by contributions. Note this was likely due to the entrepreneurial disposition of the company. Other organizations might be different. So a significant consideration to the certification question has to be the perceived value of such within current or likely employers.

Somewhat surprisingly, the question of formal certifications has been raised by a less than a handful of potential clients during the past 10 years while vetting my services. Many more have asked about my experiences in applying various tools and thoughts on how that could extend to their organization.

Therefore, the most meaningful certifications ascertain not only that coursework was completed and a test passed, but also that knowledge was applied in a meaningful project. The latter is key. I might have (miraculously) garnered an "A" or a "B" in differential equations at ISU, but you wouldn't want me designing your control system.

Even completion of an application project doesn't guarantee that extensive hand-holding didn't occur. Most certification organizations have a vested interest in ensuring participants cross the finish line.

Certifications on a resume might help clear original sorting hurdles, but a worthwhile interview searches for evidence that the certified skills have been repeatedly

and successfully applied and that a deep, thorough understanding of the principles exists.

Since certifications help make a resume more attractive, does that mean organizations shouldn't promote them in an effort to dampen employees' mobility? To that, I refer to the popular internet meme:

CFO: What happens if we invest in our people and they leave us?

CEO: What happens if we don't, and they stay?

(Author's note: I always believe that meme is a disservice to the majority of CFOs that I know).

Pursuing formal certification is almost always more expensive than procuring the same knowledge informally without certification. But it is likely more effective.

In the case of an individual between jobs and on a tight budget, the cost might likely be prohibitive. For an organization, the cost not only includes fees but it's also almost certain that there will be portions of the certification process that aren't particularly pertinent to its line of work.

For both individuals and organizations, choosing the certification organization is even more important than determining whether to pursue certification. In essence, we want to ensure that the certifier is certified to certify. Don't assume that a pretty website ensures that.

Last November, I received a message via LinkedIn from an organization with a global presence. It wanted to know if I was available to instruct its four-day Lean Six Sigma Black Belt workshop. The organization didn't know me from Adam.

Here's the kicker: I received the request on a Thursday and the workshop was scheduled to begin the following Tuesday. Two days to become familiar with four days of training materials from another organization. (It took less than a minute to respond, "No thank you.") Unfortunately, for those enrolled in that particular workshop, certification was a bad decision.

If the organization is large enough to have the resources to do so, an ideal solution is to custom design the training and certification process to meet its specific needs. This can be accomplished with an internal expert if you already have one, a contracted external consultant or a collaboration between both.

RICK SAYS

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