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The Separation of Certification and Education

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Most credentialing organizations go to great lengths to ensure their certification programs are separate from programs having to do with education, training and/or practice tests for initial certification — and for good reason. Any appearance of a conflict of interest between these product lines can potentially undermine the brand, reputation and integrity of the credential and the exam development process. The separation of programs avoids conflicts of interest and maintains the integrity of the exam.

A separation between these activities is also required if the organization plans to comply with the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA)'s Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs and/or to comply with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)/International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) ISO/IEC 17024:2012 standard to accredit organizations operating programs to certify persons (hereafter referred to as "the NCCA Standards" and "the ISO/IEC 17024 Standard," respectively).

With that said, artificially disconnecting education and certification ignores the fact that they share space in the same learning ecosystem. If approached in a thoughtful manner, paying particular attention to necessary firewalls and customer needs, the development of educational offerings can represent a credentialing organization's commitment to more fully actualizing the competency assessment mission and leveraging the larger factors in the learning system. Organizations can offer certification preparation that supports future test takers, as well as education that enhances continued competence for recertification, and still be in compliance with accreditation requirements.

Ensuring Quality Education

Google your organization's credential and you will likely find a number of test preparation products that your organization had nothing to do with developing. Purchase or review those materials, and you may be surprised to see how little the content aligns with the test blueprint or how poorly the materials address the necessary knowledge needed to be successful on the exam on in the role.

Clients often assume that any product with the acronym or credential on it is produced by the certification organization. We know that is not true and, in fact, many for-profit enterprises are actively and successfully monetizing our credentials, often with little regard for quality or the ultimate success of the buyers.

In the desire to support candidates in their aspirations to be certified and improve their knowledge, organizations have an obligation to ensure there is quality education in the marketplace for them. Certainly, organizations should not imply the programs they promote contain "inside information" that will enable anyone purchasing them to achieve certification without meeting the established standards. However, credentialing organizations should be able to control the extent to which the educational content matches the publicly available test blueprint and other requirements for recertification. In this way, the credentialing organization is satisfying a mission imperative, as well as meeting a business need for ensuring the products in the marketplace are of the quality that current and future certificants associate with the credential.

Certification and Education Synergy

In some cases, a certification program is a completely independent, separately incorporated organization. In others, it is housed within an affiliated organization, such as a membership association or other similar body. Regardless of how they are structured, a synergy can exist between certification and education. It is important to build and sustain internal communication or external partnerships that leverage that synergy.

The relationship between membership and certification organizations can be tricky. Do we compete, collaborate or cooperate? Irrespective of how groups answer these questions (and despite the fact the answer may be "yes" to all three), it is clear that certification is a driver for acquisition of education, particularly as it relates to the need for

certificants to maintain the credential through participation in continuing education activities. For this reason alone, it is critical that the certification and education teams maintain ongoing, strategic conversations about how to fill the market with the education needed to support certification activities.

Educating internal and external stakeholders on how a job analysis can support activities other than a certification exam — as a blueprint for educational programming, for example — can enable a collective approach to supporting the learning needs of the community. Proactively sharing the blueprint with program committees and others who provide education to the profession may be one way to achieve this. Engaging in collective strategic planning between internal teams or boards of directors of affiliated organization is another way to consider how to collectively approach the learners in our communities in a cohesive way that meets their needs and supports our shared missions.

Internal Competency and Capacity

It should go without saying that developing and maintaining education is not a small or short-term undertaking. It requires a team that possesses a defined set of knowledge, skills and experience to do well, particularly in an era where information changes so rapidly. Delivering education places demands on teams across the organization, so a shared understanding of those demands and the internal bandwidth available to meet them is critical.

In considering whether to offer education, certification organizations need to perform an honest assessment of their internal competencies and capacity to build and sustain a business that meets the contemporary needs of learners. A quick-and-dirty approach will rarely serve the higher-level mission and business goals we have discussed here. Instead, the community will quickly determine the education is not being offered as a means of supporting their educational needs, but solely to generate revenue for the organization. Instead, an organization needs to be willing to build or invest in the time, talent and technology needed to develop this business line or establish partnerships with membership organizations or other bodies for whom education is a core organizational competency.

Maintaining Impartiality in Test Prep

Both the NCCA Standards and the ISO/IEC 17024 Standard make it clear that education and certification activities can coexist within a single organization. When dealing with certification preparation, however, a certain autonomy and impartiality needs to be maintained. Certain firewalls and disclaimers need to be in place and clearly communicated. To make sure these boundaries are respected, certification organizations would be well served to take the following steps regarding the development of certification preparation materials:

1. Ensure that staff members, volunteers, subject matter experts (SMEs), contractors, etc., involved in any aspect of test development — writing or reviewing items, setting cut scores, or reviewing forms — are not in any way involved in creating test preparation resources (i.e., prep books, courses, preparatory tests, other exam prep materials). All individuals involved in either test development or test preparation materials should be required to sign confidentiality and conflict of interest agreements.
2. Define and enforce the qualifications for SMEs who wish to work on the development of the exam and/or the development of test preparation resources.
3. Reflect the division of duties in staff job descriptions as a means of documenting compliance with these firewalls. When contracting with or hiring any SMEs to develop test preparation materials, make sure they only have access to certification information that is publicly available (e.g., job task analysis data that is available to the public, exam blueprint).
4. Make clear that the educational offerings sponsored or developed by the certification organization are not required in order to sit for the exam. Do not state or imply that its education or training programs are the only or preferred route to certification.

5. Clearly state that the purchase/usage of exam preparation materials does not guarantee a passing score on the exam, and participants are not more likely to achieve higher scores simply because the test sponsor is the creator of the program.

Organization Size Considerations

When documenting autonomy and impartiality, the organization should keep in mind that it is its responsibility to provide the accrediting body with adequate documentation as to how the organization meets the standard(s) in this regard. Sometimes the availability of resources from within can have an effect on the boundaries used by the organization to meet the standard(s). For example, an organization with adequate resources may not have a problem developing and implementing policies and procedures that would establish clear firewalls separating roles and responsibilities of staff, consultants and SMEs regarding certification functions and preparatory education/training. On the other hand, an organization with limited resources may need to take a different approach. In the event where there might be shared staff and/or shared responsibilities, policies and procedures should reflect how clear boundaries are maintained regarding certification program autonomy and impartiality.

Summary

Learning and assessment are connected activities. Each candidate and/or certificant recognizes the processes needed for developing professionally, which requires both education and a means of assessing competency to practice. Third-party accreditation requires that autonomy and impartiality be maintained when it comes to the development of certification programs versus the development of educational programs related to exam preparation. Credentialing organizations must document how this separation is established. It is important that the credentialing organizations identify who is a part of which process and maintain this structure.

It should not be inferred, however, that certification organizations cannot serve as a conduit for quality education, either by developing it themselves or by partnering with membership organizations or other entities. Rather than opting out of education entirely, certification organizations would be well served to explore all the ways to support our constituents as they pursue their goals to elevate themselves as learners and professionals.

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Additional Resources

NCCA Standards Compliance

In order to obtain and maintain NCCA accreditation for their certification programs, credentialing organizations will need to understand and be able to comply with the following standards:

- Standard 2: Essential Elements A and E address what is required of certification governing bodies in order to remain autonomous in their decision-making processes regarding essential certification activities.

- Standard 3: Essential Element A addresses autonomy and impartiality related to those individuals having access to certification materials. Essential Element B deals with what is required of those credentialing organizations with educational programs in terms of positioning themselves to assure that no conflicts of interest exist and to protect the integrity of the certification program.
- Standards 10 and 11: These standards address requirements related to confidentiality and conflict of interest in order to assure autonomy between certification and educational programs.

ISO/IEC 17024 Standard Compliance

To meet the ISO/IEC 17024 Standard, credentialing organizations will need to understand and be able comply with various subsections of Section 4.3, Management of Impartiality. It is critical that a certifying organization be able to provide a good explanation regarding its impartiality related to exam development and exam preparation. This is key in being able to identify firewalls. Key subsections to Section 4.3 in this regard are:

- Sub-section 4.3.1: Addresses requirements that make sure there are structures in place to ensure impartiality.
- Subsection 4.3.6: Requires that the certifying body be able to identify threats to impartiality and threats to those individuals and groups involved with management of the certification program.
- Sub-section 4.3.7: Requires proof that impartiality exists and there are no conflicts of interest in terms of responsibilities regarding those involved with management of the certification program.

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