

Is Credentialing Right for Your Association?

by Joan E. Knapp, Ph.D.

We have become a credentialing society. Consider the following: In 2000, 200,000 automotive service technicians, 33,000 pharmacy technicians, and 9,000 Microsoft project managers were certified. Although there are no formal statistics available on the size of the credentialing industry, the Certification and Accreditation Programs Directory, Joan E. Knapp published by The Gale Group, contains descriptions of 1,700 national voluntary certification programs. But most industry experts believe that the actual number of credentials being offered within the United States far exceeds this count.

The credentialing process has exploded across the past two decades. A variety of credentials have evolved to meet industry demands. Professional and trade associations offer credentials to both members and nonmembers. Community colleges offer curriculum-based certificates to students. Corporations sponsor customized, in-house credentials for their employees. And information technology suppliers offer proprietary credentials to users. A recent trend has even produced partnerships between sponsors and others to create new and different programs.

If your association doesn't already offer a credential, should it?

The answer depends on your goals, whether the credentialing options available will meet them, and how willing your association is to invest in a credible, high-quality program. The following three questions will help you to decide:

1. What are sound reasons to make credentialing a part of your association's professional development activities?

- **Technological innovation.** Has the nature of work in your industry changed dramatically and rapidly across the past several decades? Are workers expected to adapt by continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills?
- **Exponential increases in knowledge.** Has there been a great expansion of knowledge in your industry? Are multiple credentials required to meet its needs?
- **Short shelf life for academic degrees.** If academic degrees are prerequisites for entering your industry or profession, are they sufficient for moving individuals forward in their career development?
- **Public demand for standards.** The media have made the public very aware of the impact of professional incompetence on public safety and welfare. Is your association under pressure to have professional standards and regulations?
- **Desire to avoid regulation.** Does your association think it can ward off government interference by self-regulation through the development of standards and credentials?

From *Professional Development Forum Online* (2001). American Society of Association Executives.

2. What are your association's credentialing options?

Before the exponential increase in credentials, associations' options were limited. Most organizations offered national programs that attempted to adhere to certification standards requiring independent governance and complex technical processes and procedures. Now, voluntary credentials come in a variety of forms.

- **Full-scale national professional certification.** The term *professional certification* usually applies to broad credentials that are awarded to individuals meeting program eligibility requirements and successfully completing rigorous assessments of their knowledge and skills.
- **Certificate of knowledge or certificate of added qualifications.** A certificate of knowledge emphasizes a relatively narrow scope of specialized knowledge used to perform certain professional or occupational duties. For example, a certified internist may receive a certificate of knowledge in tropical medicine.
- **Curriculum-based certificate.** A credential is awarded upon completion of a course (or series of courses) and an assessment process. This linkage to specific course content is one of the primary features that differentiate this certificate from others.
- **Certificate of attendance.** Participants receive this when they complete a course or series of courses. It usually requires no assessment of knowledge and skill.

3. How can you make sure that your intended credentials will be credible, of high quality, and able to meet your members' needs?

No matter what option you choose, you will want the credential to be meaningful and, in the long run, successful.

- **Relevance.** Your credential should be market-driven and reflect the immediate demands of your industry or profession.
- **Alignment.** If your credential purports to link to a curriculum, make sure the curriculum covers the skills and knowledge promised.
- **Based on outcomes.** Employers and the public want to understand what people will know and be able to do once they've obtained your credential. Be prepared to prove your claim through some sort of assessment of skills and knowledge.
- **Duration.** Is there an expiration date on the credential? What procedures are in place for individual to renew their credentials?
- **Credentials that fit.** How does the credential relate to other credentials and professional development programs offered by your association or other organizations?
- **Truth in credentialing.** Be honest and clear about what your credential means. You need to articulate what form of recognition it is and what you're recognizing in the individuals who successfully complete the process. This is true whether the credential is a broad national certification program or a simple certificate of completion.

Joan E. Knapp is CEO, Knapp & Associates International, Princeton, New Jersey. This article was adapted from a presentation at the ASAE Annual Meeting and Exposition in Philadelphia. Knapp is coauthor of The Business of Certification: A Comprehensive Guide to Developing a Successful Program (ASAE, December 2001). To order (members \$48.95, nonmembers \$59.95, plus shipping and handling) call 202-371-0940 or visit the ASAE Bookstore online and reference Product No. 216834.