
Just-in-Time Credentials

by Joan E. Knapp, Ph.D.

Where is credentialing headed?

After interviewing a half dozen association executives who are charting a new course in this area, I learned that many foresee a continued proliferation of association-sponsored voluntary credentials. They also predict that just as teleconferencing and e-learning have changed the nature of many association products and services, a new breed of credentialing will emerge as part of this change.

Included in this new breed are just-in-time credentials. Such credentials take their lead from the high-tech industry, which excels at just-in-time training, manufacturing, and service in order to meet customer needs, to compete, and, yes, to survive. Based on my interviews, here is a look at how this concept applies to credentialing and how you can tell if it might work for your members.

Just-in-time credentials?

Think of them as an agile and cost-effective response to member needs that arise relatively quickly. To provide just-in-time credentials, your association needs a system that fine-tunes your member research and credentialing process to offer the service members need, when they need it.

Successful programs require organizational alacrity, good timing, wise use of resources, and sensitivity to target markets and stakeholders. The resulting credential could be a professional registry, a certificate program, or even a certificate of attendance. No matter what you call it, a just-in-time is all about moving into the credentialing breach when the time is right and the need arises.

Successful just-in-time programs

- offer content (knowledge, skills) that is narrower in scope than full-scale, entry-level, or advanced certification programs;
- are modular or stackable, meaning that they serve as a foundation or an add-on for other credentials within a field's overall professional development offerings;
- often involve training and typically have an outcomes-assessment component that can be delivered in a "secure" (proctored) setting or "nonsecure" (open-book) manner, and
- come to market more swiftly than other credentials because they respond to industry or workplace demands as needs emerge.

A just-in-time credential might be right for you if

- your field is highly technical and changing rapidly, and you need to provide programs that demonstrate that your members are up to speed;
- ever-changing government regulations are a key driver in your industry, and your association needs to move swiftly to keep members current;
- employers in your field want to see that your members are capable of "beyond the basics";
- although your members already have an entry-level certification program available, they want more opportunities for professional development;

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- a rival organization is slow to meet the needs of your industry, and your association has the resources to create a quality certificate program quickly; and
- because you are already considered *the* source of knowledge in your field and possess the needed content, it is a natural next step to create credentials that attest to members' mastery of this content.

Upon closer inspection, just-in-time credentials might *not* be right for you if

- solid credentials already exist in your field, and a clear distinction between your prospective credential and the existing one is not obvious;
- your organization has brand recognition and mistakenly thinks it can create credentials with very little money and effort;
- the eligibility requirements for attaining your credential are likely too high; or
- your association is considering a credential in response to a currently popular individual or school of thought.

Advice from veterans of just-in-time programs

- **Don't second-guess your market.** Because this effort is all about creating value, make sure this program is what members need and want. Constantly scan the environment to determine what credentials will position your members for better professional opportunities.
- **Validate your content** through focus groups, expert panels, and other types of research. "You should push the knowledge and skills envelope, but not too far," says one veteran. "The only way to know if you are on target is to validate the content and skills with the people who are practicing on the front lines."
- **Don't start something you can't afford or can't deliver in short order.** Developing a business plan is crucial.
- **Define the scope of your program carefully.** Be sure members and the public know precisely what you are credentialing. "We had

to make our target markets understand that our program was not a specialty certification leading to a formal designation," says another source. "Its purpose was to provide those already certified with new skills and knowledge for moving into new professional niches."

- **Form strategic alliances, and recruit supporters.** Because the key driver for one veteran's credential was a federal agency regulating the industry, the association invited agency representatives to participate in program development. The result: The agency is now a strong supporter of the credential and features the program on its Web site.
- **Do not scrimp on quality.** Just because your just-in-time program is not a full-scale, high-stakes certification, you shouldn't do a shoddy job. One organization conducted a pilot before offering the live-course segment of its credential and found that several faculty members had to be dismissed because of poor training-delivery skills. As is the case with any product or service you offer, a just-in-time credential puts your reputation on the line.

Finally, follow this sage advice from one veteran on maintaining the initial success of any just-in-time program: "Plan on updating your credential. Keep up with industry standards and practice. And don't rest on your laurels."

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The following sources, who work at organizations that have successfully paved swift, cost-effective paths to new credentials, contributed their expertise to this article.

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- Shirley Nycum, vice president for education, Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation, Arlington, Virginia
- Christine Reidy, director, Commission of Dietetic Registration, the credentialing agency for the American Dietetic Association, Chicago
- Deborah Reuter, director, government programs, Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation, Arlington, Virginia
- Brenda Sanders, assistant staff vice president, University of Housing Joint Venture Education Programs, National Association of Home Builders, Washington, D.C.
- Bill Travis, director of marketing, Door and Hardware Institute, Chantilly, Virginia