

CERTIFICATE  
OR  
CERTIFICATION?

**That Is the Question**

By Lenora G. Knapp and Jennifer Naughton

**Certified Professional of Learning and Performance (CPLP), Certified Financial Planner (CFP), and Project Management Professional (PMP)...the qualifications landscape can be a confusing alphabet soup. Reading the title, you may wonder: Is this a trick question? Certificate and certification are just different terms for the same thing, right?**

Wrong, according to two national standards just released. One thing that won't come as a surprise is this: Great confusion exists about the different types of qualifications and the terminology used.

There are now two national standards for certificate programs, issued by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) and ASTM International, both of which emphasize that certificate and certification programs are distinctly different. ICE, a premier membership organization for the credentialing industry, has highlighted the differences in recent publications (see "Defining Features of Quality Certification and Assessment-Based Certificate Programs").

Both ICE and ASTM International also distinguish certificates of attendance from other types of certificate programs. Further information about the standards and accreditation processes for both certificate and certification programs can be found in Sidebar 1.

**Why should you care?**

Why do these distinctions matter? Because if you create the wrong type of program or require that employees participate in the wrong program, you will wind up wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars and people resources on a program that fails to deliver. Develop the right type of program, and you can effectively satisfy stakeholder needs and accomplish desired business outcomes. The differences are not only important to your business. Each type of program plays a role in closing skills gaps—a matter of national importance in today's competitive business environment.

Certification and certificate programs are part of a larger qualifications framework—one that has been articulated by, and a topic that has received attention from, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (see Figure 1). The Gates Foundation's philanthropic focus is to increase postsecondary completion rates, based on a belief that a postsecondary credential is the best path to success for economically disadvantaged students in the United States—whether it be a certificate, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree (see Sidebar 2).



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Table 1 | **Distinction Between Certificate and Certification Programs**

Characteristic	Certificate	Certification
Primary purpose	Provide instruction or training to aid in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, or competencies (learning through instruction)	Assess knowledge, skills, or competencies that have already been acquired (validation through testing)
Eligibility	Occasionally has eligibility or prerequisite requirements to enroll	Has eligibility requirements to enroll
Purpose and scope of assessment	Evaluate accomplishment of intended learning outcomes of a specific education or training program	Confirm mastery of the knowledge, skills, or competencies required to effectively perform a job function or occupational or professional role
Duration of program	Ends when certificate is awarded	Ongoing; requirements must be met on a routine basis to maintain credential (recertification)
Recognition of program completion	No acronym or letters are used after the recipient's name to reference the certificate OR the letters "CH" (for "certificate holder") precede the acronym/letters	Recipient uses an acronym or letters after his name to highlight certified status

It is well documented that one of the biggest challenges that the United States faces today is providing the necessary skills and competencies to the growing workforce. A 2009 annual talent shortage survey by Manpower that involved 39,000 employers in 33 countries found 30 percent of the employers worldwide are struggling to find qualified job candidates.

The traditional educational system does not provide the necessary competencies to succeed in the workplace. Many new college graduates fail to learn the knowledge, skills, and attributes that are most essential for their job, according to Yang and Yang (2009). But, the good news is that qualifications can play a major role in closing the gap.

A 1991 World Bank study consisting of 68 economies between 1960 and 1987 found that increasing the average education of the labor force by one year raises the gross domestic product by 9 percent. Understanding the differences between credentials will enable people to determine how best to address these challenges and help close this gap.

### What's in a name?

So, what makes certificate and certification programs different (see Table 1)?

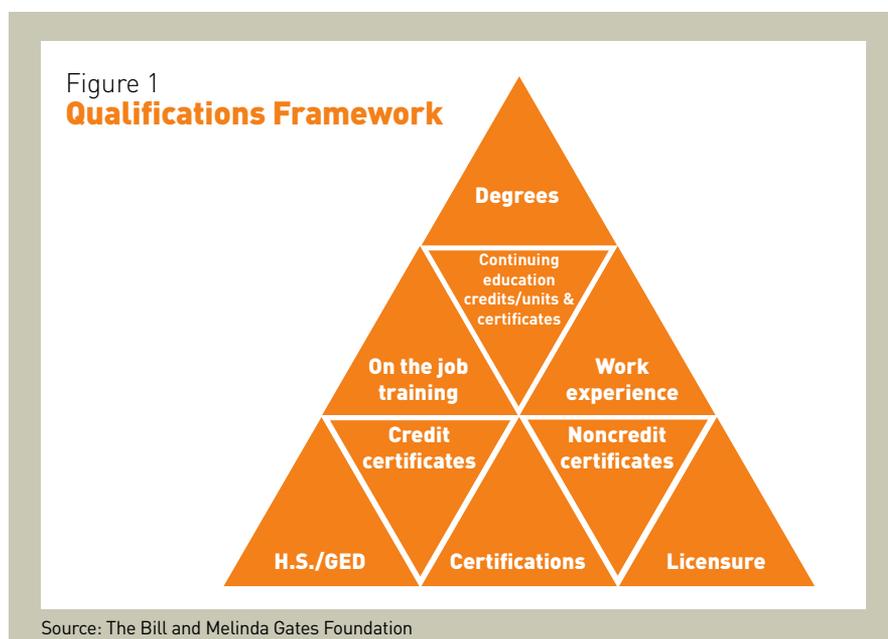
In short, a certificate program is a learning event. A certification program provides validation that learning has occurred and typically results in an awarded credential, such as a PMP.

Another example of certification is ASTD Certification Institute's Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) credential.

Let's examine the differences in certificate and certification.

**Primary purpose.** The primary focus of a certificate program is to provide instruction and training to aid learners in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and competencies associated with intended learning outcomes. The primary purpose of a certification program is to confirm that an individual has already acquired (prior to applying for certification) a set of knowledge, skills, and competencies critical to the competent performance of a professional role or specific work-related tasks. Certification programs are independent of a specific learning event, class or course, or training program.

**Purpose and scope of assessment.** Both certificate and certification programs assess knowledge, skills, and competencies; however, the purpose and often the scope of these assessments are quite different. Certificate programs use formative and summative assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction or training, monitor learners' progress, and determine whether learners have achieved intended learning outcomes.



Certification program assessments are not intended to evaluate mastery of the intended learning outcomes of a specific class, course, or training program, but rather, are designed to verify that an individual possesses the level of knowledge, skill, or ability necessary for competent performance of a specific professional role. As such, the scope of the certification assessment also is often considerably broader than that of a certificate program assessment.

**Duration of program.** A certificate program typically ends when the intended learning outcomes have been achieved and the certificate is awarded. This differs markedly from certification, which is an ongoing process. Certified individuals are required to engage in specified activities, such as continuing education or re-examination, on a periodic basis to maintain their certification.

**Recognition of program completion.** The national standards differ on whether individuals who complete certificate programs should be permitted to use an acronym or letters after their names to reference the certificate (a practice typical of certification programs), but both clearly intend to designate a difference in how successful participants are recognized by certificate versus certification programs. *ASTM E2659-09* specifies that if a designation is awarded by the certificate program, it shall not include the term “certified.” The standard also encourages program providers to refer to the designation as “certificate holder in (subject matter)” and to include the letters “CH” in front of the designation, to distinguish it from a certification designation. *ICE 1100: 2010* prohibits certificate program participants from using acronyms or letters after their names to reference the certificate, but does permit participants to state that they hold a “certificate in ...”

### Which option is best?

Here are some tips to help you decide which type of program to create, recommend, or require in your organizations. For help with which type of program to choose for your own

professional development purposes, see Table 2.

Certificate programs make sense when one (and probably more) of the following is true:

- **There are ongoing learning gaps in particular areas.** There are, on an ongoing basis, a substantial number of individuals with knowledge, skill, or performance gaps in a particular area. An example of this situation is a company that recruits 50 new sales professionals per year, all of whom must learn about the company’s products, competitors, and sale processes. Conversely, it likely would not be feasible to develop a certificate program for only a few individuals or to address sporadic or unpredictable knowledge, skill, or performance gaps.
- **There are high-impact job functions.** The gap directly affects critical or high-impact job functions, which if performed improperly, can have substantial negative consequences for the learner’s employer or recipients of products and services provided by the learner. For instance, a certificate program might provide technical skills, which if not mastered, could lead to an employer incurring financial losses or could create a safety hazard for customers.
- **Cohesive learning program is required.** A substantive and cohesive program of learning is needed to close the knowledge, skill, or performance gap. That is, a variety of integrated learning experiences covering a broad scope of inter-related knowledge, skills, or competencies are required to achieve intended learning outcomes. Certificate programs can provide an organizing framework for the learning process, encouraging the alignment of all the learning components and assessments. A certificate program may not be advisable, if, for example, learners can master required knowledge simply by participating in a one-hour, online course. That need is

## Sidebar 1 | National Standards and Accreditations for Certificate and Certification Programs

### CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

*ASTM E2659—09, Standard Practice for Certificate Programs:* developed by ASTM International, a voluntary standards development organization.

*ICE 1100: 2010 (E)—Standard for Assessment-Based Certificate Programs:* created by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE), an organization dedicated to setting quality standards for credentialing organizations.

### CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

*Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs* (commonly referred to as the *NCCA Standards*): published by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the independent, accrediting arm of ICE.

*ISO/IEC 17024 Conformity assessment—General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons:* developed by the International Organization for Standardization and the International Electrotechnical Commission.

probably best addressed through a webinar or other means.

- **Learner synthesis is required.** The learner must be able to integrate the knowledge, skills, or competencies targeted by the learning program (to achieve the desired performance on the job). When a broad scope of knowledge or skills competencies is required to achieve the desired performance, training sometimes takes place sequentially, focusing first on one knowledge or skill and then on another, providing little or no opportunity for learners to synthesize the knowledge or skills. If designed properly, a certificate program can pull all these

elements together and provide a platform which supports the learner in synthesizing the new knowledge, skills, or competencies.

- **Learning outcome evidence is valuable.** Stakeholders desire or require that a rigorous Level 2 and Level 3 evaluation be conducted to confirm that the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. By definition, a certificate is not awarded until the learner has accomplished the intended learning outcomes. So at a minimum, a Level 2 evalua-

tion should be conducted, and in some cases, the awarding of the certificate is dependent on the results of a Level 3 evaluation. The Level 2 evaluation provides stakeholders with some assurance that the training has provided participants with the desired knowledge and skills, while Level 3 verifies that participants can apply the newly acquired knowledge or skills on the job. In some situations, such verification may be critical, for example, compliance training and risk management.

- **Recognition to motivate learners is desired.** It is anticipated that recognition of accomplishment—through the awarding of a certificate—will motivate learners. A learner comes away from a certificate program with more than just new knowledge, skills, or abilities; he also receives a tangible and visible means of recognition (the certificate), which is earned through successfully completing a program of study along with an assessment process.

Certification programs may be the best option when one of the following is true:

- **One is validating existing competencies.** The primary goal is to confirm that an individual possesses a desired set of knowledge, skills, or competencies previously acquired through academic or other formal education, internal or external training programs, or prior work experience.
- **One is assuring baseline competencies.** It is beneficial to ensure that all new hires or existing employees serving in a particular job role possess a uniform, baseline set of knowledge, skills, and competencies (as would likely be the case if certification were required). This may provide employers with some assurance that these individuals will be able to “hit the ground running.” Also, if mastery of the baseline knowledge, skills, or competencies is confirmed through certification, then future training does not need to include these basics, but rather can focus on what is unique to the industry or the employing organization (for example, products, services, and processes), and in so doing, resources will be used more efficiently.
- **Assessment is desirable.** The process through which individuals acquire critical knowledge, skills, or competencies does not include a rigorous or standardized assessment to validate skills acquisition, and such confirmation is desired or required by key stakeholders. For example, it may be that

Table 2 | **Deciding Which Option to Pick for Your Own Professional Development Purposes**

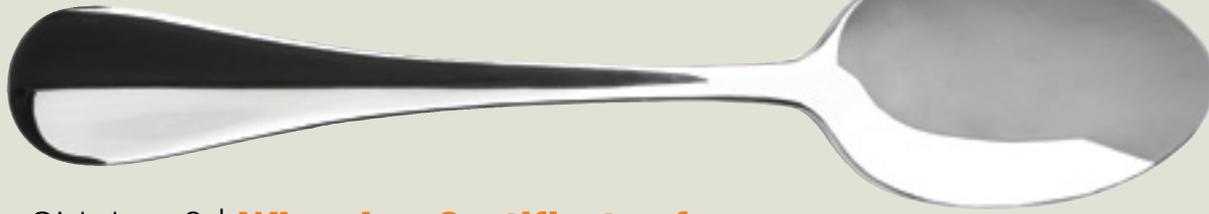
Goal	Certificate	Certification
To learn a new skill or to update an existing skill		
To validate your professional expertise		
To differentiate yourself in a competitive job market		

## Sidebar 2 | Gates Foundation Commissions Research

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored research to help determine labor market value of certificates and certification. ASTD has been involved in the Gates Foundation–sponsored research on qualifications and credentials since late 2009. The purpose of the foundation’s research is to bring organizations and people together who have an interest in the measurement and data collection of industry-specific recognized certifications and certificates to determine the labor market value of these types of credentials.

Little is known about the labor market value of these types of qualifications at the present time. More and more, policymakers understand that we all need some kind of certificate, certification, or degree after high school and the reason we need these postsecondary credentials is to gain access to employer training—formal and informal—which is America’s biggest learn and earn program, according to Anthony P. Carnevale, research professor and director, The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

The desirable outcomes of the study are to enumerate, classify, and determine the labor market value of these types of programs to make educated decisions related to which programs to fund for the greatest return on investment. This also will provide the training and certification fields with important information that will help determine the value of these credentials and the size and scope of the markets. At the present time, a research agenda has been proposed and the project is in the data collection phase.



## Sidebar 3 | **When Is a Certificate of Attendance or Participation the Best Choice?**

A certificate of attendance or participation may be the best solution when

- There are a small number of potential participants and one cannot count on having a sufficient number of participants on a routine basis to make a certificate program feasible.
- The scope of the knowledge, skills, or competencies to be addressed is very narrow.
- The knowledge, skills, or competencies do not directly affect critical or high-impact job functions.
- A rigorous assessment to confirm that participants have accomplished the intended learning outcomes is not required or not feasible (perhaps due to low volumes).

on-the-job experience is the primary means of mastering a particular set of skills and an employer requires that individuals demonstrate their ability before they are assigned to perform a particular function that relies on these skills. Or, it could be that there are disparate training programs to aid individuals in acquiring required knowledge or skills and stakeholders—employers or regulators—want a uniform yardstick by which to judge the effectiveness of these programs and to verify that the knowledge, skills, or competencies have been acquired.

- **Independent validation equals credibility.** Recognition of an individual's knowledge, skills, or competencies through an external certification process would enhance credibility, and this benefit is valuable to the recipient and her employer. In some markets, an internal certification or certificate program—one developed in-house by an employer—may be viewed somewhat skeptically, whereas one developed by an independent source, such as a trade or professional association or product manufacturer, may be seen as credible and may carry greater weight in the market.

Note that there are certain situations where certificate program of attendance and participation may be advisable (see sidebar 3). As mentioned earlier, there are additional types of qualifications that complement a certificate or a certification program. Of particular mention are continuing

education units (CEUs). One CEU is defined as 10 contact hours of participation in an organized continuing education experience under responsible sponsorship, capable direction, and qualified instruction.

CEUs are appropriate in situations where an individual receives ongoing education for the purposes of renewing a certification or license or where an employer requires or desires more formal on-the-job training. The International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET) is the curator of the CEU and holds the American National Standard for Continuing Education and Training, the ANSI/IACET 1-2007 Standard. IACET offers an accreditation process based on this standard that many industries use for their Continuing Education and Training. For more information about the ANSI/IACET 1-2007 Standard and becoming an IACET Authorized Provider, visit [www.iacet.org/content/authorized-provider.html](http://www.iacet.org/content/authorized-provider.html).

In summary, we hope that this article has provided you with a sense of just how important qualifications are in closing the skills gap and with information about some related recent developments made by the Gates Foundation and two U.S. standards organizations.

Certification and certificate programs are very different animals from one another and knowing the

differences can save you time and money. There is a sea of confusion out there. We hope we have provided you with some tools that can help you to navigate through muddy waters.

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