

# Certification: A New Industry Trend

## Credentialing can bring demonstrated benefits to both the profession and the practitioner.

USUAL FARE in this column is the reporting of trends sighted in the learning and performance industry. This time, however, this article focuses on predictions rather than observations.

The ASTD Certification Institute is launching its new groundbreaking Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) credential this summer—an event that is certain to lead to several important new trends:

- The CPLP will quickly become a sought-after credential.
- The standards around which the certification is built will raise the bar for professional competence in the learning and performance profession.
- Employers will begin requiring the CPLP certification from job applicants.
- The certification will become *de rigueur* for a successful career in the industry.

The idea of a certification for what used to be known as the training and development profession has been bandied about for years. The unveiling in 2004 of ASTD's seminal Competency Model, however, provided a solid framework around which to build a certification program, and also provided the momentum within the industry to value and accept such a credential.

"ASTD has a rich source of information on the critical skills and abilities that professionals in our field must have to succeed. Launching this program is an important step for our profession and an essential leadership role for ASTD," says President and CEO Tony Bingham.

Association certification programs are growing. "We have seen a notable increase in activity," says Greg Melia, director of credentialing for the American Society of Association Executives.

ASAE research has found that 33 percent of professional organizations administer certification programs. Why?

There can be several reasons, says Lenora Knapp, a professional credentialing consultant in Princeton, New Jersey. Organizations may offer certifications to enhance their own stature, avoid regulation, or—as in this case—elevate and set standards for a relatively young profession. "There has been strong recognition that the job of 'trainer' has changed significantly over the past two decades, and has gained much greater breadth and depth. It entails new knowledge and new skill sets to develop and refresh," says Jennifer Naughton, ASTD's director of the CPLP program.

Knapp also notes that, in professional associations rather than trade associations, demand for a certification usually is generated by the members.

Bingham says there's a lot of excitement around the CPLP. "For the first time in the profession's history, professionals have the opportunity to apply for a credential that covers the entire scope of the workplace learning and performance field. Even though the ASTD Certification Institute has just completed the pilot year of the program, the profession's high interest indicates that it has just begun to scratch the surface of demand. It's great to see the momentum and excitement build—this is hugely important work and beneficial for our members, as well as current and future practitioners," he says.

The CPLP addresses nine areas of expertise based on the middle tier of the ASTD competency model: designing learning, delivering training, improving human performance, measuring and evaluating, facilitating organizational change, managing the learning function, coaching, managing organizational knowledge, and career planning and talent management. The certification has three parts: an experience requirement (three years); a multiple-choice, computer-based exam; and a work product.

The certification program was developed with the extensive input of many members of the profession, says Naughton. "The exam is designed to test the established knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to be successful in the field. We consulted a broad cross-section of individuals with a wide range of experience. We talked to practitioners, and academic and thought leaders to take a future-forward stance."

"Members really are the experts on all aspects of their profession. Who better than they to identify, through certification, an industry standard?" says Christine Niero, vice president for professional certification and client development at Professional Testing, a consulting group based in Orlando, Florida. "Involving practitioners in certification design creates the opportunity for early buy-in and support. You don't want to leave standard-setting to other organizations. Practitioners really know what it takes to do the job every day."

In designing the CPLP, the ASTD Certification Institute benchmarked against associations with both emerging and established certification programs. "We took a hybrid approach," says Naughton. "Those with emerging programs were making the best use of technology, while those with established programs taught us a great deal about processes and procedures."

Naughton also notes that fewer programs include the practicum requirement for certification. "We think that this is an innovative feature of the CPLP," she says. Through submission of a work product, would-be certificants must demonstrate true application of knowledge. Their submissions will be judged by a series of hand-picked and specially trained teams.

Credentialing can bring demonstrated benefits to both the profession and the practitioner. "It elevates the profession in the respect that a credential signifies a recognized profession," says Knapp, who, in partnership with the American Nation-

al Standards Institute, performed a comprehensive scan of the professional certification field in 2003. Some notable findings:

- Sixty-two percent of respondents say the credential has had a significant impact on the visibility of the profession.
- Fifty-three percent say the credential has had a significant impact on the stature of the profession.
- Forty-six percent say the credential has had a significant impact on the creation, enhancement, or expansion of professional development offerings pertinent to the profession.

“Employers are increasingly looking for people trained in providing specialized information and services. A certification helps them to make a solid hiring decision,” says ASAE’s Melia. The work product requirement should enhance the reputation of the CPLP certification, according to Knapp. “From an employer’s perspective, the work product lends credibility,” she says.

World@Work, the association for compensation and benefits professionals, has been offering certification programs since 1976. In the past three decades, more than 14,000 individuals have earned credentials through one of three specialty designations, according to Pete Wood, certification program manager.

Wood has witnessed the importance that certifications have had on people’s careers: “Our certifications are definitely valued by employers. We see those with the credential rise...in their own organizations and in the governance structure of World@Work.”

“Ultimately, ASTD wants to drive demand from both the hiring manager and candidate perspective,” says Bingham. “As the credential gains its reputation in the field, ASTD wants employers to seek out candidates with the CPLP designation. And, candidates with the credential who are looking for opportunities can differentiate themselves from the competition. Employers will know that CPLP-certified applicants possess knowledge across the entire field.”

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