

## The Value of Competency Testing

Suppose you are looking for a new job and the interviewer says, "I have interviewed five applicants who tell me they are qualified and competent; why should I choose you?" How would you respond? How would your answer set you apart from the other four applicants?

Perhaps you are working for an organization (e.g. hospital, medical laboratory, or other) that requires supervisors to demonstrate that all employees under their management can meet accreditation standards for the institution. How would your employer demonstrate to an accreditation team that you possessed entry level competency at the point of hire? In other words, what documentation would show that you were qualified to do the job for which you were hired? And how would your employer provide proof that you are still competent in doing your job (i.e. that you possess ongoing competency)? Accrediting agencies do not just accept the word of an employer as proof. They want documentation that people know what they are doing.

If you can answer something like this, you will have gone a long way toward providing the proof your employer needs:

"My competency was initially certified by exam through a nationally recognized credentialing agency, and I maintain proof of my ongoing competency by participating in continuing education and/or proficiency testing activities."

By voluntarily becoming certified in your field of expertise, and by maintaining your competency year after year, you present a unique snapshot of yourself as a professional that practitioners without certification and continuing education cannot present.

Those actions speak volumes about you. First of all, employers and accreditors will know that you have met standards that were objectively established and verified by a third party. They will know that a recognized credentialing body says that you have successfully completed the organization's measure of competence because you have been allowed to wear the professional designation (credentials) behind your name. Secondly, if you were required to pass a written or practical examination as a part of your certification process, they will also know that you *cared* enough to prepare and successfully challenge a test to prove your abilities to others. And thirdly, if you keep up, they will see that you are doing what you can to insure quality in your own work on a regular basis. These are powerful statements about who you are and what kind of work you want to produce.

What do competency, certification, and credentials have in common? These three words are often used interchangeably by people when discussing this subject, although they have slightly different meanings.

- ❖ **Competency** refers to the fundamental knowledge, ability, or expertise as defined for a specific subject area or skill set.
- ❖ **Certification** is defined as a voluntary credentialing process, typically national in scope, and sponsored by a non-governmental, private sector entity.
- ❖ **Credentials** may refer both to the competencies as well as the letter designations written behind one's name after earning a certification, license, or degree.

Using those definitions, employees are typically considered for hire if they possess the entry level competencies required to do the job for which they have applied. For example, a high school diploma will indicate a specific set of knowledge and skills, even if the set will vary somewhat from district to district. A diploma or certificate of completion from a career college program or a technical training course will indicate a different set of competencies. Completion of academic postsecondary degree programs may indicate still others. How will an employer in New Jersey

know whether a graduate of one program in Maryland compares favorably to an applicant from Arizona who was trained in a completely different manner? Even if both job candidates possess excellent references, how can a prospective employer decide between the two people? Often, employers will rely upon the credentials of a national certifying organization to tell them whether a person can meet pre-determined standards. With all else being equal, which person would you hire...one with national credentials or one without?

Organizations whose missions involve helping people demonstrate competency are often known as credentialing or certifying agencies. Some agencies have their roots in founding organizations; for example, the American Society of Clinical Pathologists (ASCP) gave birth to the Board of Registry (BOR), which is a certifying organization that now operates independent of its founder. Other certifying agencies may be established without a connection to any one organization, so that they may offer their services to many. These are known as third-party certifiers. The National Center for Competency Testing (NCCT®) is an example of an independent, third-party certification agency.

On occasion, the government will be involved in such processes as well, particularly when licensure is required by state law or statute for specified occupations. In such states, licensure requirements will be governed by the laws and regulations of the state itself, and employees who wish to practice the licensed profession will need to meet standards mandated by the law. Sometimes states will use approved national certification exams for their own purposes in licensure. For example, the NCCT® national Phlebotomy Technician certification examination is one of several approved for use in obtaining California credentials as a Certified Phlebotomy Technician. The state of California decided to use existing national certification exams (approved by the state department of Laboratory Field Services) rather than taking the time to create its own phlebotomy certification exam after the new regulations were enacted.

Certification is voluntary for the majority of those professionals who hold it. For example, nearly all graduates of 4 year college degree programs in either Medical Technology (MT) or Clinical Laboratory Science (CLS) voluntarily take the national certification exam of their choice after graduation from college to prove to their potential employers that they meet established national standards. They do this because employers have come to expect it, and many make it a condition of hire. Examination standards are established and reviewed by experts who know the role and define exactly what the practitioner should know and be able to do in any laboratory. Passing that examination provides a level of confidence to the person who hires the new graduate. It tells the employer that no matter which school or program prepared the new employee for practice, s/he was able to meet the same minimum standards by examination that other graduates from around the country were also expected to meet.

Certification as a specialist is sometimes important to professionals who may also hold a license for practice. Medical Doctors may decide to become additionally certified in specialty areas by performing fellowships, residencies, or other types of training. Registered Nurses take exams to become licensed to work, but may also gather additional certifications in nursing specialties. State licensed cosmetologists may become specialized as colorists or in using special cutting techniques, although these specialties are rarely certified nationally. While various specialty certifications may be considered voluntary in nature, consumers may come to expect or demand many of them before making decisions about service providers.

There are many entry level credentials available for people involved in varied aspects of healthcare today. These include certifications for Medical Assistants, Medical Office Assistants, Insurance and Coding Specialists, Phlebotomy Technicians, Pharmacy Technicians, Patient Care Technicians, and more. Most reputable credentials are issued to qualified applicants after passing a written examination, but the requirements for taking the exam may vary a great deal from test to test. Some certifying agencies require that applicants for the exam be graduates of accredited programs of study while other certifiers may allow additional routes of qualification by experience (i.e. people with a certain amount of on-the-job experience may be allowed to take the

test without going to school). Then, once certified as initially competent, there are many ways to provide evidence of ongoing competence—through continuing education, proficiency testing, and participation in quality assurance. These processes may be invisible to most clients, but the results never are. When quality is evident, customers always know; when quality is lacking, they will let everyone else know, too.

Competent professionals are not afraid to prove that they know what they are doing. In fact, they are proud to do so. Those who become professionally certified mention the advantages of establishing professional identity, practicing by a code of ethics, and participating in a variety of continuing education options as being important to them. For employers, certification demonstrates that the individuals being considered for hire meet acceptable national standards. And last but not least, for the consumers, certification provides a level of assurance that practitioners are qualified to do what they claim they can do. Given the choice, particularly in health care, whose services would you seek for yourself and those you love?

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