

5 Tips for Selecting the Right Certification for You

Written by: Lynn Powell, CM | May 4, 2015



Jason graduated from business school with an undergraduate degree in business administration. He purposefully chose a general career path out of college, accepting employment opportunities that would expose him to a diverse array of business areas. A decade later, Jason is contemplating his next career move. He thinks about the successful careers his B school friends have forged in accounting, marketing, and management, and he wonders how he can compete as a *generalist* in an employment market that is seeking *specialists*. An Internet search reveals that *professional certification* could be the answer Jason is looking for, as it "qualifies an individual to a standard of industry practice". In

other words, it validates competency in an industry or an area of specialization—such as accounting, marketing or management! With a professional certification, Jason can compete for jobs against his B school friends or position himself for career advancement with his current employer. How do you select the right certification? Follow these 5 tips to get your career on track.

1. Define your goal

Why do you want to get certified? What do you want to achieve? Do you want to apply for a new job, advance at your current job, or change career fields? If you don't have a goal, you will never reach it. Be sure your goal is specific (apply for a job as a human resource director, rather than just apply for a job) and obtainable (manage a new educational project, rather than build a submarine).

2. Select a certification that aligns with your goal

There are hundreds of thousands of certifications available today, so be sure the certification you select aligns with your goal. For example, if your goal is to seek a job as a purchasing manager, be sure the certification you pursue specifically validates the skillset or competencies for a purchasing manager—not for a program manager, product manager or human resources manager—a purchasing manager. Proper alignment will facilitate attaining your goal.

3. Is the certification obtainable?

Once you have defined your goal and confirmed alignment, you will need to research the attributes of the certification—time, study materials, eligibility, cost, travel, etc.—to determine if it is obtainable for you. If you travel for your job and the certification requires you to attend live classes, that's a red flag! If you have a new infant and need to devote 10 hours per week to studying, that's also a red flag! Be realistic in what you can do and what you can afford to do, in light of current commitments.

4. Is the certifying body credible?

Not all certifications are created equal. You will want to visit the certifying body's website to address such questions as: How long have they been in business? Are they professionally accredited and by whom? Do they have a governing board? Is full disclosure about the certification available? When was the website last updated? Are staff responsive to your questions? You may also want to request one or more references to obtain some personal feedback from recent certificants.

5. Who recognizes the certification?

Finally, there is no value in a certification that is not publicly recognized. Find out how many individuals have been certified and if that number is on the rise or decline. Is recognition national, international or both? Whom is providing the recognition—employers, employees, customers, certificants, vendors, the public? Is the certification supported by a trade association or professional society? And, what is the recertification process to maintain current certification status.

While not exhaustive, these five tips will give you a solid start toward selecting the right professional certification for you. With certification on the rise, credentialing programs provide true value and a cost effective way to validate specialty skills for job selection and career advancement.

About the Author



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Lynn S. Powell, CM is the Executive Director of the Institute of Certified Professional Managers, an educational institute that advances managerial excellence worldwide through management training and certification. Her past experience spans banking, finance and education, working as a director for several trade associations in the Washington, DC area. She holds a BA degree in Accounting from the University of Maryland and an MBA from James Madison University.

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