

## Can You Imagine an Alternative to an MBA?

Written by: Richard L. McElroy, PhD | November 17, 2016



## Acquiring Practical Skills Outside of Business School!

### Let's Imagine

Can you imagine the mid-career adult that wants to enhance their management skill set? Can you imagine trying to juggle the demands of a full-time job and the responsibilities of family, friends, and community? Can you imagine paying bills, preparing your income taxes, mowing the lawn, fixing the leaky faucet, going to your son's baseball game, and your daughter's recital? Now, let's factor into the mix the prospect of going back to school. Can you imagine? What would you decide? There is ample evidence that there is "definitive" value in the MBA degree (see, e.g., [Baruch & Leeming, 2001](#); [Bruce & Edgington, 2003](#)). However, some experts have questioned the effectiveness of MBA education and the ultimate value for managers ([Wecker, 2012](#)). While business schools, of which the MBA program is the "flagship," have been criticized for inadequate and irrelevant management education ([Holtom & Dierdorff, 2013](#)), more than 100,000 MBA degrees are awarded each year, with some 250,000 enrolled in these programs every year ([Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2010](#)). Many of these are mid-career adults seeking additional

management skills; they have been faced with what tradition suggests is the most viable route for this: the MBA degree. However, managers should consider acquiring a comparable set of employer-recognized managerial skills through acquisition of a professional certification because of personal benefit and the recognized value by their employers. In this essay we'll explore this in these dimensions: 1. The manager: Why have managers turned to certification, foregoing the arduous task of business school and the MBA; 2. The employer: We'll take a look at the practical value of this in the workplace and why employers continue to seek certified managers. Finally, we'll conclude by outlining a set of recommendations for those interested in the professional certification. Let's turn to the management community and explore how they are turning to the professional certification.

## **Managers Experience: Derived BENEFIT**

### **Why Managers Turn to Certification**

It is wise for the mid-career adult to consider the professional certification for personal benefit. Dr. Jeffrey Pfeffer, Professor at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, has claimed that "There is little evidence that mastery of the knowledge acquired in business schools enhances people's careers, or that even attaining the MBA credential itself has much effect on graduates' salaries or career attainment" ([Pfeffer & Fong, 2002](#)). Thousands turn to certification each year. It seems they have taken to heart the notion, as suggested in *The Guide to National Professional Certification Programs*, that a professional certification "can provide an alternative source of training for new skills and revising old ones" ([Harris & Barnhart, 2001, p. xvii](#)). Ultimately, mid-career adults consider the professional certification for very practical reasons: pay, security, promotion.

#### **Pay**

Of course, pay is a chief consideration for every employee, including the certified manager. Relative to pay, industry reviews ([Anonymous, 2015](#)) find that certification can increase the manager's salary 18% more than their non-certified colleagues and has been found to be as much as 25% more ([Thomas, 2014](#)). The meaning to the certified manager: Making up to \$15,000 more each year than their non-certified \$60,000 salaried colleague!

#### **Security**

Certified managers are interested in the security of their jobs. Historically employees felt a fundamental "right" of job security ([Heneman, Judge, & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012](#)); however, that has been significantly eroded by employment-at-will legislation. Employees still seek some level of security with their employer. The professional certification has acted to assure this security ([Gilley & Galbraith, 1986](#)).

## *Promotion*

Certified managers astutely have used their certification as a springboard to a different job or a new career. A majority of younger workers are always actively looking for the next career move. The boundaryless career concept has permeated the workforce, especially the Generation X employees ([Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2013](#)). These workers will move to new employers and new occupations! One study found that 48.2% of the research subjects used their certification as a “stepping-stone” in their career ([Welsh, 2013](#)). They are, then, using the certification as a career enhancement. The certification has legitimacy relative to higher pay, more attractive promotions and job security. Let's turn to the employers to get their perspective on the certification.

## **Employers Experience: Derived VALUE**

### *Why Employers Seek Certified Managers*

Human Resource departments, as strategic partners in the business, are tasked with bringing in to the corporate family a specific set of high-quality strategically-aligned competencies. Evidence suggests that these HR professionals consider certified individuals as better employees and, in turn, are seeking more certified individuals for open positions.

### *Better Employee*

Certification is one criterion that HR professionals consider when recruiting candidates. They assume that the certification signifies a candidate's ability for the position greater than that of the non-certified counterpart. Often financial incentives are offered to attract these individuals ([Cegielski, Rebman, & Reithel, 2003](#)). One professor reports from his doctoral studies in the area of certification that he found that 97% of professional associations believe that the chief purpose of professional certification includes identification and development of the individual's competencies, a clear benefit for the hiring organization ([Gilley & Galbraith, 1986](#)).

### *Seeking Certified Candidates*

Finding the certified candidate to be a better candidate for employment, HR personnel are actively seeking them to fill open positions. Advertised open positions requiring certification increased from 1.4% of listings to 15.6% from 2002-2012, over a 1000% increase ([Lyons, Mueller, Gruys, & Meyers, 2012](#))! These HR professionals have learned for decades that “an attractive way to emphasize the importance of, and lasting value of, supervisory training is to integrate it with certification ...” ([Craig, 1987, p. 618](#)). They have learned this lesson well. The percentage of open position requiring certification continues to increase. Researchers have found that 90% of organizational leaders perceive certification for their professionals to be beneficial ([Lester, Fertig, & Dwyer, 2011](#)). Other researchers attest to managers' views that certification affords them increased credibility and recognition among their coworkers and peers ([Noble, 2005](#)).

# So, What's Next?

## Are You Ready to be a Recognized Certified Manager?

The professional certification creates a bridge between practitioner's dedicated effort and developed skills and the "world view" of its value! Management researchers consider management to be "eclectic", having to cross many organizational boundaries and employee knowledge and skill from many disciplines ([Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 1997](#)). Given this practical demand, the MBA alone may not suffice. An MBA degree and experience? Perhaps. The arduous task of getting the MBA may not result in the practical skill set needed on the job. It is only through professional certification that one can objectively verify that they possess a set of employer-recognized managerial skills.

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## About the Author



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Dr. McElroy is the president of the American Institute of Organizational Effectiveness in Raleigh, NC where he conducts research in management, leadership and adult development. He is a management consultant and organization effectiveness expert, based in and having wide, proven experience in management consulting and academia. Demonstrated results-driven expertise with superb credentials: Client-valued 14+ years consulting in organizational effectiveness; graduate work in organizational theory, design, operation, and change with PhD in Human and Organizational Systems. Rick is also a member of the ICPM Board of Regents.