

MBA: Is There an Alternative?

Written by: Lynn Powell, CM | February 23, 2016



Upon completing high school, I followed the traditional business route by obtaining a bachelor's degree in business administration, working for several years in business, and then returning to college part-time to obtain an MBA. As a working adult and student, I found the MBA classes to be invigorating, yet challenging. The classes covered a wide range of topics—economics, finance, operations management, strategy, and marketing, to name a few—and provided a macro view of the business landscape. The challenge came in balancing a full-time job, evening classes, and a social life. I was forced to make sacrifices, which in retrospect I don't regret. However, with the wide array of educational options available today, I question whether there is a viable alternative to an MBA that can fulfill the same goal? The answer is a resounding YES, and one such alternative is *certification*. If you are unfamiliar with certification, it is one of the best educational values available today. In part because it is priced at a fraction of the cost of an MBA, but there are a host of other reasons as well.

What is Certification?

Certification is a **confirmation of competency** in a specific career field--such as management, marketing, engineering, or finance. Unlike an MBA, certification qualifies an individual to a standard of practice or ensures an employer that an individual possesses the

knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to perform a specific job. This qualification **differentiates individuals for job selection and career advancement**. Like an MBA, certification is publicly recognized, however, the professional credential (CM, PMP, SPHR) attained from certification provides an edge over an MBA by providing proof of a certificant's competency—something employers value highly!

Certification's Two Parts

Certification has two parts—education and assessment. The **education piece** develops and refreshes KSAs essential to competent performance of a job. The education applies directly to the workplace, so it can be put to use right away. In contrast, MBA education, while valuable in its own right, is general in nature and non-specific to a particular job or career field. The **assessment piece** of certification confirms competency through an exam or simulation by testing the KSAs to perform a specific job. Accordingly, it is the perfect credential to help you get hired!

More benefits

Additional benefits that distinguish certification from an MBA include:

Flexibility. Multiple formats make it easy for applicants to prepare for certification exams. You can choose from among independent self-study, e-learning, live online study, and classroom study. This puts you in charge of your study time, and allows you to set up a schedule that meets your individual needs.

Time Efficient. Certification programs range from 6 to 15 months for completion, allowing you to control the time required to attain certification. Rather than following an academic calendar, you can start a certification at any time.

Value Priced. An MBA can cost \$30,000 - \$150,000 or more, and take two or more years for completion. At that cost, it could take 1-5 years to recoup your investment. In contrast, certification ranges in cost from \$500 - \$2,500 and can be completed in as little as 6 months. Should you change career fields, you can pursue a second certification to support the change.

Current Status. A standout characteristic of certification is that it is always current. Unlike an MBA where learning stops when the degree requirements are met, certification requires continuing education to keep KSAs up-to-date. Accordingly, as long as you recertify, your certification status will always be current and never become dated.

Don't be mistaken, an MBA remains a valued educational degree in today's workplace. However, I encourage you to explore the questions below to determine if certification might achieve your career goals or even provide a better alternative than an MBA.

- **What is your dream job and desired industry?**

- **What knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) do you need to perform that job?**
 - **Can those KSAs be acquired outside of a business school?**
 - **Will experience, training, and/or skills validation get you to your dream job?**
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About the Author



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