

# Breaking Barriers

I was recently asked to write an article about the value of renewing certifications—a somewhat simple task. After all, I'd only need to regurgitate the typical talking points put out by the organizations that offer industry certifications. But as I put pen to paper, it becomes more complicated. Those talking points are valid, but I think the personal journey of gaining and maintaining certification is more interesting to cover. From here on, it is purely my opinion. I will not talk about any specific certification or recommend any particular certifying body or organization. I'll first review how I progressed in my career. I will cover what certifying bodies claim is of value and then offer the value I believe is tangible. Lastly, and more importantly, I will talk about what certification offers in the sense of self-worth, no matter what market or technical field you work in, your experience level, or your age.

My journey, and please bear with me, is the journey many professionals take. Going back 15 years, as I started as a young professional in sales and marketing, I realized that to validate my experience and demonstrate my skill set, obtaining a certification might be a good idea. I was lucky to work at a forward-thinking technology company that valued accreditation, especially in technical roles. I was working in fields where the tools and technology changed at a fast pace. I decided to take training in two specific areas, a leading

## The Value of Maintaining Certification

By Michael Hewson



creative software platform, and an online advertising platform. At the end of each short training program, I took an exam and gained my certification—a pretty standard process. These were both focused areas in the field of marketing.

A few years later, my responsibilities grew, and I moved into a middle management position. At that point, if my career was to develop further, I realized I would need additional credentials that demonstrated my broader experience and depth of knowledge across the field of marketing and business as a whole. As many people do at this point in their career, I undertook a more extended educational program, a master's degree.

More recently, I looked at making changes to how I manage projects and balance time. Unfortunately, I do not have the time in my daily work schedule to put aside and train myself on the latest philosophies in time management—that age-old vicious cycle. So, I undertook a short online training program outside business hours. I joined a small cohort of my peers on a program that also offered an accredited certification. This training undoubtedly kick started my adaptation of these new time management methods.

So, back to my original point. I believe many professionals, no matter what field they operate in, undertake this three-step cycle as they build their careers.



**Step 1.** Individuals leave a university with a broad understanding of the fields in which they want to work. During their first years of employment, they are mentored and focus on a specific area. They may then undertake training in technology, tools, or platforms to undertake specific tasks.



**Step 2.** As their career progresses, they gain more experience and depth of knowledge—responsibilities increase, and the focus becomes less on tasks and more on management and business. The training, and hence certification, undertaken at this point spans technical and business functions. It is broader and deeper and generally validates expertise in the industry sector showing your ability to make connections across different disciplines and boundaries.



**Step 3.** As new technologies, processes, or fields begin to emerge in a sector or cross from other disciplines, there may be a need to adapt and utilize. Training and certification once again become focused on specific technologies, tools, processes, or strategies. To adopt these quickly, you look to 3rd party, trusted sources or organizations for help.

(continued on page 38)

## ***Developing Your Individual Shape***

Early in your career, excel in a specific position and gain a foothold on the professional ladder. As you grow, a broader outlook is needed. As you mature, you delve deeply into focused areas. This outlook fits with what Human Resources call T-shaped, M-shaped, and, more recently, E-shaped individuals.

Without getting too detailed, an I-shaped individual has a depth of knowledge in a particular area of study. A T-shaped individual, in contrast, has a depth of knowledge in a particular area of study but also has the breadth of knowledge that allows them to work effectively with other disciplines. An M-shaped individual has a depth of knowledge in multiple yet incongruent areas of study. An E-shaped individual is one that combines experience, expertise, exploration, and execution.

# Nebulous Reasoning

Certifying bodies or organizations market their certifications in very similar ways. Even though they are often presented as nebulous ideas, the reasons for you to obtain their certificates are very valid. They use high-level terms, such as providing value, reinforcing reputation, accreditation, ensuring quality, meeting industry needs, transferable, or demonstrating competence, without explaining the tangible value or benefit in terms that an employee or organization directly relates to.

I believe the primary reason anyone should pursue certification is to overcome barriers.

In the world of business, four primary reasons support this: developing capability, creating customer affinity, maintaining a competitive edge, and leading in the industry. Again, nebulous reasons without further explanation, so let me expand on each of these ideas and the barriers they overcome.



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## Develop Capability

Entering into a certification program helps expand fundamental knowledge and develop subject matter expertise. Plainly speaking... you learn new things. As an employer, it is proven that investing in your employees to help them “learn new things” helps maintain staff, reduce turnover, and build future capabilities. Both individuals and companies develop additional capabilities that allow them to do things they may not have done before, or done as efficiently.

## Create Customer Affinity

Maintaining a credible certification recognized and trusted by your customers will increase customer loyalty. This is indirectly true. It’s a great service experience that directly increases loyalty and allows firms to reduce price sensitivity. But the behavior of a certified individual can add a great deal to the service experience, such as offering an unbiased approach, demonstrating a high level of competence and a commitment to quality standards, and following industry best practices.

## Maintain a Competitive Edge

Being recognized as a subject matter expert in a competitive marketplace opens doors of opportunity. Many companies require specific certifications for employment, and they are often a project requirement or included as an integral part of a request for proposal (RFP). Maintaining a certification ensures you and your organization have the opportunity to compete.

## Leading Industry

Holding a certification increases your chances of being involved and part of the community that leads to industry changes. Strategies, practices, and technologies change at such a fast pace; these changes are sometimes local and driven from an industry segment, sometimes they are external to the market in which you operate. The current pandemic is a prime example of an external catalyst for change that is driving everyone to adapt to a new ‘norm.’ It’s the individuals that lead a community that define new regulations, adopt practices, or prove technologies that become the standards for the future. A certification grants you access to a focused group of individuals that, in turn, generally steer these conversations.



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## Increasing Your Value and Self-worth

Many individuals are technical, creative, and motivated. They perform exceptionally for the companies that employ them, often generating substantial savings for their company or performing work that will support their company for years into the future. But they may not realize their intrinsic value because they do not necessarily know their self-worth. Understanding the value you bring to

any situation and the difference you can make is crucial to realizing your self-worth. I am not saying you need a certification to understand your self-worth. But undertaking a certification program certainly demonstrates a level of self-awareness and self-worth. I think this is the most significant benefit of undertaking and maintaining certification. It can be demonstrated in the following ways:

### ***It Adds to Your Self-esteem***

They are confident in the work they produce and act professionally. Traits that help individuals develop positive relationships.

### ***You Recognize the Contribution and Difference You Make***

You believe in your skills, knowledge, and experience you can apply to your work. You can see the value of what you are achieving vs. the level of effort involved to obtain results.

### ***You Stand Alongside Your Peers***

Knowing you have achieved the same certification level helps create a sense of equality, which carries through to your interactions with clients, managers, colleagues, and even friends. You gain a seat at the table and are part of the conversation.

### ***You Become Increasingly Engaged***

As the work you do makes a significant difference, you become more committed and are willing to do more. The driver is different for many people, whether that's realizing greater job satisfaction, feeling more valued at work, or receiving greater financial compensation.

### ***You Stand for Something***

As you start to apply the information and knowledge you gain from a certification program, you become clear about your values, identify boundaries, and develop internal frameworks of right and wrong.

# In Conclusion

If you are considering undertaking a certification or are already certified, I hope some of the points I make resonate with you. In conclusion, I will leave with one last question. **Why maintain your certification?** The answer to this is the culmination of everything I have discussed.

Gaining any certification demonstrates personal development and a willingness to improve and adapt. These are vital skills for leaders and valued by an employer or a client and will stand you in good stead as you progress through your career. By an equal measure, maintaining your certification status shows longevity and commitment.

If you feel the certificate is not relevant in your current situation, I will argue that you should still maintain it. You will never know the next hurdle you need to cross or the tools you'll need at the time to overcome the obstacle. If the cost of renewals is an issue, please consider this. The measures that organizations put in place to maintain your certification demonstrate a certificate's depth and add to the certificate's value. Obtaining educational credits, attending events, or proving practical experience are designed to ensure you are involved and engaged with the wider community.

Lastly, certification programs that are relevant and endure are continually updated to fit the needs of the industry. For an organization to maintain the certification, a large portion of the renewal revenue obtained is re-invested to keep its relevancy in industry. In the words of Frank Sinatra himself, "Regrets, I've had a few. But then again, too few to mention." Every measure of self-worth plays a role in why you should maintain a certification. Don't underestimate the personal value of maintaining something you have worked hard (and possibly fought) for.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Michael Hewson** joined the AEE in 2019 to lead brand management and provide creative direction for all marketing activities. Michael is an avid (Certified) SCUBA Diver, underwater photographer, has over 18 years of experience in marketing communications and holds a master's degree in marketing from Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University. He may be contacted at [michael@aeecenter.org](mailto:michael@aeecenter.org).



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