

***Accreditation as Facilitator of Delivery of Professional Services Internationally: What Would a Workable Model Look Like?***

For the majority of humankind's existence, the provision and procurement of goods and services was primarily a local affair. As trade developed, it first took the form of raw materials, giving rise to vast colonial empires. The advent of more reliable transportation systems, first in the form of railroads and ocean going vessels, and later aircraft, facilitated the movement of finished goods. What about services, however?

The dawn of the twenty-first century is witnessing a transformation in the delivery of services. No longer are service providers and consumers tied to proximity. In fact, they may never even physically meet each other. A computer programmer in Manila may be tasked with writing software for a call center near Mumbai that services customers in Germany. An oncologist at the Mayo Clinic may be asked to remotely review the case of a patient in Lagos. An architect from Chicago may be asked to design a building in Shanghai or Dubai.

Uncoupling the physical locations of buyer and seller gives rise to certain quality assurance problems that need to be overcome. In the case of physical goods, this issue is resolved largely by physical inspection prior to acceptance. What about services? How can a buyer of a service be sure that it will be

rendered in a timely and competent manner? Licensure and certification play a role. So does accreditation. Before delving into the topic, it is probably worth stepping back for a minute and defining the terms licensure, certification, and accreditation.

Licensure is typically a function of state action. In order to practice a licensed profession, the individual must satisfy the prerequisites mandated by the state. A medical doctor, for instance, is a licensed professional. Certification, on the other hand, is a voluntary credential that is meant to demonstrate a baseline, or in certain instances an advanced, degree of competence in a given profession. It may, or may not, be sought by a licensed professional. For example, a medical doctor may seek a specialty certification granted by a medical specialty board. On the other hand, a project manager, which is a member of an unregulated profession, may also seek voluntary certification through an association such as the Project Management Institute. In the first instance, the certification is tied to a licensed professional; in the second, it is not.

In contrast to licensure and certification, which apply to the individual, there is accreditation, which applies to an organization, entity, or facility. Typically, accreditation is voluntary as well. It demonstrates that the organization, entity, or facility has met minimal standards adopted by the accrediting body. For example, a hospital might

seek accreditation by the Joint Commission as a means of demonstrating the quality of patient care given at the facility.

Accreditation of the bodies granting professional credentials obtained by professionals moving across borders or providing services across borders can play a key quality assurance role in the internationalization of professional services. As the pace of globalization quickens, the need to provide objective standards against which to measure service quality is likely to increase, if not become of paramount concern.

Currently, there is at least one recognized international quality management standard that operates in this universe, and at least one program, that although based in the United States, could serve as a template internationally. The standard is International Standard ANSI/ISO/IEC 17024 (ISO 17024); the program, the American National Standards Institute's Accreditation Program for Certificate Programs (ANSI-CAP).

ISO 17024 is an international standard promulgated jointly under the auspices of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and adopted by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). It sets forth a framework for accrediting bodies that certify personnel. The ANSI-CAP program accredits organizations that issue education and training certificates to US workers. It is

based upon ASTM E2659-09, a standard developed by ASTM International.

How might the above accreditation framework be used to facilitate the internationalization of delivery of professional services? What would such a system look like? Fortunately, a model currently exists for the recognition of professional qualifications among the member states of the European Union (EU).

The EU is a supranational organization whose purposes include integration of the economic systems of its member states. Currently, it is comprised of twenty-seven member states; three states are in the process of seeking membership. In order to implement the EU's various policies, the European Commission has established Directorates-General.

One of mandates of the EU is to ensure a Single Market among its member states, which means that all barriers to the movement of goods and services between the members are removed. The rights of EU citizens to establish themselves, or to provide services, anywhere in the EU, are fundamental freedoms under the Single Market. The Internal Market Directorate-General is charged with enforcement.

With respect to professional services, the EU does not issue professional qualifications as such. Rather, it has implemented a system of mutual recognition. Effective October 2007, the

European Commission consolidated a series of directives that had provided for such mutual recognition into a single directive: Directive 2005/36/EC.

Depending on the profession regulated either the sectoral or general provisions of the new directive applies. Each member state must harmonize its local laws and regulations to bring them in conformity with 2005/36/EC.

In application, 2005/36/EC is quite complex. In principle, it provides a fairly straightforward framework for evaluating professional credentials.

For example, medical doctors have been classified as one of the sectoral professions under a prior directive that was subsumed into 2005/36/EC. The EU member states have agreed on what constitute the formal qualifications in basic medical training. Consensus serves as the basis for granting reciprocity for professionals meeting the requisite. Thus, an individual receiving a Primary Qualification from a Competent Examining Body in Ireland or the United Kingdom is granted the same privileges in Italy as an individual whom has obtained a Diploma di Laurea in Medicina e Chirurgia from a Università. A Título de Licenciado en Medicina y Cirugía in Spain is treated as equal to a Läkarexamen in Sweden.

The same system applies under professions not recognized as sectoral. An Air Traffic Controller in Malta has the same standing as a Kontroler Ruchu Lotniczego in Poland. An Auditor in the Czech Republic will render the same

services as an Orkotós Logistís in Greece. It should be kept in mind, that not all member states regulate the same professionals. For example, only Norway and Iceland regulate Medical Secretaries.

Absent a system described above, how would one determine if an individual in an unfamiliar country had demonstrated a baseline level of competence in a given profession? How could I determine if the individual I had hired in Rio de Janeiro to analyze trends in sugar prices actually knew anything about commodities? Accreditation, and an accompanying framework of mutual recognition of accreditation similar to 2005/36/EC, provides a partial answer.

Accreditation to an international standard such as ISO 17024, or a national program such as ANSI-CAP, assures that the body issuing the certification or providing the education or training certificate has undergone a rigorous quality control review. Accreditation also provides answers to questions such as: How do I know that this certification is issued by a reputable organization? Do all individuals granted certification meet the prerequisites? Are there measures incorporated into the certificate granting training program that ensure the trainee has demonstrated a basic understanding of the training material?

Accreditation, of the certification granting body or certificate granting program, will not of course guarantee that the holder of a certification or

certificate will perform competently in all circumstances, or that a mistake will never be made. It will also not ensure that the holder has the correct skill set for the particular job. The purchaser of the professional's services will always have to make an independent assessment as to the fit between the professional's skill set and the purchaser's needs. But this is no different than deciding if a particular situation requires the services of a doctor or lawyer. Accreditation will, however, assist the service purchaser in the process of evaluating the professional's credentials.

In the case of 2005/36/EC, implementation is through the Internal Markets DG, which ultimately derives its powers through the accession of the member states into the EU. How might such a system work where there is no supranational body with enforcement powers? One model is the use of mutual recognition agreements between the national standards bodies of each state. In the case of the United States, that body is ANSI.

Such agreements may be either bilateral or multilateral. Once accreditation is granted in one country, all other countries that are signatories to the mutual recognition agreement would recognize the accreditation. This is essentially the same model adopted by 2005/36/EC, and has been the cornerstone in making the European Single Market for the movement of

professionals and delivery of professional services a reality.

Implementation of mutual recognition agreements, whether bilateral or multilateral, can be either ad hoc or through a more formalized process, e.g., a body analogous to the Internal Markets DG. Fortunately, there is a body that serves this function: the International Accreditation Forum, Inc. (IAF). The IAF can be thought of as a clearing house for multilateral mutual recognition agreements entered into by its members, which include national standards bodies.

It should be pointed out, however, that not all national standards bodies are members of the IAF; and not all standards have an associated mutual recognition agreement. That being said, the IAF represents an analogue to the EU's system of mutual recognition; one that is supported by national governments through their standards bodies, while at the same time incorporating private industry. As such, the IAF represents a true private/public partnership in the field of accreditation. Just as accreditation will serve to impact the globalization of delivery of professional services, the IAF can serve as an important facilitator for the internationalization of accreditation.

The physical movement of professionals across national borders raises an immigration issue. Obviously a complex area, there is at least one aspect in which accreditation may be useful: the granting of work visas.

For example, in the United States, permanent worker visas classified at second or third preference and temporary worker visas classified as H-1B specialty occupations require a showing of education, training, and experience. Verification of credentials, particularly when it extends beyond degree granting institutions presents its own set of issues. Certification, or specialized worker training outside the traditional classroom, can serve as a basis for assessing the visa applicant's skill levels. Accreditation of the certification or training can serve as the basis for assessing the value of the training or certification, and, therefore, ease the processing of the worker's visa application.

Globalization is likely to return to its pre-recessionary expansion. In fact, if history is a reliable guide, the pace of globalization is only likely to expand. To facilitate this expansion, there will need to be an uncoupling of the delivery of professional services and physical location of the professional. Such uncoupling can take the form of physical movement of the professional across national borders or the delivery of services across borders.

This gives rise to issues concerning quality and the ability to evaluate professional credentials and training with which the purchaser of the professional's services may not be familiar. The EU has addressed this issue by instituting a system of mutual recognition for professional

qualifications. Absent a supranational body such as the EU, such evaluation becomes more problematic. One way to address this is through accreditation to a mutually agreed upon quality standard. Although accreditation will not provide insight into the fit between the professional's skills and the expected outcome, it can assist in the evaluation of the value of that professional's certification and training.

This article details the benefits of accreditation accruing to the purchasers of professional services. But, what's good for the goose is also good for the gander. Sellers of professional services can benefit from accreditation as well. Accreditation serves as a means to differentiate the seller's services in the global marketplace.

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