



RE CERTIFICATION: A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF CERTIFICATIONS

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Many workers seek to acquire new skills and credentials that they hope will support their careers. They do so to enter or stay current in their field, obtain promotions, change careers, or find work after a layoff. In the process, however, they face a confusing landscape of credentials—degrees, certificates, certifications, licenses, and badges.¹ Among these, the least understood may be certifications, a type of credential that reliably indicates an individual has acquired the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform a specific occupation or job. In all, more than 43 million Americans hold a professional certification or a license.² Yet many employers, workers, students, policymakers, and education and workforce development practitioners know little about the use and value of certifications.

The Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, George Washington Institute of Public Policy, and Workcred embarked on a research project to provide an unprecedentedly clear picture of the dimensions, patterns, and trends among certifications, as well as how they currently or could interrelate with other types of credentials. To inform this project, the team conducted research from 2019–2021 on 16 certifications that spanned cybersecurity, healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing, and resulted in **five reports and separate overviews for each certification**.

The first report issued in December 2020, *Understanding Certifications*, is a primer to help policymakers and practitioners navigate the complex and little understood “wild west” of certifications. Three more in-depth issue briefs follow—*Certifications as Tools for Promoting Economic Mobility*, *Accreditation Standards: The Primary Source of Quality Assurance for Certifications*, and *Recertification: A Distinguishing Feature of Certifications*. The final publication, *Certifications: The Ideal, Reality, and Potential*, highlights questions that emerged during the research and topics that need further research. As a set, these reports are intended to help policymakers, practitioners, employers, and funders better understand the characteristics of certifications and their potential to help people enter the labor market for the first time or after a layoff, obtain a career goal, or reskill for a new career.

1 For more information on the types and differences among credentials, see Workcred’s **How do Credentials Differ?** graphic, or view the video, **“Differing Types of Workplace Credentials.”**

2 Cunningham, “Professional Certifications and Occupational Licenses: Evidence from the Current Population Survey” (2019).

THE FOLLOWING CERTIFICATIONS WERE SELECTED FOR USE IN THIS PROJECT

American Academy of Healthcare Providers in the Addictive Disorders Certified Addiction Specialist

American Healthcare Information Management Association Registered Health Information Technician

American Nursing Credentialing Center Psychiatric-Mental Health Nursing - Board Certified

American Registry for Diagnostic Medical Sonography Registered Diagnostic Medical Sonographer

American Society for Clinical Pathology Board of Certification Medical Laboratory Technician

Association for Supply Chain Management Certified Supply Chain Professional

Behavior Analyst Certification Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst

Board for Global EHS Credentialing Certified Industrial Hygienist

CertNexus Certified Ethical Emerging Technologist

CompTIA A+ Core Series

EC-Council Certified Ethical Hacker

(ISC)² Certified Information Systems Security Professional

Manufacturing Skills Standards Council Certified Production Technician 4.0

Microsoft Certified Azure Fundamentals

Project Management Institute Certified Associate in Project Management

Smart Automation Certification Alliance Certified Industry 4.0 Associate - Basic Operations

Selection criteria for the certifications studied included:

- » a mix of more established certifications as well as certifications that have been developed recently to address emerging skills and occupations;
- » representation of certifications with a range of educational and experience prerequisites—from entry-level to post-baccalaureate specialization with particular attention to certifications that provide accessibility to workers without a prior college degree;
- » a mix of accredited and non-accredited certification bodies and certifications;
- » an opportunity to study the relationship between industry certifications and academic credentials; and
- » an opportunity to map career pathways.

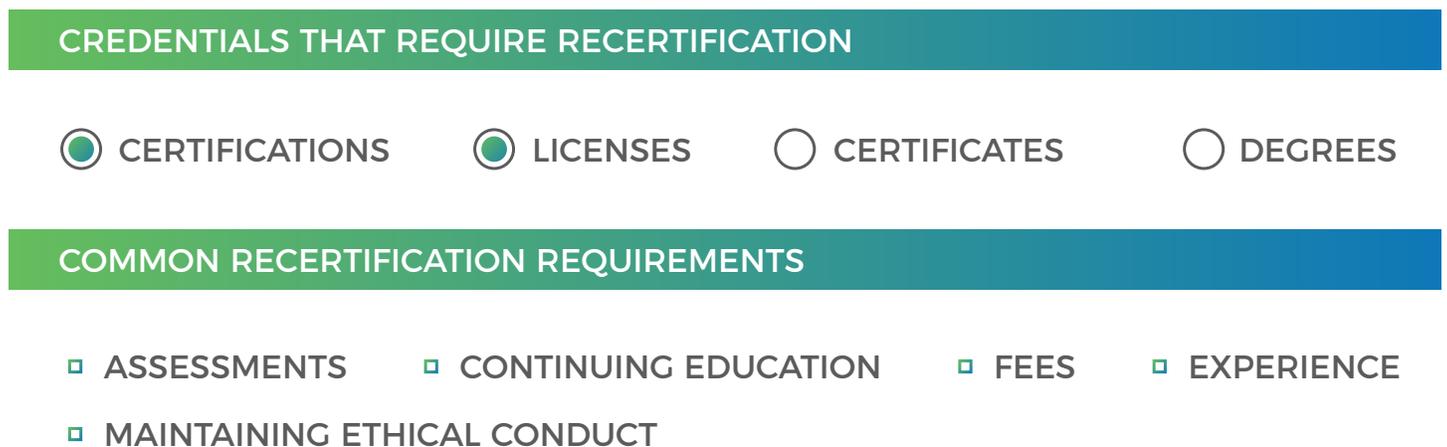
For each certification, the project team reviewed the certification bodies' websites, and interviewed staff at all of the represented certification bodies. Each interview was conducted using a standard interview protocol and the questions were grouped around the following topics: purpose and scope; assessments and recertification; accreditation and quality assurance; data; employer engagement; candidate outreach; and relationships with educational institutions. In addition, the recommendations in each report are informed by a literature review of certifications and the project team members' experiences working with the certification community.



WHAT IS RECERTIFICATION?

There are several unique characteristics of certifications that distinguish them from other types of credentials, a key one of which is recertification (sometimes also referred to as maintenance, renewal, or continuing competency). According to an industry survey, 89.3% of all certification bodies impose some sort of recertification requirements.³ While the main goal of recertification is to protect the public by ensuring holders have up-to-date knowledge and skills, it can also serve as a signal to employers of the holders' abilities, and potentially enhance the labor market value of certification by providing extra assurance that one's competencies are current. Unlike a college degree or certificate (see Figure 1), a certification can be lost permanently if no action is taken to recertify, or far less commonly, the holder violates its code of ethics or is found to be incompetent. Yet, there is always a risk that an individual will experience negative labor-market effects when they fail to recertify. Understanding the recertification process—and the substantial variation between certifications with respect to how someone can recertify—will better enable the attainment and maintenance of certification, and better situate certifications in the overall credentialing landscape. This paper provides an overview of the recertification process, how it varies among certifications, the extent to which it achieves its stated purposes, and recommendations for improvements.

Figure 1



³ Ferris et al., *Renewal Programs in Professional Certification and Licensure* (2020).

HOW DOES ONE RECERTIFY?

THE CERTIFICATION CYCLE

One of the most important choices that certification bodies make when determining the structure of their recertification program is the duration of their certification “cycle”—that is, the number of years for which a certification will remain valid without completing some sort of recertification activity or additional requirements. Often, these cycles are guided by the pace of change in an occupation and the rate at which knowledge becomes outdated, though cycle length appears to vary among certification bodies. Of the certification bodies studied, three and five years were found to be the most common cycles for recertification, though outliers exist. For instance, Microsoft’s associate and expert role-based certifications and specialty certifications must be renewed annually.⁴ Shorter cycles are most often found when a certification body perceives a higher “risk” to the public if skills are outdated (e.g., health care) or to keep pace with technological change (e.g., information technology). When a certification body selects a longer cycle, they may have “mid-point requirements” that ensure the completion of some activities and some level of assessment before a cycle ends.⁵

ASSESSMENTS

A common requirement of recertification is an assessment—usually by taking an examination (i.e., exam)—to demonstrate continuing competency of one’s abilities. While some certification bodies give individuals the opportunity to recertify by taking the same exam that is offered to new certificants, recertification exams can vary, and in some cases are shorter or less comprehensive than the exam taken for initial certification. However, an initial exam may not be appropriate for an advanced practitioner, since people more advanced in a career may specialize and become an expert in only a subset of the knowledge contained on the initial exam. The content of the initial exam is often broad based and entry level; as the practitioner develops, he or she may no longer be proficient in the broad content upon which he or she was originally examined. For most certification bodies that update their exams every few years, these exams can better assess whether a practitioner’s knowledge of his or her field is up to date—and in some cases have recertification exams that focus specifically on recent changes in a field or occupation. In addition to covering technical material, some recertification exams even have an ethics component.

4 For more information about Microsoft’s certification renewal requirements, see: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/learn/certifications/certification-expiration-policy>.

5 Moore and Philbrick, “Is it Time to Raise Certification Renewal Requirements?” (2021).

Recertification exams, just like initial certification exams, also vary with respect to being “high stakes” or “low stakes” in terms of the risks to society if one passes an examination without mastery of the knowledge being tested and the professional consequences of not passing an exam. The consequences of unsatisfactory performance can include immediate loss of certification, though in other fields the recertification exam is used as more of a diagnostic tool that may lead to a certified individual being assigned to take specific continuing education courses to plug knowledge gaps. Recertification exams can also be spread out across multiple years; for instance, the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) permits individuals to demonstrate continuing competency through optional, virtual-based quizzes that ask a few questions at a time and offer certified individuals an opportunity to review incorrect responses.⁶ While this approach may be criticized for not doing enough to ensure that individuals do not rely on outside assistance to complete recertification tasks, one important benefit is its potential to mitigate some test anxiety that individuals may feel when recertifying.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Test anxiety may be one reason that many certification bodies do not require certified individuals to undergo periodic reassessment of competency. Indeed, across the certification landscape more often than not there is an option to recertify by completing various types of training, education, and other professional activities. These requirements are often met by the accumulation of continuing education units (CEUs), credits, or points, though various other terms exist for the unit of “currency” used to tabulate whether one has met recertification requirements. Recertification by points can be achieved through a wide range of different activities, and the number of points required—and the time investment needed to accumulate those points—varies dramatically among certification bodies. Some specify that points should be accumulated for the completion of training activities, while others will allow a certain number of points, or even an unlimited number of points, to be obtained through other professional development activities (see Figure 2). The most common amount of time required to spend on recertification requirements among the certification bodies studied was 15–20 hours per year.

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLES OF RECERTIFICATION ACTIVITIES THAT CAN ACCUMULATE POINTS

- » **Providing volunteer service to a professional association or even the certification body to which one is applying to recertify, for example by suggesting or evaluating potential test items**
- » **Teaching courses or giving lectures related to one’s field**
- » **Attending and/or presenting at professional meetings and conferences**
- » **Writing articles related to one’s occupation for trade or professional journals**
- » **Assembling a portfolio of relevant evidence of professional accomplishments**
- » **Participating in or conducting academic research**

6 Author’s note: ASE certification holders may choose to take a recertification exam every five years instead of using the recertification smartphone app.

However, there is variation in the timeframe to achieve the requirements. For example, the Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT) certification program requires 20 continuing education units over a two-year period, whereas the Certified Addiction Specialist (CAS) certification program requires 20 hours each year, but allows certificants to send in up to 40 hours and will apply any hours over 20 to the following year.

Certification bodies also vary with respect to the level of control they exert over which courses or training and education providers are suitable for earning recertification points. Some certification bodies allow individuals to choose to take any course or go to any provider that may offer a required course or activity, while others provide a list of pre-approved courses and/or providers to choose from. Some even specify that the courses taken for recertification must have an assessment component to ensure learning has occurred. In addition, some certification bodies require individuals to complete a given number of points in different areas of knowledge, which can include requirements to complete training specifically related to ethics. Others create requirements that mandate when or how often points can be earned throughout the recertification cycle to avoid having everything occurring all in the last year.

Additionally, membership associations affiliated with certification bodies are a common source of recertification points, such as paid attendance at conferences hosted by the parent or related organization of the certification body or other activities that generate revenue for the parent membership or related association. However, such revenue-generating activities can lead to the appearance of conflicts of interest. Accredited certification bodies will have institutional firewalls in place that prevent a conflict of interest from occurring, but less than ten percent of all certifications catalogued in the U.S. Department of Labor's CareerOneStop database⁷ are accredited to the ISO/IEC 17024:2012 *Conformity assessment—General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons standard* or the National Commission for Certifying Agencies *Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs*. Anti-trust statutes generally prohibit certification bodies from requiring association membership as a condition of certification and recertification;⁸ however, in practice, discounts in both certification and recertification fees—as well as the cost of activities leading to points—can be powerful incentives to join professional associations.

Likewise, training providers and other professional associations can also benefit from recertification requirements. Organizers of conferences and training programs often submit material to relevant certification bodies to ensure that certified individuals can obtain points toward recertification for attendance. If a certification body does not offer pre-approval, certified individuals can submit syllabi or other materials from an event or conference to request points towards recertification. The ecosystem of training providers and other organizations that emerges to satisfy continuing education requirements can lead to advocacy for different recertification policies, but can also pose as a roadblock to efforts to change requirements related to continuing education.

7 For more information about CareerOneStop, see: <https://www.careeronestop.org/>.

8 Dunn, "The Antitrust Risk You May Be Overlooking" (2019).

Not all points-based recertification activities involve financial costs to the certification holder. For example, some certification bodies award points to individuals who speak at events, conduct research, or write articles that advance their respective professions. In other cases, training or education workshops or seminars may be sponsored by an interested product vendor or other third party, awarding points at no out-of-pocket cost to the individual. However, such practices have been criticized in the healthcare field as thinly-veiled advertising,⁹ leading to reforms initiated by professional societies. The practice also exists in other certification-rich fields such as architecture, design, and human resource management, but the fairness or accuracy of information presented in such workshops and seminars has not been thoroughly explored.



9 Steinbrook, "Financial Support of Continuing Medical Education" (2008).

FEES

The payment of fees is a near-universal aspect of the recertification process, but the price varies widely from being as much as the cost of initial certification or more, to as little as a nominal filing fee of \$20 or even none. These fees do help certification bodies cover the costs involved in tracking the completion of recertification requirements, which for the majority of certifications is done through an online platform or some combination of online and paper records.¹⁰ However, the relationship between fees and the direct costs associated with recertification can sometimes be unclear, and some certification bodies acknowledge using recertification fee revenue towards other costs like maintaining their operations.

EXPERIENCE

Another aspect of recertification occurs when certification bodies verify that an individual is still working in the occupation for which one is seeking recertification in order to ensure that individuals are not inappropriately using their certification in other fields, or to ensure that holders are continuing to accumulate relevant work experience. However, this practice is far from universal—one survey found that only 37.8% of certification bodies verify active practice in one’s occupation¹¹—and there are some situations in which certification bodies encourage individuals to remain certified while working in occupations for which the certification is not a requirement, often when the certified individual is employed as an educator. There have also been proposals to evaluate input from peers or clients during the recertification process in some medical specialties, though such requirements remain extremely rare.¹²

ETHICAL CONDUCT

In a growing number of fields, maintaining good ethical conduct is an essential part of the certification and recertification process. However, in fields where practitioners may have less direct contact with the public, or in which ethical misconduct has not historically been as much of an issue, ethical requirements to recertify may be limited to the exam (e.g., not divulging confidential test material). The manufacturing certification bodies that participated in this study, such as the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council (MSSC) and the Association for Supply Chain Management (ASCM), focus on ethics in the context of preserving the integrity of the certification process itself. This contrasts with the approach taken by many certification bodies in allied health fields where there is potential for certified workers to inflict personal harm on patients. For example, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) requires that individuals be directly supervised once certified, and those supervisors are listed on the BACB Certificant Registry website as being responsible for the certified person(s). If an entry-level practitioner is found to be lacking in ethical compliance while on the job, the supervisors themselves could be held accountable.

10 Ferris et al., *Renewal Programs in Professional Certification and Licensure* (2020).

11 Ibid.

12 Lipner et al., “The Value of Patient and Peer Ratings in Recertification” (2002).

EXCEPTIONS

Finally, it should be noted that some certifications use a hybrid approach: requiring nearly all of the outlined requirements to be met or allowing certification holders to choose from a menu of recertification options. In addition, exceptions to recertification requirements may exist in cases where individuals are retired or are in a late stage of their careers, with some certification bodies offering an “emeritus” or “retiree” status to individuals no longer actively working in the occupation in which they were certified. Such statuses honor those who have been certified for long periods of time, but cannot be used to practice as an active, certified person any longer. In general, recertification tends to be less commonly required in fields characterized by lower risks to the public’s health and safety. However, with more than 8,000 certifications¹³ and more than 2,000 certifying bodies developing their own assessments in the United States alone according to the CareerOneStop database, usually without governmental oversight, there is no predicting how or why a certification body will establish a particular set of requirements.

In sum, there are many different routes to recertification in use throughout the U.S. labor market. Pros and cons exist with any model of recertification, and certification bodies must balance pressures and interests from a range of stakeholders when designing their programs. If certification bodies impose requirements that are not found to be justified to ensure the competence of certified workers, they face the risk of antitrust litigation.¹⁴ The extreme level of variation between certifications in recertification requirements is difficult to explain, and would likely be a fruitful topic for further research. Regardless of the reasons that exist for the many different approaches to recertification taken by certification bodies, all certifications could benefit from giving more attention to whether recertification requirements are well aligned with their stated aims and with the most current job analysis (to the extent not already required for accreditation), and whether steps are warranted to make recertification less burdensome on certification holders without undermining the purposes of recertification.

¹³ Reamer et al., *Counting U.S. Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials* (2021).

¹⁴ Pittman, “AAPS Sues to End Recertification Program” (2013).

PURPOSES OF RECERTIFICATION

THE THREE MAIN PURPOSES OF RECERTIFICATION

- ① CONTINUING COMPETENCE
- ① LIFELONG LEARNING
- ① LEGAL DEFENSIBILITY

CONTINUING COMPETENCE

Professionals who recertify demonstrate that their knowledge and skills are up to date, which, in theory, gives the end users of professional services confidence in the quality of services they receive.¹⁵ In other words, when practitioners maintain their certifications, they signal to employers and the public that they can still do what they are certified to do. In so doing, they reduce pressure on their employer to provide professional development activities and demonstrate that they are at lower risk of triggering a malpractice lawsuit or making egregious mistakes.

In addition to ensuring that certified workers are up to date on the latest technologies and practices, recertification should mitigate the natural loss of professional knowledge or initial training that may occur as individuals age. By recertifying, a worker is signaling their continuing competence in their chosen field. Workers may also signal their ability to integrate knowledge and skills from related occupations and industries by obtaining additional certifications in relevant fields. Even so, certification bodies seem evenly divided when asked whether they see the purpose of recertification as maintaining an initial level of competency or expanding competency: 50.2% indicated that expanding competence beyond initial certification is an objective of their recertification program.¹⁶

Recertification also provides an opportunity to question certificants on ethical compliance and to confirm the accuracy of primary contact information. Many certification entities require certificants to report changes in a timely manner of their contact information (e.g., name, address, email, phone number) along with ethical concerns. Through this process, certification entities often can identify those who have failed to comply with the requirement to report ethics concerns in a timely manner. For example, recertification applications often solicit information about any investigations or charges against the applicant (which can be criminal or professional in nature) for behavior that would comprise an ethical violation as defined by the certification organization.

15 Schoon and Smith, *The Licensure and Certification Mission: Legal, Social, and Political Foundations* (2000).

16 Ferris et al., *Renewal Programs in Professional Certification and Licensure* (2020).

LIFELONG LEARNING

Regardless of the method by which one recertifies, recertification encourages practitioners to become lifelong learners and embrace opportunities for ongoing professional development and personal growth. Some certification bodies claim that this is a benefit of recertification in and of itself, as practitioners may not have explored opportunities for professional development without being required to do so. Recertification can also serve to incentivize or even force necessary engagement with particular professional associations and academic institutions. Indeed, certification bodies often note collateral benefits to mandating the educational and professional activities associated with recertification. For example, one representative of a certification body interviewed for this study noted that individuals who participate in activities sponsored by professional associations are more likely to grow as professionals, which should yield career advancement benefits. The promotion of lifelong learning also helps to spread knowledge of emerging best practices within an occupation as recipients of continuing education share new knowledge with their peers. Such benefits may explain some of the documented labor-market benefits associated with certification, though they can also make it difficult for researchers to isolate the value of certification itself.

LEGAL DEFENSIBILITY

Finally, recertification can serve as an important shield against possible lawsuit. Certification bodies often tout that their certifications can provide holders and even employers with a defense against claims of substandard work performed by certified individuals, as individuals with up-to-date credentials demonstrate that they are proficient in their profession and trade.¹⁷ Employers may be more interested in whether their workers recertify if they know that a robust recertification process is in place that they can point to if they ever find themselves in a lawsuit and need to prove that their employee was certified to provide the professional services. For these reasons, recertification requirements are more common and stringent in fields characterized by a high risk of litigation.



17 Jaffeson, *Certification Communications: Issues from Fifty Monthly Issues of the National Certification Commission* (2005).

CONSEQUENCES OF LOST CERTIFICATIONS

As noted previously, a truly unique characteristic of certification relative to other types of credentials is that certifications are lost when not renewed. Unlike a college degree that cannot be revoked (except for discoveries of academic misconduct), certifications are not “banked” for life. While someone can indicate on a resume or in job applications that one held a certification previously, one faces significant reputational and legal risks if failing to disclose that a certification has lapsed, as certification status can be easily verified directly with the issuer.¹⁸ Lapsed certifications may retain some residual value in the labor market insofar as they signal that a person’s skills were validated in the past, but since they do not vouch for a worker’s current competence or continuing competence, it is assumed that employers tend not to value expired certifications. Moreover, we lack representative data on renewal rates, but even if that data was readily available, there would still exist significant challenges to collect data on the reasons why individuals do not renew—which may range from factors completely out of the control of a certification body, such as retirement and career changes, to cost and the perceived difficulty or unimportance of renewal.

There is legitimate reason to improve attainment rates and be concerned about the potential loss of certification through unmet recertification requirements. The costs associated with recertification—especially in a point-based model where individual learning experiences can be costly—can add up to hundreds or even thousands of dollars every few years. As a result, certifications can have a much higher lifetime cost in terms of direct monetary expenses than certificates, especially certificates issued by community colleges which usually involve a one-time payment for tuition and fees. Certification bodies interviewed for this research study were quick to note that the earnings premiums associated with maintaining certification should provide an excellent “return on investment” for recertifying, but not all certifications are in such high-demand industries or provide in-demand skills that can lead to greater labor-market returns than those attainable with certain low-cost certificates that have no expiration date.

¹⁸ Author’s note: we have no reliable data on the extent to which individuals may be listing expired credentials on their resumes or in job applications.

Not all certifications have high costs of renewal, however. On the low-cost end are activities that can be completed remotely, such as distance learning courses that are provided by the certification body (possible only if a certification body is unaccredited) or an affiliated membership association free of charge. Interestingly, some recertification activities can even be submitted and apply simultaneously to renew multiple certifications—such double-crediting is permitted by organizations such as CompTIA and can result in savings to certification holders, especially in certification-rich IT occupations. Similarly, the points towards recertification that can be obtained by publishing in journals or volunteering for professional service tend to be free of monetary costs for the individuals renewing their certification. For the higher-cost activities, employers may cover some of the costs, but this coverage is hit-or-miss, and may depend on the value that a particular employer places on certification and recertification or a worker's assertiveness in requesting reimbursement.

Even if financial cost is not an issue, in some cases certification holders may simply decide that recertification's benefits do not justify the time and effort required to recertify. Employers may not care as much about recertification once someone has attained initial certification, and as individuals get promoted and rise through the ranks of their occupation, they may find that certification provides less of an advantage in the labor market than other indicators of quality (e.g., references, on-the-job learning experience, other credentials, or prior work experience). This temptation to let certification lapse could result in individuals not having certification when they reach a career juncture where it may be the most beneficial.

Ensuring the validity of recertification practices remains a challenge for all certification bodies, and one that they must balance against the risk of imposing burdens that result in fewer individuals staying certified, which could in turn put the public at risk of lower quality services or safety risks. In some situations, certification bodies would like to do more to strengthen recertification practices, but feel constrained by pushback from holders and other stakeholders. Nursing, in particular, has faced controversy when initiatives have been proposed to transition from models of recertification based entirely on continuing education to models that involve the re-assessment of competency. The determination of how much effort is reasonable to expect of individuals seeking recertification tends to be subjective, but it is a topic on which very little research has been attempted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Workers, certification bodies, and the public at large could all stand to benefit from a more scientific approach to recertification. Historically, a seeming lack of interest on the part of research funders has been a barrier to this sort of approach, but it is nonetheless desperately needed to ensure that certifications promote labor-market equity and continue to signal worker quality.

MORE DATA IS NEEDED FOR QUALITY RESEARCH

One important hurdle for the certification community to overcome is the lack of quality data on the demographics and economic background of certification holders (i.e., administrative data). Certification bodies have thus far been reluctant to collect information from certified individuals that could be used to identify individuals in larger datasets, such as date of birth or ethnicity. This reluctance is especially acute for certification bodies with exposure to international data security regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European



Union¹⁹ or the California Consumer Privacy Act.²⁰ Such reluctance limits certification bodies' obligation for safeguarding individuals' data, but also limits their ability to participate in research using such administrative datasets. The lack of data on the race or ethnicity of individuals attempting certification exams, as well as individuals seeking to recertify, limits the ability of certification bodies to even determine whether gaps exist between racial and ethnic subpopulations in terms of who recertifies. Such gaps could merit efforts to conduct outreach to communities recertifying at unexpectedly low rates relative to normal patterns of turnover.

The certification community, by and large, has also failed to systematically study the validity of the non-assessment activities commonly used to demonstrate continuing competency in point-based recertification systems. Certification bodies vary in the extent to which they require that points obtained for attending courses be validated by assessment, and when assessments are conducted they may involve simple reading or listening comprehension questions that do not reflect the real situations in which practitioners find themselves needing to apply the professional expertise. Many certification bodies interviewed during this study were unable to point to evidence that non-instructional activities, such as publishing and volunteering for service in professional societies, were as effective as continuing education courses at ensuring the accumulation and retention of knowledge during the recertification process. This lack of data collection is indicative of a broader problem for efforts to gauge the value of certification: certification bodies lack incentives to collect high-quality data, which leaves researchers unable to draw adequate conclusions about what works in certification and how practices throughout the certification community can be improved.

CERTIFICATION BODIES SHOULD DO MORE TO ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGHER-IMPACT RECERTIFICATION ACTIVITIES

While some certification bodies proudly note that free and low-cost recertification opportunities to obtain the required points exist, such opportunities—especially if based upon self-study or distance education—may not provide the same or parallel professionalization benefits that the more expensive recertification activities (e.g., conferences and live trainings) can provide. Whether certification bodies have a moral responsibility to help low-income certification holders pursue higher-impact recertification activities is beyond the scope of this report. However, given that some certification bodies point to professional socialization and engagement as positive outcomes of point-based recertification, certification bodies—and, perhaps, affiliated membership associations—should want to make sure that certified individuals are choosing their array of recertification activities on the basis of educational value and competencies retained rather than cost, convenience, or time commitment. Certification bodies may also find that supporting recertification is good business: discounts and incentives designed to boost recertification rates may make financial sense for organizations that can achieve increased revenue as more individuals recertify.

19 Author's note: the GDPR went into effect in 2018 and was designed to increase data privacy and security for people in the EU, though it also imposes these regulations on any organization out of the EU if they are targeting or collecting data on people in the EU. More information on this can be found here: <https://gdpr.eu/>.

20 For more information about the California Consumer Privacy Act, see: <https://oag.ca.gov/privacy/ccpa>.

EMPLOYERS AND POLICYMAKERS CAN MAKE RECERTIFICATION MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

Policy proposals for “individual learning accounts” (i.e., tax-advantaged savings accounts for training and upskilling activities) and other forms of public funding for training and workforce development are not new, though they seem to be enjoying a resurgence in the COVID-19 era. Any new program providing favorable tax incentives for certification-related expenses could potentially reduce the cost burden of recertification activities, especially if such credits or deductions were expanded to cover all costs other than just tuition or registration fees (e.g., hotels and travel to conference sites).

Employers, however, need not wait for policymakers to make the first moves with respect to alleviating the burdens of recertification activities. In a hyper-competitive labor market where tuition assistance is a highly-sought employee benefit, employers may find that retention and recruitment processes are improved if they were to include the fees and costs associated with recertification professional development activities are eligible for reimbursement as well.²¹ In addition to making employees happy, such efforts would likely benefit the employer’s bottom line by bolstering clients’ confidence in the quality of services provided and ensuring that workers have the necessary competencies and stay up-to-date with the latest technology. Employers can also signal that they value recertification by seeking out job candidates with valid or renewed certifications and/or by offering such incentives as increased compensation or recognition in the workplace to those who recertify. Doing this can help ensure that recertification delivers in practice on its purpose to improve competency and quality throughout the labor market.

In conclusion, recertification requirements are a characteristic of certifications that distinguish them from other types of non-degree credentials. Choices that certification bodies make about the structure and character of recertification requirements have implications that affect who attains and keeps certification, which in turn can affect broader patterns of socioeconomic inequality. Certification bodies, employers, and policymakers can all take steps to ensure that recertification requirements enhance the value of certification without leading to the premature loss of valuable, labor-market credentials.

21 Schwartz, “From Appetizers to Tuition, Incentives to Job Seekers Grow” (2021).

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