

# Certification Program

## Planning Guide



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# Certification Program Planning Guide

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## Introduction

Certification has gained acceptance largely due to the demand for proven expertise to perform very important job functions.

Certification provides proof that an individual has mastered specific skills at a certain level of performance to perform a specific job function.

A growing number of industries, such as information technology, education, non-profit, marketing, human resources and more, recognize the need for a solid certification program for their partners, employees and stakeholders.

Certification is valuable to individuals and organizations for a variety of reasons.

- Sponsors can achieve a competitive advantage by developing a pool of experts and advocates that support expansion of their market.
- Certifications can ensure that jobs are performed according to standards and implementations are successful.
- Hiring managers are able to find and retain skilled individuals based on certification.
- Individuals gain skills, credentials, and confidence to advance in their careers.

The design and implementation of a bona fide certification program requires a strong organizational commitment at senior levels; a financial investment to launch and maintain the program; and the expertise of many highly experienced individuals to help develop the program and the products.

## The Guide

This Certification Program Planning Guide provides executives and managers with an overview of the key elements in the certification program development and planning process.

The concise format of the Guide allows for quick assessment of what is needed for successful implementation of your own certification program.

The Guide cannot cover everything you need to consider in detail. However, it does provide the necessary steps for the program process - from strategic planning to exam development, including financial, administrative, and marketing considerations.

## Formulating A Program Strategy



It is essential to establish clear goals up-front for your program's success. First, perform your market research and analysis. Then determine your mission, goals, and objectives. You want to explore the following questions in as much detail as possible.

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## *Who needs certification? Why?*

- How could certification help my customers, partners, and organization?
- How could our certification help individuals?

## *What are our certification mission, goals, and objectives?*

- Why are we implementing a certification program?
- What should our certification achieve?
- What are our financial objectives?
- How will we measure program success?

## *What is the market potential for certification on our products or services?*

- What is the size of our potential audience that may desire certification (globally) and how may that vary in the future?
- Where are our products or services in their life cycle and how will certification fit?
- What are the competitive certifications that could affect our certification market potential?
- Can we leverage other certifications to serve as prerequisites for our program?

## *What are our organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats?*

- Are management and critical departments supportive of providing certification?
- Will we be able to get the resources needed to build a successful program?
- Can training courses be developed in time to support new certifications?
- Do we need to change our training development to a job-focused model instead of a curriculum-based (content) model?

## Defining and Designing the Program

A certification program is very much like a product line. You need to decide which certification “products” to offer, then define product features. Your “product” will evolve as it is developed and as requirements change over time. Here are some things to consider.



### *What certifications should we offer?*

- Should tests measure skills required to perform a job, use a product, or implement a solution?
- Should the framework be structured around career tracks or competency levels or both?

### *What is required to achieve each certification?*

- Completion of course(s)?
- Some verified level of experience?
- Tests and practicum?
- How much time would a typical candidate need to take to achieve certification?

### *What should we name our program and each certification?*

Names should be developed jointly with your organization's marketing communications group or others who have a strategic organizational perspective. The program names should:

- Reflect your desired identity
- Have meaning in your marketplace
- Be consistent over time and easy to remember
- Be flexible for future growth

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## *What should we recommend or develop to help candidates prepare for tests?*

- Identify prerequisites
- Training and study guidelines
- Years of experience applying learned skills
- Offer sample test items or practice tests

## *What benefits should we offer as incentives to becoming certified?*

- Credentials, such as an ID card or certificate, use of certification program logo
- Promotional incentives, such as gifts or discounts
- Public recognition of achievement

## *What policies are needed to protect the integrity of our program?*

- Confidentiality agreements
- Policies concerning cheating and what is needed to identify cheating
- Policies concerning retaking a test(s)
- Certification maintenance requirements

## *What startup requirements should be considered?*

- How long will it take to get sign off on program budgets to proceed?
- What tools and resources will be needed?



## **Developing the Tests**

Developing quality tests is much more than “writing a handful of questions” which is a common misconception.

Test development requires the most technical resources of all certification program activities. As a result, organizations often rely on a psychometrician to manage this highly techni-

cal process to increase the validity of their examinations.

High quality exams are defined as having test scores that are valid and reliable and therefore, are clearly able to differentiate between people who have the knowledge and skill and those who don't.

Quality tests are more likely to accurately measure skills, be legally defensible, and receive positive word of mouth publicity from test takers. This is a critical component to gaining acceptance in your market.

Remember, you are developing a product that is representing very important measurements that may have legal implications.

## *How should we create our tests?*

Certification or assessment tests should be designed to meet the business goals. Tests should also be developed in accordance with a proven methodology to ensure their integrity.

## *Who should be involved?*

If you're serious about implementing a quality program, consider relying on trained specialists and psychometrician's for guidance and assistance to:

- Help design the program
- Manage the test development process
- Assist in developing job or practice analyses, test blueprint specifications and conduct reviews
- Provide training to your subject matter experts on writing high quality test items
- Ensure test items are thoroughly reviewed to be: congruent with test objectives, technically accurate, grammatically correct, and psychometrically sound
- Perform statistical analyses throughout

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the test development and administration process to ensure exam quality and integrity for the product life cycle

- Prepare tests for publication

## ***How long does it take to develop an exam?***

The entire test development process may take between four to six months. Your organizational needs and scheduling of internal/external resources are key components to planning your program. Keep in mind that other program planning needs may lengthen the timeline.

## ***What are some design considerations?***

- Test lengths and number of parallel forms needed
- Methods to conduct exam standard setting - defining the cut scores
- Tools for test item development
- Test administration requirements
- Certification management and fulfillment
- Public policy statements concerning the program

## ***What internal resources are needed?***

- Subject matter experts (SMEs) - how many and when?
- Marketing communications support

## ***Who is available to write and review test items? How can we get their commitment?***

Identify subject matter experts (SMEs), such as employees, customers or partners, and give them reasons to participate. Recognition for their work is often used as a means to engage expertise.

Another approach is to employ professional item writers and have the test items reviewed by your SMEs or train your SMEs to become skilled at writing test items.

## ***How do we manage items and tests for development, analysis, and revision?***

Test development tools can keep track of test items in development (associated files, status, etc.), test generation, and integrate test outcome data for comprehensive analyses.

Owning and managing comprehensive certification systems can be quite costly. Large organizations that maintain many certifications and large numbers of examinees might consider purchasing these tools.

The alternative is to hire a consulting firm to do the work for you. A consulting firm can manage item and test details, supply reports of their activities and provide files of work completed. Hiring a consulting firm reduces the overhead costs of buying and managing a test item bank system, hiring and training the people to do the work.

## **Developing Tests - Key Steps**

The following is a snapshot of the test development process as it relates to developing high stakes exams. The steps identify the major objectives and process overview of each key activity.

### **I. Perform Job Analysis**

Objective: Determine the most critical aspects of a job and related knowledge, skills, and responsibilities that will be measured by the test. This includes scope, range, depth of the skills, and competencies.

#### ***Key processes may include:***

- Review related job activity materials
- Conduct interviews and/or workshop(s)
- Develop survey instrument(s)
- Invite broad review; participation in survey
- Analyze and report results

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- Use results to create test specification

## II. Develop a Test Blueprint

Objective: The blueprint (also known as a test specification) essentially identifies the highly important knowledge and skills to be measured. It provides a framework of the test for item writers and test takers setting the:

- Scope and content of the skills to be measured as well as the level of importance of each content area
- Foundation for validating content and constructs

### *Key processes:*

- Conduct workshop reviews
- Determine domains/objectives weightings
- Develop survey instrument
- Invite broad review; participation in survey
- Determine target number items for development per domain/objective
- Analyze and report results

## III. Develop Test Items

Objective: Develop test items which precisely measure the content prescribed by the test blueprint.

Quality test items are the heart of any good test. If the individual items are not well behaved and appropriate, how can the test scores be meaningful? It is suggested that test

items go through iterative reviews to ensure the technical accuracy as well as psychometric reviews.

### Key processes:

- Establish quality standards for item writing
- Conduct item writing workshop; compile and conduct preliminary psychometric quality reviews
- Conduct thorough item technical review
- Conduct editorial and psychometric review
- Track and revise items throughout development process

This phase involves significant time by the SMEs, psychometrician, and program manager.

## IV. Pilot Test Items

Objective: In a pilot or beta testing phase, test items are presented to a similar group of examinees (as the certification group) to gather performance data on each test item.



This is important because a good test item not only appears to be appropriate, but must also demonstrate empirically to be well behaved under actual test-taking circumstances.

This is a critical phase to ensure the integrity of the final examinations.

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## **Key processes:**

- Identify approach for pilot
- Prepare candidate survey/online screens
- Prepare exam files for pilot
- Prepare for delivery administration

## **V. Prepare Test for Publication**

Objective: Determine the reliability and validity of test scores; build content-balanced, equated forms of the final examination.

### Key processes:

- Conduct test and item performance analysis
- Review and select best performing test items
- Determine reliability/validity of test scores
- Cut-score determinations and standard setting
- Build content balanced, equated form(s)
- Prepare files for test delivery vendor

## **VI. Review Test Performance**

It is important to periodically review how a test performs after the initial piloted or beta testing phase. Over time, test items may become over exposed.



Always gather examinee comments to help understand how the test performs as seen by the examinee.

A plan should be in place for examination revisions.

## **Administering the Tests**

Administration of tests to candidates is probably the most visible aspect of your certification program. Selecting a solution that best meets your needs is dependent on a number of factors such as: financial considerations, size of your program, and testing locations. Questions to consider include:

### ***How should our tests be administered?***

- Computer-based, on-demand at testing centers
- Web administered through scheduled locations
- Paper and pencil, classroom/lab observations

### ***How secure of an environment do we want for test administration?***

- Proctored
- Non-proctored
- Controlled, non-proctored for item pilots with no certification

### ***What information do we want to provide to candidates to help them prepare for an exam?***

- Practice Test(s)
- Test Blueprint
- Study Guide(s)

### ***Where do we want tests administered?***

- Domestic sites
- Global sites
- Internal organization sites

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## *What is the registration process?*

- Taking and scheduling examination registrations by telephone, Web, e-mail
- Collecting candidate demographic data
- Processing fees via Web with credit cards, mailed checks or other methods

## *How will test results be collected and processed?*

- Data transfer – electronic, manual
- Data format – standards or proprietary
- Data storage – spreadsheets, database
- Data processing – manual, automated by tools

## **Administering the Program**

As you plan your program, you may want to give thought to a less visible but critical aspect for your program. That is, the infrastructure and support tools to help manage the program.



After you develop and publish your examinations, it is important to consider what will be used to support the day-to-day operations and long term program growth?

Data from certification tests and results can provide insight to build and fine-tune your certification program. There is a wealth of information that can help you pinpoint problem areas as well as identify opportunities.

Every program has differing needs and there are various solutions to address those needs. Some types of reporting requirements that may be anticipated is the ability to:

- Track communications with candidates
- Track candidate profile and contact information
- Capture demographic information on candidates participating in the program
- Generate standard and ad-hoc reports for specific program and management needs
- Review candidate information in response to candidate inquiries
- Review item and test performance

There are a variety of tools and solutions that are available in the marketplace to assist in managing certification programs. Some solutions allow you to manage your own data in-house, include standard reports, and provide capability to generate ad-hoc reports, as needed. Others offer outsourcing solutions/services for handling candidate inquiries and program reporting needs.

Selecting the best solution for your program depends on the size of the program, number of tests and the number of candidates anticipated. You may want to consider selecting a lower cost solution that will offer the flexibility of growing along with your future program growth.

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## Managing Customer Relationships

As you plan your program, you will want to consider methods to nurture the customer relationship. Earning the loyalty of candidates, certified individuals and their employers is key to growing your program.



Certified individuals can be invaluable to your program as these individuals are likely to promote the organization's products/solutions. If these "customers" are pleased with the quality of your service and tests, they will be your best promoters.

In light of this, consider:

### *How do we reward certified individuals and make them feel special for their achievement?*

Plan to congratulate candidates that passed the exam and give recognition for their success. Among the numerous ideas to consider are a:

- Welcome Package
- Press release template for candidates to use within their organization and/or community
- Press release recognizing certificants

### *What opportunities are available for certified individuals to contribute their expertise?*

Individuals are pleased to be recognized for their expertise. Invite individuals to participate in:

- Reviewing of future blueprint surveys
- Contributing to item writing for future test development
- Registering for upcoming beta test(s)

### *How do we encourage ongoing interest in the program and retain commitment of employers?*

- Solicit input from certification customers by way of surveys, interviews, etc.?
- Notification of upcoming program plans?

## Promoting the Program

Preparation for and approaches to market and promote your program should be addressed at the onset of the program. The long-term success and growth of a certification program is dependent on marketing strategies.

Since certification is all about establishing credentials, make sure your market knows about your program and understands its value. Begin by creating awareness soon after you've decided to have a certification program. As you begin your program, consider:

### *How should we brand our program?*

- What certification names are appropriate?
- What image should our logos convey?

### *How do we gain commitment and support from our own organization and partners?*

- Announcements at conferences
- Notification via training organizations
- Sales and marketing tools

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## *How do we make our target audiences aware of our certification program?*

- Who will benefit from our program - directly or indirectly?
- What messages are appealing?

## *How can we expand the program?*

- Offer practice tests
- Accreditation for college credit

## *How can we expand awareness of our program and get more individuals to sign up for tests?*

- Targeted marketing campaigns
- Promotional incentives
- Exam delivery at conferences

## **Program Financial Management**

The return on investment in certification can be difficult to calculate. Expenses are easy to see. But, there may be indirect revenue sources that contribute to the success of a certification program. For example, some certification programs are viewed as marketing vehicles for training and consulting revenues.

In addition to everything considered up to now, thought should be given to the following additional financial considerations before moving forward.



## *What is our projected volume of:*

- Tests to be delivered
- Candidates
- Certified individuals

## *What are our projected revenues from test fees?*

- Practice Tests
- Recertification Tests
- Study Guides

## *What resources will we need – internally or through outsourcing?*

- Program managers
- Subject matter experts
- Item writers
- Editors
- Psychometrician
- Data administrator
- Data analyst
- Translators
- Systems and Web developers
- Marketing and PR professionals
- Legal support

## *What other expenses will we incur?*

- Test development
- Test delivery
- Program administration and systems
- Promotional marketing

## *What is our certification program schedule?*

- Certification-related dependencies
- Time to market
- Resource availability/constraints

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## Evaluating the Program

Like any product, as a certification program matures, adjustments are needed. Periodically analyze your program information and market data to determine what is and is not working. Based on your analysis, modify your program accordingly. Consider questions such as:

### *Do our strategic goals still make sense?*

- Is our certification program achieving its intended goal(s)?
- What is affecting results?

### *Is our test delivery process working?*

- Are there other available approaches for test delivery to be considered?
- Do we need to review alternative methods to reduce costs?

### *Are there alternative solutions to help contain program costs?*

- Remote item writing
- Pilot test delivery
- Managing certification data

### *How well are our tests performing?*

- Are there legal issues to be addressed?
- Are revisions needed to reflect technology or job changes?
- Are some test items over-exposed and should they be removed?
- Do we need to plan to analyze test performance for translated exams?

### *Is our test delivery process working?*

- Are there other approaches to consider?
- Do we need to review alternative methods to reduce costs?

### *Do our systems support our information needs?*

- Do our reports give us what we need?
- Have our reporting needs changed and do we need to review alternative solutions?
- Do we need to make changes to reduce the cost of our current solutions?

### *How does the financial picture look?*

- Are we meeting our financial goals?
- Is the program an efficient use of resources compared with alternative resources?

### *How effective are our promotional strategies?*

- Do our current promotions help increase certification interest?
- Are we targeting the correct audiences with the right information?
- Do we need to expand our visibility?



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## Summary

As stated earlier, the Certification Program Planning Guide cannot cover everything that you need to consider. However, it does identify key program areas and provides the necessary steps for the program process - from strategic planning to development, including financial, administrative, and marketing considerations.

The process of preparing a certification program and meeting industry standards is a challenge. We can help you focus your efforts to help you meet business priorities and bring the highest value to the company.

## About the Author

**The Donath Group, Inc.** is a professional examination development consulting firm helping organizations design, develop, manage and administer certifications for professional and occupational assessment programs.

Whether you are planning a new program or enhancing an established one, you can rely on The Donath Group for guidance. Our experienced team and offerings can provide the right resources to help you develop cost-effective approaches to optimize your investment, and most importantly, achieve success.

For assistance in launching a new program or to discuss any facet of developing a certification program, feel free to contact us. We are here to help.



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