

Creating a World-Class Workforce Through Certification

My two young adults, Marguerite and Gerard, are completing their bachelor's degrees in music education and human health and performance (emphasis business sports management), respectively from accredited colleges in the United States. However, they will not secure employment in their fields unless they are certified by independent professional organizations. In fact, Marguerite has secured certifications to teach in the public and private school systems. Gerard must obtain several levels of certification before he can practice in his field. He is currently studying on his own for his first level of certification.

In The Bahamas, several professions require certification or licensure before one is allowed to practice. These include some health-care professions, accounting, teaching, air conditioning and refrigeration, electrical installation, information technology, etc.

Administrative professionals wishing upward mobility usually sit the prestigious Certified Professional Secretary (CPS) and Certified Administrative Professional (CPA) examinations.

Why Should One Secure Certification?

One should secure certification for several reasons.

1. With all respect due to our educational community, having a post-secondary or tertiary degree does not guarantee that one would have acquired all the critical skills nor would have achieved the rigorous standards required by a specific profession. Professional educational literature confirms that testing and evaluation are mastered by a few. Moreover, most of the test instruments used in educational institutions are not designed in collaboration with practitioners. They are mainly developed by instructors who may or may not have practiced in their field of expertise or who may or may not have been trained in testing and evaluation. These instruments usually test knowledge, not hands-on skills.
2. It is well known that many college graduates cannot perform in the workplace because their programme of study did not adequately prepared them to do so. They must be trained in-house to become proficient at what they do.
3. To compete in the market place, one must have an advantage over others. Certification provides that advantage.
4. Certification requirements and standards usually keep pace with new technology.
5. Soon most employers will require workers to be certified and re-certified as technology changes.

The Benefits of Certification

- Certification is an indicator of professional commitment.
- It is a mark of excellence.
- It attests that one has achieved the skills and standards required by a profession to be productive in the workplace.
- It provides an edge for job advancement.
- It enables the holder to negotiate a higher salary.
- It contributes to developing a better self-concept.

Certification Centres

A few certification centres exist in The Bahamas, including Office Skills Certification Service (OSC). In September 2005, the Tertiary Quality/Assurance Division of the Ministry of Education approved OSC as a testing centre for computer application, clerical, and financial tests, and tests for medical knowledge included in **OPAC** (Office Proficiency Assessment and Certification).

OPAC was initially developed by the International Association of Administrative Professionals (formerly Professional Secretaries Association and the originators of the CPS and CPA examinations) with input from and validated by industry to ensure that skills tested and certified are the critical set of job skills widely required in most office positions. It is distributed by Biddle Consulting Group, Inc., USA. OPAC, as testing software, is self-administered, self-scored, and reliable. Test results are available immediately, and Biddle Consulting Group, Inc. awards the certification.

Who Should Get Certified?

According to our 2004 labour force statistics, clerical workers represent 13 percent (or 20,295) of the 158,340 persons employed. The majority of them, employed in the Government Service, could benefit from upgrading and certification.

Employment seekers, post-secondary and college graduates, supervisors, managers, and all those involved in information processing activities should validate their skills through certification. In fact, employers should now insist that job applicants be certified since office skills certification is now available in The Bahamas. I call on all employers to raise the bar and demand that their personnel present proof of competency upon application for employment.

How Can One Prepare for Certification?

One can prepare for certification in three ways. (1) One can download course outlines from the OSC web site and practice independently until standards are achieved. (2) One can receive training at OSC or another educational institution. (3) One could already have the skills and met the standards and opt to sit for the examination without setting a foot in a classroom.

Is Certification Affordable?

Securing certification is a worthwhile investment that is entirely doable because OPAC is affordable.

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