

With companies allocating more resources than ever to employee training, it's important to get the most out of it with a certification program.

By Carla Barker

**W**e all know how important knowledge and skills development are to our organizations' performance. Companies are allocating more resources than ever to employee training and development, with U.S. businesses spending more than \$60 billion a year on it, according to the Corporate Learning Factbook.

To make lasting change, however, investing in training courses isn't enough. What happens after the training is just as important. For a return on your investment and to ensure that you're getting sustained results from training, consider a certification program.

Certification, simply, is confirming that the information delivered in training has "stuck" with the participants and that the new key learnings are being practiced and demonstrated on a consistent basis, delivering the desired outcomes—long after the training class has ended.

Nearly all training programs come with some immediate validation of understanding, such as an after-training quiz, exam or demonstration. We can call this initial certification. But what happens after that to ensure key learnings are put into ongoing action? To gain a full return on your training investment, long-term validation and follow up are critical.

By implementing ongoing certification programs as a follow up to training, participants can keep key learnings and messages top of mind. And with ongoing

reference and measures in place to track understanding and demonstration, those key learnings will, over time, become part of an employee's DNA.

### Give Them "Bites"

At one time, corporate training took the large, "single meal" approach. Participants would spend several hours confined to a room with an instructor delivering content over the course of one or several days. That ap-



# Why Post-Training Certification Is Good for Business

QUALITY  
LEVEL

LOW

## Post-training certification can...

- Validate that training objectives were met and provide insights into training ROI.
- Help create a highly skilled workforce over time.
- Lead to greater employee compensation through bonuses and review incentives.
- Provide growth opportunities, even within a job level.
- Let busy managers know where they need to put more coaching effort.
- Help managers see where additional work or change is needed.
- Give employees a clear view of expectations and how to meet them.

proach might work for some initiatives, but in today's dynamic corporate world, taking people away from their work for an extended period of time to deliver large amounts of training isn't effective. Today's corporate learner is able to digest more in smaller "bites" through training that takes place over time.

For example, a leading telecommunication company initiated a service excellence program created to address procedural changes as well as improve customer

service skills to create higher levels of customer engagement. The program was designed to take place across 12 weeks in small segments using various media, such as instructor-led and online content, video demonstration, and in-class exercises and activities.

Each module was allocated three weeks to allow par-

ticipants the opportunity to fully understand the required content and be able to demonstrate the desired key learnings before moving onto the next phase of training. In conjunction with the training modules, the existing learning management system (LMS) was incorporated as part of the content delivery and helped to track course completion, in addition to validation of key learnings.

Technology innovations, such as an LMS and online communities for employees, help deliver and track these more complex training and certification programs. Tracking functionality that comes with an LMS is often an overlooked element that can benefit a comprehensive certification program, especially in instances where the employee population is larger in scale making manual tracking and some content validation a cumbersome exercise.

### The Long-Term Phase

Once initial certification is complete, then a long-term plan can go into effect. When creating the long-term phase, demonstration and validation checkpoints or milestones can take place over longer periods of time such as quarterly or semiannually and be incorporated into your company's annual review and/or bonus and compensation program.

For example, a multilevel marketing company initiated refresher training and semiannual certification checkpoints, once all frontline agents completed initial certification. Quizzes were created to confirm agent understanding of various elements of initial training, and a team of leaders reviewed a series of randomly selected calls for every agent to ensure that key learnings were not only understood, but continue to be demonstrated on a consistent basis.

This series of semiannual checkpoints were incorporated into the company's overall compensation plan. Upon successful completion of the certification standards, frontline agents received additional compensation as part of their yearly review process. Those who were not able to meet certification standards were

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provided additional training and coaching opportunities to aid in employee growth.

By including certification into the corporate compensation plan, the company communicated the message to employees that it stands behind the training and is committed to ensuring key learnings are part of its long-term corporate strategy.

### “Measure Up” With Certification

When a certification program is in full swing, companies will be able to identify trends when it comes to employee knowledge and skills demonstration. Successful companies understand that by measuring the impact of training, actionable information can be captured to assist in improving not only processes in place but also aid in the balance of efficiency and effectiveness. Pain points can be identified through a successful tracking mechanism in place—a mechanism fueled by certification.

When implemented correctly, and with regular tracking, a certification program provides numerous benefits for the company, the employee and the customer.

#### 1. It validates training objectives were met.

When creating training with a certification program, outline short and long-term objectives, ensuring these objectives can be incorporated

into existing business metrics. In the case of a customer engagement training program, key earnings can correspond to customer satisfaction, first call resolution or even likelihood to recommend, to name a few.

Create a scorecard so you can take a snapshot of business metrics before, during and after a certain period of time post training. This will provide data to validate not only that training objectives were met, but also provide insights into the training ROI.

#### 2. It increases organizational capabilities.

Healthy companies rely on their employees to perform consistently well. By implementing a certification program and tracking progress over a period of time,

organizations will create a highly skilled workforce. Certification programs also push the leadership team to do more coaching and validating of desired skills, which leads to a more consistent, and successful, customer experience.

### 3. It provides compensation incentives.

Achieving various levels of certification can be incorporated into a company's compensation and incentive program. For example, completing a training program focused on improving customer service skills and achieving the levels of certification outlined can lead to greater levels of employee compensation through bonuses and yearly review incentives.

### 4. It offers growth opportunities within job levels.

Focusing on improving employee capabilities will better prepare the workforce for next-generation leadership. And for those organizations that are unable to provide a greater amount of upward movement positions, providing certification objectives can offer employee growth opportunities within a designated job level.

Some companies may find themselves with a very tenured workforce with very little room for upward movement. Subject matter experts (SMEs), queuing opportunities, matching employees to customers with various levels of lifetime value are just a few ways certification can address a lack of upward movement. Certification can provide growth opportunities, even if it's within a job level.

### 5. It provides a snapshot of employee performance and capabilities.

Certification can help busy frontline managers know where they need to put more coaching effort and identify better-performing employees that can help mentor their lower-performing peers. Often times, highly tenured employees need additional motivation and incentive to buy into certification programs.

Understanding their strengths and presenting a clear vision of the benefits a certification plan will offer for the customer, the company and the employee will help to overcome concerns and aid in employee buy-in. Lastly, certification can also be used as a tool to use for

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SME placement or call-based routing to top performers.

### 6. It identifies overall trends and areas of strength and opportunity.

Based on tracking performance after training as part of ongoing certification, managers can see the overall results and identify areas that are changing as well identify the areas within the organization that require additional focus. Managers can take actions such as additional training or increased communication based on these identified trends.

### 7. It creates greater employee

#### engagement.

Employee engagement is as important as any other initiative; engaged employees just do better, are happier and stay longer. Ongoing certification programs give employees a chance to engage since they have a clear view of expectations and the process to meet those expectations. Certification also creates a common way to measure the results of training, so everyone is being measured by the same measuring stick.

Companies that invest in training and development coupled with a certification component benefit by having stronger talent pools, greater employee engagement, increased employee retention, lower turnover and higher employee satisfaction rates, which all translates to healthier and stronger organizations.

It can cost up to 150% of an employee's annual salary to recruit new talent—much more than to develop existing employees. With the money that's invested into employee development, it makes sound business sense to not only retain those employees, but also track their learning success for future opportunities. Certification provides the roadmap for the training and development journey. **CRM**



*Carla Barker, senior account manager at CX Act (formerly TARP Worldwide), develops and delivers custom training and communication programs for customer-facing employees, which are designed to improve the overall customer experience. She has more than 20 years of progressive experience in the areas of customer experience, training development and delivery, corporate and employee communications, customer retention, call center management and operations.*