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# CIO Corner

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# Certification: Does the Emperor Have Any Clothes?

Tom Costello, *UpStreme*

Over the last couple years, I've seen a vast increase in the number of requests for proposals (RFPs) and job postings that require certifications or credentialing at both the individual and organizational levels. These range from certifications on specific tools and technologies to broad-based methodology competencies. In an ever-escalating pattern, they're being abused by all parties concerned. The process is overwhelmingly becoming a "check off the box" feel-good exercise, with decreasing value as the process itself devolves. I've asked executives if they really achieve value from these mandates (either perceptible or measurable). Their answers are a bit unsettling, and the entire situation certainly requires a "get well" program for CIOs.

There are plenty of zealots on both sides of the argument who will not step back and accept the reality of the situation. But if they want tangible examples, I'll be only too sorry to produce them. To be very clear about the premise behind this article: I value credentials but am appalled by the rampant and escalating abuse and abdication or responsibility around this topic.

## The Broken, Expensive, Ineffective Process

Let's start with the most cited abuse: "paper certifications." Your credentialed candidate has done the reading and testing to be certified and is now "book learned." You have an open position and have mandated those credentials. The perfect candidate will have both credentials and experience, but does your interview process ensure that's what you'll get? Some certifications are truly crushing to obtain and are not the kind of test you can pencil-whip your way through—for example, the Cisco Certified Network Engineer (CCNE) exam. This is greatly outnumbered, though, by the vast array of product and methodology certifications that can be had for the investment of a short week and a few hundred dollars.

If you think you're 50/50 in weeding out the bad, multiply the number of new hires in your organization this year by .5, times their average salary, times about .3 (for the three or four months of on-the-job training they'll need to make them useful). Let's be kind; assume there are no other costs because they're perfect learners and don't mess anything up along the way. The resulting number is your minimum annual cost for that poor

process. With the current economy and pool of solid, experienced talent, you have no excuse for not getting the hiring process right.

While the processes to leverage individual certification are costly, the mistakes on project requirements are much more expensive. As an example, let's assume you have a large project heading into the RFP stage. You're going to require that the winning firm is CMM certified above a certain level. At the same time, you're driving the process to get the best output at the lowest cost. You run through the process and select a firm that offers the best balance of price, scope, capability, and of course proper credentials. It starts the project, and before long, you notice that certain "best practices" are missing. When you question the vendor, you hear either, "Yes, our firm is CMM3, but that is another division, not our group," or "We're CMM3 certified, but to get our bid to your number, we can't follow those practices," or the ever-popular "We're CMM3 certified, but your directions are forcing our team to abandon those practices."

You and the vendor can argue who is to blame. But while you  
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might not have caused these scenarios, you certainly could have stopped them. Solid controls in the RFP process can avert the first two example mistakes. These can be solved with simple questions (written and verbal) as well as contractual commitments and penalties. The third excuse, however, can only be managed while your project is in progress. You need a solid project monitoring and control effort and a detailed change-control process that ensures you know when the vendor begins to lighten the load. Then you can determine the cost/benefit/risk of such moves. Although I cited CMM in the previous example, I could substitute many other acronyms.

## Checking Off the Box?

I wouldn't want to play the blame game here, only because there's too much to go around. CIOs drive their organizations to require and select firms and individuals on the basis of certifications, but are doing a poor job of owning the responsibility of ensuring they're properly vetted and leveraged. Vendors get certifications at the individual and organizational levels to make themselves more appealing but often show little backbone or ethics in being clear on the connection between the hypothetical certs and the reality of a given proposal. Both sides are busy checking off boxes in the name of best practices and abdicating their responsibility to be diligent and cautious.

As a CIO, I completely understand the need for certifications and credentials as a baseline to evaluate the vast array of vendors that show up at my door every month. I also understand the need to balance the costs of moving through a continuum of various certification models (few firms

can afford to actually execute at CMM5, for example). As a consultant, I also see the need to offer a spectrum of solutions (leveraging certification best practices or not) while meeting customers' pricing needs. But we must call this process what it is—nearly completely broken.

After almost 30 years, I have trouble finding a direct correlation (or even any cause-effect) between the rise in certifications and the quality of IT delivery. We need to break the cycle, accept that the emperor has no clothes, and move on to the tougher stage—the solution.

## Get Well

If you're going to require certifications, you must ensure those mandates have an impact by setting targets and measuring outcomes. For individual certifications, it would be great to be able to do a better job during the interview process, but the more reliable impact will come from measuring new-hires against your needs/targets during a "probationary" period. This will require some work to define your goals—all of which you can and should share during the interviews. As for corporate-level certifications, I've already noted that we can resolve most of these risks through a more deliberate, transparent, documented selection and contract process. Likewise, any project sent out for RFP that has a mandated methodology or framework required should also clearly note how much of that implementation is really expected and/or budgeted. Once a project begins, having a sponsor or project management office that regularly reports on what has been "implemented" versus "contracted," along with a solid change-request process, can help provide early detection and correction.

propose a challenge. At your next team meeting, put this topic on your agenda and gather input from your teams. Give yourself a score on your current capabilities in acquiring and leveraging certifications. Propose and discuss my recommendations with your team, and see if you believe they would have a positive impact on your enterprise. At a minimum, these discussions will raise awareness and visibility. ■

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