



# How To Do Certification

## Training Application Notes

MOITAN001

### Purpose

This document explains what certification is, its value, how to implement it, and how to troubleshoot problems with your certification program.

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### Overview

#### *The Definition of Certification*

The dictionary definition of the verb “to certify” is “to attest as being true or as represented or as meeting a standard; to testify to the truth or genuineness of something.”

In training, certification is the independent verification of a person’s ability to perform a certain task to a specific standard. It ensures that your business can operate to meet and exceed customer expectations.

#### *The Value of Certification*

Certification has always played an important part in fields, such as medicine and aircraft maintenance, where poor performance can be life threatening. More and more, however, companies are starting to realize its uses in other areas. Since certification ensures consistent and uniform performance, and since business growth and share price are driven by a company’s ability to perform, these companies have realized that certification can be used significantly across the board. Today, certification plays an ever-increasing role in everything from software training to package delivery.

For example, in the software industry, many companies have realized that repeat purchases and recommendations depend on customers being able to take full advantage of all that their software products have to offer — which in turn means that they must produce not only software, but fully-trained and certified users as well. In the fast food industry, companies have realized, too, that certification can be an important tool for delivering

consistent products and services — and therefore quality — from franchise to franchise, and thus certification has become an integral part of fast food operations from Tokyo to New York.

In other arenas, like customer service and technical support, certification has also started to play an important role. These days, customers expect their problems to be handled by qualified personnel, and companies know that sending out unqualified personnel is both potentially dangerous and very costly. In fact, the ability to provide superior customer support has become a major selling point for many companies, such as the computer manufacturer Dell and the car manufacturer Mercedes-Benz.

In summary, certification allows your business to employ safe and effective operating procedures, while providing the highest quality services and satisfying your customers’ needs.

### Guidelines

#### *When:*

Certification is needed when:

- Uniform performance is needed in critical business areas
- Customer satisfaction ratings need to be improved
- Business, legal, professional, and/or safety requirements mandate certification
- You need a fair system for defining organizational career paths
- You need to differentiate your products and services from your competitors’ products and services
- Products and services are being provided inconsistently

- Your service productivity has dropped and your expenses are increasing in the customer support area (phone support, travel, etc.)

### How:

There are four primary methods of certification. These methods differ in the level of certainty they offer as to the accuracy of the evaluation process in assessing student competency. Note, however, regardless of the method used, a person is either certified or not certified, and no judgments can be made as to the level of expertise a person has based on the method by which they were certified.

The four certification methods are (in increasing order of certainty):

- **DKO, Demonstrate Knowledge Orally**

This is typically used when the certifier is confident that the person can do the task and when training equipment is unavailable or the business cost prohibits an actual performance of the task.

- **DKW, Demonstrate Knowledge in Writing**

This is used when the cost of an actual performance of the task would be too high and when oral certification is not considered to be a reliable indication of competency.

- **DPT, Demonstrate Performance as Part of a Team**

This is used when the costs of individual performances of the task would be too high and when neither oral nor written certification is considered a reliable indication of competency.

- **DPI, Demonstrate Performance as an Individual**

This is used when an individual must demonstrate complete mastery due to the risks associated with performing the task.

Which method you choose will depend on the business risks you face versus the rewards you stand to gain. For example, for obvious reasons, you would not want to certify a coronary heart bypass orally nor insist on having each of the bus boys in a restaurant demonstrate they can take out the trash. In general, low-risk tasks should be certified orally or by written testing, while high-risk tasks should be performed. This is so because the benefit of using expensive equipment to test low-risk tasks rarely outweighs the costs and because high-risk tasks mandate a greater certainty with regard to ability.

A formal classroom setting is not required for certification testing. Certification can take place anywhere — over the telephone, over the Internet, or on an oilrig in the Caspian Sea. With that said, however, it should be understood that the goal of a good certification program is to simulate real life situations as much as possible, especially in the case of high-risk tasks. A good example to keep in mind is that of a firefighter's training program. With the exception of starting a three-alarm fire, every aspect of firefighting is replicated — from driving the fire trucks, to hooking up the water hoses, to scaling a multi-storied building to rescue people trapped inside.

It should be noted that, in some cases, performance must be demonstrated in the field, with certification following after the task has been performed a certain number of times. This “on the job” time may be required because of business risks, prohibitive costs, or the inability to simulate a task in the training environment. For example, in surgical training, one cannot “order up” kidney transplants at will, so certification must wait for appropriate circumstances in the field to arise. In this case, certification is only given after the task has been done a number of times in the real world, both with and without assistance.

The actual certification of individuals should, of course, only be carried out by appointed and qualified certifiers. The certifiers should be permitted ultimate approval and should only give that approval when they have been fully satisfied that a student can perform the task in question.

MOI strongly recommends student-driven certification programs. That is, the students should approach the instructor to be certified. This is a just-in-time kind of approach, which allows students to move forward at their own pace, without holding anyone else up. Also, confidence is an essential part of being able to perform any particular tasks, and certification should only take place when a student is ready.

Finally, it should be understood that the certification process must be supported by the provision of relevant theory (the why, when, where and how of the tasks), supervised demonstrations, and practical training exercises that explore the limits of the tasks. Certification validates, but it is training that enhances ability.

### Record Keeping

A key component of any certification program is keeping records. Today, almost all business quality systems, not the least of which is ISO 9000, call for maintaining training records.

Certification records tell you who is certified and who is not, and are an excellent source for determining your corporate training gap. Certification records also tell you who needs to be recertified. The phrase “use it or lose it” comes to mind — and

the importance of keeping one's certification current cannot be overemphasized, especially in high-risk jobs.

Your records should include the name of the person certified, date of certification, the name of the certifier, and the signature of the certifier.

## Troubleshooting Certification

The following sections lists “red flag” comments that may indicate problems with your training and certification program — and what they might mean.

You should be aware that certification can be a sensitive subject — as many people are somewhat frightened by testing. In order to improve your program and reassure those it affects, it is important to listen carefully to what people say about your program and to determine what problems, if any, they are identifying.

### “J Doe attended the class and was certified, but can't do anything”

A statement like this can indicate that students are being awarded “certificates of attendance” and not “certificates of achievement.”

Many training programs award certification at the end of a course without testing to verify what the students have learned.

More specific reasons for this comment include:

- No expectations or the wrong expectations were set as to what students would be able to do at the end of class and after being certified.
- The class was larger than the recommended size and it was not possible to provide the students with the necessary practice time.
- No tools or equipment were available, and it was not possible to provide the students with the necessary demonstration and/or practice time.
- The students attended the wrong class — that is, the class did not cover tasks that were relevant to their jobs and needs.
- “Beginning” students were put in the same class as “advanced” students and their needs were not met.

### “I've been certified — and a couple more practices and I should be able to do it”

This is a normal response for newly certified students who have yet to build up their “comfort level” with regard to a task. It in no way invalidates the certification. Regardless of their comfort level, they still demonstrated the ability to perform to the required standard. For example, many people pass their driving exams but still feel uncomfortable driving alone until some time has passed and they have driven a little more.

### “I had to certify the student because they had practiced the procedure so many times”

Excessive practice, and failure, can indicate a student is having difficulty and needs special assistance. It is not a valid reason for certifying a student.

A statement like this indicates that 1) the student was inappropriately certified and 2) the certifier felt pressured to certify the student and abdicated responsibility as a certifier.

The student should be retrained and recertified, and the certifier should be assured of his/her authority to reject or approve a student performance for certification purposes.

### “I certified them because they did the Task and met Key Results...but they still can't do it”

A statement like this also indicates the certifier felt pressured to certify the student and abdicated responsibility as a certifier. Additionally, it can indicate that the certifier has identified problems with the curriculum — for example, performance standards which are too low or incorrect, or incorrect/insufficient job tasks.

The certifier should be assured and reminded of his/her authority to reject or approve a student performance for certification purposes. The performance standards should also be revised, if necessary.

### “Real life is nothing like this”

Usually, when you receive a comment like this one, it indicates that your Job Task Analysis is faulty and that it addresses the wrong tasks or has missed important ones.

On the other hand, it may simply reflect the reality of the situation. Sometimes it is not possible to recreate all the different conditions a person might encounter on the job in the training environment — due to physical, financial, safety, or other issues. If this is the case, you may need to determine if the discrepancy

between real life and what you can provide in the training environment is too large. If it is, you may want to stop classroom training and to mandate in-the-field practice as a prerequisite to certification instead.

### **“I am certified, but I have forgotten it”**

Unless a person continually practices a task they have learned, they will lose the skill over time. It is recommended that re-certification dates be established for each task or group of tasks that you certify students in. This is a common practice in many industries; for example, pilots are required to regularly complete certain exercises to maintain their pilot's license.

### **“We should use mentors to certify”**

Mentoring can be a very effective tool for providing students with in-the-field practice opportunities, but it fails as a substitute for an entire certification-training program in the following ways:

- Mentoring does not provide students with the required formal theory
- Student practice time is often pre-empted in the field by customer needs and the business' need to complete the current assignment
- Student practice time is often halted all-together because customers do not like the idea of uncertified people working on their equipment and/or because they resent the idea that they must pay for the equipment to train the manufacturers personnel
- The standards of certification are inconsistent from one mentor to another, informal, and thus without meaning
- Travel expenses will be doubled if the mentor is required to travel

### **“We have a certification program, but it's useless”**

A statement like this indicates one of four things usually:

- It is not clear what the students should be able to do at the end of the training and certification sessions
- The program doesn't cover the right tasks or the students are not being sent to the right classes
- The students' managers and/or business do not actually support the task methods being taught

- There is a problem outside of the training and certification arena — such as a lack of proper equipment and other resources

In the first two cases the solution is to develop a new Job Task Analysis and develop the certification tests around this new set of tasks. Business needs and processes change constantly, and the training and certification program must be updated in parallel for it to be useful.

In the last two cases, solutions must be sought outside the training and certification arena.

### **“If DPI is so reliable, why don't we certify everybody this way?”**

Although the Demonstrate Performance as an Individual (DPI) method is the most reliable method of certification, it is also the most difficult and expensive method and may not be feasible. Reasons it may not make business sense are:

1. The costs associated with the activity are too high
2. The value of certification is low for particular tasks
3. The certification program is being implemented to meet quality control standards or customer requirements in an organization with long-standing employees who are known to be competent

It should be understood that all of the other certification methods are equally acceptable, provided that the risk of uncertainty is acceptable.

### **“Why is J Doe the Certifier?”**

Certifiers for any set of tasks should be those who have been vested with the authority by the organization or those who have been approved by the primary Subject Matter Expert who developed the Job Task Analysis (on which the certification program is based).

All certifiers should be validated in either of these manners, or your certification program may be at risk.

### **“If I only had more time, they would have certified me”**

In general, the key results for a task do not include time standards for testing purposes. Performance time requirements are, however, important for the purpose of certification testing and should be included in the skills test instructions so that students are aware of these testing restrictions.

## “Why do we have to sign-off on each task individually when certifying a student?”

Tasks are often grouped together for organizational and teaching purposes. However, a policy of certifying against entire task groups, as opposed to certifying each task individually, is *not* recommended. Doing so often leads course developers and certifiers to assume that ability in one task implies ability in another, and that “spot testing” is sufficient to indicate overall ability. But this is not true. Each task in a Job Task Analysis is to be considered essential in its own right to the operation of the business. No tasks may be skipped or overlooked if it was deemed necessary to include them separately in the Job Task Analysis.

Individual certification in each task allows three things:

1. It allows full verification that students have a complete grasp of each task
2. It allows the organization to pin-point specific training gaps and to focus its attention in those areas where it is weak
3. It allows the testing process to be broken into manageable portions, and should a student fail in one area, to only require retesting in that one area

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