WHAT DEFINES A QUALITY CERTIFICATION PROGRAM?

Make Sure Your Employees Stand Out from the Crowd
A constant question that arises from those involved in the evaluation of potential candidates for employment is, “How can I be sure they are competent and can perform the job?” A tool used by many in the hiring process is to look for what credentials an individual has as a way to verify their competencies and skills. Credentials can be in the form of degrees, certificates, licenses, and certifications. Knowing how to differentiate between the terms used in the world of credentialing can help a hiring manager have greater confidence in what they are asking for in a job posting and ultimately, in their hiring decisions. This paper focuses on understanding the concepts of certificate and certification programs, and defining what constitutes a quality certification program.

There are two key terms that are often used when considering credentials: “certificate” and “certification.” Many providers of education/training programs improperly use the terms interchangeably. The Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) provides definitions of these terms (emphasis added):

- **An assessment-based certificate program** is a non-degree granting program that: (a) provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and/or competencies associated with intended learning outcomes; (b) evaluates participants’ achievement of the intended learning outcomes; and (c) awards a certificate only to those participants who meet the performance, proficiency or passing standard for the assessment(s), (hence the term, “assessment-based certificate program”).

- **Professional or personnel certification** is a voluntary process by which individuals are evaluated against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, or competencies. Participants who demonstrate they meet the standards by successfully completing the assessment process are granted a time-limited credential. To retain the credential, certificants must maintain continued competence. The credential awarded by the certification program provider denotes that the participant possesses particular knowledge, skills, or competencies.

As the definitions indicate, the focus of an assessment-based certificate program is on education/training, the focus of professional/personnel certification is on the assessment of a participants competency. Moreover, the assessment used in a professional/personnel certification is independent of a specific class, course, or other education/training program and also independent of any provider of classes, courses, or programs. Another common distinguishing factor is that most assessment-based certificate programs are not time limited. However, a certification program, is time-limited and requires the individual to verify on-going competence in order to continue to hold the certification.

There are other types of “certificate programs” that do not include an actual assessment of the participants achieving the learning outcomes of the education/training. These types of certificates are typically referred to as “certificate of participation”.

Assessment-based certificate programs and professional certification programs each serve a given purpose and value to the hiring manager. The assessment based certificate program offers confirmation to a hiring manager that an individual who has the certificate has participated in a specific education event and they achieved the learning outcomes. On the other hand, a quality professional certification program validates that an individual has demonstrated the knowledge, skills and abilities to be competent in the profession covered by the certification and participates in an ongoing program designed to maintain their competence over time.
So, as a hiring manager, if you are looking for help in determining if an individual has the competency to perform the job, your best option is to look for a valid and reliable professional certification program that demonstrates the competency of an individual. But there is still a question remaining that a hiring manager must answer—“How do I know a professional certification program is valid and reliable?”

There are both national and international standards that define the minimum requirements for a certification program to be considered valid and reliable. When deciding on which certification program(s) to require, look for compliance with the requirements set in either of these standards. The two standards are: (1) NCCA Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Bodies and (2) ISO 17024, Conformity Assessment-General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons. The common features of both standards are:

- Stakeholder Involvement
- Separation of Education and Certification
- Security
- Job Analysis
- Valid and Reliable Assessment Tool
- Standard Setting / Psychometrically Sound Scoring
- Re-Certification

The intent is not to go into detail on each of the above requirement but rather to highlight the critical importance of each of the requirements as they relate to ensuring hiring managers can have confidence in the credential they are asking job candidates to hold.

**STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT**
Certification programs should not be developed and operated in a vacuum. A quality program will seek stakeholder involvement in helping to develop and administer the program. The industry standard requires that a governance body be in place that includes stakeholders impacted by the credentialing program. In addition, the NCCA standards specifically require at least one public member to ensure consumer-type issues are addressed. The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) credentialing program, as an example, brings together HIM professionals, hiring managers, educators and others to serve on the Commission on Certification for Health Informatics and Information Management (CCHIIM).

**SEPARATION OF EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION**
As noted in the definitions provided previously, a certification program and the assessment tool used are designed to validate an individual’s competence in a profession. The validity of the assessment tool can be compromised if there is not a proper firewall between the education and the assessment tool. As an example, one firewall that is standard in a quality certification program is to not allow individuals involved with the approval of exam items/questions to also provide exam preparation materials and courses. The obvious concern being that a person involved in both might be tempted to “teach to the test,” reducing the validity of the assessment.

**JOB ANALYSIS**
The NCCA Standards define a job analysis as, “Any of several methods used singly or in combination to identify the performance domains and associated tasks, knowledge, and/or skills relating to the purpose of the credential and providing the foundation for examination validation.” AHIMA develops a job analysis report for each of its credential programs. Subject matter experts develop a draft job analysis which is then validated through a national survey to individuals in the profession. Without a properly conducted job analysis, the assessment used to determine an individual’s competency is not of value. The results of a properly conducted Job Analysis can be found in the appendices of the AHIMA Candidate Guide which can be found on the AHIMA website, ahima.org/certification. Hiring managers should ask for the Job Analysis that was conducted in support of credentials before you consider accepting the credential. This will ensure the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for the position are being validated by the certification body.

**VALID AND RELIABLE ASSESSMENT TOOL**
There is a significant amount of literature written about the development of exams. The intent of this paper is not to go into great detail on this issue. The important element to remember is that any exam/assessment tool used in a certification program needs to be based on the job analysis, including the weighting factors assigned to each job domain. Individuals writing questions need to be properly trained in how to develop fair and unbiased questions and each question needs to be statistically analyzed to ensure it is fair and unbiased.

**STANDARD SETTING**
The pass/fail criteria for an assessment is based on a statistical process of determining what a typical minimum score of an exam would be achieved by someone considered competent in the profession being evaluated. The end result is what is referred
## What Defines a Quality Certification Program?

### CODING CERTIFICATIONS COMPARISON CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>AHIMA CCS®</th>
<th>Competitive Credential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competencies Covered and %</td>
<td>Inpatient and Outpatient</td>
<td>Inpatient and Outpatient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Information Documentation</td>
<td>Yes (8-10%)</td>
<td>Yes (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis and Procedure Coding</td>
<td>Yes (64–68%)</td>
<td>Yes (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory Guidelines and Reporting Requirements</td>
<td>Yes (12-16%)</td>
<td>Yes (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Quality and Management</td>
<td>Yes (2–4%)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and Communication Technologies</td>
<td>Yes (1–3%)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy, Confidentiality, Legal, and Ethical Issues</td>
<td>Yes (2–4%)</td>
<td>Yes (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Yes (2–4%)</td>
<td>Yes (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Terminology, Anatomy, and Pathophysiology</td>
<td>Eligibility Requirement</td>
<td>Yes (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Case Studies</td>
<td>Clinical scenarios addressing both primary/principle diagnosis and additional diagnoses and procedure codes using ICD-10-CM Vol. 1-3 and CPT</td>
<td>Code the ICD-10-CM Vol 1-3 codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Exam Questions</td>
<td>97 questions</td>
<td>60 questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Limit for Test</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>5 hours and 40 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility Requirements</td>
<td>RHIA, RHIT, or CCS-P; or Completion of coding program that includes autonomy and physiology, pathophysiology, pharmacology, medical terminology, reimbursement methodology, intermediate/advanced ICD diagnostic/procedural and CPT coding; or Minimum of two years of experience directly applying codes; or CCA plus one year of experience directly applying codes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

3 | What Defines a Quality Certification Program?
to as a “cut score.” A hiring manager should know the cut score determination process followed by a certification body as well as the pass/fail rate for the exam and consider if an exam that is too easy to pass truly measures competence. The NCCA standards require a certification body to publish the pass rates for a given certification.

RE-CERTIFICATION
One of the key distinguishing factors that separate quality certification programs from other programs (e.g., certificate, diploma, etc.) is the requirement that the certification is time-limited and an individual must document they have maintained their competence in the profession in order for them to maintain their certification.

All the above information is good to know by all hiring managers but the one remaining question, and probably the most important one is “How am I going to be able to evaluate credentialing programs I am considering based on accepted industry standards?”

This is, of course, a critical question but the answer to the question is simple. All of us in the healthcare industry understand the importance of third-party accreditation (hospitals, physician offices, educators, etc.) We count on third-party accreditation programs to show that our services are in compliance with industry standards and patients can feel comfortable in knowing a third-party is overseeing our processes. The good news for hiring managers is that there are excellent accreditation programs that evaluate and approve certification bodies. As an example, the AHIMA coding (CCA, CCS, CCS-P), RHIT, and RHIA credentialing programs have been accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the premier third-party accreditation body serving the health services credentialing community.

Hiring managers should first check to determine if a credentialing program is accredited.

Determining Competencies Tested in a Certification Exam and Comparing to Your Job Postings
Those involved in the hiring of medical coders in the hospital setting are being asked to consider different types of credentials when considering an individual for hire or when determining minimum job requirements. The comparison chart included in this white paper could prove useful in determining if available credentials meet your needs.

Also consider the following questions:
• Does it make sense for a credential specifically covering medical coders to provide an exam where less than 20 percent of the questions are specifically related to coding?
• Does it make sense to consider a credential that does not have a major competency component related to information and communication technologies or data quality management?
• Does it make sense to consider a credential that requires no prior experience and/or formal training?
• Can the asking of five multiple choice questions adequately determine an individual’s competency level in medical terminology, anatomy and pathohysiology?
• Is third-party validation that a credential has been developed in accordance with industry standards related to quality, validity and reliability important?

We hope the above information is helpful in determining your organization’s credential(s) of choice for medical coders.