Certificate vs Certification

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The major differences between a certificate and certification

The differences between certificates and a certification is often a topic of great confusion. While one is not better than the other, certain circumstances may warrant one being more appropriate based on the needs of the program. Upon examination of numerous sources, we realized there are many varying definitions and distinctions. Below, we identify three key differences.

Knowledge of specific content vs. a Professional body of knowledge

Certificates and certifications often differ in the end products they offer and the breadth of knowledge they cover. Certificates typically indicate the completion of specific courses or training based on learning objectives – for this reason, they typically cover a narrower scope of content. Certifications, on the other hand, are generally earned to demonstrate competency in certain domains, as measured against predetermined resources developed by the professions. As a result, certification holders are often measured against task and knowledges (KSAs/competencies) based on a body of knowledge whereas a certificate often assesses specific areas.

Focus on education vs. Focus on assessments

There are significant differences in objectives between earning a certificate or a certification. The goal in earning a certificate is to acquire specific knowledge, and the primary focus of certificate holders is to gain further education or training on the professional topics. In the case of certification programs, the primary focus is in passing a comprehensive assessment to demonstrate professional mastery. Earning a certification usually allows one to list a designation after their name, whereas certificates are often used as verification to specific education.

Updating certificates vs. Recertification

Certificates indicate the completion of a course or training and are sometimes followed by an assessment; therefore, they do not usually expire. However, to keep up with an ever-changing knowledge, certificate holders often update their status by enrolling in the most recent certificate program. Certifications, however, require consistent and continued maintenance – to keep a certification requires a long-term commitment to fulfilling ongoing requirements.

Additional differences

CERTIFICATES
- Narrower learning content
- Open to wider audiences
- May or may not require assessment

CERTIFICATIONS
- Broader learning content
- Professional experience required
- Always requires assessment

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References

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