
Hospitality certification: experiences in North America – international implications

Kemal Birdir

Graduate Student, Purdue University, USA

Thomas E. Pearson

Purdue University, USA

An in-depth analysis of hospitality certification programmes was conducted. The study revealed important insights on certification demographics, development processes, certification paths, administration, benefits of certification, credibility and the future of certification programmes. It is found that developing certification programmes commonly involves a long and detailed process. There are serious obstacles in getting association membership to adopt certification programmes. Associations prefer to develop, and manage their certification programmes. Certification programmes seem to benefit both associations and members.

Introduction

Due to increasing competition for international travellers, and a shortage of fully qualified hospitality professionals, tourism ministries in many countries are exploring the use of certification programmes. The goal of this paper is to provide guidance to these countries by examining common experiences in North American hospitality associations.

In the North American hospitality industry “programmes which provide either certification or professional designations for workers or managers in hospitality and tourism-related fields are, in a word, proliferating” (Lambert and Riegel, 1996). The number of certification programmes has grown from around two in the early 1980s (Morrison *et al.*, 1992) to around 100 in 1994 (Hassmiller and Perdue, 1994).

Numerous reasons have been proposed to explain this rapid growth. To be recognized as a professional in fields such as law and medicine there are well-established requirements. Unfortunately, this has not been the history for most of the hospitality professions (Morrison, Hsieh and Wang, 1992). A 1992 study showed that only 4.3 per cent of 451 corporate travel managers in the USA had degrees in travel and tourism (Berning and Morrison, 1992). Similarly, Nebel *et al.* (1994) found that while 38.7 per cent of luxury hotel managers and 44.3 per cent of F & B managers had hotel degrees, the rest had other academic backgrounds (Nebel *et al.*, 1994; Nebel *et al.*, 1995).

As developed to date, certification in the hospitality industry recognizes this diversity of backgrounds and is developed to prove “... the holder knows how to carry out the tasks associated with a particular job function [i.e., hotel administration, catering, housekeeping, etc.] at an established level of performance. In other words, it shows the attainment of professional competency” (Wiley, 1995).

Recognizing the need to demonstrate competency, associations develop, manage, and update their programmes for the benefit of the industry and their members. Virtually none make money on certification (Hassmiller and Perdue, 1994).

Another reason for this rapid increase in certification programmes can be attributed to practitioner demand. Many people enter the hospitality industry having a degree in another field. Since certification programmes typically require much less time and cost than an additional degree in a hospitality discipline, these people often prefer certification programmes instead (Morrison *et al.*, 1992).

Rapid development of certification programmes in North America is attracting attention from the rest of the world. The historic factors for US programme development are no different from conditions in many countries. For example, a study conducted by the Turkish Ministry of Tourism and the International Labor Organization in 1993 (Ministry of Tourism, 1993), showed that less than 10 per cent hotel administrators had hospitality degrees. The situation was the same through the whole Turkish industry. Only 2.7 per cent of restaurant administrators had restaurant management degrees, and 9.9 per cent of the travel agency administrators had travel and tourism degrees.

Previous studies

In general the research shows that all associations have followed similar paths – with varied sophistication, and have developed common programme features. For example, Gilley’s (1985) study revealed that associations, in general, administer certification programmes themselves, allow non-members to achieve certification, develop promotional public relations programmes, have written ethics codes, and enforce these codes in cases of violation.

More attention is being paid to understand the benefits of certification for members, associations, and all other stakeholders (Eisenhart, 1991; Lee, 1986; Varney, 1989; Wiley, 1995). A study conducted by Morrison, Hsieh, and Wang (1992) found that 78.6 per cent of CTP (Certified Tour Professional) graduates reported increased recognition and respect in their industry, and 74.1 per cent reported more competence as a tour professional as a result of attaining the CTP

designation. Additionally, 34.2 per cent of the CTP graduates reported either moderately, or greatly increased salaries after certification. On the other hand, only 5.8 per cent of these people reported promotions as a result of CTP designation.

Certification is also designed to serve other purposes. Many associations design certification programmes to gain more recognition in their field/industry. The CPA (Certified Public Accountant) designation of the National Association of Accountants is notable as it has become the defining standard for practising public accounting in the USA. Other certification programmes have started to experience similar recognition. For example, General Electric requires purchasing managers to complete certification from the National Association of Purchasing Management (Muller, 1993). Federal Express now requires the Society for Human Resource Management's PHR (Professional in Human Resources) designation from new applicants (Schleier, 1989).

Study objectives

This study was an exploratory attempt to identify lessons from the North American experience on certification. Information regarding seven fundamental elements of the programmes were solicited including:

- 1 *Demographics*: per centage of members certified, direct cost of certification, average yearly income of members.
- 2 *Development*: preliminary work, material development, obstacles experienced in programme development.
- 3 *Certification path*: programme completion time, requirements, steps, exams, levels of certification.
- 4 *Administration*: group review/critique of the programme, greatest challenge(s) in maintaining the programme, common reasons people chose not to be certified.
- 5 *Benefits for members and association*: the rewards of being certified for members, effects on future promotions and pay, effects on the association's image.
- 6 *Credibility of the programme*: support of members, field, and industry group;
- 7 *Future*: plans for change, government influence, internal participation.

Methodology

A ten-page survey was utilized based on a comprehensive literature review, including available printed materials from various associations. It was designed to uncover areas

of effort and concern, and quantified results where possible.

Seven hospitality associations from the USA and Canada were recognized for their efforts regarding certification and were invited to join the study. Participation was limited to facilitate a complete review of programme experience. All seven were very generous in providing assistance. Out of these seven certification programmes, one was eliminated from this report because of its specialized orientation. The findings then come from associations specializing in six hospitality professions including food service, housekeeping, hotel administration, and restaurant administration.

Findings

Demographics

No group was able to provide complete information about the age structure of their members, length of association membership or member background. Regardless of this the associations were able to provide important insights about their members – certified and non-certified. None of the associations reported a completely certified membership body. The average certification rate is 35.6 per cent.

Associations reported the income structure of their certified members and non-certified members. Certification administrators reported an income difference between certified and non-certified members in favour of those certified. The differences averaged \$10,000 to \$20,000. This report is consistent with income gains reported by other researchers. For example, a study in 1992 showed that 27.9 per cent of certified tour professionals experienced moderately increased salaries after certification, and 5.3 per cent received greatly increased salaries (Morrison *et al.*, 1992).

Development

Development of certification programmes is reported to take a tremendous amount of time, energy, and resource utilization, as well as expertise and support of outside groups. The associations reported that on average it took 2.25 years to develop certification programmes, including preliminary work. This preliminary work commonly includes:

- completion of a skill needs assessment;
- determining members' goals for certification;
- determining members' interest in such a programme;
- determining a common job profile of the members;

- development of a common career path concept.

Four out of six associations used outside expert assistance in developing their programme especially in needs assessment, and the development of materials.

Books specifically written for each certification programme stand as the primary materials available to people preparing for certification. They are provided by five of the associations. Associations also reported providing videos, and “review courses” to members. All of the associations prefer specialized materials. The associations reported updates to their certification preparation materials every two years on average.

There are numerous and serious obstacles that are reported in getting the association membership to adopt certification programmes, including:

- divisions within the leadership group (regarding emphasis of the programme);
- who should be allowed certification, such as unit managers, executives, or educators;
- initial cost of programme development;
- member resistance;
- lack of support from board of directors;
- charges to members; and,
- other activities of the association judged more important.

Associations were also asked why they develop certification programmes if they are so costly, time-consuming, and difficult to start and maintain. It was apparent that in establishing a certification programme, associations sought more than one goal. The major goals shared by all the participating associations are to:

- 1 award recognition to those who show a high level of competence or professional knowledge and skills;
- 2 raise the standards of the profession;
- 3 improve the performance in the profession by encouraging participation in a continuing programme of professional development.

Some other goals sought by the associations include:

- encouraging self-assessment by offering guidelines for personal development;
- increasing the association income;
- increasing publicity of the association; and
- increasing awareness of the changes in the field.

Certification path

When the associations were asked to rank the importance of specific components in their certification programmes (Table I),

Table I

The most valued certification requirements

Requirement	Score ^a
Length of industry experience	4.00
Formal education	3.83
Specific training offered by universities, institutions, etc.	3.83
Industry participation activities	3.60
Specific seminar programmes	3.00
Association participation	2.70
Association leadership	2.00
Length of membership	1.50

Note: ^a 5 is highly-valued; 1 is not valued

associations ranked length of industry experience as the most important.

Highlights of the certification paths are summarized below:

- 1 Five out of six associations have a prescribed set of required steps.
- 2 Four associations have a specific time limit between starting and completing the certification programme. This limit ranges between half a year and four years, averaging two years.
- 3 Only one association requires certain activities as part of the certification programme – an “educational course”.
- 4 Only two associations require a minimum education background – both requiring a high-school degree.
- 5 Only two associations have more than one level of certification.
- 6 Two associations allow their members to take the exam before completing experience requirements. All the associations allow their members to take tests multiple times. Members can take the test two to three times in one year. Only one of the six associations is able to provide testing by correspondence.
- 7 Five associations recognize certification for a limited time period. This period ranges between two to five years with an average of 3.2 years. One association which recognizes certification for three years plans to change to a seven- or ten-year period.
- 8 Finally, five associations allow non-members to apply for and achieve certification.

Administration

Similar to findings in other fields (Gilley, 1985), all associations surveyed indicated that they prefer to develop, and manage their certification programmes. However, some of them are open to outside help for reviews and

critiques. Three associations reported using industry experts, certification committees, and certification advisory committees including outside experts in their review/critique process. Three of the associations reported also using outside help (professional staff, testing company, and universities) in their grading or scoring effort.

Three associations reported to have an ethical behaviour component to their certification. Of 70 associations, Gilley (1985) found that three quarters of the associations had written codes of ethics and revoked the certification of individuals whose behaviour would violate the code. Three associations in this study reported that a certificant might lose certification (and membership) following unethical or illegal behaviour.

When the associations asked to list the greatest challenges in maintaining their certification programmes, cost topped the list (Table II).

Cost of certification has always been an important issue for associations in developing and maintaining programmes. There are high costs for each area of programme development, including needs assessment, competency identification, instructional design, evaluation system development, and development of administrative policies and procedures (Morrison *et al.*, 1992). One special reason for this high cost of certification development (Gilley, 1985) is because associations work independently to establish certification programmes. This duplication of effort “increases the cost of implementing the programme, drains the organizations’ human resources, lengthens the process, increases the probability of costly mistakes, and leaves room for dissension within the organization” (p. 127).

According to the certification programme managers we surveyed, the most common reasons people chose not to be certified are:

- cost of certification;
- not required;
- fear of test taking;
- lack of value;
- having a degree; they do not feel the need.

Table II

The greatest challenges in maintaining a certification programme

- 1 Labour cost
- 2 Making the credential meaningful to current and potential certificants and their employees
- 3 Marketing the programme to members and non-members
- 4 Maintaining credibility
- 5 Getting the credential mandated
- 6 Promoting the programme

In a study carried by Muller (1993) about the purchasing profession, 25 per cent of people who prefer not to be certified remained so because their company put no value on certification; 11 per cent did so because they believe their field requires generalist management skills but not specialist skills; 6 per cent did so because the existing certification programmes are not current and 5 per cent did not have enough time.

Benefits for members and associations:

The most widely used reward for a certified person is a “Special Pin”. It is used by five of the associations surveyed for this study. Newsletters are also used as effective tools to publicize the certified people throughout the association. Other reward devices reported by the associations are:

- special dinners;
- special rates on organization seminars and conferences;
- special rates on published materials;
- recognition by the association;
- plaques and letters to employers; and
- publicity in local papers.

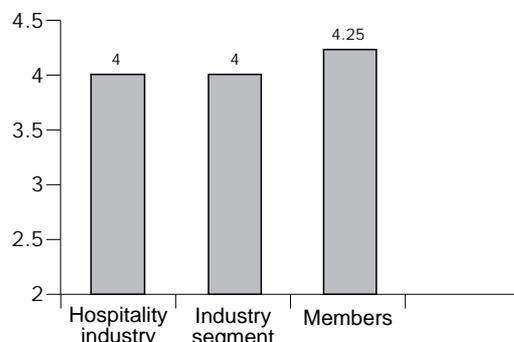
Four of the associations reported that certification assists with future promotion. This finding disagrees with Wiley (1995) who found no clear evidence of a positive relationship between certification and increased promotion opportunities.

All the associations reported individual certificants who had a pay increase after certification. One should review these claims carefully since other studies on the subject have shown mixed results. Bayley, Jackson, and Johnson (1984) found higher earnings for certified members for a group of certification programmes. However, these individuals were older and more experienced than non-certified members. When age was held constant, salary was found to have no association with certification. Eisenhart (1991), reporting on results of a study conducted by the Business/Professional Advertising Association (B/PAA) found that business marketing managers who earn the association’s Certified Business Communicator (CBC) designation earned \$52,200 on average compared with \$49,300 for non-certified B/PAA members. However, the statistical significance of this difference was not reported.

In terms of improved image, certification programmes seem to be consistently important. All the associations reported positive impact on their image after programme implementation (Figure 1).

There has been an increase in membership due to certification programmes. The increase ranged between 15 per cent to

Figure 1
Certification programmes' impact on
association's image among members, industry
segment, and hospitality industry



Note: 5-highly improved; 4-improved; 3-not changed; 2-weakened; 1-highly weakened

30 per cent with an average of 22 per cent for all the associations.

External credibility of programmes

All the associations reported that member certification is receiving increased

recognition, and that members publicize the importance of the programmes. Conversely, none reported certification as a normal requirement for hiring or keeping positions in their industry group. However, two associations' certification programmes apparently have some impact on institutional level. One of the associations reported that their certification is a legal job requirement in the government facilities of one state. Another association's certification programme is recognized such that the standards have become the base of course curricula in universities and colleges.

Future

The associations report plans to make major changes in their programmes. Redefining the eligibility and re-certification requirements, planning to expand certification programme to include sub-specialty areas, and planning additional parts to exams are common.

Concerning government influence and international involvement, all associations predict future government influence on certification programmes in areas regarding public safety. One association even foresees a major government effort to review all certification programmes for some "super approval".

Finally, we learned that given their current experience, associations will design future certification programmes to:

- utilize computerized tracking and grading;
- make increasing use of technology to reduce labour cost;
- have a balance of education and experience as eligibility requirement; and
- have more required courses.

Table III

Recommendations on developing certification programmes

Programme item	SR ^a	NR ^b	SNR ^c	Notes
Preliminary work:				within the association
skill needs assessment	✓			
survey members				
interest/goal	✓			
job profile	✓			
career path	✓			
Material/test development	✓			using an outside expert
Material/test oversight	✓			
University involvement	✓			
Government involvement		✓		
Prescribed certification steps	✓			
Specific completion time	✓			two years maximum
Association activities		✓		participant cost is an issue
Minimum education background	✓			at least high school
More than one level of certification		✓		
Exam before experience requirement completed		✓		—
Testing by correspondence	✓			
Test multiple times	✓			two-three times in one year
Limited time recognition of certification	✓			two to five years depends on profession
Certify non-members	✓			attracts membership, financial source, nice publicity
Proctor system	✓			

Note: ^a strongly recommended; ^b no recommendation; ^c strongly not recommended

Discussion

Using the experiences from the participating associations, many useful and practical recommendations about developing certification programmes can be offered (Table III).

Overall, based on the experiences of the respondents, groups planning to develop new certification programmes should not expect an easy task. In general, there are five areas of special concern:

- 1 Initial work in certification development such as needs assessment, job profile and career path development, are especially complicated issues, need careful analysis, and require more expertise than utilized to date. Expenses can be expected to far exceed projections.
- 2 Obstacles in developing and keeping the programme strong are numerous including some long-term member resistance,

and often lack of support from directors. Some members and directors view certification programmes as an extra burden without any significant contribution to the association, or do not see the programme as a responsibility of the association.

- 3 Groups planning to develop similar programmes in the future should not expect a peaceful, and supportive business environment. Any programmes which limit business practices or bear costs will be resisted by many operators.
- 4 Certification's contributions to professionals, and professions have not been strongly researched, and documented yet. As a result, programme developers should be well-prepared in selling their programmes to potential stakeholders.
- 5 Even though most of the associations do certification to benefit professions, professionals, and the hospitality industry overall, getting full respect and support will continue to be difficult.

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