The Importance of Industry Validated Certifications for Front Line Skilled Technicians

This is an important moment for industry certifications in the U.S. In an era of swelling college debt and the need by employers for specific job skills, industry certifications are enabling many more Americans to secure good-paying jobs in high-demand occupations that do not require a college degree.
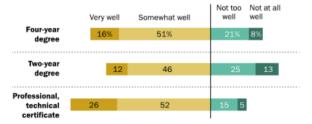
Many of these certification programs are eligible for public aid, further reducing a student's cost. Federal student aid programs can be used to cover many industrial certification programs (there are restrictions, however, and not all programs are eligible), and many states are awarding funds to high schools for each student that graduates with an industry certification.

In addition, public interest in postsecondary certifications is mounting as they become more equated in the public mind with traditional academic degrees. In a Pew Research Center report, The State of American Jobs (October 2016), 78% of respondents ranked "professional, technical certificate" above either a four-year or two-year degree in terms of how well they prepare someone for a well-paying job in today's economy.

Americans have mixed views about how well post-high school education prepares students for the workforce

In general, how well do you think a _____ prepares someone for a well-paying job in today's economy?

	Very well	Somewhat well	Not too well	Not at all well
Four-year degree	16%	51%	21%	8%
Two-year degree	12	46	25	13
Professional, technical certificate	26	52	15	5

Note: "Four-year degree," "Two-year degree" and "Professional, technical certificate" were asked of different samples. Volunteered responses of "Depends on the person/job" and "Don't know/Refused" not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 25-June 29, 2016.
"The State of American Jobs"

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Industry and the public increasingly recognize the importance of industry certifications in raising the skills of the American workforce, providing alternatives to traditional college degrees, and limiting college debt. At the same time, the quality of thousands of industrial credential programs is uneven. Among the issues: some have value only at a local level, some do not adequately teach the skills needed for the industry they are designed for, and some are not taught by qualified instructors.

On the other hand, the growing popularity of industry certifications is creating an uncontrolled proliferation of them. This has resulted in confusion over the quality and utility of many certifications, with government agencies unable to make distinctions between well-established, nationally portable industry certifications and local, regional and state "industry credentials" having little or no support from an industry or industry sector.

More rigorous standards are vital to distinguish between high quality, nationally portable, industry-wide certifications and literally thousands of those with much less value to individuals and employers.

It is important to build consensus around a common definition of quality control for industry certifications so that limited federal, state, and local resources are not wasted in supporting poor quality programs. The National Center for Supply Chain Automation (SCA) recommends certifications should be:

- accredited by a nationally-recognized third-party personnel certification accreditor; or

- used by an entire industry or sector; or

- endorsed by a nationally-recognized trade/industry association or organization representing a significant part of that industry or sector

The following characteristics to should be used to define high quality certificate programs when applying the above definition:

- Define "industry" to ensure that it only applies to industry certifications that represent an entire industry, a large industry sector or major occupation, or are consensus-based with documented industry-wide acceptance

- Choose programs that are accredited by nationally recognized, third-party accreditation bodies responsible for audits consistent with ISO 17024 (Personnel Certification)

- Focus on certifications that are based on industry-defined, nationally validated, competency-based standards developed in cooperation with a nationally-recognized trade association or other industry body

- Use certifications that have applied legally defensible validation methods, reflecting demographically representative samples of the target population

- Focus on certifications that are recognized nationwide (national portability) supported by an infrastructure able to deliver related training and assessments nationwide

- Focus on education and training programs that include "earn and learn" experiences and include attainment of industry-recognized credentials

- Choose programs that use well-qualified, experienced instructors who are themselves certified

- Focus on programs with assessments delivered under strong security safeguards