

Should strategy professionals be certified?

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Strategic planning and strategic management have long been widely regarded as more art than science and, probably for that reason, have never been codified into a body of knowledge that would lend itself to credentialing. But an analysis of what strategic planners do suggests that the process can be described and defined. In fact, strategic planners – using the tools and techniques of strategic management – conduct a process for making crucial choices about actions that play out in an uncertain, ambiguous, and ever-changing future. So, can people be trained in strategic planning and strategic management? Absolutely. Therefore, in my opinion, corporate practitioners and the leaders who rely on them have a lot to gain from supporting a training and certification program in strategic planning and strategic management that shows a significant level of expertise has been achieved.

The argument in favor of credentialing has already prevailed in other professional specialties. For example, companies and auditing firms looking for a qualified accountant make sure they hire someone with a CPA certification. Credentialing is also standard practice for project managers, civil engineers, and registered nurses. In each of these fields the credential signifies an accepted standard of knowledge and expertise in the subject, and that credential has to be maintained by continuing education.

The current argument for certification in strategic management and planning is taking place in the context of an ongoing debate within the business community as to whether “management” is a profession equivalent to the professions of medicine, engineering, and law.[1] A line of reasoning against this proposition centers on the absence of an accepted professional-certification program for credentialing professional managers. Richard Barker, a Cambridge University professor, writes in the June 2010 issue of *Harvard Business Review*[2] that “for a (certifying) professional body in any given field to function, a discrete Body of Knowledge (BOK) must be defined and boundaries must be established.”[3] Management, as a field, is probably far too broad for either of these conditions to be met any time soon.

The same is not true for specific management functions like accounting, project management, or strategic planning. Beginning in the 1950s, strategic management emerged as one of the most widely used (and often misused) terms in the business-management lexicon.[4] In the decades that followed, it was discussed, analyzed, refined, and finally emerged as an accepted business-management course taught in most universities. Though few schools offer degree programs in strategic planning or strategic management,[5] the academic community has established criteria for specific areas of management to be considered an academic discipline (Exhibit 1).[6]

Regrettably, this level of acceptance has not been translated into an agreed-upon set of definitions, best practices, and a professional credentialing program for strategic-planning practitioners. Until very recently, no professional body had developed performance standards to certify a base level of knowledge or competency level among strategic-planning practitioners. While the body of knowledge and boundary thresholds

Exhibit 1 Established criteria for becoming an academic discipline

- A body of knowledge based on scholarly inquiry and research has been established
- Peer groups have exchanged ideas and concepts, thus contributing to the development of this body of knowledge
- Appropriate research methods have been employed to validate propositions and findings
- Contributors to this body of knowledge include scholars, theorists, researchers, teachers, practitioners, consultants, and the management community
- The body of knowledge includes prescriptive, description, analytic, and research-based knowledge

posited by Richard Barker have been met by other discrete management fields, such as project management[7] and risk management,[8] the actual practice and boundaries of strategic planning have not been summarized and defined into a true body of knowledge against which professionals can be fairly tested.

Before strategic planning can become a recognized profession, an accepted set of standards for strategic-planning practitioners and a widely recognized practitioner-credentialing program must be in place. The Association for Strategic Planning, the largest organization for strategic management professionals, has been hard at work on such a program and is well on the way to creating it (see box).

The Association for Strategic Planning's (ASP) certification program

In 2008, ASP began work on assessing demand for a certification in strategic planning as well as laying the groundwork for developing one. ASP initially formed two subcommittees to carry out the initiative. The first focused on defining the body of knowledge that would form the basis for subject examinations, while the second surveyed twenty key organizations and certification processes to learn about best practices and identify potential partners.

Out of this process emerged a Body of Knowledge (BOK) centered on what strategy practitioners needed to "know" to meet the certification standard. Five foundational components make up the ASP BOK – see Exhibit 2.

ASP now offers two levels of certifications: the Strategic Planning Professional (SPP) and the more advanced Strategic Management Professional (SMP), plus a designation, the Strategic Planning Apprentice (SPA) (see Exhibit 3). In addition, ASP has approved an initial set of Registered Educational Providers (REP) that offer courses, seminars, and programs in strategic planning and strategic management consistent with ASP's BOK to individuals wishing to prepare for the certification exam.





The Professional Testing Corporation (PTC) of New York City[9] was retained to lead a team of twenty-four experienced strategic-management practitioners through a rigorous process intended to develop valid and reliable exams for each of the two levels of certification. Also, the certification team developed an application form together with a scoring matrix with which to process the applications, and scoring teams were formed to review submitted applications. Over time, further refinements will be made both to the application form and the scoring matrix. The next rounds of testing will take place in October 2010 and February 2011.

Central to achieving ASP's vision of establishing a national standard in the field of strategic planning is a continuing focus on building consensus on an ever changing BOK as new theories emerge, new research is completed, and new practitioner insights are gained. Collaboration with other strategic-management professionals, including, for example, readers of *Strategy & Leadership* and members of the Strategic Management Society[10], will be critical as the program and field evolve.

Exhibit 2 ASP Body of Knowledge components

1. Strategic Leadership – role definition and planning for change are primary jobs of leaders; at a basic level, the focus is on leading through facilitating a strategic-planning team
2. Strategic Thinking – which precedes planning
3. Strategic Planning – deciding on the right strategy for success
4. Strategic Action and Change – executing the strategy and measuring performance
5. Business Acumen – roles, ethics, and general business knowledge

Exhibit 3 ASP Certification Program

| |  |  |  |  |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Full Name | Strategic Management Professional Level II | Strategic Planning Professional Level I | Strategic Planning Apprentice | Registered Educational Provider |
| Role | Works with C-Level Executives and their Teams | Works with Executives, Managers, and their Teams | Becoming a professional as a student or in an apprentice role or just transferring to a Planning Department | Instructional Leader for Strategic Planning Materials |
| Eligibility Requirements | 5 years (minimum) as an internal Executive or external Consultant leading multiple Strategic Planning assignments. College Graduate or 10 years experience. Obtained SPP Certification | 2 years (minimum) in an internal planning role or junior external Planning Consultant. College Graduate or 5 years of work experience | Last year in a degreed program (undergraduate or graduate), or someone starting out in Planning transferring from another discipline. Must agree to sit for SPP within 3 years. <i>No experience in planning or business acumen required</i> | Yearly Qualification of REPs. Courses use BOK materials. Lead instructors must qualify also |

To realize its goals, ASP believes three important criteria must be met:

1. Establish a common framework, language, and operational process on which a refined BOK can be debated, refined, or reshaped and then improved again and again. Every effort is being made by ASP to create a base framework, boundary definitions, and certification program, which, together, serve as a starting point for this journey.
2. Clarify not only on what certified strategy professionals need to “know,” but also what they actually must be able to “do.”
3. Obtain acceptance by the academic and management communities across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

ASP's vision for its certification program includes achieving the following outcomes:

- A continuously improving system that works efficiently to fairly evaluate a strategic-planning professional's knowledge and skill level against a reasonable and recognized standard.
- Effective professional education and training programs are reasonably accessible and affordable to anyone seeking help in preparing to take the certification exam.
- Large organizations routinely require that a standard credential be obtained before filling executive-level and staff-strategy positions and/or contracts for outside consulting and facilitation support.
- The Institute for Credentialing Excellence[11] and other certifying organizations recognize the ASP Certification Program as a model professional-certification program.
- Positions like Chief Planning Officer and Chief Strategy Officer are more common and have achieved broad recognition within the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.
- Because of the growing acceptance of the ASP certification program, the position of Chief Planning Officer or Chief Strategy Officer reports directly to the CEO.

ASP intends to engage a broader set of voices to build on this solid foundation. For more information about the certification programs, to get involved in developing the BOK for each level of certification, or simply to apply to become certified, please contact Terriane Reynolds, ASP Certification Coordinator, 847-578-3309, Terriane.Reynolds@rosalindfranklin.edu

Notes

1. Podolny, Joel, "The buck stops (and starts) at business school," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2009.

"An occupation earns the right to be a profession only when some ideals, such as being impartial counsel, doing no harm, or serving the greatest good, are infused into the conduct of people in that occupation."

Khurana, Rakesh and Nitin Nohria. "It's time to make management a true profession," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2008.

"True professions have codes of conduct, and the meaning and consequences of those codes are taught as part of the formal education of their members." Yet they wrote, "unlike doctors and lawyers," managers do not "adhere to a universal and enforceable code of conduct."

2. Barker, Richard, "The big idea: no, management is not a profession," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2010.
3. Barker, Richard, op. cit.
4. Rollinson, Randall and Earl Young, *Strategy in the 21st Century*, p. 1, Looking Glass Publishing, 2010.
5. ASP Certification Program Project – <http://www.strategyplus.org/>

The following organizations were identified by Core Project Team Members and Extended Team Members. The goal was to consider what was being taught about strategic planning and strategic management in 2008-09 at leading institutions.

Companies, associations and educational institutions interviewed for the planning body of knowledge and best practices in certifications included:

- Academy of Competitive Intelligence.
- American Management Association – Strategic Alliance Management Certification.
- Association of Professionals in Business Management.
- Balanced Scorecard Institute/A Strategic Management Group Company
- Cornell University – Certification in Strategic Management.
- Design Build Institute of America (DBIA) Designation.
- Haines Centre for Strategic Management Gold Mastery.
- IMC/CMC.
- INSEAD Blue Ocean Strategy Institute.
- MIT Sloan Executive Certification – Strategy & Innovation.
- Northwestern University – Kellogg School of Management.
- Project Management Institute (PMI).
- Professional Pricing Society.com.
- Stanford University – Strategic Planning Certificates.
- Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) Association.
- UCLA Technical Management Program.
- University of Calgary – Strategic Management Certification.
- University of Michigan.
- University of San Francisco – MSPMGT Program.
- University of Virginia/Darden School of Business.
- US Green Building Council/LEED.

6. Rollinson, Randall and Earl Young, op. cit.
7. PMBOK, *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 4th edition, Project Management Institute, 2008.
8. Greenfield, Jeremy, "Risk managers get certified," *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2010.
9. Professional Testing Corporation (PTC) founded in 1983, provides professional organizations of all sizes with quality psychometric services. Since 1983, PTC has expanded its range of services to include the following: <http://www.proftesting.com/>

- National Certification and Licensure Testing Program Development.
 - National and International Test Administration.
 - Self-Assessment Test Development and Administration.
 - Survey and Questionnaire Development and Administration.
 - Statistical Analysis and Reporting Services.
 - Psychometric Consulting Association/Board Management.
10. The Strategic Management Society has also launched an initiative to design a certification program as a means of fostering the objectives of the SMS. <http://strategicmanagement.net/pdfs/NEWSLETTER2010S.pdf>
11. The Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) advances credentialing through education, standards, research, and advocacy to ensure competence across professions and occupations. www.credentialingexcellence.org

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