Training Alignment Team:
General recommendations on certification

Executive Summary

Scope

In July, 2009, the Training Alignment Team's (TAT) sponsors expressed their interest in exploring the possibility of MIT-sponsored certification for MIT employees, explaining that the Audit Committee had recently communicated their desire for MIT to offer certification in sponsored research administration. Following this discussion, TAT identified certification as a strategic goal and defined the scope of its work as developing a menu of options for how to implement certification at MIT.

Methodology

The common interest in certification expressed by the TAT sponsors and the Audit Committee resulted in the formation of three separate teams looking at different facets of introducing certification programs at MIT:

- *TAT sub-team* – primary goal to develop the menu of options for business areas interested in implementing certifications

- *RACC sub-team* – primary goal to develop recommendations for key features of a certification program in sponsored research administration at MIT

- *Leader to Leader (L2L) project team* – primary goal to investigate cultural implications of certification at MIT

TAT formed a sub-team to work toward the goal of developing the menu of options for business areas interested in implementing certifications. We began by researching existing professional certifications across different disciplines, both nationally and internationally. Through this research, we realized that many organizations define certification quite differently. We therefore focused our early work on understanding different definitions of certification and the ways in which organizations implement and sustain certification. After much discussion and analysis, TAT reached consensus on a recommended definition of certification focused on improving employee performance.

Concurrent to the TAT sub-team's work, the Research Administration Coordinating Committee (RACC) was developing recommendations for key features of a certification program in sponsored research administration at MIT. The TAT sub-team met with the RACC sub-team to share what each had learned and to clarify our respective roles and responsibilities. John Roberts, Manager of Training and Communications in OSP, was a member of both sub-teams and played a critical role as the liaison between the two teams. Similarly, in March 2010, a Leader to Leader (L2L) project team began its work to investigate cultural implications of certification at MIT. The TAT sub-team met with them once, as key stakeholders of their work, during their six-month project.

Based on TAT's recommended definition of certification and informed by its collaboration with the other two teams, the TAT sub-team then established guidelines (attached) that any stakeholder group at MIT would follow to design a certification program. Our expectation is

that such a stakeholder group would design and develop such a program in consultation with TAT.

Recommendations

Our recommendations below represent key considerations that we believe should be in place for MIT to implement employee certification effectively. We encourage you to review the attached guidelines and options to get a more comprehensive perspective on the variables underpinning our recommendations.

Certification should represent proficiency. Many organizations have certification programs that are essentially training programs. TAT believes that attending training alone cannot ensure proficiency. For MIT to move towards the goal of excellence in work performance, certification should be a trusted indication that an individual has demonstrated both skills and knowledge, as measured against agreed-upon standards, for performing specific work at MIT.

Certification should be a means of equipping people for excellence in their roles. Certification at MIT will have a beneficial impact if it is implemented as a career development opportunity, not remediation or a mechanism to identify poor performers. Any efforts to remediate or identify poor performance should occur through a stronger system of performance management, not through a certification program.

There is no one formula for what certification should look like. There are many variables to consider when developing a certification program. For this reason, we explicitly present our work as guidelines and a menu of options, not as a formula. Groups that are interested in certification would get the greatest benefit by working with TAT to apply these guidelines and options in their particular setting.

Certification requires explicit leadership and accountability. We believe strongly that those senior leaders accountable for a particular area of work at the Institute must provide visible leadership for any certification program in their area(s). Without this leadership and accountability, a certification program will likely be ineffective.

Readiness for change is a crucial consideration. We did not address whether MIT is ready for any particular certification. We are acutely aware that for certification to succeed and have a lasting effect, the key constituencies and leaders who would establish a certification must determine whether MIT is able to manage the practical and cultural changes that certification may require.

Guidelines and Options for Certification at MIT

Guiding Principles

The **purpose** of providing certification at MIT is to:

- Set objective standards for work performance
- Certify that a defined group of people are capable of consistently performing their work at the level of those standards
- Ultimately result in improved individual and organizational performance

While other organizations set other forms of standards, a certification worthy of MIT will require candidates to **demonstrate proficiency** in a defined area of knowledge, skill, and ability. This ensures that those who are certified have proven they are capable of carrying out the work in that area.

Certification implies that some form of **learning** takes place to prepare to be certified.

A group of committed individuals must establish and maintain the standards, evaluations, and, at a minimum oversee the ongoing operation of certification activities. This is the **certification body**.

Certification implies a process of **recertification** to renew certified individuals' learning and give them the opportunity to show that their knowledge, skills, and ability are current by demonstrating proficiency.

Goal	Audience	Standards	Learning	Evaluation	Sustaining
What will certification accomplish for MIT?	Who is eligible to be certified?	What should certified individuals be able to do?	What forms of learning will best prepare eligible candidates?	What is the best way to evaluate skills and knowledge?	What is required to keep this certification operating as intended?

Considerations and options

• What would be different?	• MIT staff with specific responsibilities	• Critical tasks	• MIT training	• Work performance with evaluation	• Resources
• Benefits to individuals?	• MIT staff with related responsibilities and/or experience	• Frequency	• External training	• Simulation of work performance with evaluation	• Systems
• Benefits to the organization?	• MIT staff who demonstrate potential	• Margin for error	• Advanced degree	• Ongoing coaching with evaluation	• Content Expertise
	• Any MIT staff, regardless of role	• Desired level of performance	• Licensure	• Successful completion of test	• Leadership and Ownership
			• Develop-mental experience		• Communication
			• Involvement in professional association		

Goal

What is the goal of certification?

Clarify and build alignment around **the desired impact of certification** answers the question, "Why should MIT invest in certifying staff?"

- What will be different at MIT after individuals are certified?
- What will be different for people who become certified?
    - What will they do differently?
    - How will the way they work be different after certification?
    - How will the responsibilities they carry out be different?
- What are the benefits of certification to those who accomplish it?
- If certification is part of a solution to a perceived problem, what is the simplest and clearest statement of the problem? How will certification contribute to the solution?

Who is eligible to be certified?

Error! Reference source not found.	Reasons to select this option	Drawbacks and risks to consider	Implementation and Resource Considerations	Examples
MIT staff in a role with responsibilities clearly related to area of certification.	Focuses on improving performance of people currently in a role, potentially reducing risk to the organization	People in this audience may feel that their time is not well used because they consider themselves to already meet the standards of certification	Ease of implementation depends on carrot/stick question (mandatory or voluntary)	Staff who manage projects of a defined scope would be eligible for MIT Project Management certification.

EHS Coordinator would be eligible for EHS Coordinator certification |
| MIT staff who don't currently have targeted role but demonstrate potential to grow into role | Addresses MIT's interests in talent management and individuals' interest in career development

. | New skills acquired during certification would potentially not be exercised on the job for a period of time. | Potential that certified individual would most likely need to be re-certified when s/he steps into role (because of time lapse)

Requires developing objective standards that define "potential to grow" | FO who aspires to become an AO.

Business Analyst who wants to be a Project Manager.

Administrative assistant may choose a financial certification (hypothetical) with the goal of becoming a Fiscal Officer. |
| Staff who have relevant experience outside of MIT | Recognizes value/quality of external experience.

May attract job seekers to MIT by validating their experience and offering career advancement at MIT. | Non-MIT experience may not be relevant in the MIT context.

May negatively affect the perception of MIT certification if the outside experience is perceived to be valued more than MIT experience. | Requires establishing a consistent, objective measure of the quality of non-MIT experience.

. | A new hire who comes to MIT with Project Management experience earned elsewhere is eligible for MIT Project Management certification

A person who has been a Research Administrator for a minimum amount of time at another institution comes to MIT and is eligible for MIT certification |

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Staff who are nominated by "credible expert" in area of certification	Integrates with managers' development planning by identifying talented people. Could help retention and engagement by recognizing staff who are capable and make a contribution to MIT Receiving a nomination for certification could be perceived as recognition for successful performance	If nominated candidates do not want to be certified, they may feel pressure to pursue certification if nominated	Requires a group that will define a nomination process and evaluate nominated candidates Would work best if managers had ongoing performance discussion with potential candidates, focusing on their development goals	Assistant Deans nominate capable, willing candidates for research administration certification. Lab Director recommends a technician for EHS coordinator certification. A nomination committee seeks out and suggests candidates who have demonstrated capability.
Staff who demonstrate skills and/or knowledge at the level needed to pursue certification.	Establishes a minimum standard for knowledge and skills among candidates.	Test or assessment may be subjective, or perceived as a poor representation of real world knowledge and skills. Creating a test or assessment that evaluates skills, decision-making, and other behavioral competencies requires significant development and rigorous validation.	Creating and maintaining objective testing and simulations are resource intensive, especially as qualifications evolve	Staff who complete all modules of StarWeb and achieve a score of 85 percent or higher are now eligible for certification. Staff who manage projects successfully are now eligible for Advanced Project Management certification.
Staff who, with other staff from their department, form a departmental "certification team"	Encourages teamwork and cross-functional work		Requires teamwork, communication and open, trusting environment	An Administrative Assistant, Fiscal Officer, and AO earn Research Administration Certification for their department

Standards

What is the role of standards?

- The purpose of setting standards is to establish a set of criteria in order to know if someone is proficient or not.

- Because certification is an independent standard of knowledge and skills that relate to a job or profession, certification standards are best expressed as objective descriptions of those who perform at the highest level.

- To establish standards, consider and discuss these general questions.

- Identify and reflect on one or two people are outstanding at carrying out work encompassed in the envisioned certification:

- What critical tasks do they do?

- How frequently they perform these tasks?

- What is the margin for error? How frequently do the best of the best make those errors?

- How can the level of their work be observed directly? Is it possible to observe it indirectly, though results, data, or other reporting?

What different learning experiences could prepare people to develop proficiency?

Error! Reference source not found.	Reasons to select this option	Drawbacks and risks to consider	Implementation and Resource Considerations	Examples
Training courses offered by MIT training providers	Curriculum focuses on MIT-specific needs. We can ensure that the content and skill development will be closely tied to MIT priorities High probability that training will be useful from a career development standpoint (e.g., transferable to other internal organizations).	Developing new custom courses can be resource-intensive	Developing custom courses is a specialized skill set and requires instructional designer expertise. Requires availability of instructors, subject matter experts, and technology Certain offerings may require the purchase of technology products	SPA program Essentials of Managing STARweb COEUS Premium SAPgui: Reporting
Training offered by an external professional organization	No internal costs associated with developing curriculum. Professional organizations brings instant credibility and peer recognition Allows for jump starting the overall certification process External training will expose attendees to other organizations, thus broadening their experience and providing career development opportunities outside of MIT	The curriculum is not specific to MIT Requires ensuring the credibility and viability of external organization	No internal costs associated with developing and delivering training Although tuition assistance could be leveraged to cover some costs, individuals or MIT may also incur some costs External programs will require translating the content to MIT Requires ongoing research and review of acceptable training While sustainability is not MIT's responsibility, the course may not be sustained by the external provider	Project Management Professional (PMP) certification National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) training Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) certification Microsoft certification

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Advanced degree from accredited institution in relevant field	Formal degrees typically provide strong theoretical foundation that cannot be replicated by simply taking a collection of training classes	Requires ensuring the credibility, rigor and relevance of the degree. Theoretical knowledge doesn't always translate into practitioner proficiency. Formal degree programs may not exist for a particular field/profession	The expense is typically the responsibility of the individual. Tuition assistance could potentially be used to offset a portion of the costs. Requires ongoing research and review of acceptable training While sustainability is not MIT's responsibility, the course may not be sustained by the external provider	MBA Master of Information Systems Masters in Training and Development
Professional license	Ensures a level of proficiency, particularly if the work involves danger or risk to the Institute	Licensure outside of US/Mass may not transfer to Mass/MIT and might require re-licensing Relevant licenses may not exist	Typically requires fees associated with obtaining and maintaining a license. Requires ongoing research and review of acceptable licensure Because of legal oversight involved in licensure, and the fact that we aren't dependent on one external organization, this could be a highly sustainable option	CPA Pilot's license (as at Lincoln) Forklift driver LSW Legal/State bar
Development opportunity tailored to the individual	Brings the learning out of the classroom and closer to real work, ideally providing realistic opportunity to develop skills for the role	Management and/or organizational changes may leave people feeling stranded and at risk	Requires identifying and generating development activities (e.g., credentialing body, manager of individual, etc.) Significant managerial responsibility in overseeing development activity Depending on the length and commitment of the tailored opportunity, may require backfill for existing role.	Internship with different functional area Successfully mentoring a junior person in the role Selected to serve as subject matter expert for training program Consulting to an outside organization and bringing back learnings to MIT

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Service to the profession by taking a leadership role in recognized, credible professional organization	Gives MIT visibility as a leader in the field Broadens the candidates' experience through exposure to other organizations.	Real limitations in accurately assessing proficiency	Candidate may incur travel expenses based on location of organization Requires candidates' discretionary time and effort	Presenting at a conference Leading a community of practitioners Organizing IT Partners or HR Partners events

How can you determine if someone is proficient?

Evaluation	Reasons to select this option	Drawbacks and risks to consider	Implementation and resource considerations	Examples
Evaluated Work Performance (a qualified, credible professional evaluates the candidate performing the role in actual, work-based environment)	Provides the truest assessment of proficiency in actual role	Evaluations have the potential to be highly subjective depending on the evaluator(s) Based on organizational constraints, individuals may not have the opportunity to demonstrate the skills in an actual role	Requires development of quantifiable tool(s) to evaluate performance Requires qualified, credible evaluators Requires educating evaluator(s) to use the tools effectively	Manager/ Assistant Dean/Center Director evaluates individual's performance in administrating sponsored project(s) from proposal to close-out Safety Officer/EHS Deputy Director evaluates EHS Coordinator's performance in consistently following specified safety procedures
Evaluation of Simulated Performance	When a high degree of proficiency is desired before individual performs role in real life (e.g., the task involves a high level of risk, is expensive or difficult to re-do if work is done inaccurately) Once the simulated environment has been established, it is easily accessible (e.g., could be used to grandfather individuals who have demonstrated proficiency). Provides objective evaluation and allows for consistent measurement across candidates.	Creating and maintain a simulated environment is expensive and time consuming and requires a specialized level of expertise.	Requires qualified, credible evaluator(s). Requires quantifiable tools and simulation environment for evaluator(s) to measure proficiency Requires educating the evaluator(s) to use the tools and simulation environment effectively	Assessment Center has responsibility for evaluating individual's performance in specified tasks and providing summary report

How could a person who is certified re-certify?

	Reasons to select this option	Drawbacks and risks to consider	Implementation and resource considerations	Examples
Testing		This is a demonstration of knowledge, rather than a demonstration of proficiency		Candidates, who have previously received certification, can become recertified by taking an approved test.
Continuing Education		Ensuring that these programs are consistent with the MIT bar for certification.	Requires validation of the requested option	Viewing a webinair sponsored by Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to earn recertification credits Candidates can obtain credit needed toward recertification by attending and completing an approved continuing education course
Be a Mentor or Coach	Ensures a continuous pool of certification candidates	Difficult to measure the value of the coach/mentor	Identifying qualified coaches/mentors and determining the success criteria. Successful coaching/mentoring programs take time to define, implement, and maintain	Candidates can obtain credit needed toward recertification by successfully coaching and mentoring less experienced candidates for certification.

What needs to be in place to sustain certification?

We caution any stakeholder group that is exploring certification not to underestimate the resources involved in sustaining a certification program. While the design decisions would impact the necessary level of investment, a certification program would involve, at a minimum:

Resources

To be effective, a certification program involves time from:

- Learners
- A certification body (individuals and/or group that has responsibility for the area of certification)
- Learning and development professionals
- Technology professionals
- Content experts

Systems

- Without integration with existing data, a stand-alone tracking mechanism would limit the potential of certification to impact the organization

- Many elements of certification could be integrated in SAP Enterprise Learning and future SAP talent management modules

Content expertise

- Close involvement of content experts is critical to ensure that the certification is grounded in business realities

Leadership and accountability

- Who, ultimately, has accountability at the Institute for the area of work considered for certification? Is this individual or group ready to take on leadership role?

Communication

- Risk of perception that certification is a means of remediation or means of identifying low performers
- Managing the community's expectations and perceptions is critical