

KM Competencies: Is Certification the Way to Go?

By Patrick Lambe

How does a knowledge manager acquire the appropriate competencies in a professional, structured way? Knowledge management novices often look to certification programmes to give the necessary assurance, and there is no shortage of providers to step up to the mark. But to evaluate the merits of certification programmes, we really need to have a clearer understanding of the competencies we want to build.

Angela Abell and Nigel Oxbrow from the UK firm TFPL conducted a study of the competencies required from knowledge and information professionals a few years ago, commissioned by the UK Library Association. Their report was subsequently published in book form under the title "Competing with Knowledge: the information professional in the knowledge age" (Library Association Publishing 2001)

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1856043398/qid=1123736696/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/104-1104699-5487955?v=glance&s=books

They ended up mapping 16 competency groups, ranging from information mapping, business process analysis, to interpersonal skills and team working, and technology understanding. For anyone familiar with competency mapping for job profiles, 16 groups is far too diverse for any single job, and Abell and Oxbrow themselves map the competency proficiency expectations for three different classes of knowledge professional: the strategic planning team member, the project implementation team member, and the knowledge practitioner. KM is not a single job role, but a cluster of jobs.

It seems clear then that a short certification programme couldn't possibly cover all the competencies required for knowledge management. Nor would you want it to. KM is too diverse a field, where you can play any number of roles, depending on the stage of maturity of the organisation, the nature of its business, and factors like size, resources, business environment, and internal/external constraints. KM as a profession and as a practice is a team-based discipline rather than an expert practitioner discipline, so no single professional is likely to embody all of the competencies required for effective practice.

So why do people want certification?

Well, I guess there are a number of possible reasons. These are the obvious ones:

- Novices would like a quick and reliable grounding in general awareness and core concepts
- Practitioners would like to have their own practice validated against professional standards and commonly agreed approaches
- Practitioners see career opportunities from acquiring professional recognition embodied in a certification process
- Consultants would like a qualification that gives them a competitive selling edge

What would you expect to see in a professional certification programme?

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In the HR literature "competencies" are usually unpacked into knowledge, skills, and other work related attributes, such as attitudes and values (including the ethical dimensions of practice), and sometimes aptitudes (ability to learn adaptively and pick up particular skills or knowledge quickly).

It follows that a "strong" certification programme would need a diverse instructional and testing model:

KNOWLEDGE: taught input and verbal testing (ie describe the difference between a knowledge strategy and a knowledge management strategy)

SKILLS: demonstration, supervised practice and outcomes based testing (ie put together a project plan for a knowledge audit; conduct an after action review session for a project team)

ATTITUDES AND VALUES: cannot be taught or tested, can only be modelled and observed in an environment of continuing professional interaction and peer review

APTITUDES: cannot be taught, can only be uncovered and fostered over time, most likely in a mentoring/coaching kind of partnership

So if a good KM certification programme did exist (let's say for more manageable competency groups as sub-practices within KM), it would need to have the following features:

- taught and examined knowledge input
- guided and assessed practice
- continuing professional interaction and peer review over time
- mentoring and coaching structures

Professional societies or networks are clearly the best candidates for providing this combination of features: as good as universities are, few of them are well placed to develop and deliver the practice based skills and professional interaction areas. The problem with professional societies in KM is that they are mostly run on a voluntary basis, and the ability to put together a strong curriculum and coach people through it, does require significant investment - in the available talent as well as money to pay for it. Membership dues will only pay for this if you have a very large membership base (as, for example, the American Society for Training and Development does, or the IEEE for engineers).

This is why, some societies (especially in the US) have contracted commercial providers to deliver these services for them. The problem with commercial providers is that they need to be profitable and make money. You only really make money in this space through the workshops (ie the knowledge component) - the practice and professional interaction elements (skills, values and aptitudes) are decidedly non-commercial and very labour intensive. Some vendors say that they offer this element, but in my experience, there's more talk than substance in this part of the deal. Moreover, there is a strong economic incentive to gloss over the testing component (you want people to feel successful, so you go easy on testing whether or not they have "got it"). Even if there is testing, it's only of the knowledge component, not the skills or other attributes required.

Testing is easy to gloss over in this scenario, because if the vendor operates under the umbrella of a professional society, they can let people assume that the testing and validation of candidates knowledge is "covered" by the professional society. In fact, to my knowledge (and I've explored this in some depth), supervision and accountability for testing

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of people's knowledge and skills in these programmes and for according certification, is typically opaque. Where you would expect to see an active review board and a range of delivering and assessing professionals, you normally see one or two self declared experts and a nominal and largely uninfluential review board (if at all).

So as far as the professional dimension of certification is concerned, of people's possible expectations from certification that we covered above, only the novice is likely to be satisfied - they might well get a reasonable introductory overview of KM and what's involved (weak certification), but they will get no real professional value from the commercial-type programmes (strong certification).

The commercial approach also has other, less attractive consequences - competition for candidates and revenue by up-playing the validity of your brand of KM certification, versus the brands sold by other certification vendors. In the US this has damaged the credibility of several KM organisations, with all sorts of nasty lawsuits or threat of lawsuits, accusations and schisms. Some of these organisations are still actively seeking to grow their presence in Australia and Asia Pacific.

This whole mix of reasons is why the Information Knowledge Management Society of Singapore, the Hong Kong Knowledge Management Society, and the Knowledge Management Association of the Philippines all agreed in principle at a conference in Singapore last year, that certification and training courses in KM that they support or deliver, be not-for-profit, and non-commercial in nature. The profession itself is too easily brought into disrepute by the incentives of commercial gain... or so history has taught us so far.

There is a final problem with certification in KM, and this is extremely well stated in Joe Firestone's article at http://www.kmci.org/media/KMCI_Position_Statement.pdf - he points out quite correctly that there is no standard, commonly accepted set of concepts, theories and practices that embody KM. Even the standards work done in the UK, Europe and Australia, is tentative at best, with standards documents pitching themselves as guides to good practice rather than definitive statements of correct approaches. The profession is still young, still in formation, and it deals with that most intangible of stuff, knowledge and how people behave around it.

So what are you being certified in? From the knowledge point of view (as distinct from skills, values and aptitudes), it's likely just one perspective among many. This is innocent enough in itself, but it is dangerous if it claims or implies that this is the only "correct" way to do it. Practitioners who submit to this view are likely to be disadvantaging themselves and their organisations by over-limiting the approaches and perspectives they employ in their KM efforts.

What then do we do?

If you are a novice, go to a few certification courses if you must (but a range of "ordinary" workshops on KM topics would probably work just as well), - just don't believe (or bank on) the propaganda about "strong" certification. You should also attend conferences, meet and talk to peers in other organisations, and if you can, join a professional KM society whose main activity focuses on bringing professionals together to share their experience.

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If you are a practitioner and you want more depth and validation of your practice, then you should either join or form a professional forum of some kind, either formal or informal. Physical ones are better than virtual ones, typically (with the honourable exception of very active ones like ACT-KM). Look for somebody to mentor you (ie locate excellent and experienced practitioners and share with them). Taking a graduate certificate or diploma course from a university is usually good value, especially if they have practitioners as well as academics on the teaching faculty.

If you want career advancement or are a consultant wanting a competitive edge, take a Master's course. Specialise in something. Do good work.

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