



Call Center Certification – What Really Makes Sense? **Maggie Klenke – The Call Center School**

Call centers have come a long way in the last five years in terms of elevating the role and stature of their operations. One contributing factor is the move to provide certification programs that can designate an individual or center as meeting a specific set of standards or having defined skills and knowledge. While some of these are only meaningful within the context of a single employer, there are others that are intended to make certification transportable so that hiring managers and potential clients can use such certifications in their recruiting strategies.

Manufacturer-specific programs are available, although they tend to concentrate on certifying operators and technicians on the technical aspects of using and/or maintaining a specific system. Some are quite broad like those from Cisco and Microsoft, while others are focused on one specific package of software. These certifications are generally accepted in the industry and serve as proof of competency for those seeking employment in companies that use the products. While there have also been broad certification programs available to all industries such as ISO 9001, now there is also a certification focused entirely on call centers.

There are several types of call center certification available today and there is a role for each of these in a call center's overall development strategy.

1. Certificate of attendance at a course or curriculum
2. Certification of an individual as competent on a body of knowledge
 - a. Training Company Certification
 - b. Industry Body Certification
 - c. Internal Company Certification
3. Certification of a call center as meeting defined standards

Most training providers have been providing some kind of “certificate of attendance” for their seminars for years. It simply indicates that the individual participated in the program and paid the fee. There is typically no test to see if the student has learned the material or can apply it in their job. Even internally provided training typically includes a certificate of attendance. The value of such a certificate is largely just an indication that someone showed up for class.

Some training companies have expanded to a multi-session offering and added a testing program so that the attendee can receive a more relevant certification that they have learned the material. Call Center University pioneered such a plan in 1997 and developed a curriculum of 10-12 courses that covered a broad spectrum of skills and knowledge needed by a call center manager. There was a comprehensive final exam and a work project requirement in which the student had to effectively apply some of the skills to their own job. A few other training companies followed suit with certification expansions of their own.



In 2001, The Call Center School began offering a 26-session web seminar series called *The Masters Series in Call Center Management* which covers both people management and operations management topics and includes a test on each session and a comprehensive final exam to achieve certification.

The Call Center Industry Advisory Council (CIAC) was formed in 1999 with the idea that an industry-wide certification would take the concept to the next level. This council, made up of a cross-section of industry leaders, has developed a broad set of objective tests, to be combined with work projects, and other assessments. This group provides no training of its own but simply serves as an independent testing and certification group. Once again, there is an objective test on a body of knowledge, work projects, and other assessments to ensure that a certified call center manager is competent in a wide range of capabilities. The first series of tests was released in 2002 and the first group of participants is working their way through the process. Several training vendors, including The Call Center School, are in the process of having their programs certified by CIAC as appropriate to prepare students for the tests.

During this push for certification, many call center organizations have decided to develop their own internal certification programs. These are often focused on specialties such as workforce management skills. For example, The Call Center School has been working with a major bank and a well-known security company to certify all of their workforce management staff on the techniques and processes of forecasting, scheduling and tracking the personnel. While there is a core body of knowledge on the subject that all call centers need, these programs are supplemented with company-specific material on their unique processes, the tools that they use, and the goals they must meet. These programs are focused on elevating the quality of the work in the discipline within the company, driving out variation among sites and personnel, and making an investment in this staff that will reduce turnover. Similar programs are underway in the area of monitoring/coaching, performance measurement, and technology management.

The last type of certification is one that is focused on the whole call center and its practices, procedures, and delivery of results. COPC is an organization that focuses on such a certification process. This has been applied in larger industrial operations such as Dell and in outsourcing providers who want to demonstrate their competencies to prospective clients. This certification does not apply to an individual but to the call center as a whole.

In summary, there has been much progress in the certification arena. There are likely to be more programs from these and other vendors as the call center moves out of the realm of a job and into the world of a profession. Pick the type of certification that makes most sense to you and your organization, but no matter what you do, additional education will enhance your skills and capabilities, and your value to your current and any future employers.