

Comments on Certification from a Private Discussion List

These posts were mostly from March – July 2002, although some date back to an earlier discussion in late 2000. The discussion thread was long and covered a wide range of topics. One of the interesting points about this discussion was its very range and how many other issues in the profession relate to certification.

The comments are roughly grouped for the convenience of the reader, but this categorization is far from rigorous.

Note: The authors of all materials quoted gave permission to include it. Most quotes are taken in full, but some have been clipped for length or to avoid including other material for which permission has not been given. Simple typos were corrected, but they are otherwise unaltered. – Whitney Quesenbery

Diversity of Skills Required and the Profession in General

Even the most qualified usability/design people have to operate in complex social environments where design decisions involve many people and groups. You could have a supremely qualified usability/UI Design person testing a product, yet end up with an unusable product because of the influence of marketing, dev constraints, QA, etc. A key skill for a usability person/UI designer is the ability to persuade others to follow good UCD processes. It helps if you have a vice president who believe in the value of usability and design, but even that isn't enough since most VPs have other issues in mind. Ideally, you want someone who is both a good evangelist as well as competent in both the practical and theoretical aspects of our profession. Moreover, we need to get usability people in positions of development and marketing managers so they can influence design more powerfully.

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I'm worried that requiring specific HCI or usability qualifications might create barriers for people to enter this fascinating and worthwhile field. I'd rather that people tried some usability approaches to their work than felt that they can't "do usability" because they don't have a specific qualification. Yes, we need to be vigilant about the way we do our work and try to disseminate good practice. I think we should be careful to distinguish experimental-quality work from the everyday "let's try to make this a bit more usable" work - which isn't brain surgery, or clinical psychology, but something much more like management where most people try it but not many have qualifications.

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Many wonderful and good interaction designers and usability engineers I've met along the way don't have Human Factors or HCI degrees. Instead, they have a brain full of curiosity, problem solving, logic, understanding of human psychology, etc. They ended up in their jobs because they were the only ones concerned about the usability of their products and used common sense and logic to solve UI issues and advocated and pushed for usability changes in the product. Along the way they started educating themselves about usability and human factors and were interested in working and talking with other people in the industry and learning new techniques, honing their skills, etc. They took the time to explore what made for good usability in a product and pushed and advocated for changes in the product, organization and process.

Lately, I've found my role being more Project Management and validating my decisions/proposed suggestions and educating Product Managers and Visual Designers about basic concepts of usability. I was an MBA student before I was an HCI grad, and lately I've been using more of my MBA classes to help me drive the usability solutions and see them implemented.

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Certification seems to be a continuance of a trend towards specialization, which runs directly counter to what I do well--which is to be a generalist, and to integrate a lot of different skill sets and knowledge areas into an overall architecture that covers both user and system perspectives. There are a *lot* of projects that are just too small to afford specialists. UPA itself is one of them (thinking of things like the online review system, one person, two months, covering everything from task analysis to database modeling back to screen and interaction design and onward to implementation).

In a broader sense, a lot of technology trends (such as the web, and what I hope will develop in wireless) are democratizing trends. Anybody can put something on the web, and they can do it quickly. How do we promote usability skills for those masses? I feel like certification is moving in the opposite direction. From this perspective, it closes off rather than opening anything up.

My personal opinion is that *all* of the alternatives you mention are far better investments for UPA than certification. Especially things like self-assessment and career guidance.

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I think that there's enough diversity in this field that people with a specific interests and background can find their niche wherever they go. I think it's very important to have the "soft skills" ... first and foremost.

Second I think it's important to build a robust and well-rounded user experience team with Usability Engineers, Interaction Designers, Visual Designer, strategic management and strong process. I'd rather higher a person who is extremely good and passionate in one area, understands UI process and works well with others in a team than someone who is a usability jack-of-all-trades, has the requisite Ph.D. and doesn't work well with others.

I've found many Ph.D.s I've worked with to be inflexible in their viewpoints, just because they have the prerequisite Ph.D. and I don't. I've also worked with and know other Ph.d's that work well with others, strategize, manage, listen and collaborate extremely well.

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Frankly, strong involvement in the requirements process is where usability practitioners can make the most impact on the success of a product. Learning a variety of methods from the software engineering, marketing, and usability domains that relate to the requirements process should be at the top of a usability practitioners list of critical skills.

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Experience v. Education

Here's why: in my experience, for certain roles in the UCD process, formal HCI training is a liability. (To be fair, for other roles it is clearly an asset.) I believe the reason for this is that much of what I know to be valuable as a practitioner had not *yet* made it across the divide into academia. We are a young discipline, and it takes time to build and disseminate a body of knowledge. (And we in industry tend to be secretive about what we know.) We're still in the process of building that body of knowledge, and I for one am deeply suspicious of any certification process that build on top of a yet-to-be-established canon.

That's the first reason I oppose certification, because as a UCD-aware hiring manager in IT, it does not serve my needs. But there's a second reason: imagine that I'm a hiring manager who thinks UCD is a bunch of hooley. (In <name's> words, I don't have a strong concept of usability.) Now, you come to me and tell me that you are certified in hooley. How does that help?

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My own 30-years-old Ph.D. (in something sort of like animal husbandry) included learning lots off facts, almost all of them not true anymore. But methods of investigation have stayed pretty much stable. In particular, I retain a pretty intense respect for the difficulty and perilousness of finding out *any* bit of truth about the real world in the face of seductive opportunities to jump to conclusions.

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Whenever I question why I went to grad school and through a certification process, I think of a scene from Jurassic Park. Basically, Jeff Goldblum states that things are bound to go awry with the dinosaurs ont he island because the practitioners did not accumulate or understand the knowledge they were using. (Apologies to real JP fans). They were standing on the shoulders of the greats.

Meaning....Let's not forget practitioners/engineers and scientists need each other. And since our job, in the end, is to translate between groups that usually do not communicate well (designers and users), we should be able to talk through the old academia/practitioner issue. Finding a common language is something at which we are supposed to excel. Let's try and practice what we preach--always the best marketing. You take it seriously, they take it seriously.

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In my experience, the most practical and quickest approach to increasing knowledge and skills as a usability professional (regardless of years experience and besides the obvious on the job performance) is a workshop, tutorial, conference, course, or self-study. And these efforts don't require years of commitment, major life changes, or significant time and dollar investments. Training in specific design and analysis techniques and developing better usability skills in the areas one enjoys, or that are needed/required in a specific job, is what will further someone's career. Additionally, seeking out mentors is crucial to any career. As a profession we can try to provide encouragement, mentoring, training, tools and so forth, but a certification program, even if it exists, is no magic pill for recognition or career success. And lack of some certification program does not keep people from becoming a part of this field, nor does it prevent success. The real debate here is whether the ROI of usability certification is great enough to warrant the time/money investment. I'm not convinced it does, either to the newcomer or the experienced professional.

As to the IT analogy, the current certification programs in the IT industry are very specific in their knowledge and application. I don't believe usability can be shoe-horned into the same type of certification program. Usability is broad. Current popular IT certifications focus on specific operating systems/applications (Microsoft) or hardware (Cisco routers) for example. There is a demand for this kind of specific knowledge. There is no parallel demand for validation of general usability knowledge. That could indeed change but it doesn't

exist at the moment. If anything, our field is filled with lots of "roles" and certification of the various roles such as designer, tester, analyst might be a better way to begin thinking of certification possibilities.

I personally love the work I do and the usability field. When I discovered it, it felt right. I think it is a great field and will only get better! I have never been made to feel like an outsider for any reason. In fact, many colleagues have commented just how inclusive this field is compared to others. Over ten years ago I took a career leap of faith and decided on usability rather than pure computer science. And at every step during my usability career, people have been helpful -- from bosses, to peers, to colleagues -- I have received good advice, training and mentoring. Obviously I've encountered my share of jerks and stumbling blocks along the way, but overall I am very satisfied with my career choice and the usability profession. And without sounding too arrogant, I have been very successful without a "human factors" degree or usability certification program. And I am by no means one data point.

There are many, many good people in this field who want to see the field increase/expand in importance and recognition of our contributions; and that means increasing the demand for usability professionals, which of course means bringing in new usability professionals. The idea that this is some academic/practitioner debate is incorrect IMHO. Additionally, I don't believe the usability profession is trying to be, or in danger of, turning into some aristocracy.

...We may have our differences from time to time, but we are all on the same side, the side of usability.

Personal Value

I can know I am fully competent to provide the service and work required, but, how can/do I convince others of this fact? My answer - Certification!

Obviously, I can't (nor do I presume to) speak for any specific employers concerning whether they consider a human factors degree or a usability certificate most important for their needs. But, I have consulted out my expertise, and believe me, the buyer wants to know if you can do the work. Can you use Word, can you use CorelDraw, QuarkXpress, Flash, Dreamweaver, code html, ASP, Javascript, etc. Certifications in these, regardless of a university degree, was by far what I found most desired and accepted. Why? Because the certificates said I had **relevant** training/experience.

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As another "old fart" who is a CPE with the HFES, I have to agree 100% with Daryle and others. Certification might be a nice notch in the belt for someone just getting started - but I can't believe there are that many people outside the usability profession that even know you are wearing a belt.... Nor have I seen that the \$\$\$\$ spent on my CPE have bought me anything (fortunately - all \$ so far have come from corporate support - I wouldn't pay a nickel for it).

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Professional Value

We're still a paper-based society in the sense that the majority of us will accept a certificate as proof that the individual was exposed to core competencies and understood them in the context delivered. But whether certification can influence the hiring decision will depend on two things:

- 1) What the employer needs--for example, someone whose skills are very up-to-date; someone less expensive to hire and more moldable to the job; someone with a long and proven experience record who can "hit the ground running"; someone to develop and enforce usability standards and methodologies; someone with new ideas, less ensconced in the old way of doing things... this list could go on. You get the idea.
- 2) The employer's hiring practices--some employers prefer certifications, others do not. It's not predictable. People entering the job market might do well to contact the HR department of a prospective employer to find out what resume criteria (content, format) they look for.

<Name> suggests that managers only use references to get information on performance in usability skills. As a former bench manager for a computer consulting firm, I disagree. In the expansive, and expensive, chore of weeding through candidates, references are not the most useful early identification tool. It's much more work for a prospective employer to sit down and call lists of references than it is to see a list of credits and qualifications including certification. (Our clients actually preferred to see test scores along with certification and education backgrounds, especially for personnel who had logged less experience in the specific skill.)

Certifications demonstrate initiative, professional growth, career focus, and willingness to learn. Dated certifications can be updated much more easily than a university degree can. Recertification as the industry grows is as important and respectable as other forms of continuing education. On the downside, setting up new certification (standard, curriculum, administration, marketing strategy, review board, etc.) is an enormous undertaking.

Technical communicators are going through the same growing pains, as the Society for Technical Communications (<http://www.stc.org>) can attest. I suspect that every existing certification has been through this process, beginning with the question as to whether certification is needed, and ending with a good rule of standards and practices.

BTW: College degrees are subject to the same credibility risks as certifications.. especially with the onslaught of online degree programs now available.

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Personally, I'm really, strongly against certification. My impression of certification in the IT industry has been that it's a substitute for experience, and a weak substitute at that. If you have to fight against this perception, it's a losing battle, and one that isn't going to gain the respect that usability sorely needs. In particular, this impression of certification seems to be especially strong in areas that are often cited as strong proof of certification, the Microsoft and Cisco certification programs. Managers looking for those skill areas are looking for experience and references; if certification is the high point on someone's resume, it basically says that there are no skills to back it up.

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I also agree with your assessment... "Once the IT industry gets a stronger hold of the concept, you can bet they will be looking for certification." In addition, what do doctors, chimney sweeps, plumbers, psychologists, lawyers, police officers, EMTs, automotive service technicians (mechanics), firefighters, architects, surveyors, home inspectors, IT professionals, and on and on have in common? They all require a "certification" (degree, diploma, certificate) as a "confirmation" of their ability i.e. knowledge and skill, and at least some of the above can be "practiced" w/o any certification. However, most of us would choose to have the certified individual perform the work or service we require.

Certification is simply a confirmation of individual competence within a specified field and serves to provide a sense of security to employers (and contractors) about an individual. Deciding upon the specific qualifications for certification and the means to determine individual competency is the difficult part of this discussion. How or by what means "we" acquire the knowledge should be left up to the individual.

Those long-time practitioners of usability should indeed step up and provide guidance and insight, as well as knowledge to those on this committee who are attempting to perform this service for the rest of us. You will certainly be helping all those who are working in usability and you will be solidifying the credibility our profession needs.

We don't need an aristocracy. We do need mentors.

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I am curious at the vast number of nay-sayers. The more certifications the better in my company's eyes (a government contractor). Every person in my office has certification of some kind, whether professional or software based. It is expected. I have been a technical writer and editor for 17 years and have been learning usability all the while. The IT industry job search is tough right now and the professional with the experience, the education, AND the certification will get the job first.

I hold 3 university based certifications and will be taking my first software based one soon (Technical Writing, Professional Writing, Technical Editing; RoboHelp2002). My company uses this fact in combination with the variety of MCSE, etc. certificates of my developer coworkers (many of whom are very interested in usability) to gain us contracts. How does it look to a hiring group to see resume after resume of certified people and one without? "You say you need a usability person, couldn't you find one as experienced as your developers? Everyone else has certs." (This is an actual quote from a contracting officer who was questioning the hiring of a usability specialist for another contract). A sensible and standardized usability certificate should certainly not be a detriment to anyone's value.

Customer's who fear increased costs due to certification don't sound like customers who understand usability in the first place and are assuming it is simple (and yet there are Microsoft Word certifications!).

I consider it a notch in my belt, a part of my experience, and another way to prove my talent. I would look forward to the challenge and the reward.

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ROI and Perceived Value

IMHO, a company that tries to sell it's products by claiming it was "designed by a certified usability analyst" is not filling to sell the product on it's merit or the on it's fit with the customer. A good UI is transparent - that includes advertising who the designers were.

While I agree there are a number of people claiming to be usability experts without sufficient knowledge of the field, there are just as many who would have all the learning and still not be able to apply it well. The proper approach is to educate management as to what usability is and how it is done. Hiding behind a certificate is not the way to do it.

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Unlike usability, these are fields in which the ordinary citizen can be expected, on multiple occasions, to choose and pay for a professional in a high-stakes situation.

That's not to say that certification is good or bad, just that certification movements in those fields probably benefited from a feeling in the general populace that you didn't want to mess around with these things.

What about fields where the average Joe doesn't typically hire a professional directly -- say, structural engineering? In that case, most people have an automatic understanding of the threat of a badly made building. And sure enough, in that field, you have to get a license.

Usability seems unlikely to prompt the same regard among the masses, until they get a lot more sophisticated about design than I think they ever will. If certification comes to this field, it will be because professional associates demand it.

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As a field we have failed to adequately communicate our impact on the bottom line to corporate management, i.e. they still don't know what their ROI is for HF/UCD involvement in product development. I give tons of respect and credit to those who have mastered this challenge and are trying to educate the rest of us (thank you Bias, and Mayhew), but by and large most of the work that goes on in our field is subjective, vague, or "unquantifiable" enough that higher-ups continue to put it on the "nice to have" list instead of the "must have" list. We have got to make it a priority to get the data we need to make our case, and to present it convincingly to decision makers. This list keeps revisiting the idea of why other fields don't have to prove themselves over and over again like we do. It's because they already know what happens to the bottom line when their part of the process is shortchanged. We just haven't finished our homework yet. Someday in the future when enough folks have done the analyses and the data-supported evangelizing perhaps everyone will get it and our jobs will be secure.

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Certification in Other Fields

I think there's an interesting parallel to accounting, which has certification, standards, and licensing. ... Much of the downfall of accounting and auditing, and particularly with regard to Arthur Anderson, has been a failure of certification and standards to set and enforce a minimum set of skills and behaviors (whether in terms of ethics, or disclosure, or accuracy, or anything else). Several of the more effective reforms that have been proposed would function by removing control from the profession over its own standards and ethics. While the history of that failure is pretty fascinating, I think there's a strongly relevant question here about the degree to which either certification or standards automatically confers respect on either individuals or a profession. Accounting has failed itself miserably, and publicly, and I don't think that lesson is going to be forgotten by the public.

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I've been reading with interest the whole thread dealing with certification, and it reminds me greatly of what happened in the medical profession in the US at the beginning of the 20th century. There are some interesting lessons to be learned.

In the first decade of the 20th century, it could be downright dangerous to go to a doctor in the US--although there were about 150 "medical schools," many were diploma mills that turned out "doctors" after they had taken two five-month courses of the same lectures, never having been inside a lab or seen examples of the diseased they were now "certified" to treat. College degrees, internships, and licensing were not required in most states. The medical profession was torn between those who wanted to improve the practice of medicine, their status, and their income and those who wanted to keep the diploma mills alive so that the "poor boy" could rise in the world by becoming a doctor.

In 1910, the Carnegie Foundation funded a study (The Flexner Report) of US and Canadian medical schools. Beside recommending the closure of the diploma mills and weaker schools, the report recommended higher educational standards for admission to medical school; longer training; the addition of labs, libraries, and clinics to medical schools; internships; and licensing through examination. The Report also wanted American medicine to follow the German model and become scientifically grounded--in other words doctors should do research as well as treat patients. The medical profession (especially the American Medical Association) took this report to heart and did much to turn around US medical education and treatment in a decade. The number of medical schools was reduced by almost half, and the number of doctors in the US declined (in part because the AMA began to narrowly define what a doctor was). Physicians' income and prestige rose. Licensing and rules for becoming a specialist began to be instituted, and the patients' treatment improved. On the downside, the numbers and proportion of minorities and women in the profession declined, medical education

became increasingly expensive, and only one definition of medicine was acceptable (e.g., practitioners of homeopathy were no longer considered doctors) for many, many years. The success of the medical profession spurred lawyers to follow suit (they had their own report of the legal profession) a decade later, then dentist, etc. What the discussion ... indicates to me is that usability professionals are going through the same growing pangs.

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I think as a profession (and I do think we are a profession, regardless of the seeming implication to the contrary because we lack a certification program), we would be much better served in developing a generalizable ROI model and presentation. And I certainly believe this is a worthy cause for our professional organizations. After all, they are marketing themselves as premier "usability" associations in our profession and as such support and promote the usability profession. What better way to support and promote it than to clearly articulate the ROI of our profession's contributions? We have all done the evangelism and justification many times over on an individual basis. I think it is high-time we had a collective, knock-out ROI model.

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I have followed the certification discussion, too, for a while and come down firmly on the con side. Having been involved in certification discussions with two other organizations, RESNA (for rehabilitation engineers, rehabilitation technologists and assistive technology providers) and HFES (ergonomists/human factors specialists), I've heard it all before. But I'll be up front....I'm old enough and experienced enough to be considered an "old fart," so I admittedly have fewer reasons to support certification personally than do some others on this list.

In the case of HFES and RESNA, there were driving forces behind certification. In HFES, I think it was the desire on the part of forensics practitioners (expert witnesses) to be perceived as expert and credible in the courtroom, and a college degree wasn't considered to be enough. In RESNA, it was the reimbursement for services issue - a nasty can of worms brought about by the government's way of reimbursing medical/health care/rehabilitation service providers.

In usability, neither of these drivers exists. I'm not sure what driver does exist beyond some desire to "legitimize the profession." And frankly, I don't think certification would do that. Further, it costs a heap of money to develop and maintain a certification program, and one really can't do it well without also talking about re-certification and continuing education (which would be "must haves" in a field that changes as rapidly as software does).

I don't think the ergonomics/human factors certification legitimized the human factors professional in any circle beyond the legal one (if there), and similarly, I don't think the credential legitimized rehabilitation engineering service providers to anyone beyond the government (though I suspect this was worth it in their case). Certification is no guarantee of quality (I knew certified ergonomists for whom I had little respect, professionally, and who I would never hire, personally.) Lack of certification also is no guarantee one way or the other. Another argument I've heard, particularly with respect to HFES certification, was the harm being done to the profession by "unqualified practitioners." Has certification prevented that? I'd love to see the proof. Licensure has teeth in this regard; certification does not.

Finally, in the cases of ergonomics/human factors and usability specialists, I don't see employers crying out for certification. You can say that if you had certification, employers would then want to hire only certified people, but I don't think the HFES experience supports that, with the possible exception of forensics and, maybe, some industrial ergonomics (OSHA-oriented) work.

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Governance Issues

What I am not getting a clear idea of in this discussion is the following: What is the problem (or problems) we are trying to address? Will certification or licensing solve the problem(s)? Who is going to champion this movement (doctors had the AMA, lawyers the ABA, dentists the ADA--it was not private companies)? And since this is an international mailing list, how do you factor in the differences in certification/licensing that go along with different countries?

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[Concerns about the survey include...]

1. Concern about the impartiality of a certification organization that stands to benefit financially from the outcome.
2. Certification potentially used to further an agenda, for example the Usability in the large/in the small debate.
3. Questions about the technical competence and credibility of *any* existing organization to pontificate on certification criteria

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I share the concerns listed (along with other issues from my earlier posts on the subject) and personally I still think it would serve our community much better if our professional societies and/or industry working groups concentrated on coming up with a general usability ROI presentation or ROI methodology similar to other business ROI methodologies that, easily translates into manager or business speak.

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To approach certification without political or state licensure with firm pass/fail criteria and a qualified certifying body is meaningless, and until it comes to litigation time for failure to perform, even that is relatively meaningless. For example - to call yourself an "engineer" in many states requires passing serious testing and licensing - that never stopped thousands of "Sanitary Engineers" from using the title. Few people know or care about a certificate -- much less a license but us - and most of us in a hiring position know better than to look for that stamp of approval as making someone worthy...

###

I find the idea of a consortium of usability organizations developing the requisites for certification to be a good way of achieving the desired results - certification that proves the knowledge of the aspirant. I can understand your concern about those in the training field profiting unreasonably from certification requirements. However, I don't see a problem if no one entity, organization, or "school" is endorsed by the certification "grantor." I believe it is essential that training and certification be provided by separate, unrelated (financially) organizations. This would leave the free market system intact and those providing affordable, effective training would survive and thrive. The alternative is to leave "knowledge-providing" in the hands of a few educational institutions that also would "...receive some form of financial benefit (directly or indirectly) by the incorporation of a certification process."

For persons like myself, I'm past 55, the notion of college is just not a viable choice. However, training tailored specifically to help me acquire the knowledge and skills to advance my career quickly is.

I have come up "through the ranks" progressing from technical illustrator, to technical writer, to web content and copywriter, to usability specialist. I do not have a degree from a college but have acquired several certificates over the years to validate my knowledge. If costs to acquire this certification do not become outrageous, I will certainly seek it as well.

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Future of UPA and the Profession

Most of the arguments against certification seem motivated by test fear, lack of knowledge about the process, a focus on self or company rather than profession, or by changing the subject to what some imaginary resources might pay for. If you want Usability to be a field or specialty, or even a set of services, fine.

If you want it to be a profession:

- You need an independent certification (before a private or government entity takes that place), or at least some measure of skills. Certification is a process, not a test. It usually involves a number of years and steps to "full certification". Many have "grandparent" clauses that account for education, experience, and certification in other areas. I would suggest reviewing what is involved before making a judgement
- You must learn how to sell her/his services, or hand that duty to a partnership or larger entity. It seems a bit much to ask UPA to produce marketing materials for us. If you cannot convince people your services are worth it, learn how or hire someone who can. Or admit they are not worth it to that client at that particular time.
- You act like a professional, but realize "like" has nothing to do with it in consulting. You are paid to make the client look or feel better.

The strength of Usability is in the many disciplines that contribute to it, but its basis is always consistency, or at best, predictability. We need a common basis before we can celebrate the diversity. A common skill set, a mission, a certification. Whatever.

###

I see two camps, which are not distinguished by any easy problem like different tactics, but rather by choice of goals.

Here are the two camps:

1. The usability in the large group.

- Purpose is to positively influence ROI by increasing purchase volumes, especially in e-commerce
- Focus is user experience
- Main technical approach is gathering of information about user preferences

- Main organizational approach is to influence management
- Appropriate organizational position is in marketing.

2. The usability in the small group

- Purpose is to positively influence ROI by making the development process more efficient without sacrificing quality on the usability (in the narrow sense) dimension.
- Focus is user performance
- Main technical approach is detailed representation of user interaction with systems
- Main organizational approach is cost effective delivery of design work products to the development team
- Appropriate organizational position is engineering.

For the first time, I feel that these approaches are incompatible. Adherents are almost religious in their preferences. For example, one of the panelists described an engineering focus on human performance as something that has become a thing of the past, superseded by concerns about user experience even extended to concerns about the user's overall life experience. I admit to having an emotional reaction to that position that is just slightly beyond rational.

Frankly, I think its time for the two camps to go their separate ways. The question on my mind now is whether the separation can happen amicably, or whether it will involve nasty struggles for control of the usability-related professional organizations and who own the name (or can be certified) to be a "usability professional."

###

Although I can't make it to UPA, I had some thoughts about certification, and what I hope might come from the meeting to discuss it. In case there's anyone still in doubt, at the moment I'm on the "no" side of the debate. A summary of my reasons:

- Locus of control. I remain uncomfortable with the idea of some higher authority determining what constitutes best practices when as a profession we're still hotly debating most of them... to the benefit and enrichment of all. I'm much more comfortable with the "self-assessment" approach that Rolf Molich advocates.
- Resources. Certification would be a huge commitment - we don't just have to give birth to the baby, we have to support it for the rest of its life. I don't know who is in the position (authority-wise or funding-wise) to take this on.
- Conflict of interest. I'm concerned about the possibility of someone getting involved in the certification effort with the intent of eventually profiting from it. (I don't have a specific someone in mind; this is just a free-floating anxiety).
- Constituents. I'd like further clarification of who certification is intended for. I don't believe the answer is "Everyone, for different reasons." There seems to be evidence that the perceived need for certification may depend on years of experience, industry, or possibly country. If those factors or others play a role, we need to first identify them - maybe the problem can be solved in some other way besides certification, or its scope is different than we've been thinking. I'm pretty sure that certification won't benefit me as a US consultant - most of my business comes from referrals, and clients never ask me about my academic background or credentials. They're usually far more interested in whether I've worked on an interface like theirs and/or can speak articulately to the challenges they face.

And I've pretty much agreed with the other concerns that have been raised on [lists] about the concept. Having said all that, I do think there are a couple of important areas that a task force like the one at the UPA meeting can focus on in the near term:

- Code of ethics. Other professions have one - lawyers, doctors, financial planners - and I've had occasion to wish that we did too. It would cover things like dealing with users, communicating test findings, facts vs. opinion, etc. Actually, I would view a code of ethics as integral to any sort of certification effort, so pursuing this goal would be complementary to the concept of certification rather than a tangent from it.
- Collecting "best practices." This name may be misleading for what I have in mind... some sort of database to store our collective wisdom about various facets of usability practice, including (and especially) our disagreements. Unlike an approach that decides upon the "best" way to do something, what I envision is some means of expressing the most radical views on each issue in a thoughtful and reasoned way that would give people the insights necessary to choose the most appropriate course of action for their unique "it depends" situation. And maybe it could include voting or other means of feedback from the usability community. For example, in-room observers - I could write a "pro" piece, and someone who breaks out in hives at the mere thought could write the "con," and perhaps the rest of the usability world could weigh in on what they actually do. My theory is that it's less valuable to practitioners to know who's "right" than it is to lay out the issues in a manner that encourages us to think about how all the pros and cons might affect what we're trying to do.