MemberSuite
By GrowthZone

MEETING YOUR MEMBER'S LIFELONG LEARNING NEEDS

HOW TO IMPROVE THE CERTIFICATION APPLICATION EXPERIENCE, SAVE STAFF TIME AND INCREASE NON-DUES REVENUE

Introduction

Changes in technology affect everyone's job. You probably rely on different tools and skills now than you did ten years ago. Members are no different. They must continue to develop new knowledge and skills so they can adapt to changes in the workplace and keep themselves employable and promotable.

This type of lifelong learning isn't a luxury reserved for those who can afford the time and expense. It's is an imperative for everyone. What professionals need today are focused programs that teach them what they need to know as quickly as possible.

It's no surprise the interest in certifications is growing. Professionals are seeking ways to distinguish themselves from the competition. Associations can respond to this market demand by offering certificate programs and certifications. These nondues revenue drivers allow professionals to show their mastery of in-demand skills and knowledge.

> **Read on to learn how to meet your constituents' lifelong learning demand while improving their certification application experience, saving staff time, and increasing non-dues revenue.**

MEET YOUR CONSTITUENTS' DEMAND FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Credentials, such as certificates and certifications, help professionals show current and prospective employers what skills and knowledge they bring to the job.

The need for this type of validation is not limited to one segment of your membership or market.

Young professionals need to acquire the skills and knowledge they didn't learn in high school and college, particularly soft skills and job-specific hard skills. They're seeking a less expensive and timeconsuming alternative to higher education. They also need to validate newly acquired competencies, especially if they don't have relevant work experience. They can gain marketable skills and knowledge through your association's certificate and credential programs.

The competencies that got mid-career professionals to their present position aren't going to get them to their next one. They want to develop the skills and knowledge required for promotion. They also need

the certification that shows employers and boards that they have what it takes for senior management or C-suite positions.

Many professionals at the peak of their career have to rethink the path ahead, for example, those who've been laid off or forced into early retirement. They need help with reskilling so they can enter your profession or industry. Other professionals in transition, such as military veterans and parents returning to fulltime work, would also benefit from credential programs that provide the education and validation they need.

A growing sector of the economy is made up of freelancers, solopreneurs, contract workers, and small business owners. These self-employed professionals have different educational needs

than those who work for others. Consider developing a certificate program or learning pathway for them that focuses on industry-specific business management skills.

Certificate programs and certifications are the answer to many of the challenges facing young and seasoned professionals, as well as employers.

- A certification is a validation of a professional's experience, knowledge, and competencies. For example, the CAE certification is awarded to those who meet education and experience requirements, and have passed an exam proving their competency in association management. Certifications usually must be renewed every few years by showing proof of additional continuing education.

- A certificate program provides instruction. The student is awarded a certificate upon successfully completing the educational program and proving mastery of the skills and/or knowledge taught.

Programs like these also help you create deeper connections with the members and prospects who participate in these programs. In an Associations Now article, Shelly Alcorn, CAE, said: "The kind of member loyalty that you have always said you wanted to create? I don't know of any better loyalty than 'They helped me get a job, keep a job, and get a better job."

HELP EMPLOYERS BRIDGE THE SKILLS GAP

Your educational programs have two target audiences: individuals and the employers who pay for or encourage their continuing education.

Associations usually focus the marketing of their education and credential programs on the individual learner. But your educational programs have two target audiences: individuals and the employers who pay for or encourage their continuing education.

Think of employers as the influencers who can help persuade members and prospects to register for educational programs or apply for certifications. They have the power of the purse. They also have the power to hire, promote, and fire. They see where existing and prospective employees are deficient. In fact, 92 percent of business leaders think Americans aren't as skilled as they need to be, according to the **Adecco State of the Economy Survey.** 59 percent said the U.S. education system was to blame for gaps in workforce skills.

Associations can help bridge that gap, but don't wait too long to act. Colleges and universities have already received this message loud and clear.

Many of them are consulting with employers to develop new certificate and credential programs that teach and validate the skills and knowledge in demand by employers. Don't let them steal your members and prospects.

Become your industry's educator of choice by partnering with member employers. Invite them to be on an advisory board that identifies skills gaps in your marketplace. Employers who help you design credential programs are more likely to send employees to them. Your association becomes an extension of corporate training.

44 percent of the executives participating in the Adecco survey lamented their workforce's lack of soft skills, such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. These skills have not traditionally been included in certificate or certification requirements, but they could be a way to distinguish your programs from those of your competition.

INCREASE NON-DUES REVENUE & ENGAGEMENT

Your association already has a reputation as a provider of information and education. Your members, attendees, and customers have chosen to have relationships with you.

You should have the advantage over higher education and Massive Open Online Courses when it comes to your professional community's lifelong learning needs.

You are in the best position to help your members manage their lifelong learning journey. You can help them track their educational history and credits. Even better, you can provide the certifications and certificate programs they (and their employers) need.

You'll solve their challenges while tackling one of your own too: the non-dues revenue challenge. Certifications bring in application, prep course, exam, and renewal fees. Plus, certified professionals need to find their education somewhere—why not from you?

- *Certificate programs* bring in course enrollment or registration fees. Plus, you can offer sponsorship opportunities to help subsidize program expenses and fund scholarships.

- *Educational programs* provide members with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. Members in certificate programs and in certification study groups and prep courses also get the chance to connect with other members—a key reason they join your association in the first place.

People who earn certificates and certifications will have a deeper connection to your association. Professional development is empowering. It engages members on an emotional level. Your association should be the one who facilitates this transformative experience for your members and others in your professional community.

MEET CERTIFICATION APPLICATION EXPECTATIONS

Time is a limited asset for everyone, including your certification applicants.

Take advantage of the functionality provided by certification tracking software to streamline your certification application process. Don't give applicants any excuse to completely abandon the process once they start.

Look for ways to make the process as clear and concise as possible. Don't make applicants think too hard or guess what they should have to do next. Use certification tracking software that allows you to design and configure an application workflow that guides applicants step-by-step through the application or renewal process. Based on their answers throughout the process, allow them to skip steps that aren't applicable.

Display a progress bar that shows where they are in the process and which steps remain. For example, let the applicant see that they're on Step 6 and have two remaining steps to go.

Give applicants and renewing credential holders the ability to upload documents, such as certificates of completion, to support their application.

Given the details involved in applying for certification, some people will run out of time or need to take a break to find the information they need for the application. Allow applicants to save their work and return later.

Meet their expectations up to the very end. Make sure your certification tracking software provides a user-friendly payment experience. Allow applicants to conveniently store a credit card within the system. Let them apply association issued promo codes or credits to their application fee. Anticipate the needs and questions of your certification applicants and renewing credential holders. What questions have they asked in the past about the application and renewal process? Make sure you answer these questions on the screen or provide the answers on a linked page.

Don't give applicants any cause to wonder and worry about the status of their application. Use certification tracking software that allows you to configure statuses to keep the applicant informed. They should be able to see if their certification was approved or renewed, and, if not, why it wasn't.

Credential holders want to be kept up-todate on their certification status. Help them stay in the loop by setting up automated email notifications that alert them to upcoming expiration and renewal dates.

EMPOWER APPLICANTS TO SELF-SERVE

Members, credential holders, and certification applicants expect to take care of any association and certification "business" online.

A member portal provides the self-service experience expected by professionals in your membership and market. If you wish, you can allow anyone to create an account and take care of business, i.e., apply for certification, renew certification, register for an event, or take care of whatever association task is on their to-do list.

Credential applicants and holders can also use your member portal to:

- Print certificates and transcripts
- Self-report CEUs
- Keep track of their CEUs

When you give applicants and credential holders the power to help themselves, your team also benefits as well—you won't have to spend time fulfilling all those requests. However, always give portal visitors the option of talking to a real live person on staff for help if that's their preference.

Additionally, the member portal is a tool to draw credential applicants deeper into the association. Take advantage of the "real estate" on your portal's home page by displaying teaser copy and links to other engagement opportunities.

- Advertise exam prep courses, study guides,and practice quizzes.
- Invite new credential holders to a reception at your annual conference.

Promote membership to certification applicants and credential holders who aren't yet members. Remind them about the lower prices members pay for educational events and resources. Some associations even have a special membership tier for certification holders and applicants which includes discounts on exams, courses, and study materials for the association's credentials.

AUTOMATE TASKS AND SAVE STAFF TIME

The administrative work involved in certification management takes its toll—on your level of productivity, stress, and engagement with your job.

Thankfully, there's a solution to this problem: an online, automated process for certification applications made possible by certification tracking software.

Certification solutions allow you to set up your online application so it walks applicants through the different steps of the eligibility criteria and application process, while saving your staff's time.

- Look for certification management software that allows you to configure the steps of your application process so it mirrors your old paper application. Configuration also comes in handy for other updates, such as application status.

- Offer application auto-saving throughout the process. Applicants will appreciate not having to rush through the steps in fear of having a system time them out.

- Anticipate and address common applicant questions or mistakes in a FAQ page linked to the application.

- Prevent applicant errors and oversights so you won't have to take or make as many calls as you do now. You can make certain fields required so you don't have to chase down applicants for missing information. Credits can be datesensitive so applicants can only use them for one application, if that's what your policy requires.

- Set submission eligibility rules, so you can ensure that applicants meet a minimum criteria before submitting their application. They won't waste their time completing an application for nothing, and you won't have to spend time reviewing it and getting in touch with them to explain why they don't qualify.

- Let participants pay for certification applications and renewals online too.Personal payment data is more secure when applications are processed online instead of being mailed or faxed (yes, it still happens!) Online payments can be automatically applied to the appropriate GL code or product line—saving time for all departments involved.

LEVERAGE AUTOMATED WORKFLOWS

No matter your place on the org chart, you shouldn't be doing data entry. Data entry is bad for your morale and bad for your association's payroll.

If your existing process doesn't allow you to automate your certification and CEU tracking processes, it's time to look for a new solution.

Provide application status updates. When it comes to online experiences, we're all spoiled. We expect immediate responsiveness and instant gratification. If an individual interacts with your association online, for example, submitting an application, they expect to see a response from you right away. They want assurance that you received their application. They may even want to know if it's been approved, even provisionally. Does your software do that yet?

Score applications. Automated workflows make both instant gratification and immediate responsiveness possible. Certification tracking software automatically scores applications based on an applicant's answers throughout the workflow. They can immediately see their provisional status. If their application wasn't approved, they're told why so they know what to do next without having to call or email your office.

Upload exam taker info. Upload applicant information directly to the exam test center as soon as the applicant completes and pays for the application.

Update records with CEUs. Nowadays, you can reduce the time spent on administrative processes that can be automated with some IF/THEN logic. For example, if you host an event that is eligible for five CEU credits, your solution should be able to automatically assign the five unverified credits to registrants' records, skipping the task of entering the CEU credits manually.

Import exam scores. With software that integrates with your Learning Management System (LMS), you can eliminate manual data entry. With the click of a button, you can import thousands of exam scores into member (and customer) records. Applicants will even see an update of their score on the member portal.

Let applicants help themselves. A certification solution makes it possible for members to take care of certification business when it's convenient for them. They can see how they're doing on their certification application and renewal, and know exactly how many credits they need to complete either. They can self-report any CEUs they've earned from other organizations. They can also go online to print certificates or transcripts instead of asking your staff to print and send them a copy.

CONCLUSION

The increased member and employer demand for credentialing programs is a huge non-dues revenue opportunity for member-based organizations. Professionals need focused programs that validate their competencies and teach them what they need to know as quickly as possible. Associations can respond to this market demand by offering certificate programs and certifications that satisfy their needs while deepening connections with members and prospects.

Leveraging certification management and CEU tracking software that offers automated application workflows will be the key to meet applicants' demands, save staff time, and boost nondues revenue.

MemberSuite™
By GrowthZone

We'd love to show you how our
**certification management and CEU
tracking solution can help you.**

Contact us to get started.

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The powerful AMS provides mid- and upper-market level membership organizations
with applications that deliver the functionality, integration, reporting, and support that
empower associations to manage, engage, and grow membership.