

Certification Program Design Considerations

Designing	Conferring
Developing	Accrediting
Implementing	Maintaining

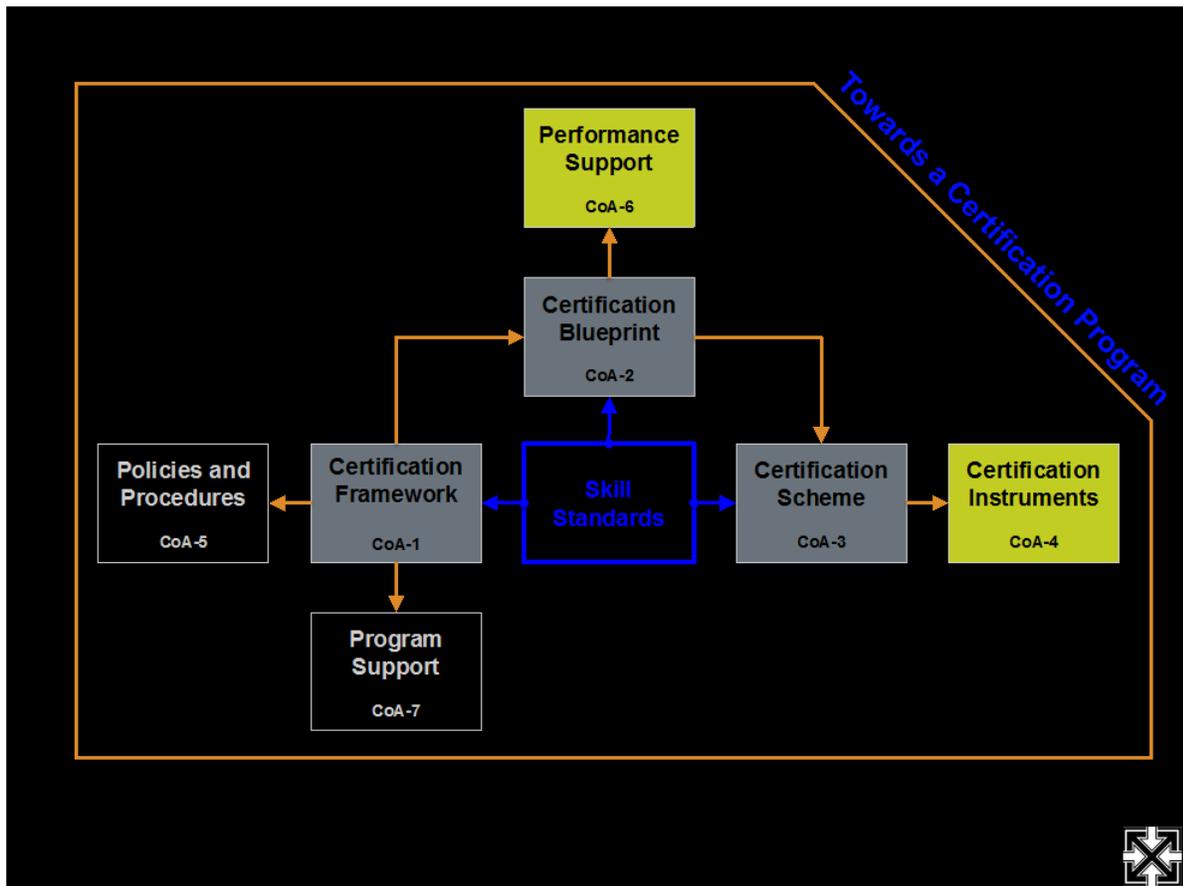


Functional Manager	PMO
Component	Candidate

PREFACE: A critical PMO (Program Management Office) role and responsibility involves working with the FM (Functional Manager) and the certification program’s governing body (hereafter, “program stakeholders”) to ensure that the certification program is designed and developed in accordance with USD(I) requirements. This includes ensuring that program stakeholders have the guidance and technical support they need to stand-up a certification program that complies with applicable third-party accreditation standards.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this job aid is to provide an overview of design considerations that PMO personnel should be aware of in order to successfully perform the aforementioned role and responsibility.

PROCEDURE: Program stakeholders need to execute at least seven (7) courses-of-action (CoA) to stand-up a certification program. Ideally, program stakeholders should consider enacting these 7 CoAs in the sequence depicted in the figure below. The sequence is intentional and it ensures that program stakeholders have the right information at the right time to make informed decisions regarding the certification program’s form and function.



1. USE OF WORKING GROUPS TO ENACT COAS - To efficiently and effectively enact the various CoAs, program stakeholders (including the PMO) may want to establish at least two working groups: (1) a Certification Working Group (C/WG), and (2) a Policies and Procedures Working Group (PP/WG). Ideally, the C/WG with PMO support (e.g., psychometric support) will address actions necessary to specify and codify the certification program's: (1) skill standards, (2) certification framework (CoA-1), (3) certification blueprint (CoA-2), (4) certification scheme (CoA-3) and (5) certification instruments (CoA-4). The PP/WG, on the other hand, will address policies and procedures critical to the efficient and effective management, administration, and sustainment of the certification program. All working group products need to be approved by the program's governing body.
2. SKILL STANDARDS - Skill Standards (SS) specify both the essential body of work (EBW) and the essential body of knowledge (EBK) that define and codify what the target population must know and be able to do. Program stakeholders must ensure that the skill standards:
 - a. Are based on information gathered and validated through the execution of a structured process (e.g., job analysis, practice analysis, job/role delineation study) that leverages both process expertise (i.e., psychometrician) and domain subject matter expertise. The process must be thoroughly documented and the resulting documentation must meet standards set by the third-party accreditation body.
 - b. Although it is possible to simply generate a set of skill standards associated with a particular certification, it would be more efficient if the skill standards development process takes into account the full scope of work and worker characteristics that the program may want to address.
3. CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORK (COA-1) - Given a full understanding of what practitioners must know and be able to do, the first CoA focuses on establishing the program's certification framework. A certification framework depicts the various certifications the program will offer to the target population in order to address the knowledge and skill expectations specified in the program's skill standards. To generate a program's certification framework, program stakeholders may want to:
 - a. Identify certification levels necessary to address the full set of knowledge and skills the community values (and therefore wants certified).
 - b. Differentiate between "core" and "specialty" certifications.
 - c. Determine relationship amongst the envisioned certifications.
 - d. Balance program stakeholders' wants and needs (with respect to number, levels, and types of certifications) and program constraints.
 - Ideally, the program's governing body will review and consider approval of the program's skill standards and proposed certification framework at the same time. In addition, this review and approval consideration will also need to address the timing associated with the design and development of the certifications specified in the certification framework.

4. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES (COA-5) & PROGRAM SUPPORT (COA-7) - Once the governing body approves the program’s skill standards and certification framework, the PP/WG can start addressing and codifying the program’s policies and procedures (e.g., Candidate Management, Assessment Management, Assessment Management, Assessment Delivery and Administration, Records, Registry Management, Conferral Management, Appeals and Waivers, Refresh Policies and Procedures, Communication, Reporting Responsibilities). The policies and procedures must be sufficiently detailed to identify roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, and, more importantly, to ensure that the PMO is able to leverage the resulting policies and procedures to establish standard operating procedures it will use to administer and manage the envisioned program (i.e., the focal work associated with CoA7). At the same time, the PMO must have a clear understanding of its capabilities and constraints to ensure that PP/WG members address them as they deliberate on the program’s policies and procedures (to ensure that the PP/WG generates implementable policies and procedures).
 - Ideally, the program’s governing body will review and consider approval of each overarching policy and/or procedure generated by the PP/WG. Although, the program’s governing body need not approve the PMO-generated SoPs necessary to implement the approved policies and procedures, it behooves the PMO to ensure that the program stakeholders are informed of the SoPs.
5. CERTIFICATION BLUEPRINT (COA-2) - A certification blueprint characterizes the knowledge and skills identified in the skill standards in terms of specific outcome statements (hereafter, certification objectives). This document specifies what the target population must be able to demonstrate (in terms of knowledge and skills) in order to obtain the certification, and it also specifies the weights associated with each “terminal certification objective.”¹ Development of this document requires both process expertise (i.e., psychometrician) and domain subject matter expertise, and must be fully documented in order to fulfill third-party accreditation requirements.
6. CERTIFICATION SCHEME (COA-3) - For a given certification, program stakeholders must define prerequisite(s), certification requirement(s), and certification maintenance requirement(s). The first two – pre-requisites and certification requirement(s) – should be based solely on what is defined and codified in the certification blueprint. The certification maintenance requirements, in turn, could either be based on the certification blueprint or the skill standards depending on the certification renewal philosophy (i.e., maintenance of existing competencies or continuing professional development) the program stakeholders’ adopts. From a PMO perspective, enactment of this CoA should be informed by professional judgment(s) of a trained psychometrician (to ensure that the scheme options are appropriate for the content specified in the certification blueprint).
 - Ideally, the program’s governing body will review and consider approval of the program’s certification blueprint and proposed certification scheme at the same time. During their deliberation about these certification elements, the PMO must

¹ See “Development002.Blueprint_weights-Guidance.21May2015.V1.0” for guidance regarding the establishment of weights.

ensure that members of the governing body fully understand that approval of these two certification elements will necessarily trigger the start activities associated with the development and validation of the certification instruments specified in the scheme. Hence, they must ensure that they are fully “on-board” with respect to these certification elements.

7. **CERTIFICATION INSTRUMENTS (COA-4)** - The development and validation of instruments and/or protocols that will serve to operationalize the approved blueprint and scheme is the primary focus of this CoA. Depending on available resources, this step could take between 3-6 months to complete and will require both process expertise (i.e., psychometrician) and domain subject matter expertise. The assessment development and validation phase consists of four major steps: (1) development of seed items for assessing the content specified in the certification blueprint, (2) subject matter expert review of the seed items and subsequent adjudication of comments/feedback to generate a beta-version of the certification assessment, (3) pilot test of the certification assessment, and (4) generation of the production version of the certification assessment (including the establishment of the cut-score for the production version of the certification assessment). Again, execution of this CoA (i.e., criterion-referenced test development process) must be fully documented in order to fulfill third-party accreditation requirements.
 - Ideally, the program’s governing body will review and consider approval of the program’s production version of the certification assessment. To facilitate discussion, it is critical that members of the program’s governing body are informed of the psychometric qualities of the certification assessment, and the potential impact of approval of the production version of the certification assessment (e.g., pass rate).

8. **PERFORMANCE SUPPORT** - Program stakeholders will necessarily inquire about the type of support (i.e., training) the target population may be provided to prepare for a certification. The PMO must address this issue carefully to ensure that the program does not “run afoul” of third-party accreditation standards. For the most part, program stakeholders and the PMO have a responsibility to ensure that the target population has information regarding the certification program’s assessment scheme, and the content specified in the certification blueprint. This set of information is typically part of a “candidate handbook” designed to provide members of the target population information specific information about the certification program. The governing body and the PMO may want to stay away from the generation of specific training or other tools specifically designed to “prepare” members of the target population for the certification assessment. Instead, program stakeholders should adopt a policy that gives any and all organizations equal access to the certification blueprint so that they could develop organization-specific performance support tools.