

High Quality Continuing Education and Training: The IACET Advantage

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Introduction

Since the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) began more than 100 years ago with the concept of keeping workers safe, healthy and productive, the mission has not changed as much as it has expanded. Through continuing education, publications and research, the association carries out its mission and as the Manager of ASSE's Education and Program Development, Trudy Goldman works to provide the continuing education ASSE's 35,000 members need to successfully carry out their jobs. ASSE became an IACET Authorized Provider (AP) more than 12 years ago and continues to use the ANSI/IACET Standard as a framework for its continuing education and training (CE/T) programs.

In this session Sara Meier, IACET's Executive Director, along with Trudy Goldman, will share how ASSE used the AP accreditation process to improve internal procedures for conducting high-quality professional development programs and providing reliable continuing education units (CEUs) for program attendees. In addition to learning how using the ANSI/IACET Standard leads to effective practice in the continuing education and training field, participants will also learn about the value and benefits of accreditation to CE/T providers, to individual learners and to the general workforce. Furthermore, participants will also learn what it takes to become an IACET Authorized Provider.

IACET Authorized Providers vary widely in the markets they serve. In establishing a partnership with IACET, our accredited providers like ASSE, recognize the significance of delivering high quality continuing education and training and the credibility that the IACET AP accreditation lends them in marketing to their prospective learners. With organizations demanding that their employees stay current with industry trends, technology and standards, it is vital to an organization's survival to be able to offer effective professional development.

History

IACET grew out of a task force commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in 1968. The task force was challenged with the question "Is it feasible to measure noncredit continuing education activities?" The result of their work was the Continuing Education Unit (CEU). As the need for CEUs continued to develop in the 1970s, the task force was encouraged to become a certifying body and over time morphed into the Council on Continuing Education and Training and eventually the International Association for Continuing Education and Training, which today accredits more than 500 organizations using the ANSI/IACET Standard to benchmark their training policies and procedures.

Defining Accreditation

Accreditation is the certification by a non-governmental organization that an education provider adheres to standards that are based on documented educational best practices. Many providers of CE/T seek accreditation to elevate the development/training opportunities they offer to employees/staff and/or clients. It may be required by governing bodies, required for funding, part of a strategic initiative or demanded by the learners themselves. Accreditation suggests a professional stance toward learning; the standards and associated competencies and criteria become goals toward which to aim. Moreover, management then has a strategy by which to benchmark organizational performance and to determine how well the organization compares to others like it.

As accreditation becomes institutionalized, organizations must reflect on their experiences—and rigorously determine how they have benefitted from the relationship or arrangement. *What is the value added? How are the benefits identified and measured? What has changed operationally or logistically?* Accredited organizations have realized value added to their organizations and the learners through consistent quality throughout a standardized program and achievement of learner-focused goals. The benefits they realize are as varied as the providers themselves however most experience an improvement in their program structure, a consistency to their program development, and a more rigorous assessment resulting in an increase in learning.

Benefits of IACET Accreditation

Educational providers benefit from accreditation in many ways important to the organizations themselves and the learners they serve. Below is a list of the top benefits of accreditation from a recent study conducted by Lori Schnaider and Marcie Bober-Michel, PhD.

- Increase in quality
- Increase in enrollment/demand for training
- Learner satisfaction
- Cost effectiveness
- Increase in students achieving/maintaining certifications and registrations
- Increase in learning

Organizations realized an improvement in the reliability of the training they deliver due to accreditation. The IACET AP application process includes a self-study and formal review that requires organizations to standardize and document their development, delivery, and recordkeeping processes. With the exception of the few organizations that had this in place prior to seeking accreditation, all have benefitted from this process and their learners have benefitted from the improvement in reliability. According to one AP, “(with accreditation) we have taken our training to a higher level of quality. Enrollment has increased and the quality of our training program has become highly recognized by partnering agencies.”

APs benefit from an elevation in their perceived image due to accreditation. It improves their marketability and credibility. Accreditation also allows a provider to offer CEUs for maintenance of registrations/certifications and for funding requirements. It also enables APs to more successfully compete for training contracts. One AP describes their increase in credibility by the following, “We are recognized world-wide as the leading training institute in our field. Our courses’ average score on satisfaction/goal attainment evaluation forms is consistently between 4.5-5.0 (on a 5 point scale, where 5 is the highest). Last year the professional association in the field chose our program as its certification program worldwide.”

The Decision to Seek IACET Accreditation

Providers of CE/T seek accreditation’s third party approval of their program for several different reasons. According to Schnaider and Bober-Michel’s research, the two primary ones are *to facilitate licensure* and *to gain a competitive edge*. Achieving accreditation of one’s training program increases an organization’s prestige and even if it is not the primary driver, it can influence enrollment numbers and funding sources. While an organization does not need accreditation to maintain a high level of quality, many organizations recognize that undergoing the self-study and formal review forces them to adhere to the standards. While organizational goals and strategies can change over time, a commitment to maintaining accreditation ensures the program and learning events it provides will continue to be of the highest quality despite organizational change.

CE/T providers within individual industries have similar drivers for seeking accreditation. The data reflects these trends within certain industries by the reasons they indicated for seeking accreditation. **Engineering** organizations use accreditation to both facilitate licensure (86% of engineering respondents) and gain a competitive edge (57% of engineering respondents). Based on a review of each state licensing board’s continuing education requirements, three-quarters of all states require their Professional Engineers to maintain their license with CEUs. This is directly in line with the high number of CE/T providers seeking accreditation for facilitating licensure.

CE/T providers in the **manufacturing** industry overwhelmingly seek accreditation to gain a competitive edge; 83% of respondents indicated this. However, half of them also indicated they sought accreditation to facilitate licensure. In manufacturing, and within the CE/T providers in the industry, there is an increase in certifications created to establish and maintain a high level of quality using and troubleshooting machines and processes. Organizations and workers alike are embracing this emerging trend towards certification as it increases marketability.

Achieving Goals

IACET accreditation is a strategy for organizations to achieve specific organizational goals.

Success is assessed most commonly in this area in the following ways:

1. Increase in requests for CEUs/increase in enrollment - accreditation has helped APs achieve goals around marketing their quality, obtaining repeat business, increasing demand, achieving acceptance by certifying bodies, etc.
2. Improvement in quality - accreditation has helped APs through:
 - Documenting instructional design and other processes;
 - High educational standards;
 - Consistency in training events;
 - Reduction in refunds and complaints; and
 - Maintain quality during organizational change.
3. Increase in learner satisfaction - accreditation has helped APs establish a solid, positive reputation and recognition as a leading training institute in their field.
4. Increase in financial benefits - accreditation has helped APs reduce the costs of recertifying employees (for internal providers), increase revenue, achieve a positive Return on Investment (ROI), and win contracts, especially those specifically asking for APs (for external providers).

Measuring Learning

Learning assessment is important for both accountability and improving learning. Accountability enables stakeholders to be able to measure the success of the training and make judgments on its value compared to other opportunities. Students and supervisors also use assessment to determine if there was sufficient transfer of knowledge or skills to meet their needs. Also, those funding the learning event need data regarding the success of the event to determine if money should continue to be invested there or elsewhere.

Applied correctly, assessing *for* learning can improve it.¹ Inevitably, instructors teach to the test and students focus on what will bring them success on the test as well. Thus a well-designed and appropriate assessment can focus instructors and students on achieving the learning event's goals. To be successful, assessment *for* learning needs to be identified in the planning stages of the course and it should measure the specific behavior the learning event is trying to

¹ American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). 2012. *The Value of Accreditation for Continuing Nursing Education* (retrieved from <http://www.nursecredentialing.org/Accreditation/ResourcesServices/Accreditation-WhitePaper2012.pdf>).

bring about. Learning assessment for both documentation and to improve learning is required by the ANSI/IACET Standard and adhered to by APs.

Improving Learning

Learning is a key indicator of educational success. The methods respondents use to measure learning are as varied as the programs they provide. While many different methods are utilized, most programs employ final exams and learner response surveys. Outlined below are all responses from the seven interviewees who answered this question.

- 50% (3) indicated there was a positive change in learning as a result of accreditation.
- 33% (2) responded that there was not a change in learning primarily because their organization was already adhering to the criteria prior to applying for accreditation. As one of these two quoted, “Accreditation was a good fit for our processes.”
- 17% (1) responded that a change in learning was unknown because they did not measure it prior to achieving accreditation.

All the APs interviewed indicated an improvement in the process of developing learning events due to standardization based on best practices in continuing education. Standardization of the development process ensures all programs receive the same structure, planning, and resources. One interviewee replied, “Accreditation raised the bar of what’s acceptable (training).” Because of this, many have been able to increase and diversify their offerings. Other causes of improvements were identified by several as student-focused learning environments and strengthening the role of learning assessment.

Value of CEUs to Learners

Certifications attest to an individual’s qualifications and ability to perform on the job. They ensure a highly skilled workforce and are attractive to employees because they increase their pay and prestige. They are desirable for employers to improve the capabilities of their workforce and marketability of their products or services. Most certifications require some level of experience, education, knowledge or skills test and maintenance through continuing education. Many positions require completion of CEUs, often through the maintenance of professional certifications.

IACET accreditation enables providers to award CEUs to students fulfilling their training requirements. The CEUs awarded for training provide a significant value to the learner. In addition, accreditation ensures a quality learning event that increases learning and applicability back on the job. Accreditation requires the measurement of learning outcomes to ensure and document that the learning in a class met the goals established for it.

Becoming an IACET Authorized Provider

The AP application serves as a self-study and allows an organization to benchmark current operations to the ANSI/IACET Standard for CE/T.

IACET's Standard addresses processes for designing, developing, and delivering continuing education and training, not the content of individual programs, which means that our Standard applies across all disciplines. Through an emphasis on the educational processes, the Standard ensures clear program development and valuable learning outcomes.

IACET Authorized Providers demonstrate that their programs meet ten nationally recognized standard categories. The rigorous application evaluates the CE/T aspects listed below and allows the applying organization to conduct an internal audit of their CE/T processes and procedures. The IACET paper and site visit review of these policies and procedures then provides an external audit lending credibility through IACET to the organization's CE/T programs.

- Category 1: Continuing Education and Training Organization
- Category 2: Responsibility and Control
- Category 3: Learning Environment and Support Systems
- Category 4: Learning Event Planning
- Category 5: Learning Outcomes
- Category 6: Planning and Instructional Personnel
- Category 7: Content and Instructional Methods
- Category 8: Assessment of Learning Outcomes
- Category 9: Awarding CEUs and Maintaining Learner Records
- Category 10: Program Evaluation

Conclusion

Benefits of Accreditation

Accreditation is a status that denotes the highest quality. The American Nurses Credentialing Center provides a comprehensive description of accreditation and how that quality is maintained: Purposes of accreditation include establishing and maintaining criteria based on best-available evidence, recognizing organizations that have met criteria, holding organizations accountable for consistently adhering to criteria during the period of accreditation, supporting accredited organizations in providing evidence of outcomes, and providing evidence to consumers and to the public that accredited organizations are functioning according to quality standards.²

The value of accreditation in CE/T programs is determined by how well the benefits realized help each organization achieve their strategic goals. Accreditation is an effective strategy for those organizations that strive to achieve and maintain a high level of quality in their CE/T program and/or need to be able to award CEUs. The research conducted by Schnaider and Bober-Michel, shows that accredited organizations typically achieve the goals they set out to meet. The high level of quality includes a standardized learning event development process based on best practices. It also requires the documentation of policies and processes and the success of the learning itself. This high level of quality increases the credibility and marketability of the provider. The ability to award CEUs is also an important benefit since it helps individuals achieve and maintain certification or other employment requirements. Organizations measure and

² American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). 2012. *The Value of Accreditation for Continuing Nursing Education* (retrieved from <http://www.nursecredentialing.org/Accreditation/ResourcesServices/Accreditation-WhitePaper2012.pdf>).

document the increase in reliability and perceived image associated with the benefits of accreditation. Individuals also identify benefits of accreditation through the earning of CEUs and participating in meaningful and effective programs.³

³ Alves, Helena. 2010. *The Measurement of Perceived Value in Higher Education: a Unidimensional Approach* (retrieved from http://www.dge.ubi.pt/investigacao/TDiscussao/2010/TD04_2010.pdf).