

The Importance of Continued Education

Continued education should not seem like an unnecessary burden placed on credentialing professions, but rather the process of on-going learning should be considered an opportunity, an asset to one's profession. As with any improvement strategy in business, continued education should be thoughtfully considered. A simple analysis of one's competency status can identify key areas which may warrant improvement or specific attention. Performing a SWOT analysis aids in identifying business or professional characteristics that may present risk or financial opportunity. The SWOT analysis requires a business to audit its operations and capabilities and can be very useful for expanding a marketing or service strategy. The S in SWOT represents all the business or professional STRENGTHS; these are the aspects of the business that best support financial vitality. Opposing business strength is the W of the SWOT analysis – WEAKNESSES. A business weakness may be low competency in particular areas, lack of business knowledge, undercapitalization or any host of other limitations. But as with any weakness the right application of effort can often negate negative outcomes if those weaknesses are identified and rectified before they manifest into collective failure. The O of the SWOT analysis is often the most exciting aspect as it represents business OPPORTUNITIES. Opportunities are those aspects and areas where the business can improve. Different aspects of opportunity are commonly found in market expansion via new marketing or promotional channels, new revenue streams, or a decrease in costs. Opportunities should present a positive outcome and lead to financial stability and growth. But opportunity must be carefully managed, as good opportunity can create a risk if misdirected. The final stage of the SWOT analysis is the T, which represents THREATS. Threats are any number of factors that present risk for some type of loss. Threats are commonly seen in the form of competition, liability risks, lack of capital, inability to deliver products or services, and/or loss of market share due to any number of controllable and uncontrollable factors.

Continued education is one aspect of a credential based business that should fall under the category of opportunity and lead to business strength, but may also be categorically defined as a threat if improperly managed or disregarded. Credentialing based professions often necessitate the maintenance of a valid credential to provide services defined by the scope of the profession and corresponding competency exemplified by the professional credential. Any professional that mismanages the credential may allow that credential to expire or be removed due to lack of compliance to continued education requirements.

There are several strategies that can be implemented to ensure that the continued education aspect of the profession serves to better the business and does not become a threat. The first step to successful continued education management is to know the credential maintenance requirements and the expiration date of the certification. Very few professionals read the detailed continued education handbook that always accompanies legitimate credentials. In many cases, professional credentials require multi-category competency. This means that a certain number of credits must be attained from specific learning categories. Professionals who do not pay attention to these categories of education may attain the correct number of continued education contact hours, but fail to

renew their certification because they did not comply with the re-certification requirements. The loss of a credential can cause one to lose their job or place them at a high risk of liability if exposed for working while not properly credentialed.

Once knowledgeable as to the recertification requirements and time to expiration, the next step is to identify areas of the business that are currently identified as threats. If the threat is high risk due to low competency in a key domain of personal training it is important to list that as a continued education need. Threats treatable by education and training should all be preferentially prioritized for continued education. Next focus on business opportunities; for instance older adults, hypertension and diabetes management, and children markets are all growing areas in personal training that provide lucrative opportunities. Each market requires specialized education and training to best exploit the potential financial benefits while still working with limited liability.

Competency deficiencies are weaknesses which are also important to identify so they do not manifest into business threats. In some cases deficiency management is prioritized, particularly when these deficiencies blatantly limit one's ability to perform or succeed at a key job task. Rectifying deficiencies and limitations using continued education converts potential problems into advantages and possible strengths. Once threats, weaknesses, and opportunities have been identified and prioritized, any areas of interest can round out additional continued education pursuits.

After the prioritized areas of focus for continued education are defined, the next step is to create a timeline for course involvement to ensure that all the education can be completed in a realistic timeframe consistent with expiration requirements. Delaying participation in continued education programs or not forming an appropriate timeline creates several possible negative outcomes. Individuals who fail to create and follow a timeline may not complete the necessary categorical credits before the expiration date, may miss courses or education opportunities offered during the tenure of the credential, may be forced to spend more money than previously budgeted for continued education, be forced to commit unplanned and possibly costly time to completing hours in a short period of time, and may require one to complete last minute coursework that is not beneficial to professional growth. Most of these errors occur due to poor planning and procrastination. The timeline helps to establish a balance in time management and cash flow as some courses can be rather costly.

In general, continued education will require \$20-40 per credit, but if travel is involved that cost may increase. Therefore it makes sense to identify the costs of the courses as well as when and where they are offered before placing them on a timeline. Although home study or distance learning courses are readily available, they require commitment and time management. Workshops and seminars can be more costly, but have a defined beginning and end preventing procrastination-related problems and often are more practical-based, which makes them valuable assets in continued education. Likely, a mix of coursework, again consistent with the required categories, best serves the need of the profession and prevents single dimension competency.

Credibility of the continued education is another key consideration. Competency assurance requires education from valid sources. Although the fitness industry offers diverse course offerings, the sponsoring organization must be credible for the credits to be applicable to your certification renewal requirements. It is important to check with your credentialing organization to ensure the credits are accepted and under which category before registering for a program or seminar. Pre-approved sponsoring organizations are listed on credentialing organization websites or are readily available from the organization's continued education department. Some things to look for in valid continued education courses include instruction by graduate degreed professionals with readily available instructor biographies, providership numbers and CEU values on certificates of completion, and categorical content agendas which identify contact hours and breaks.

Most legitimate certifying organizations will not provide credit for passing a certification exam. It is the education and training component that is measured in continued education, not the testing process. Although many continued education courses throw the word certification at the end for improved marketability, they hardly represent a valid certification. An easy litmus test to tell if the "certification" is valid is to identify if it is a recognized career path by the U.S. Department of Labor. For instance, personal training education workshops leading to a certification fits this criteria as personal training is a defined profession. On the other hand, is a flexibility specialist a job or are there any job openings for a core trainer specialist? No, which is why it is important to understand the programs, contents, and actual outcomes before registering for these types of "certifications" if using them for continued education. It is the professional's job to identify legitimate sources of continued education, as the certifying agency has specific requirements for recertification, and not all programs meet the set standards for credit. Being educated with regard to the credential maintenance requirements and how continued education can help the professional is a valuable asset to professional growth and development. Taking the short period of time to become acquainted with the organization's continued education program can prevent costly errors and possible loss of a credential due to preventable ignorance. The NCSF Continued Education Handbook can be downloaded from the organization's website under the continued education heading.