

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed Certification Programs

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The historic shutdown not only had a profound impact on how certification programs were carried out, but it also provides lessons for the future of certifications.

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic was a moment of truth for issuers of professional certifications. For the first time, they faced the challenge of an abrupt and extended disruption in their ability to fulfill their core function: evaluating and confirming occupational and professional competencies.

While the pandemic revealed blind spots in certification program management and operations, it also highlighted certifiers' strengths and sparked insights and changes that will better position them for the future. These are five lessons association certifiers learned during the pandemic that they can apply as they move forward in 2022 and beyond.

The Certification Program Supply Chain Deserves More Attention

Arguably, the biggest "aha" for certifiers was that a certification program has a supply chain. "Pandemic-related closures and travel restrictions impacted how various functions, such as exam construction, delivery, and proctoring were performed," said William Ellis, MS, RPH, executive director of the Board of Pharmacy Specialties (BPS). "We have been made more aware of core business activities and the need to at least consider a Plan B to accomplish these." Certifiers are now taking steps to actively manage their supply chains and mitigate

associated risk. For example, many plan to continue to offer live, remotely proctored, online exams in addition to administering exams at testing sites.

Standard-Bearing Organizations Can't Lose Sight of the Human Element

Certifiers debated how to balance maintaining the standards and rigor of their programs with being respectful of the impact the pandemic was having on their candidates and certificants. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) modified its policies to address challenges their customers were facing. "Too often we practice rigor above customer orientation when the exact opposite should be true," said Chief Knowledge Officer Alexander Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP. "Offering your consumers convenience does not mean you are cheapening the value of your credentials."

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Communications also were scrutinized by certifiers for appropriate tone and messaging. ASIS International CEO Peter O'Neil, FASAE, CAE, shared his organization's approach: "During COVID's early days, we took steps to ensure that we were more empathetic and less 'salesy' in our communications. We knew that people were struggling in more and different ways, and we took steps to ensure that we were sensitive to this." ASIS has continued to actively review and adjust its tone throughout the past 20 months.

Agility is Key to Responding to the Unexpected

Taking calculated risks and quickly implementing new practices enabled certifiers to make timely pivots. "As simple as it may sound, we just ... wait for it ... deliberately didn't take as long to make choices, and we often accepted the data points that we had at that moment in time to be sufficient, whereas in the past, we may have taken time to search for more data before making a decision.," O'Neil said. Agility enabled certifiers to implement major operational changes, such as initiating online testing, in only a few weeks.

A Solid Organizational Structure and Sound Ways of Working Facilitate Effective Responses

ASIS International leveraged the team structure it already had in place. Certification activities were directly and proactively supported by a dedicated team that included representation from IT, finance, and marketing and communications. "Had we not been an organization with these attributes prior to the pandemic, we would not have done as well in the pandemic as we did," O'Neil said.

Prior Scenario and Business-Continuity Planning Expedites Action

The onset of COVID-19 was surreal for BPS staff, who only a few months before had participated in a desktop disaster planning exercise for a global pandemic. Although the scenario did not focus on all the circumstances encountered in 2020, the experience helped BPS create a structure to apply to the COVID-19 pandemic. "While it is impossible to forecast exact

situations, it is very helpful to have at least a general emergency plan to draw upon when the inevitable disruption happens," said Ellis.

SHRM also had a history of business-continuity planning, including a desktop exercise to revise and rebuild business lines during crises. "While many focus on growing businesses, too few focus on surviving a direct blow," said Alonso.

Certifiers passed the test presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. While meeting these challenges, they also gained new insights that will serve them well as they continue to operate in an increasingly disruptive and unpredictable business environment.