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Are certifications less crucial for healthcare IT jobs?

Some certifications can be baseline requirements for healthcare organizations

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Timothy Stettheimer, CIO for St. Vincent's Health System in Birmingham, Ala., has more confidence in IT certifications than referrals and in-person interviews when it comes to hiring.

"How do you know you're hiring a good person? You can get a referral, but so what? Someone can interview well, but so what? How do you really know?" Stettheimer said. "But when you can say, 'I've hit these [IT education] targets,' that shows a commitment to advancement."

He admits that some certifications get a bad rap, and are seen as useless or too granular. "I mean, how many Cisco certifications are there out there? I've lost count now. It's great for a technology specialist-level profession, but for a leadership profession, it's not so helpful," he said. But, Stettheimer believes if you're not growing professionally, you're not doing your job.

Flush with federal funds and under the gun of federal regulatory deadlines, [the healthcare industry is leading the market](#) in IT jobs creation, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' job placement services.

The bureau projects that IT jobs in healthcare are expected to grow by 20% a year through 2018, "much faster than average." There are currently 176,090 IT jobs in healthcare, according to the agency.

Since November 2009, the number of healthcare IT positions has increased 67%, according to online job search engine SimplyHired.com, which lists 7,200 open healthcare IT positions out of 4.9 million jobs on its website.

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Continuing IT education is a passion for Stettheimer, who is a fellow with professional organizations such as The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), and the College of Healthcare Information Management Executives (CHIME). He is also being certified through the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS).

Stettheimer refers to CHIME as the "scalpel" of healthcare executive organizations because it focused on specific skill sets for healthcare CIOs. CHIME offers training in 13 key skill sets developed by 50 CIOs.

"Healthcare is the most information-intense and complex industry that I know of. I've worked in manufacturing ... but in terms of complexity and the impact of information ... I don't know anything that compares with healthcare," he said.

Stettheimer helped develop CHIME's CIO certification program and is also a teacher with the professional organization's [CIO boot camp](#), an intensive two and a half-day leadership course that has sold out for the past two years. The camp involves presentations, small group discussions, case studies and interactive problem solving.

Healthcare IT certification programs have two types of value, according to Stettheimer: They allow IT workers to benchmark where they are in terms of technology advancements and they let CIOs, CTOs and other IT managers know that they're likely hiring a good employee.

Less pay for certifications

Labor research firm Foote Partners said additional pay for IT specific certifications has been shrinking since 2008, while money for non-certified IT skills has steadily climbed.

Foote Partners tracks 502 IT-specific certification programs, measuring what additional money the market typically pays workers for those skills. The overwhelming majority of certifications tend to be vendor driven, not industry driven, according to Foote.

Since 2008, incentive pay for specific certifications has decreased 8.9%, while pay for non-certified IT skills has climbed 2.3%.

According to Foote Partners founder and CEO David Foote, at issue is the fact that business executives are looking for technical workers with business skills.

"We need people with liberal arts degrees that work in security operations right now," he said. "They're not deeply technical, but they're able to communicate and help companies to plan strategies. For example, if you are going to be engaging in social media, how would this content, if compromised, create a security threat? Those are things that have to be attacked by a person who works on both sides of the fence."

Foote said there are now legions of "hybrid IT-business professionals" in the market, and the demand for them is not waning.

Of the certifications that are gaining value, Foote said the most highly sought after are in more general areas such as project management, [security](#), networking and communications and systems administration and engineering.

"The definition of an IT professional has changed from a pure play to a subject matter expert," Foote said. "It's better not to get another certification for your tool belt but to go and get some business courses, take some marketing courses or operations courses."

Far from being on the decline, IT jobs are increasing to the tune of 123,000 in the past nine months, Foote said. But, while there are currently about 4 million IT specific jobs listed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are 20 million to 24 million IT workers who are employed by lines of business that aren't funded under an IT budget line item, Foote said.

"They're working in the marketing department, HR, sales, distribution, logistics, finance and accounting. They're working in product development," Foote said. "They're out there building product and making money for the company."

Lt. Col. Eric McClung, CIO for the U.S. Army's Pacific Regional Medical Command (PRMC), said that instead of looking for technologists, he often looks for healthcare workers who'd like to move into IT because it's easier to overlay technical skills on someone with a healthcare background than the other way around.

"Healthcare's a little more challenging," he said. "As it relates to the informatics workforce, just get me an interesting, willing person with a healthcare background and my organization will overlay the IT knowledge required."

For McClung, having a professional organization such as HIMSS and CHIME is invaluable because of the CIO skill sets he gains -- everything from vendor management to peer networking. McClung laments the fact that leadership over his command changes every two to three years, so being able to stay connected to the outside community of healthcare professionals through professional organizations keeps him abreast of the latest technologies and workflow practices.

Keith Fraidenburg, vice president of education & communications at CHIME, agreed that IT workers with business knowledge are more in demand, particularly for leadership positions.

Fraidenburg said CHIME's Healthcare CIO certification is highly complex, as it incorporates business-side requirements along with technical knowledge. The course is so difficult that even he didn't pass it the first time around.

But, Fraidenburg noted that workers with vendor-specific certifications, particularly in EHR deployment, are also highly sought after.

"Healthcare is definitely one of the most significant areas of growth, and it requires the most skilled people," Fraidenburg said. "It's the ultimate matrix management. Each part of the organization is fully dependent on other parts: patient care feeds into house keeping. In the payer space, care management and financial are related."

What employers are looking for

According to Fraidenburg, the most coveted IT certifications are the [Project Management Professional](#) for clinical systems and Electronic Health Records (EHR) deployment and administration, both for healthcare organizations and the vendors that sell the products.

"You look at any jobs board out there and everyone's hiring," said Fraidenburg. "You name the clinical system: EPIC, Eclipsys, Cerner, McKesson, Siemens, etc. The job boards are full of wanted ads. Anyone who has training on those systems are in very high demand now. Everyone is fighting for very small pool of talent."

Fraidenburg pointed out that more colleges and universities are announcing certification programs, many of which are being helped by federal funding.

Last fall, using [\\$144 million in government funds](#), more than 80 community colleges and universities in the U.S. began training healthcare IT workers to help fill an estimated 50,000 jobs needed to assist doctors and hospitals as they roll out EHRs over the next four to five years.

While civilian organizations are challenged by federal regulatory requirements to roll out EHRs and upgrade to [the World Health Organization's IDC-10 medical coding system](#), areas of the federal government have even greater challenges.

McClung, who is also CIO at Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii, also said he relies on IT certifications to vet candidates for IT positions, which is critical in an organization that changes leadership every two to three years. The PRMC is one of five Army regional medical commands worldwide that oversees day-to-day operations of treatment facilities in their regions.

Because of a high rate of IT workforce turnover, McClung views certifications as a baseline starting point for any potential employee. "The Department of Defense IT workforce at large

just underwent a requirement to be baseline certified in information assurance and in the computing environment," he said.

McClung has struggled to build an IT support infrastructure, but his challenges in finding good candidates are exacerbated by the fact that he can't competitively hire IT workers off the street based on the most qualified.

McClung said he has to go through the federal government's hiring system, which in its efforts to be non-discriminatory toward veterans and federal employees, "sometimes has the net affect of providing lesser qualified individuals." So he's always looking for qualified workers.

"We are realizing we're not able to keep up with the demand," he said.

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