
Professional Certificates versus Academic Education in light of Market Needs

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"Seek knowledge even (as far as) in China."

Mohammed (PBUH)

Abstract

This paper discusses the value of professional certificates available on commercial basis, as compared to academic education programs. We attempt to answer questions like: are commercial professional certificates sufficient for designation of qualified and knowledgeable individuals? Can commercial professional certificates replace academic education in some fields? Are commercial professional certificates considered an equal education opportunity for people who missed the chance for academic education? What are the negative and positive sides of both paths, and can they be complementary to each other? We will also suggest some governing factors that can limit the negative sides of the two paths, and how to maximize their value. The focus will be mainly on project management certificates and education programs.

Keywords: *Education, Professional Certifications, Job Market, Higher Education, Continual Education, Professional Development, Career Management*

Definition and Opposition

What we mean by professional certificates in the context of this paper is mainly professional development certificates available from associations and companies that focus on serving the community of a certain profession. These certificates in general measure understanding and / or compliance to standards developed and published by these institutions, and sometimes on multi-level basis. Examples of such certificates in the project management arena are PMI certificates for various specialties, IPMA certificates, Axelos certificates, etc.

Academic education programs are either undergraduate or post-graduate studies that take around 2 to 4 years on average to complete, and provides students with knowledge in many subjects related to a certain discipline, so that graduates are ready to pursue the practical job life as specialists in their field of study. Examples of such programs are tracks in business administration programs with major in project management. This is available in most universities around the world.

Talking about the knowledge base on each side, we can see that professional certificates are based on standards that are developed and maintained over years by experts, while available for review and contribution from the wider community of professionals, and in most cases this is an international scope, although the institutions who issue these certificates are companies based on specific countries and governed by their specific regulations, and they are in general viewed as non-profit institutions, although some are just registered legally as commercial companies.

Academic programs are pursued and supervised in universities, by academic staff who develop knowledge accumulatively and collaboratively, with in-depth study of each individual subject in the field. In addition, pursuing an academic program successfully would require the student to practice many assignments and research papers along with the theoretical study of the literature. Universities are ranked nationally and internationally, and students from around the world have the opportunity to enroll in local or abroad studies.

These two types of education are different by far, but we need to analyze them together, because there are reflections on the job market. Academic programs are the original and normal path of education when available and affordable, and commercialized professional certificates are not considered an alternative in any way. Professional certificates can be complementary to academic studies to acquire specialized knowledge in some field if it's not the major in academic specialization. Also they offer an additional opportunity when the academic study is not affordable. Take in consideration also that institutions offering these professional certificates would require some level of academic education combined with number of years of practical experience as a prerequisite to enroll for their professional certificates.

The value of academic degrees is much outweighing that of professional certificates, but these professional certificates are valued in the job market more than they are actually worth, mainly due to the marketing efforts done by the issuing institution. However, this worth is dependent on how much they are recognized and valued by the community.

Pros and Cons of each type

Comparing academic programs to professional certificates will show where each of them has advantage over the other in some aspects:

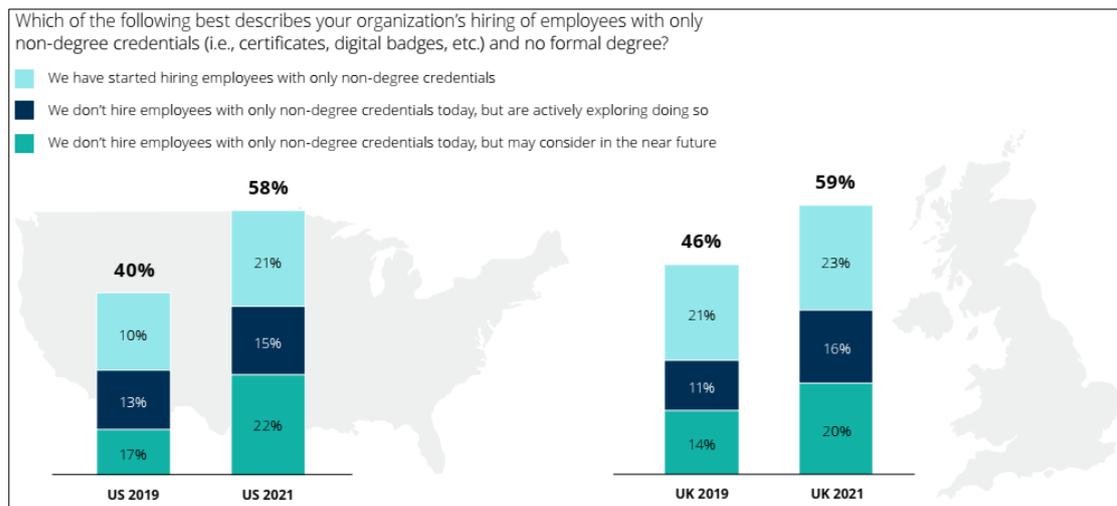
Academic Degree	Professional Certificate
Core specialization intense study	Incremental enhancing and updating knowledge
Long term, lasting for years to acquire	Usually short term or part time programs for already working people
Slower path to the job market but more rewarding and future proof	Quick path to the job market for picking low hanging fruits
Costly to complete	Less costly programs
Degree certificate is acquired after completion of the full program	For some programs, intermediate level based certificates can be earned in shorter terms while progressing towards the top level certificate
Less liable to abuse for commercial reasons, clear tracks and objectives, conducted by official universities	Liable to abuse commercially by companies who trade on certificates and promote a professional image, making use of individuals desire to raise their professional profile through certifications
Provides broad knowledge across subjects related to specialization field, with higher degrees available for narrower specialization	Provides specific track, job focused knowledge for performing a certain task or role
Allows wide range of higher paying job opportunities, with payment range increasing as higher degrees are earned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allows opportunity for specific job roles - Allows further promotion to higher levels and offers advantage when combined with academic degree
Available for a segment of people who can afford degree education	Available to disadvantaged people who didn't have the chance to enroll in academic education, to catch up with the job market
Abroad study for full degrees requires relocation to the offering university physical place	Remote or local training and examination is the norm for global applications, very limited requirements for relocation
Recognized world wide	Recognized world wide at varying degrees

Implications in the Job Market

Qualifications sought after in the job market will include both academic degrees, as well as professional education certificates. It can be an organizational HR policy to require specific academic major degree, while additional professional studies are considered as extra advantage. However, a visible trend in the job market is to focus on what an individual can do rather than their educational level or background.

Take in consideration also that many people change their career after graduation from college to pursue a totally different profession of their passion. This also offers the opportunity for those who missed the chance of receiving an academic degree of their desired specialization for any reason to compensate that through attending professional education programs and get a formal certificate to build their career upon.

"While degrees are still important, employers are starting to think about alternate credentials". According to an employer research report by Pearson released in 2021, "six in ten employers are open to hiring candidates with non-degree certificates, up from four in ten in 2019". [1]



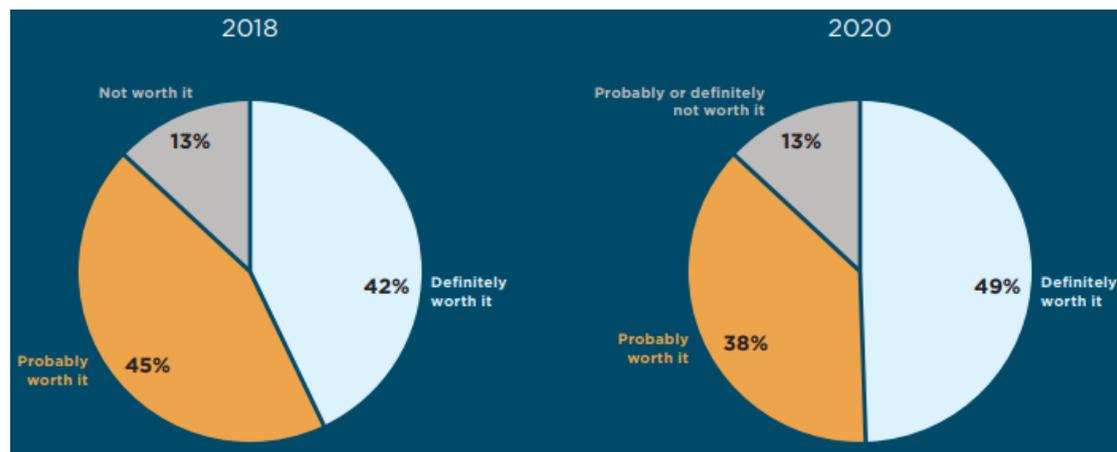
Also, employers want to offer training in soft skills like leadership and collaboration: [1]



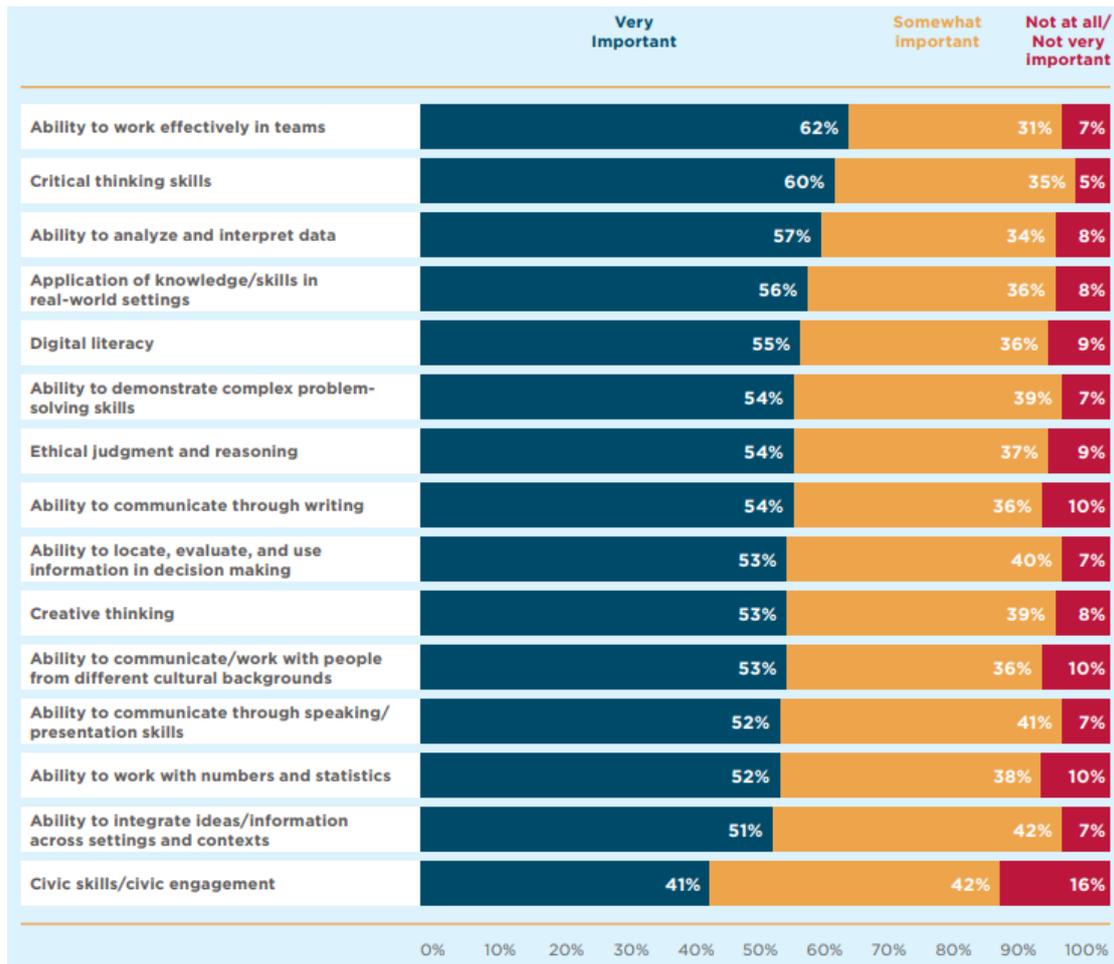
Looking at this list of skills will show the complimentary role professional education plays in equipping employees with essential skills to succeed in the job market, and highlights the need for continual education and professional training and certifications, in addition to major academic degrees.

It's worth to note here also that the frequency of change in a certain field and need to keep up to date will entail how important is continual education in technical specializations, depending on the professional needs of each field, for example like in information technology related industries.

"Nearly nine out of ten employers think that getting a college degree is either definitely or probably worth it", according to a 2021 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U): [2]



On the other hand, and according to the same study, "At least half of employers view the skills of a liberal education as 'very important' for college graduates": [2]



This confirms the idea that professional certificates are complimentary to academic degrees, and the added value of acquiring certain needed skills through continual education.

Note: The statistics mentioned above are based on the US and UK societies, but the results can be indicative for the trend in the job market in general in most regions around the world, with probably different measures within acceptable error limits.

Credibility Metrics of Commercial Certificates [3]

Clearly, certification is an industry and business by itself, and in some cases the business part is so prevailing that the mission of the institution itself is threatened to be lacking credibility. So how to judge the credibility and worthiness when selecting professional certificates and the issuing institutions? The following symptoms may signify a possibly con business institution:

- They keep releasing new certification programs all the time without being driven by real professional needs in the community and not serving any professional development purpose. These new certificates are released mainly as new income generation channels.
- They may cancel certification programs at any time when these certificates are no longer generating the financial reward that was expected from them, or when more financially rewarding options are found, even as reseller for another company. Such financially focused institutions don't care about the certificate holders of the cancelled certificates or about their professional and investment losses out of this cancellation. One incident of this kind is enough to mark such institution for elimination completely from your professional development plans.
- Competitive, rather than collaborative, institutes who are driven by the desire to outperform and win over other institutions working in the same profession and issuing competing certificates. This is a clear sign of pure business mission of such institutions.
- Releasing commercial products which were developed by volunteer efforts from the professionals who were taken by the glossy image of those institutions and thought doing efforts free of charge will enhance their professional profile just by attaching those institutions' names to their resume. Unfortunately, those well-intentioned professionals were abused by such commercial institutions who take advantage of their hard work for the purpose of income generation and image building.
- They require periodical payment for maintaining the professional certificates you earned. Although periodical renewal in general is valid and acceptable, associating this with the need to keep continually paying endlessly to keep your certificate active is evidently a financially driven action.

That said, most of these criteria, if not all, are actually materializing in majority of certification institutes in the market currently. Arguably, we can say that academic studies are more credible and of higher value than commercial proprietary certificates, unless it's clear enough from those institutions performance that they are professionally, not financially, driven.

Conclusion

Governance is necessary when it comes to commercial conduct. However, value of professional certificates based on standards developed by the community is not overlooked, and the need and impact are recognized both on the level of individual development, and on the level of business market needs. Realistic weighing without over estimation of the brand name and market image of a certificate title would save people rights through objective selection and valuation of their credentials, and avoid misleading decision making in appointments of professional positions that will eventually lead to business results.

References

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