

ASQ Certification: My Competitive Advantage in a Tough Economy

by Tyler Wallace

At a Glance . . .

- After graduating from college during the worst job market in decades, I discovered my passion for quality and obtained a CQIA and a CSSBB to jumpstart my career in healthcare.
- ASQ certification prepared me to implement a new departmental notification process just one month after landing my first job. I'm now being considered to help launch a health system implementation of Lean Six Sigma.
- In addition to opportunities to participate in quality improvement projects, within two years I received two promotions and tripled my salary.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a healthcare professional. But after graduating from college during the worst economy in decades, I began having doubts about getting a chance to work in the industry that I aspired to be a part of.

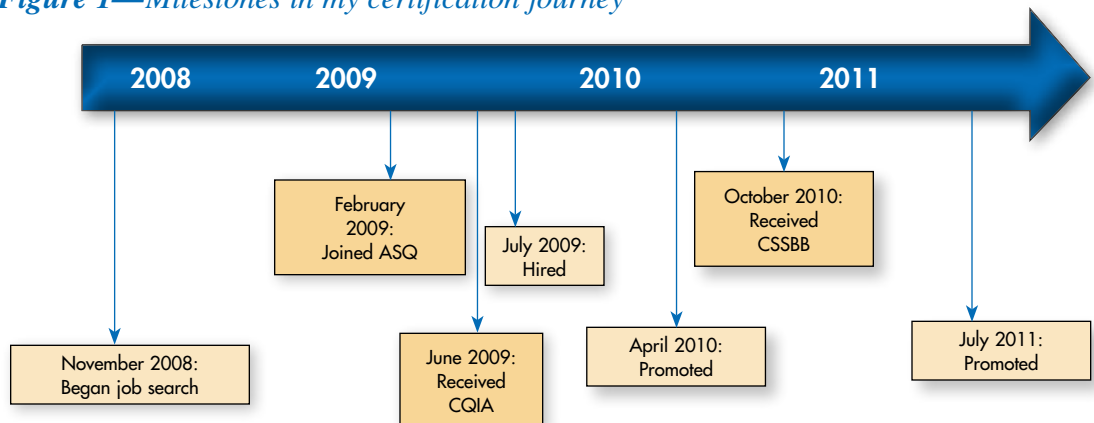
That was until I discovered my passion for quality and got a boost from ASQ certifications, which brought a focus to my career and gave me the edge I needed to succeed in a tough job market. A month after attaining my first certification, Certified Quality Improvement Associate (CQIA), I landed my first “real job.” Within two years, I received my Certified Six Sigma Black Belt (CSSBB), earned two promotions, and tripled my salary (see Figure 1).

My Quality Journey

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in public health from Indiana University in December 2007, I took a year off of school to help run a non-profit children’s camp in Auburn, Ala., where I met my future wife, Casey. I returned to Indiana to begin working toward my master’s of business administration with high hopes of getting my foot in the door somewhere, but I couldn’t find a job.

A CEO of a large health system agreed to interview me for an internship in the department of my choice. “Where there’s a need, I’ll work,” I said. At that point, I didn’t care what department I was placed in; I just wanted a management role someday. During the interview, the CEO asked me what I’m passionate about. I said healthcare was my passion. She smiled and replied, “You need to figure out what your passion is, what you want to live for, what you want to wake up every morning and look

Figure 1—Milestones in my certification journey



forward to.” It wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear; I wanted an internship offer. The discussion, which probably is long forgotten by her, forever changed my life. I didn’t get an internship or a job offer, but I learned a valuable life lesson.



Tyler and Casey Wallace

Discovering Passion for Lean Six Sigma

After the interview, I thought long and hard about what I wanted out of life. I loved healthcare and I wanted to make a difference, but I wasn’t sure how. I scoured the Internet for positions that I could feel passionate about, and I kept stumbling on articles about how Lean Six Sigma (LSS) was radically improving healthcare. A light bulb went on in my head: that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to learn to use quality tools to eliminate waste in healthcare.

An adjunct faculty member who mentioned that LSS was going to be the next big thing in healthcare first exposed me to LSS as an undergraduate. He even taught us a few basic quality tools, such as the fishbone diagram and flowcharting. Little did I know, those lessons would springboard my quality training.

My research on quality positions in healthcare helped me determine that a CQIA certification was the best stepping stone for my career track. Since ASQ certifications were common requirements listed in position descriptions of jobs that interested me, I felt it was important to become ASQ-certified and join ASQ. In preparation for my career in quality, I joined ASQ in February 2009 and signed up to take the CQIA exam. After I received my CQIA certification in June 2009, I began studying the Six Sigma approach.

Landing My First Real Job

In June 2009, I was still out of work and missed Casey, who had moved to Athens, Ga., to be with her family while her nine-year-old cousin fought Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. I relocated to be with her.

I applied for jobs at the two local hospitals in Athens. After I didn’t hear from them, I went against job-seeker advice and

called the hospitals’ hiring managers. One agreed to interview me for a housekeeping supervisor position—I think the fact I was willing to drive from Indiana to Georgia for one interview is what intrigued her.

During the interview, the hiring manager shared some issues that the housekeeping department was experiencing. I told her that my CQIA certification prepared me to help resolve those issues through 5S, level-loading her staff, and standardizing processes.

After seven months of job searching and coming up short, I was finally offered a job at St. Mary’s Health Care System in Athens. While the pay wasn’t much, it was a full-time job with benefits, at a hospital, in the same city as Casey.

My Big Break: New Departmental Notification Process

Less than two months later, I was given a spot as the housekeeping delegate on a cross-functional process improvement team for the discharge process of patients. I was the only team member with an ASQ certification or formal quality training.

We were tasked with reducing the number of phone calls from housekeeping to the bed control department. On average, housekeeping called bed control 650 times every month to notify them of a dirty room. Because bed control was missing other critical calls, the CEO challenged the team to develop an alternative notification process.

Since the team had already met several times by the time I joined, the CEO’s patience was beginning to diminish. He wanted a solution in a week, and the team was out of ideas. Over the following weekend, I developed a new process based on the Kanban system, a concept related to lean methodology. The process allowed for bed control to be notified of a dirty room without phone calls being made.

That Monday, I presented my idea to the chief nursing officer (CNO). Not only did the CNO support my idea, she appointed me to implement it. I was on Cloud 9! I immediately implemented the new process, which significantly reduced the volume of calls made between housekeeping and bed control. During the first month, 14 calls were made. In the following month, there were zero calls.

Getting Serious with Six Sigma

After I participated on the bed control notification project, I took the next step toward mastering the Six Sigma methodology by applying to take the Certified Six Sigma Green Belt exam (CSSGB). My request was denied because I lacked the amount of experience required to take the CSSGB exam.

Since I had already participated on one project at St. Mary’s, I volunteered to help with another project that would allow me to

meet the experience requirements for the Certified Six Sigma Black Belt (CSSBB) exam. I worked with the Human Resources department to streamline the audit process for clinical employees. We used a fishbone diagram, measured process flow, and SIPOC analysis. The project shaved 12 hours off of the audit time.

After I submitted project descriptions, I was allowed to take the CSSBB exam. In October 2010, at the age of 25, I received my CSSBB certification.

Promotions

In April 2010, a project manager position opened up in the IT department. Even though I was unfamiliar with IT, the chief information officer agreed to meet with me to discuss the position. He already had knowledge of me from the projects previously described. After a couple of interviews, I was offered the opportunity—talk about a huge leap of faith to trust a housekeeping supervisor to lead IT projects! It turned out to be a great fit. While I wasn't able to focus specifically on quality, I still applied LSS principles to the way I managed projects—to much success.

In July 2011, I was promoted to project and operations manager for the IT department. I'm now tasked with streamlining IT operations to reduce costs and increase customer satisfaction—an adventure I'm thrilled to be a part of. I apply quality tools in a very practical way, in a high-visibility area.

Currently, the health system is planning for a system-wide Six Sigma initiative, and I'm playing a role in determining how we should move forward.

Next Steps

Because of ASQ certifications and my passion for quality, I was able to land a job in a recession, receive two promotions, and triple my salary in two years (and have a lot of fun along the way). Now, at the age of 26, I may get a chance to participate on a strategic team to facilitate implementing LSS to a health system that has dozens of service lines and over 1,400 employees. From scrubbing toilets to determining the strategic direction of an organization that generates over \$175 million in revenue annually, I couldn't image a more drastic change than that.

Long-term, I hope to spread the use of quality tools in healthcare. One of my dreams includes starting a business to help smaller hospitals utilize the synergy of IT and LSS to decrease their

costs and increase quality. Hospitals must embrace quality tools in a hurry if they want to survive. Also, I would like to obtain my doctorate in health policy and work at the state or federal level to facilitate industry-wide improvements.

I hope that my story will inspire others to begin (or continue) their quality journey. What makes quality so amazing is that it is applicable to any aspect of a process, organization, or industry. It doesn't matter if it's the IT department, nursing units, ancillary departments, physician practices, or even housekeeping. An organization is made up of hundreds of processes, and someone has to make sure they're efficient.

For More Information

- Contact Tyler Wallace at tyler.wallace@outlook.com.
- For more information about St. Mary's Health Care System, visit www.stmarysathens.com.
- To learn more about ASQ certifications, visit asq.org/certification.
- More case studies about certification and resources for preparing for your certification are located in the ASQ Knowledge Center at asq.org/knowledge-center/certification-news.

About the Author

Tyler Wallace is a project and operations manager for the IT department at St. Mary's Health Care System in Athens, Ga. He earned his bachelor's degree in public health from Indiana University in 2007, and his master's degree in business administration from Kennesaw State University in 2011. He is an ASQ member, a CQIA, and a CSSBB.

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