



ASQ Certifications: Great Workforce Development Tools

By James Teeple, Ivy Tech Community College and ASQ Senior Member

Like most of our county, the recent and sudden economic downturn has proved to be a real challenge to the economic competitiveness of the state of Indiana, with an abrupt slowdown in the manufacturing sector and the resulting rapid rise of unemployment rates.

The workforce in the northeast region of Indiana has been hit particularly hard this last year, largely due to an idled recreational vehicle (RV) industry, which added a large number of workers to the unemployment ranks. Unemployment rates in this region had already begun escalating because the manufacturing base is firmly rooted in the automotive industry supply chain. Combine these contributing factors with an aging and retiring skilled workforce demographic, and there's an instant realization that a greater emphasis must immediately be put on workforce development.

State assistance

Indiana offers a variety of incentives, programs and assistance that invest in and create jobs in the state. One example is the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, which allocates training dollars from the Federal Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act through the region's Workforce Investment Board (WIB) Rapid Response funding.

Often, this funding process is put in motion almost immediately after employers announce planned cutbacks in their workforces. Some important objectives of these funds are for retrofitting the workforce with marketable skills and finding suitable employment for workers as quickly as possible. The state administrators and regional WIB has mandated that authorized training programs provide professional certifications or college credit as a potential outcome for participants, so they can sustain employment opportunities in current and future endeavors.

As authorized training providers quickly rush to develop programs targeted toward "re-skilling" the area's workforce, the main challenge is to identify applicable skills that could be immediately or eventually applied to more resilient industries, such as healthcare and defense, and emerging industries, such as renewable energy. From the start, it became painfully evident that many of the suddenly jobless workers, who in most



cases have invested a number of years with an organization, lacked the skills needed for personal marketability outside of their respective industry of experience. Job skills specific to certain industries, such as RV manufacturing, can be a challenge to market beyond that industry when those positions are reduced.

Popular technical programs, such as Ivy Tech Community College's Welding for the American Welding Society, CNC Operation for National Incident Management System and Soldering for IPC certification courses, are filling quickly and are proving to be a great first step for those needing to renew their skills or further their professional development.

In addition, many of these participants are looking to continue their educational experience and are planning to enroll in college degree programs. However, many of the adult learners seem to be content with obtaining as many résumé builders as they can with their personal allocation of training funds. A portion of them are also looking for practical, bona fide skills they fully understand and know how to apply in real-world scenarios.

A budding partnership

I work as director of operations for the workforce and economic development division at Ivy Tech Community College and am the education chair of ASQ Northeast Indiana Section 0905. So, the decision for me to develop training programs toward obtaining ASQ certifications was an obvious fit. I know the value of these certifications after a 25-year career in quality assurance and as an ASQ member for as many years.

As more and more of these participants completed programs and gained technology-related credentials, it became apparent they could also achieve an advantage in competing for scarce jobs with an ASQ certification. Not only can these certifications benefit production workers and technicians, they have also proved beneficial to supervisory and management staff. Plant closures can necessitate that all employees, regardless of stature, possess a competitive edge in today's job market, where a degree alone may not be enough to attest for one's abilities.

Ivy Tech Community College made the decision to initially develop training programs for the certified quality improvement associate (CQIA) and Six Sigma green belt (SSGB) certifications, because they are more generalized in content and not



necessarily specific to a professional position in quality. These programs teach useful continuous improvement skills and knowledge that can be applied to supplement any profession within any organization.

For those participants with minimal or no prior exposure to the concepts, tools and methods of continuous improvement, the CQIA certification is considered a prerequisite program to the SSGB training. Another prerequisite is meeting the minimum requirements of the ASQ exam application. Although Ivy Tech doesn't require anyone to be an ASQ member, trainers explain the benefits of membership and encourage them to consider completing a membership application at the same time they apply to sit for the exam. Most take advantage of the opportunity, because the reduced exam rate for members typically covers the first year membership.

Our research has shown that many viable organizations in the region with potential hiring opportunities already practice lean Six Sigma. These organizations understand the need for a competitive edge in their business operations; therefore, they realize they need to show a return on their investment by adopting continuous improvement philosophies for reducing waste, improving efficiency and enhancing product and service quality.

Based on this reality, we've made a conscious decision to integrate a thorough understanding of how lean and Six Sigma work in harmony. Most employers recognize that individuals with these particular ASQ certifications not only know of continuous improvement, but are more likely to be knowledgeable with the practical applications. This makes the CQIA and SSGB certifications attractive credentials for potential new hires, as well as incumbent workers.

The college's workforce and economic development division has had many inquiries recently from organizations planning lean Six Sigma or general continuous improvement training programs for their incumbent workers. Some of these inquiries come from individuals within organizations who are seeking professional development opportunities, while others are company representatives who seek to train groups of their employees. To accommodate individuals and groups, the college decided to offer programs via open-enrollment schedules and on a contractual basis.

In addition, in an effort to provide as much flexibility as possible for the varying demographics—such as employed vs. unemployed, Gen-Xer vs. boomer and commuter



vs. local student—the college’s delivery options include traditional classroom and blended e-learning—online content combined with classroom.

An added benefit to running these courses has been the positive energy generated from tapping core value systems of natural leadership tendencies in the students and teaching them how to achieve constructive results by applying useful tools and methods of continuous improvement. A couple of recent testimonials corroborate this:

“This training was extremely valuable to me for its overall value to my continued professional development. Ivy Tech provided the coordination of the coursework, the course material and support throughout this training. Additionally, it was very helpful to get trained with other professional individuals and networking.”

—*Ambarish Dave (SSGB)*

“I’ve been involved with my local ASQ section for several years to gain the knowledge and work experience required to sit for the exams. From my involvement with section members, I understand the valuable importance of ASQ certifications—both personal and for career development. Recently, I had been laid off for about six months when the opportunity presented itself and allowed me to attend a course that taught me the importance of the SSGB certification body of knowledge. Passing the exam and receiving my SSGB certificate gave me the opportunity to prove myself as a self-starter and continuously improve myself, which in turn has proven I can do the same in my career. I recently accepted a new job in the medical device field, working on improvement projects. I have been involved with several projects that, without the experience and knowledge gained from the SSGB certificate, I feel I never would have been given the chance. The workforce and economic development class prepared me for the exam and gave me the confidence and knowledge to overcome my fears and uncertainties of being able to pass the exam. If, in the future, any other refresher or training courses were offered, I would strongly recommend them, regardless of your knowledge or experience.”

—*Ed Woodward (SSGB)*

“My certification is through ASQ. In brief, the value for me has been when analyzing new projects or existing opportunities—I stay focused on the processes that are needed to accomplish or improve the end result. Effective teamwork is also strongly emphasized. When assigned a new task instead of focusing on the deliverables, teams I lead or participate on focus on minimizing the obstacles to collaboration, identifying and maximizing each of our unique talents, and finally following a protocol where meetings are short, effective and valuable. Finally, by understanding the difference between controllable and uncontrollable variation in processes, I feel confident in using the various quality tools to analyze, change, and ultimately improve most work processes.”

—*Patrick Buesching (CQIA)*



Looking ahead, some next steps under consideration for product development include Six Sigma Black Belt, quality technician and manager of quality certification workforce development programs.

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