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CERTIFYING SUCCESS

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

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BAD, THE UGLY


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Want to stand out from the crowd and take your supply chain career to the next level without pursuing a full academic degree? A certification or certificate program might help you make the cut.

by Merrill Douglas

When David Gilmore retired from the U.S. Navy, he hoped that his experience in military supply would lead him to a new career. To make the transition to civilian industry, he needed to learn about supply chains in the private sector. “I was looking for a way to get my feet wet with industry terms and current best practices,” says Gilmore, now manager of commercial finance, Americas region at CEVA Logistics, a third-party logistics provider in Jacksonville, Fla.

For Gilmore, one key to rewarding civilian employment consisted of three letters: CTL. They stand for Certified in Transportation and Logistics, a credential he earned from the American Society of Transportation and Logistics (ASTL) in June 2013.



Certification in a supply chain discipline shows that you know your stuff. The work you do to earn this stamp of achievement helps you deepen or broaden your knowledge without investing in an advanced degree. The same is true of a supply chain certificate offered by an academic institution.

CERTIFICATION VS. CERTIFICATE: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

A certification is a credential from a professional organization. Besides ASTL, some other sources of certification in supply chain-related fields are APICS, the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP), the Institute for Supply Management (ISM), and the Supply Chain Council (SCC).

To earn a certification, usually you must take an exam or series of exams. Those who pass may add a set of letters to their names—for example, CPSM for Certified Professional in Supply Management (from ISM) or CPIM for Certified in Production and Inventory Management (from APICS). To maintain their certifications, every few years professionals must demonstrate that they have taken classes, attended meetings, or otherwise kept up with developments in the field.

A certificate is a document that proves you have completed a non-credit course of study at a college or university. Don't let the "non-credit" part fool you: these programs can be rich and rigorous. Unlike a certification, a certificate doesn't earn you a string of letters after your name. On the other hand, you don't need to renew it. Like the diploma you earn in a credit-bearing program, once you earn it, a certificate is yours for life.

People may pursue certificates and certifications at many different points in their careers. ASTL, for example, collaborates with several high schools and community colleges to prepare students for the entry-level Global Logistics Associate (GLA) credential.

"We also have a mid-level credential for people who have some experience,"

says Laurie Denham, president of ASTL in Washington, D.C. Individuals whose companies want them to add logistics to responsibilities in other areas, such as finance, may pursue that credential as well.

ASTL's CTL—the one Gilmore earned—is an advanced designation. "That designation is pursued by people who have been in their jobs for 25 years but maybe

from entirely different disciplines, such as engineering, marketing, or sales. "They are trying to position themselves to take on broader, more strategic responsibilities," Frayer says.

And some people, such as Gilmore, pursue certificates or certifications to ease the transition from the military to civilian supply chain management.



Michigan State University's supply chain certificate programs attract experienced professionals, as well as students from other disciplines who want to take on broader responsibilities.

didn't finish college, or didn't get a degree in supply chain or logistics and transportation," Denham says.

The certificate programs at Michigan State University (MSU) also attract many experienced professionals. "Sometimes people progress through their careers to a high level in an organization without a formal supply chain education," says David Frayer, director of executive development programs at the university's Eli Broad College of Business.

Those people want to complement the practical knowledge they've gained on the job with the deeper understanding a formal program provides, he says.

Other students in the program come

HIGHER PAY

Besides enhancing a student's knowledge, a certificate or certification may significantly enhance your career prospects. For example, people who earn certifications from APICS see their earnings increase by 14 to 21 percent. "The certification designates a higher level of knowledge, and better applying the practices within supply chain and operations management," says Abe Eshkenazi, CEO of APICS. Those achievements tend to impress corporate managers.

"Hiring executives tell us that resumes highlighting an industry credential go to the top of the list," says Denham.

Donna Raihl, a purchasing and supply



management specialist with the U.S. Postal Service (USPS), earned the CPSM from ISM in 2012. “Having a CPSM behind your name is the golden ticket,” she says.

Students who finish the courses for the Supply Chain Management Certificate offered by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Extension often call Carol Eisman, anxious to know when



Certification programs offer a pathway to improve skills and enhance overall job performance, says Laurie Denham, president, American Society of Transportation and Logistics.

they’ll receive their documents. “When it comes time for job evaluations, their managers want to see that they’ve finished the certificate,” explains Eisman, program manager, technical management.

When a business underwrites the training for certificates or certifications, the advantages are twofold: not only does the company gain more supply chain expertise, but it gains a new benefit for valued workers. “We find that investing in education increases employee retention,” Denham says.

Many advantages of certificates or certifications also accrue to people who earn undergraduate or graduate degrees. Deciding which route to follow may boil down simply to how much time and money you feel able to invest.

Each option—gaining an industry credential or pursuing a degree—offers its own advantages. “A certification means you’ve been validated on a body of knowledge,” says Denham. “But if you sit in a classroom for 30 hours, you’re going to be digging a little deeper.”

Unlike courses leading to a degree, the programs that prepare students for APICS certifications focus on the nuts and bolts of supply chain management. “This is for individuals who want not only to gain the knowledge, but also to apply it,” says Eshkenazi.

MANY CHOICES AT MSU

If you want to earn a supply chain certificate, you’ll probably apply to the continuing education department at a college or university. MSU, for example, offers two week-long residential programs aimed at people who have reached more senior levels in their careers. These take place on the main campus in East Lansing.

The school also offers a year-long program, the West Michigan Supply Chain Management Certificate Series, at the Steelcase University Learning Center in Grand Rapids. In addition, WMU provides several online Master Certificate supply chain management programs that emphasize logistics, operations, procurement, or integrated supply chain management.

The West Michigan series is designed particularly for people who execute company strategies. Class assignments include a project that students must scope out, design, review, and implement, then report on.

But all of WMU’s supply chain certificate programs take a broad view, showing how supply chain strategies can drive innovation and financial health. “The courses help open people’s minds to the real potential of supply chain,” Frayer says.

That’s why the WMU programs often attract professionals from other fields—such as business planning, information technology, and customer service—who want to take on broader, more strategic roles, he adds.

Kevin Johnson, human resources manager, supply chain operations at the retail chain Meijer in Grand Rapids, entered the West Michigan program to learn more about the organizations he serves within the firm. “I felt that getting some cross-functional knowledge would better position me,” he says.

Johnson manages HR for the company’s distribution centers and manufacturing facilities, and for related operations such as logistics, food safety, and asset protection. He holds a bachelor’s degree in business economics from Florida A&M University, and is finishing an MS in employment law from Nova Southeastern University. He also holds an HR certificate from MSU.

For their project, Johnson and three other Meijer employees in the program developed a plan for moving privately branded milk from two Meijer-owned dairies into stores. This wasn’t just an academic exercise: the company might implement the new strategy. “We ran it by our executive team, and they liked it,” Johnson says.

Collaborating with colleagues from Meijer helped Johnson forge ties that serve him well on the job. “This has enhanced my knowledge as an HR professional, to become a better partner to the businesses I support,” he says. Interacting with peers from other companies, and with the instructors, also proved extremely valuable, he adds.

Meijer sends four employees to the West Michigan Supply Chain Management Certificate Series each year. It’s a way to cultivate people who have shown potential. “This incremental exposure, providing better knowledge of supply chain management, will position them as leaders,” Johnson says.

UCLA Extension offers its Supply Chain Management Certificate program mainly online, although companies can arrange



to offer it in-house as well. “We’re currently holding the program on site at the Boeing Company in Huntington Beach,” notes Eisman. The school has also sent instructors to teach the course for the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon.

To qualify for the certificate, students take six required courses and two electives. Instructors post narrated PowerPoint presentations, and some also schedule live Web sessions, allowing students to interact. Instructors archive those sessions for students who aren’t able to attend.

In some courses, students team up to conduct projects, often with a practical bent. “Most instructors allow students to pick projects relevant to their work,” Eisman says.

GLOBAL ATTRACTION

The online program draws students from all over the world, including military personnel on deployment. Demand has increased in recent years, reflecting a corresponding demand in the job market. “Supply chain management has become an important skill and asset for a company,” Johnson says.

One special feature of the UCLA program is its relationship with the Los Angeles chapter of ISM. The school encourages students to participate in ISM’s events and to pursue its CPSM certification. It also keeps that certification in mind when it designs its curriculum.

“We have worked with ISM-LA to look at elements on the CPSM exam, to make sure our classes are comprehensive and cover all those topics,” Eisman says. “Our program is hands-on and practical; it’s not just geared to an exam.” But it does cover the subject matter that ISM considers important.

Raihl at USPS says the UCLA program was invaluable to her preparation for the CPSM exam, in part because the instructors explained how to handle real issues one might encounter on the job. “Without that education, along with book knowledge, I would have failed,” she says.

Raihl started working on the UCLA certification in 2008 and completed it in 2011. She entered the program because she wanted to advance in her career without committing to graduate studies. “I wasn’t sure I was ready to spend the money and time on a master’s degree,” she says.



“Having a CPSM behind your name is the golden ticket,” says Donna Raihl, purchasing and supply management specialist, USPS. She earned CPSM certification from ISM in 2012.

After earning the CPSM in 2012, Raihl found that the two credentials attracted attention from potential employers such as Lockheed Martin, Accenture, Hilton Worldwide, and Nike. She joined USPS in 2012, and is currently working on an MS in government contracts through George Washington University.

ASTL: AVATARS AND COHORTS

Students who want to prepare for ASTL certification have several options. Some high schools and community colleges teach the GLA curriculum to qualify students for entry-level jobs in logistics.

In Florida, ASTL’s Jacksonville chapter underwrites the course at 15 high schools. “Any student who graduates and passes the

GLA exam can articulate 12 hours in college credit to any state college in Florida,” Denham says.

Curriculum specialists at ASTL designed the GLA course with advice from industry professionals. Schools that deliver the course can employ both classroom instruction and online modules using avatars and gaming strategies.

Students also can study for the GLA on their own. “We send the student materials, and they do the online avatar program,” Denham says. “Then they go to a test site or to their HR department to get a proctor, and take the exam.”

People who want to prepare for the mid-level Professional Designation in Logistics and Supply Chain Management (PLS) or the advanced CTL can study on their own or work with colleges or universities that offer the relevant courses. The University of North Florida (UNF), for example, offers a program leading to the CTL. The classroom experience in this “cohort program” provides terrific opportunities for networking, Denham says.

The classes draw a wide range of participants. “Some people have had no experience in logistics at all; some have just had military experience; some are shippers; some are carriers,” she says.

Gilmore says he chose UNF’s cohort program in part because the ASTL credential is widely recognized in and around Jacksonville.

During his job hunt, the CTL provided an extra edge. “I was proud to put those letters behind my name,” Gilmore says. “They spark some people to ask, ‘What does that mean?’—and I get to describe it.”

The certification also put him one step ahead of applicants with college degrees but no professional credentials. “It proved that I knew what I was talking about when I applied for some of those jobs,” he says.

Gilmore holds a bachelor’s degree in business from St. Leo University and a master’s degree in management, with a concentration in procurement and contracting, from the University of Maryland University College.



For people trying to decide which supply chain or logistics certification to pursue, a good first step is to define the job you want, then find out which credentials are most valued by employers in that field. “Make sure you take the right path to get you where you want to go,” Gilmore says.

One other route to ASTL certification is an academic waiver. Under a recent agreement between ASTL and American Public University System (APUS), students who complete an undergraduate or graduate degree in transportation and logistics from APUS can also receive the PLS from ASTL.

APUS is an online institution that includes American Public University and American Military University. It draws students mainly from the military (including veterans), public safety organizations, and the private sector.

The certification is a valuable addition to the undergraduate or graduate degree. “Professional certification is a great way of validating your expertise in a given field,” says Jennifer Batchelor, director of the transportation and logistics management program at APUS.

APICS OPTIONS

APICS offers two certifications. CPIM is designed for someone who has two or more years of experience in the field but doesn’t necessarily hold a bachelor’s degree. To earn it, the candidate must pass exams in five areas: Basics of Supply Chain Management, Master Planning of Resources, Detailed Scheduling and Planning, Execution and Control of Operations, and Strategic Management of Resources.

Certified Supply Chain Professional (CSCP) is geared to professionals with five or more years of experience in the field, or with a bachelor’s degree and two or more years of experience. The exam includes three modules: APICS Supply Chain Management Fundamentals; Supply Chain Strategy, Design, and Compliance; and Implementation and Operations.

Both credentials have a practical orientation. “This is for individuals who want not only to gain the knowledge, but to

“APICS certification focuses on the skills necessary to maintain an individual’s current job and competencies, as well as on what the organization is looking for to advance the enterprise and the individual.”

— Abe Eshkenazi, CEO, APICS

apply the knowledge,” Eshkenazi says.

For example, the CPIM covers subjects such as inventory control, materials resource requirements, and strategic management of resources. “Each module for the certification trains individuals on a specific content area in the organization’s planning, manufacturing, inventory control, and production,” he says.

APICS updates the content of its training and exams every few years, based on its studies of real-world supply chain practices. “We focus on the skills necessary to maintain an individual’s current job and competencies, as well as on what the organization is looking for to advance the enterprise and the individual,” Eshkenazi says.

A candidate can prepare for the CPIM or CSCP exam by taking an instructor-led course sponsored by more than 200 local chapters across the United States or 90 partners around the world. “We also have an online program and self-study opportunities,” Eshkenazi says.

Jason Wheeler, process improvement manager at Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis, and the chairman of APICS’ board of directors, started working on his CPIM in 2004. At the time, he worked for tomato processor Red Gold, and started taking the review class sponsored by his local APICS chapter.

When he moved to Roche, Wheeler joined an on-site class, and earned the credential in 2005. In 2006, he was part of the first wave of candidates to earn the newly developed CSCP. Wheeler also holds a bachelor’s degree in statistics, with a minor in math, from Eastern Kentucky University.

Although experience taught him a great deal, Wheeler says the certifications deepened his understanding of certain aspects of his work.

For example, he has learned to appreciate what the supply chain looks like from the perspective of his vendors. With a good understanding of those motivations, Wheeler says he has been able to build several collaborative relationships that benefit both Roche and its suppliers.

People sometimes turn to Wheeler for advice about whether to pursue certification or enter an MBA program. His answer depends on the person’s goals. For those who want to keep working in supply chain management, an APICS certification offers a great advantage. “I describe it as a specialized MBA,” he says. But if your ambition has a broader scope, an MBA is probably the better choice.

ONLINE ONLY GETS LONELY

For those who decide to pursue certification, Wheeler suggests that they not rely entirely on online preparation. “You get the education and the content online, but you miss out on valuable real-life examples,” he says. Sitting in a review class with colleagues from different industries, and from companies large and small, you’ll hear many stories about strategies that worked or didn’t work in various settings, he says. Those stories will stick in your mind.

Whichever option you choose from the many available, the chance to gain in-depth knowledge and practical insight will likely make a certification or certificate well worth your while. ■