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# The Paper Chase



**By emphasizing the credentials of certified employees, your club shows members that you are committed to delivering the very best services.**

**By Jeff Cioletti,  
Associate Editor**

**T**he various types of certification offered by reputable health and fitness industry organizations often serve as measuring tools of your staff's professional abilities. "It's an assessment of the knowledge and skill of the instructor," notes Richard Cotton, chief exercise physiologist and director of certification at the American Council on Exercise (ACE, San Diego). "It's all based on the instructor's ability to provide both a safe and effective service. It provides a benchmark for the owners and for the public to know that their instructor has at least met some requirements in order to do the job."

Indeed, when you hire certified workers, you know you are adding the very best people to your staff. However, you knowing this isn't enough; your membership needs to know too. You want your members to realize that they're being guided by the

cream of the crop. So it's a good idea to inform members about your employees' credentials.

Unfortunately, prospective club members often cannot distinguish among different types of certification

and determine what exactly that certification means to them. It's your job during the prospect's initial exposure to your facility to make the different levels of your staff's certification meaningful to them.

"During the orientation to the club, staff should emphasize the club's commitment to providing a safe training environment, which includes attention to the proper maintenance of the equipment, security of the facility and, foremost, the hiring of qualified trainers," advises Thomas R. Baechle, Ed.D., executive director of the National

Strength & Conditioning Association (NSCA; Lincoln, Neb.) Certification Commission. "The connection between well-qualified trainers and maximizing the effectiveness of workouts while reducing the likelihood of injury should be emphasized."

An effective way to market your certified staff to potential members is to explain the academic background and training experi-





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ence required to pass the exams offered by the certifying organization. "The club representative should comment on the breadth of competency areas and explain that these areas were an end result of a national job analysis survey of other professionals [if one was undertaken]," Baechle offers. "Additionally, an explanation of the difficulty level of the exam, using pass/fail information from the certifying body, will help prospective clients better appreciate and respect the knowledge and skills held by certified staff. If staff members hold nationally accredited credentials, several brief comments about the significance of them having earned a nationally accredited credential can also be a strong selling point."

It's critical to let prospects know that not only is the certified staff member backed by the club that recognizes certification, but by the international educational body that had tested the individual and deemed the staffer worthy of certification's distinction. "This is an individual

who has demonstrated competence against an international set of standards accepted throughout the world," explains Marti West, Telefitness executive director of the Aerobics & Fitness Association of America (AFAA; Sherman Oaks, Calif.). "Those international standards are developed by many of the leading researchers and educators in the field of exercise science. By hiring certified instructors, you're able to bring the latest in exercise science research and safety to your club members."

### Rising Above

So, you've got a certified staff. Big deal! So does the club down the street. How do you differentiate yourself to stay a step ahead of the competition? The key, according to some experts, is specialization. That means going above and beyond the basic staff certification offered by many organizations.

"One of the most important things for clubs to do is differentiate themselves from other clubs promoting, say, certified personal trainers," believes Dr. Sal Arria, executive director/co-founder of the International Sports Sciences Association (ISSA) in Santa Barbara, Calif. "[Standard certification] does give the club prestige and credibility, but the next step is for clubs to promote

the fact that they have individuals on staff specially trained to serve areas of the population other than the general public."

For instance, having individuals on staff certified to work post-rehab clients is a definite plus. Or, some staff members may be trained to work with physically challenged clients, seniors or kids. "Now, the certification takes new meaning," Arria points out. "It gives clubs the advantage of promoting their services to more members of the community." And, he adds, the media would have a field day with the fact that a health club has specialists to provide service to physically challenged individuals and kids after school.

While certification can impress members, prospects and even the media, most people still reserve their respect for certification that comes from a credible organization. How your facility looks in the eyes of members and prospective members depends on the due diligence you use in seeking out only the most reputable certification organizations for your staff's training.

"There are so many certifying agencies out there; you have to choose one that best suits your needs," recommends Angie Clark, office manager for the National Federation of Professional Trainers (NFPT), based in Lafayette, Ind. "You have to look at

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## Setting the Standard

The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA; Washington, D.C.) has established a number of criteria to assess the quality of certification programs offered by various organizations. Among those criteria are the following:

- The organization is not-for-profit.
- The examination is developed from job analysis data gathered as a result of undertaking a national study.
- Pass/fail rates and reliability statistics are a matter of public record.
- The policies and procedures and the officers of the organization are determined by a vote of certified members.
- Examination design involves qualified professionals such as content experts and individuals with expertise in exam development, known as psychometricians.



the organization's credibility and how long it's been around."

When researching an organization, consider word of mouth and do some checking on the Internet, Clark advises. Both provide good means for gathering background on different organizations.

Before choosing an organization, you should also look at the manner in which the certification exam is created. "It must be developed in a manner consistent with industry standards," says ACE's Cotton. "And it should be national in scope."

In addition, there should be a continuing education requirement built into the certification. "There also should be a code of ethics that the certified individuals must adhere to, as well as disciplinary policies and procedures," Cotton adds.

Other factors to consider include the passing grade of the certification exam, the percentage of how many people pass and the type of study materials the organization



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offers. A high percentage of passing grades may be a sign that the exam isn't rigorous enough.

You should research the staff teaching the certification classes, as well. You want only the most seasoned professionals instructing your employees. ISSA's Arria recommends looking at the table of contents of textbooks and carefully reviewing the founders, advisors and professors. "There's a very clear distinction among organizations when it comes to reputability of founders, et cetera, and what they've done," he says.

"The more reputable organizations will likely boast about them, while the less reputable ones will probably hide them."

Also, you should see whether the organization is accredited by a reputable organization, such as the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) based in Washington, D.C. "If the certifications held by staff have been received by nationally accredited and/or well-respected credentialing programs, this should be mentioned [in marketing]," suggests NCSA's Baechle. "If

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the contrary is true, misleading statements about certified staff should be avoided."

### Take the Test

The certification process varies among the different organizations. Some offer written examinations, while others offer both written and practical components. While both methods have proven effective, you'll want to steer clear of anything that resembles a crash course.

"One of my biggest pet peeves is that certified people come to me and say, 'I'm certified through such-and-such organization, but I don't really know how to teach. Can I intern?'" reveals Lauren Lewis, program director at World Instructor Training School (WITS) in Virginia Beach, Va. "They have this piece of paper that says they're certified and don't know how to apply it. It takes my time to retrain them."

Too many professionals, Lewis offers, are trained in a specific activity — such as a group cycling class —

without receiving any type of primary certification. "They know how to teach that one specific thing, but haven't been trained formally or properly on warm-up, stretches or cooldown," Lewis argues. "Many organizations consider that certification. That's a certificate of completion of a workshop, not certification."

WITS's program is taught over a

four-week period, two nights a week, for three hours each night. One night is designated as a lecture, while the other is a practical training night. There's a written multiple-choice exam, as well as an individualized 20-to-30-minute practical exam.

Toledo, Ohio-based Powerline Personal Fitness is launching a hands-on certification curriculum,

## Find Out More

**The following organizations offer varying levels of certification for fitness industry professionals. Staff members at each agency will be happy to help you determine if the education and certification they provide are right for you and your staff.**

**Aerobics & Fitness Association of America (AFAA)**  
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Sherman Oaks, CA 91403  
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**The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)**  
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**American Council on Exercise (ACE)**  
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(800) 825-3636  
*Circle Reader Service No. 199*

**The Christian Aerobic Resource**  
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Fort Worth, TX 76133  
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*Circle Reader Service No. 210*

**International Fitness Professionals Association (IFPA)**  
905 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Suite 500  
Tarpon Springs, FL 34689-4830  
(727) 944-2707  
*Circle Reader Service No. 200*

**International Sports Sciences Association (ISSA)**  
1035 Santa Barbara St., Suite 7  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101  
(805) 884-8111  
*Circle Reader Service No. 201*

**National Federation of Professional Trainers (NFPT)**  
P.O. 4579  
Lafayette, IN 47903  
(765) 447-3648  
*Circle Reader Service No. 202*

**National Strength & Conditioning Association (NSCA) Certification Commission**  
1640 L St., Suite G  
Lincoln, NE 68508  
(402) 476-6669  
*Circle Reader Service No. 203*

**National Strength Professionals Association (NSPA)**  
700 Russell Ave.  
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*Circle Reader Service No. 204*

**Powerline Personal Fitness dba Bodyline**  
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which, owner Mark Iagulli says, is designed to show trainers a practical application of "everything they think they know about exercise." He believes a practical component should be mandatory for certification candidates. "With a written exam, they're only memorizing words to pass an exam," he argues. "By mandating a practical component, the industry is making sure a person knows how to work with a client. It sets a higher standard."

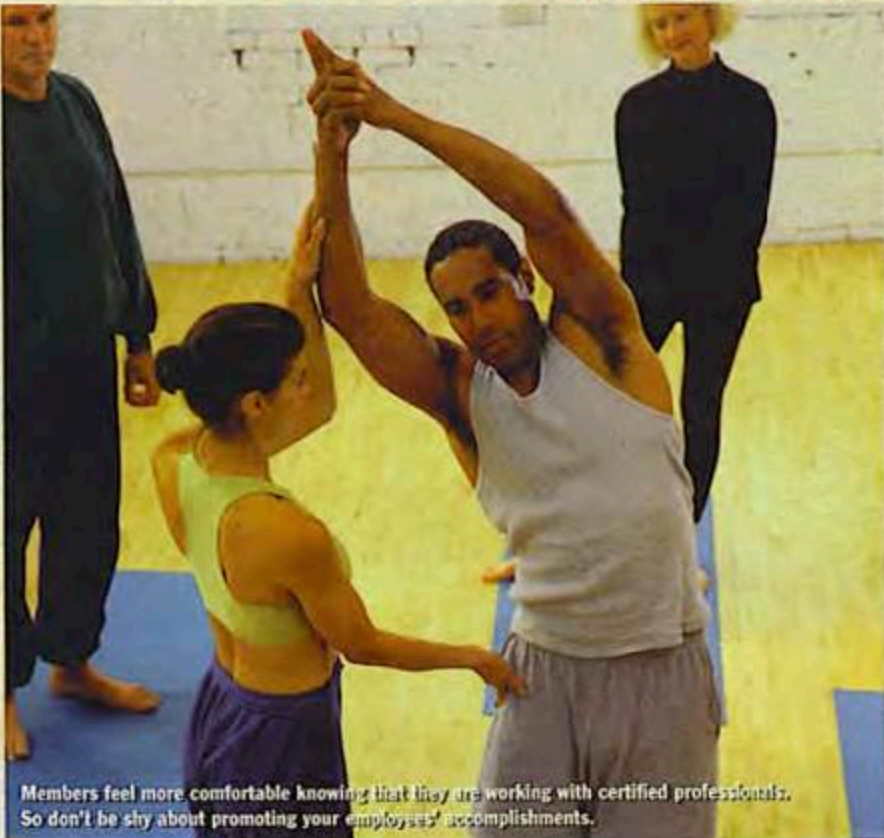
### The Practicality of Practicals

While ACE doesn't currently offer a practical component to its certification process, the organization has studied the possibility. Its certification practices have been effective without it, and the organization continues to offer some of the most recognized credentials in the industry. "From a cost perspective, in order to do a true practical exam, it's just too expensive to do it right," Cotton says. "If we can't do it right, we're just not going to do it. We're very confident in our exam development procedure and the exams themselves."

According to Cotton, a true practical exam requires a minimum of two examiners to test only one person at a time. In addition, the session should be videotaped. The number of ACE certification candidates make that scenario cost-prohibitive and difficult. The organization does, however, offer a videotaped portion for its clinical exercise specialist exam. "It's an alternative to a practical exam," Cotton adds. "We felt we could do that and maintain exam integrity."

No matter how certification is accomplished, the important thing to remember is that learning should never end once a person receives a piece of paper. Certification is only an initial step. Without continuing education, the process is meaningless.

"The club needs to tout the training staff has, even above and beyond certification," believes Cotton. "You want your employee to sell quality service through safe service. It puts the onus of responsibility on the club owner to provide on-site training and encourage staff to continue their education throughout their tenure of employment." ♣



Members feel more comfortable knowing that they are working with certified professionals. So don't be shy about promoting your employees' accomplishments.

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