Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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For most Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists, the answer to the above question is simple: anyone who is serious about his/her job in this field.

Reality, of course, is not as straightforward. For example, while some Panelists put great stock in their in-house programs to validate workers, others say a lack of management support for certification keeps its benefits out of reach for many. The result is an interesting patchwork of perspectives on the topic, which our group of maintenance professionals shares with us this month.

It should be noted that some industries—*nuclear, pharmaceutical and others*—require certification for many job functions. Federal law (typically) has determined that certification is a reliable way to ensure that qualified employees are at the helm when critical tasks are underway. “We must be trained and certified to the guidelines of the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO) to work on equipment,” says a mechanical journeyman at a nuclear plant in a mid-Atlantic state. Fully certified since 1997, he extols his employer’s ongoing training program that includes formal classroom sessions, vendor site visits, on-the-job activities and proficiency tests. “And after initial certification,” he says, “we do refresher training annually, if not more often, to keep up on industry practices and techniques.” Many of the plant’s more complicated tasks require recertification every five years, he adds, asserting that “without certification, you are but a pair of hands.”

Important, but with spotty support

In many other parts of the manufacturing world, certification is just as revered by workers—*but not always by management.*

“I believe it’s very important to work toward professional certification as it gives the team added knowledge along with a sense of accomplishment and pride,” says a maintenance and facilities team coordinator in New England. Noting that “predictive certificates are currently the most useful and relevant in the day-to-day maintenance here,” he boasts that his 11-member maintenance crew has six licensed electricians, two with Level 1 infrared certifications, one with Level 2 and one with Level 1 vibration-analysis certification. “This is up from several years ago,” he says, “when we had only four electrical licenses and no other certificates.” Regarding his

employer's policy on certification, however, this Panelist's situation matches that of others. "Our company will assist with [certification] training on a case-by-case basis," he observes, "but encouragement is not a part of it."

In a similar vein, a maintenance manager in the Midwest put it this way: "I feel certification is very important, but management does not agree." A CPMM (Certified Plant Maintenance Manager), this respondent plans to become a CLP (Certified Lean Professional) and hopes management's stance toward certification will change.

In nearly the same situation, another maintenance manager from the Midwest says his company does not view certification as important, "but I am trying to change the culture by getting employees proper training through a local community college and other venues." He holds a Maintenance Management Certificate from a Midwestern university and hopes to soon become a CMRP (Certified Maintenance Reliability Professional) as well.

A third Panelist in the Midwest also plans to obtain CMRP certification, and believes his company might reimburse him if a passing grade is achieved. "Certification is very important," this production support manager for maintenance and reliability explains. "It gives the department a good base and common mindset to start making the right decisions. But I still need to convince the powers that be," he tells us. "We currently do not have any certified professionals at our company in any maintenance disciplines, and never have. My employer does not encourage it."

Not important, not pursued

On the flip side, there are Panelists who view certification beyond what their current employers provide as unnecessary. "Certification is of little importance," writes a reliability/maintenance engineer at a heavy manufacturer in the South that provides extensive company-specific training. "We believe we have a much more efficient organization in multi-craft technicians as opposed to certified welders, electricians, etc."

A mechanical maintenance supervisor in the upper Midwest is on the same page: "We do our own training and refresher training that is equal to or better than maintenance-related certification programs," he notes. According to him, he's the only certified professional (CMRP) on a maintenance staff of 45.

Or important, but flawed

At least one Panelist would express deep disappointment with those who don't value certification—*though he admits it's become an imperfect tool to gauge worker ability*. "Certification is a topic dear to my heart," says this Canadian practitioner-turned-consultant. The co-developer of an industrial training program for Canada's Ministry of Colleges and Universities, he not only believes certification is important, but that it should be more rigorous. Most industry-wide certification programs, he says, "are bereft of any hands-on proof of competency," adding that "industrial exposure may only represent 10% of actual trade content [for some certified workers]."

He also faults the test-taking process: "Who would know if you needed to take the test many times and required several exam refresher courses so that you could just squeak in?" he asks. "This has become a trade nightmare, with most recent certified workers having only some of the trade skills needed and lacking most of the fundamental support abilities like accurate measuring, correct blueprint interpreting, knowledge and use of bench tools, fabrication and machining skills."

"Solid hands-on skills must support the trades," he continues. "To that end, a major revision of how you pre-test a mechanic by having them demonstrate what they can actually do with their tools on production machinery is what I believe is needed. Even well-trained college technicians and technologists lack exposure to industrial machines and conditions because colleges cannot duplicate the industrial environment," he says, "and co-op experience is just a fraction of the experience that an apprentice would typically get."

This Panelist's solution: "Industry needs to form the same types of guilds that started apprentices originally, and use immigrant workers as a base. They are motivated and are fully capable of learning apprenticeship skills and knowledge like anyone else. Attracting sufficient high-school grads is becoming an exercise in diminishing returns," he laments. "We are losing too much ground to white-collar options." **MT**

About the MT Reader Panel

The Maintenance Technology Reader Panel is comprised of working maintenance practitioners who have volunteered to answer bimonthly questions prepared by our editorial staff. Panelist identities are purposely not revealed, and their responses are not necessarily projectable. The Panel welcomes new members: Have your comments and observations included in this column by joining the Reader Panel at www.mt-online.com . Click here for more information. If accepted, you will automatically be entered into a drawing for a cash prize after one year of active participation.

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