

Use AHA Certification Renewal to Jump Start Your Professional Development

by Lenora G. Knapp, Ph.D.

Are you looking for new job opportunities? Interested in expanding your current responsibilities? Want to position yourself for a new role in your organization? The AHA Certification renewal process can be a stepping stone to all of these goals. Renewal is not just an “exercise” necessary to maintain your Certification. It’s a terrific opportunity to implement a professional development plan to boost your career. Here’s how to do it:

Step # 1: Identify your strengths and weaknesses.

The first step in the process is to pinpoint your current professional strengths and weaknesses. Because the Content Outline for the Certification Examination represents the scope of expertise necessary for competent professional practice, reviewing this Outline is a good place to start your self-evaluation. As you read through the Examination Content Outline, rate your proficiency on each task using the following scale:

How proficient are you in carrying out this task?

- (0) Not sure
- (1) Not at all proficient
- (2) Somewhat proficient
- (3) Moderately proficient
- (4) Very proficient

Tasks in which you are less proficient may be good targets for your professional development plan. Even if these tasks are not part of your current role, they may be important in other jobs you seek in the future.

You might also consider how frequently you engage in each task. You may be “rusty” in tasks that are not part of your current job, or there may be some tasks in which you have had little experience over the years. Further education or training in these areas could be beneficial.

The AHA-CC Self-Assessment Examination (SAE) is another tool you can use to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. This 100-question, online practice test mirrors the Certification Examination in content and difficulty; but, unlike the real Examination, it gives you the answers to the questions! It also explains why the incorrect options are wrong.

These explanations make the SAE a learning experience, as well as an evaluation, which is why you can earn continuing professional education (CPE) contact hours toward renewal for completing the Self-Assessment Examination. At the conclusion of the SAE, you will be informed of your total score, as well as the number of questions you answered correctly in each content domain, making it easy for you to identify areas for further professional development. Check out the five-question sample SAE on the AHA-CC website at www.aha.org/certification to see if completing the full Self-Assessment Examination might be helpful to you.

Step # 2. Identify other knowledge gaps or areas in which you wish to develop greater expertise.

Future career opportunities and your effectiveness in your current role could perhaps be enhanced by developing more specialized or more in-depth expertise than is specified in the

Examination Content Outline or by gaining expertise in an area *outside* of the categories in the Outline. For example, if you aspire to a higher managerial role, additional education or training in supervision and leadership may be valuable. Be sure you understand which professional development activities will be applicable for CPE contact hours and which will not, so you can plan accordingly. (To be accepted for renewal of your AHA Certification, the CPE must relate to at least one of the categories identified in the Examination Content Outline.)

Step # 3. Determine what types of continuing professional education activities will be most effective in helping you to accomplish your goals.

The table below describes the different types of CPE that are recognized by the AHA-CC for Certification renewal and highlights some of the unique professional development benefits of each. Use this information to help you determine which types of activities will best aid you in achieving the professional goals you've identified.

Activity	Description	Professional Development Benefits
Educational program	Participation in lecture, workshop, educational session or case presentation provided by a professional healthcare association/society, healthcare facility or provider of services to a facility, or an industry-recognized provider of education	<p>Each lecture/workshop/session typically covers a narrow topic, so your time is used effectively (i.e., You concentrate only on the specific areas in which you wish to develop your knowledge/skills further.). If you are attending an annual conference, you may be able to find several sessions on your selected topic, thus creating your own “educational track” for the conference.</p> <p>May be the most effective approach if your weaknesses are limited to a very narrow area or if there are narrow topics you wish to pursue in a variety of different content domains</p> <p>Provides an opportunity to interact with, and seek further clarification from, an expert on the topic (i.e., the instructor or presenter)</p>

<p>Academic coursework (in person or online)</p>	<p>From an accredited college or university</p>	<p>Typically covers a broad content domain</p> <p>May be the most effective approach if your weaknesses are concentrated primarily within a single content domain or if you wish to target several knowledge areas/skills in a particular content domain</p> <p>Provides in-depth instruction and a comprehensive learning experience, including the opportunity to learn from other students</p> <p>Includes one or more assessments (test, project, etc.) to evaluate your mastery of the content</p> <p>Can obtain academic credits as well as CPE contact hours</p>
<p>Self-study, including audio conference, or online educational program</p>	<p>Provided by a professional healthcare association/society, healthcare facility or provider of services to a facility, or an industry-recognized provider of education; the provider must award contact hours or a similar measure of continuing education</p>	<p>Often, the scheduling and pace of the program are fully or partially under your control. May offer more flexibility and convenience than other learning experiences</p> <p>Typically, there is an opportunity to interact with, and seek further clarification from, an expert on the topic (i.e., the instructor).</p>

<p>Professional speaking/teaching</p>	<p>At an educational program or meeting of a national, regional, state or local professional association/society</p>	<p>Demonstrates your in-depth mastery of the topic</p> <p>Positions you as an expert or knowledgeable professional on the topic</p> <p>Demonstrates that you possess other skills that may be important for your career (e.g., public speaking, teaching)</p> <p>Increases your professional visibility</p>
<p>Academic teaching</p>	<p>In an accredited college or university</p>	<p>Demonstrates your in-depth mastery of one or more broad content domains</p> <p>Typically requires that you stay current in the field</p> <p>Positions you as an expert or knowledgeable professional on the content domain</p> <p>Demonstrates that you possess other skills that may be important for your career (e.g., public speaking, teaching)</p>
<p>Test item writing</p>	<p>For the AHA Examination</p>	<p>Requires you to drill down and thoroughly understand the specific concept or issue on which you have elected to write. May be an effective approach if your weaknesses are limited to a very narrow area or if there are narrow topics you wish to pursue in a variety of different content domains</p> <p>Encourages you to think more broadly and critically about typical situations you encounter in your professional role</p> <p>Gives you an opportunity to learn how others in a similar role might handle specific work situations (through interactions with other test item writers)</p>

Self-Assessment Examination	Completion of the Self-Assessment Examination provided by the AHA Certification Center	<p>Identifies and quantifies your relative strengths and weaknesses and guides you in determining how to focus your professional development activities best</p> <p>Can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of your professional development plan (i.e., How well did you master the targeted areas?)</p> <p>Can be completed at any time in your home or office – offers maximum convenience</p>
Authoring/Publishing	Authoring a book chapter or at least two articles published in professional journals or periodicals with a documented circulation that exceeds 1,000 readers	<p>Demonstrates your in-depth mastery of a topic</p> <p>Positions you as an expert or knowledgeable professional on the topic</p> <p>Demonstrates that you possess other skills that may be important for your career (e.g., writing, research)</p> <p>Increases your professional visibility both within and outside your facility (e.g., The publication can be announced in the facility newsletter and local newspapers.)</p>

Step # 4. Outline your professional development plan and your goals for the renewal cycle.

Begin this step by deciding what your primary professional goals are for the next few years. Would you like to expand your knowledge in a particular area, position yourself for a promotion, pursue an advanced degree, etc.? Next, list each knowledge area or skill you want to target during the upcoming renewal cycle to help you accomplish these goals. Lastly, specify what CPE activities you will engage in related to the knowledge or skill to be targeted and the approximate time period in which you will complete each activity. You now have a concrete professional development plan that can serve as a roadmap to achieving your career goals.

Step # 5. Evaluate your success in accomplishing your professional development goals and identify your goals for the next renewal cycle.

At the end of the Certification renewal period, repeat Step # 1 to evaluate your progress and update your professional development plan for the next renewal cycle. Complete your proficiency ratings once again or retake the Self-Assessment Examination and compare your current results to those from the start of the renewal cycle. This information will help you to identify your accomplishments, determine what knowledge or skills still need further work, and decide what new knowledge and skills you would like to address in the next renewal cycle.

Follow the five easy steps outlined above for each renewal cycle and you will make significant progress toward accomplishing your career goals. Don't miss this opportunity to jump start your professional development.

Lenora G. Knapp, Ph.D. is president of Knapp & Associates International, Inc. (K&AI) and is a well-respected author in the certification community. Her company is a consulting firm specializing in the development and revitalization of professional credentialing programs. K&AI's expertise in both the technical intricacies of testing and the business fundamentals of professional certification is unique in the certification industry.