Solutions for Small Certification Programs

Albeit organizations of all sizes offer certification programs oftentimes this endeavor is more challenging for those with small programs. While there are differing definitions of a small program, research has illustrated commonalities such as: a small number of candidates, a certification program that is not financially viable/self-sustaining, and the interpretation of statistics being suspect. For the purposes of this article, our focus is on organizations with an annual testing volume of 100 or fewer candidates.

- **Feasibility Study**

  Organizations should define a clear mission and goals for the certification program. These goals should consider the perspectives of potential certification holders, employers, and other key external stakeholders in the industry. Organizations should consider conducting a feasibility study: (a) prior to the implementation of a new certification program to assist in the design and development specific to their needs; and (b) for an exisiting program to inform and guide their marketing strategies.

- **Psychometrician**

  Organizations should build a partnership with a psychometrician that knows their program. Based on the skill set of the staff and volunteers, psychometricians can help determine what can be done in-house versus what must be done by the psychometrician. Organizations may also consider having a psychometrician on a small retainer to ask questions as they arise. Making assumptions or guessing, in lieu of technical expertise, may prove costly to fix later.

- **Financial Performance**

  Information gathered through quantitative and qualitative research should inform the business plan of the organization. Organizations should decide if the certification program needs to be self-sustaining, profitable, or can be subsidized (i.e., grants). Small pools of candidates (e.g., niche specialties) can contribute to smaller revenue and stand-alone certifying organizations may have restricted access to financial resources to support the program.

- **Subject Matter Experts**

  ➢ Conduct a broad call for volunteers at the beginning of a development cycle for all certification tasks. Ensure transparency with regard to qualifications, roles, responsibilities, commitment/time allocation, conflict of interest/NDA, and training. Provide summaries for each task so potential SMEs may make an informed decision as to their preference.

  ➢ Develop a comprehensive matrix to track all eligible SMEs, data fields and potential gaps (experience, practice setting, SMEs vs. task, etc.).

  ➢ Solicit governing board members if a gap cannot be fulfilled to network with professional colleagues.

Standard Setting

For accreditation purposes, the use of standard setting procedures in place of equating procedures is generally unacceptable. Organizations conducting a standard setting, typically after a job analysis, must have sufficient candidate volume to perform item analyses. For example, an organization using testing windows (e.g., spring, fall) would strive for at least 75 test takers, respectively, during the first testing window. This would allow the psychometrician to conduct a standard setting to establish a passing score prior to the second testing window. If sufficient candidate volume is not met, the standard setting task would be delayed until after the second testing window.

Delayed Scoring

- Delayed score notices should be developed in collaboration with your psychometrician. Communicate clearly with applicants and publish the waiting period/policy in advance.
- Organizations should clearly communicate that immediate scoring will not be available and candidates will receive a delayed score notification.
- Communicate when official score reports will be available; after sufficient candidate testing volume is achieved and you have determined the passing standard for the exam.

Equating

The circle-arc method proposed by Livingston and Kim (2009) is an equating method introduced for small sample equating. There is research (Livingston and Kim, 2010; Dwyer, 2016) that circle-arc equating methods produce more accurate results at all levels of the score distribution compared to other methods, especially in samples of less than 200 test takers. The circle-arc method constrains the estimated nonlinear equating curve to pass through three data points—the maximum possible scores on the test forms, the minimum likely scores on the test forms (i.e., chance score by guessing), and the equated mean scores of the forms.

Score Reports

If an organization reports subscore data on failing score notifications (not an NCCA requirement) than technical analysis reports must have subscore (domain) information to support this format. Estimates of score reliability and decision consistency must be reasonable to support accurate pass/fail decisions. If domain-level information has low reliability, SeaCrest suggests consulting with your psychometrician to further discuss the inclusion of this data on score notifications. Typically, if domain-level information has low reliability, certification programs are advised against reporting it to candidates.

Authored by Lisa Nepi, EdM
VP of Certification and Client Services

SeaCrest Company
4009 Corning Place Drive
Suite E2-378
Charlotte, NC 28216
P: (877) 619 – 9885
Email: info@seacrestcompany.com
Website:seacrestcompany.com