Help or Hubris: Certifications in UX and Human-Centered Design

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A common post in social media is the announcement: "I have achieved xyz certificate in fill-in-the-blank." A round of applause comes from connected people with encouraging comments. It's another day in the online life of today's digitized world. But what is being heralded here? An achievement? New knowledge? A new skill? Or even the key to a new profession? Human-Centered Design is a vast field, fed from very different academic sources with very diverse history and context. It has evolved, just as interactive systems have involved, which includes our understanding of those systems. Further education, vocational training, and qualifications are efforts that are to be recommended, and certifications are an expression of the acquirement of knowledge. Oh, if only it were that easy!

Who Offers Certifications in Human-Centered Design?

When considering certifications we need to understand their nature. What exactly is the certification of a person? Who issues them? And what do they certify?

Before diving into the technical aspects of certifications in UX, a formality should be noted: Sometimes the assessing organization (the organization that conducts an assessment of whether the required knowledge has been presented by the applicant) is an accredited certification body that follows the ISO 17024: Conformity assessment - General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons. But this has nothing to do with the quality of the content of the training. Certificates that adopt ISO 17024 just declare formal process compliance with certification for people. It is not a quality statement for the content, completeness, or standard compliance of the taught materials.

Certificate Providers

Let's look at the offering parties, the organizations that provide certifications.

1. **Authorities and offices:** Entities that are legally empowered, and obliged, to certify other organizations and/or persons

2. **Academia:** As part of their task to educate, they often add special academic certificates that deepen a specific field of study and therefore supplement existing programs

3. **Private organizations and associations:** Commercial or non-profit organizations that offer training and study programs

Aside from dedicated court experts mandated for expert opinions in the field of Usability and Human-Centered Design, we don't see many kinds of certificates of the first type. This is complicated by the fact that every country handles those official certificates differently. The common basis is international standards, as part of their legal functions in relation to international laws, regulations, and contracts.

Academic certifications follow the same approach as other academic programs. They have a transparent curriculum; literature is referenced, and the quality of content must meet academic criteria. More and more often, such programs carry microcredits; that is, collecting certificates can be used to complete, or even represent, a full program.

The third type is troublesome. Considering the diversity of the field of User Experience, it becomes clear that a single program cannot cover it all. Nevertheless, many academic programs endeavor exactly this. Depending on the faculty, the respective program leans either more toward engineering, visual design, psychology, human-factors, or cultural science. Diverse specialization is a challenge for a profession. Upon reviewing certification programs that can be found today, we must distinguish between offerings that emulate a full education with training (which qualifies one to be a degreed professional), offerings that only focus on a specific area, method, or technique, and training certifications. The latter attempts to emulate a degree in UX, bestowing a qualification certificate to one such as UX Professional or Design Thinker.

An additional type might be UX Bootcamps. Their duration is often 4–12 weeks and includes a journey through different stages of (mostly) app and web projects. Often they include almost no context-related work, some research (if one is lucky), a heavy focus on prototyping and user interface design, and evaluation is an afterthought. Such programs cannot replace a full bachelor's or master's program. Because the focus of bootcamps is very much on practice and the tools that play a major role, fundamental scientific findings or international standards are usually not included. Still, after finishing such a course, participants feel entitled to be seen as UX Professionals, without even knowing that they have no idea about the foundations whatsoever.

Certification Content: I Make the World as I Like
Focused trainings can vary greatly in duration from a few hours to several days. The topics vary, depending on the organization that is offering the training. As different as the topics are, the quality varies as well. However, knowing and understanding a technical field shouldn't depend on a training provider; alas, we cannot ensure that in the context of human-centered design and UX. Sometimes, focused training is directed at a specific activity in the context of UX like interface design, prototyping, or micro animations. Trainers can propose a generic subject like using AI to improve analysis in user research or a specific approach to creativity like storytelling. The power of variety in the field of user experience is also a weakness in the reliability of content. Giving a subject a specific and proprietary flavor enables providers of certification programs to:

- control the content,
- create a competitive advantage,
- avoid easy comparison of other offers through some ambiguity, and
- lock in services, as consecutive trainings or certifications only work within their own narrative of qualifications.

Of course, this could be amended by applying the knowledge and approaches outlined in ISO 9241 series about human-system interaction, where applicable. As the ISO standard does not talk about tools, specific methods, or even specific technologies and design solutions, it offers enough freedom to add one's own approach into a training curriculum. The benefit would be a harmonization of terms and concepts used, based on international standards. It would also provide quality criteria to assess the content of the training that experts and participants could verify for information that applies standardized guidance (such as definitions, recommendations, and requirements). This latter benefit is not something a certification provider is eager to enable; non-compliance is easier. But, in fact, we do have international standards in place, and we can use them to validate certification programs.

Certifications should help us professionally: They should make vocational education attractive, harmonize the professional field, and enable professionals to migrate from one focus area in human-centered design to another area. But instead of using international consensus, offering parties choose what they like. Let's look at the definition of usability, which has legal implications in work safety laws and regulations of the European Union.

The ISO 9241 Ergonomics of human-system interaction - Part 11: Usability: Definitions and concepts defines usability as the "extent to which a system, product or service can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use."

Despite this standardized definition, certification providers come up with their own text for the definition:

Nielson Norman Group™: "Usability assesses how easy user interfaces are to use. Usability is defined by 5 quality components: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, and satisfaction."

IxDF™: "Usability is a measure of how well a specific user in a specific context can use a product/design to achieve a defined goal effectively, efficiently and satisfactorily."

Coursera™: "Usability is a way to measure how easy a product is to use. It is a concept in design circles to ensure products—whether websites, furniture, or hotel lobbies—can be used as simply and painlessly as possible."

CareerFoundry®: "Usability is how easily a person can accomplish a given task with your product."

Responsibility, Please, It's About Humans
Having a handful of definitions for one term is not very helpful, right? Definitions are not a self-service shop, especially not in an area that concerns people's health and wellbeing! Usability affects our work, our work tools, the results of our work, and also our work performance. It also affects our commitment, our emotions, motivation and joy, our experiences, attitudes, and expectations. Bad usability makes people sick, is unsafe, and can cost lives! That is why there are international standards!

A quick search for certifications in the field of UX that advertises compliance to ISO 9241 series yields but a few certifications. After reviewing them, you might see programs that emulate a longer education and qualification, enabling participants to become professionals in the field (with a duration of 9 months, for instance). Or you might see certification programs that focus on the event that a participant passes a certification assessment, so this person may claim a title like Certified UX Professional (with a duration of 2–3 days).

We cannot expect that hiring parties with no or little knowledge of the different topics in UX can differentiate between very different qualification certifications. Person A has passed a 1-year certification program, labeled UX Management; Person B has passed a 1-day training including a certification assessment with the same label, UX Management. There is no authority to control this, and there is no mechanism to disclose the difference between different UX Management labels, so there is only chance. Imagine that both people apply for a position within an organization as UX Manager. Which candidate is the more qualified one? And yes, this case has happened: A person with a 1-day training as UX Manager took over a team of skilled UX professionals. As you can imagine, the team evaporated quickly, the manager lost their job, and the organization lost its trust in the human-centered approach, agreeing, "They don't know

what to do anyway." And, the last, former UX professional ended up designing PowerPoint™ slides for management stakeholders instead of doing work related to user experience at all.

Who Needs Certifications and for What?

When considering certifications, we need to acknowledge two separate groups: professionals, and companies that employ professionals.

The Professional

A professional wants to display proof that a specific qualification, the specific mastery of a subject, can be expected. Another motivation to gain certification is to further their education to deepen or broaden knowledge in human-centered design and UX. A problematic context is the person that uses a certification program to start working in the field; that is, using a program to become a UX professional in the first place, attempting to emulate a multi-year academic program condensed into just weeks of training. As those people don't have a respective academic grade (bachelor, master, doctorate), they need a type of proof of professional qualification and hope that a certification program provides this proof.

The discrepancy between the content taught and the qualifications required in companies is often not clear to these inexperienced professionals. Those who want to change careers not only invest a lot of time but also significant funds for training and living expenses during a period for a multiple week training like a boot camp.

The Company

A company that is looking for such services most likely lacks detailed knowledge, doesn't know how to assess differing qualities of work in such fields, and is satisfied when a certificate provides an easy criterion to identify. The company trusts that, if a person features such a certificate, the required skills may be expected.

In addition, an organization wants to ensure that their professionals have access to vocational education to improve their professional stance and thereby invest in the organization's future. Certification programs are the typical means to establish that specific technical knowledge or expertise has been acquired. We see such qualifications with technology providers like Microsoft®, SAP™, or Oracle™. It is therefore not a surprise that such an expectation is also applicable to UX. Companies are also familiar with working with international standards (such as in management systems and quality management). It is naïve to state that "since it is only about design, we don't need standards." Yet the notion is common, not only with hiring managers, but also within the design community, many of whom, alas, unfortunately have no experience with ISO standards to begin with. Recent developments in law and regulations force companies to embrace standardized technical knowledge and its application, as highlighted by the European Accessibility Act, which implements standardized definitions of accessibility (based on ISO 9241) into national law within the European Union. Therefore, it is clear that standards matter, more and more so. It is us, the UX community, who must embrace standards in our work; it is the community offering certification programs that must adopt and comply with international standards to ensure that our work is relevant!

The Dilemma: Perceived Qualification Versus Mastering a Subject

If professionals have little to no added value through longer training, or if companies see no improvements in the user experience after hiring these professionals, it is not the certificate that is challenged but the profession itself. Many people seem to think that one can be a UX professional in just a few days without any basic training, thereby democratizing UX. Alternately, there are already mounting challenges for UX professionals who repeatedly fall into the trap of defending UX against non-UX specialists and departments instead of simply delivering high-quality work. Because of this, UX departments are being closed or reduced to merely UI design work.

It is time for the brutal truth. Instead of streamlining and harmonizing our concepts, definitions, and approaches, we must notice the fragmentation that threatens the future of our professional field. Certifications can range from 5 to 100 offerings in different topics, each presented in different flavors in different languages with prices from $14.95 for an online certification, which requires watching 25 minutes of video content, to $25,000 for a year of academic work. New

topics add to the cacophony of countless providers: user research with AI, AI and user interface design, AI and testing, and so on. In fact, adding "AI" to a search for UX certificates produces more than 20 courses, including, sadly, even courses that deal with practices prohibited by the European AI Act.

How Should Certificates Enrich the Professional Field of UX?

Certificates and training courses are certainly justified. However, to ensure the quality in this professional field is high, it is necessary to keep the promise of a certificate by holding providers accountable accordingly.

1. The real, added value in the later working environment must be clear, and no unrealistic promises should be made. The content taught should conform to international standards and be communicated transparently. There are no UX unicorns; it is important that other departments cannot do the whole UX job. Being a UX professional means specializing in a focused area; it's naïve to believe one could do the job of a psychologist, human-factor specialist, designer, and engineer all at once with just a few weeks of training. If it were so easy, no one would pay for a bachelor's, master's, or PhD degree. To assume as much disrespects the fundamental qualification and knowledge of major academic disciplines.

2. If very short certificate courses of just a few days are offered, or training for people who want to change their profession, this can only be guaranteed with appropriate prior knowledge, which must be assured and recognized by the company offering the certificate.

3. To demonstrate your own professional experience, the international accreditation program for UX professionals is preferable to a certificate, as it focuses on work done, work experience, and if submitted, publications and vocational education.

To be clear, certifications are important. They enable the community to achieve and to prove vocational education in a field that is constantly evolving, changing, and innovating. But they are also a double-edged sword. Anybody can develop a certification, define what they want to teach, communicate, promote, and advance it to push their agenda. This situation dilutes the profession, leads to the false assumption that UX can be learned in a few days, and inefficiently democratizes UX activities in companies, thus increasing risk for the user! But if we, as a community, succeed in establishing our international standards as a basis for a common understanding of our certifications, if we can hold certification providers responsible for the quality (or the lack) of their programs, we can improve education, qualification, and professional work in human-centered design and UX.

Guidance for Evaluating Certification Programs

If you are interested in a certification program, check the following indicators:

- Is the topic clear?
- Clarify one's goal:
    - Vocational education
    - Qualification to get into the field
        - Program needs to be at least 6 months long; the longer, the better
        - A ton of references, resources, and material is required and expected
        - Shall follow ISO standards to ensure acceptance
    - Proof of qualification as a UX professional
        - Shall follow ISO standards to ensure acceptance
        - Understand that this certificate is not the same as an academic grade
        - Beware of 2- or 3-day trainings with the title "Certified UX Professional," as to become a professional, one needs time and experience (did I mention experience?)

- Transparency: What is the basis of the training? What role can be sought with that certificate?
    - If this is not clear, or if this doesn't fit into one's personal development path, reconsider or choose another topic.
- Is the curriculum of the program available? In sufficient detail?
    - Understand the content of the program, and make sure that the segments are interrelated and build on each other.
- What literature is referenced?
    - Most importantly: Is literature referenced? Do you see more than one reference per topic? Is the list managed and up to date?
- Is the content referring to ISO standards?
    - Look for ISO 9241 numbers. If unclear, ask the provider.
- What is the entry level or the required prior knowledge for the certificate program?
    - This is important when you don't want to endure repetitive sessions on material you already know.
- How long is the program?
    - Reflect on the offering, your motivation, and the realistic match of knowledge, time to acquire the knowledge, and your willingness to dedicate resources.
- What is the advertised benefit? And what is your personal benefit?
    - How applicable is the advertised benefit? Is it something that you will benefit from and expand on?
- Can you get feedback about the program from other participants?
    - Ask and discuss your peers' experiences with the program of your interest.
    - The more feedback you collect, the better.
    - Share your personal experiences as well!

About the Author

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Clemens Lutsch is a Professor of Human-Centered Strategy and User Experience in Munich. He is Managing Partner at swohlwahr human-centered business consultancy, based in Vienna. His work focuses on reducing risk in innovation and fostering robust organizations, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Clemens Lutsch is active in national and international standardization of Human-system Interaction and Chair of the Accreditation Board of International Accreditation Program for UX Professionals. He was recognized as a UX Knight by the World Usability Congress and is an accredited UX Professional, #010204001.