

Raising the Bar: A Case for the Certified Technical Advisor

BY ROBERT CIOFFI

As an IT or Computer Consultant, I am often compared to other professionals such as accountants, lawyers, financial advisors and even medical specialists. It's a logical and fair comparison. Although the masses have some basic knowledge of what these pros do, our expertise is required and trusted to get the job done correctly. However, there is one very stark difference that separates IT experts from their financial, legal and health counterparts: we do not require a license.

Let's suppose for a moment that I had extensive self-studied legal knowledge but never went to law school or passed the New York State Bar exam. I might impress the ladies at happy hour with my legal-speak, but I would never be able to actually provide legal services... at least not without eventually finding myself in need of a real lawyer and a bail bondsman. The same is true for the other aforementioned professionals. Can I sell life insurance policies without passing the LAH exam? Is it legal to provide financial advice without being a CFP? Am I allowed to provide medical services sans an MD? No! So, why then are there hundreds of thousands of "IT professionals" conducting themselves without the similar standards? The short answer to this question is industry maturity. The world of IT is relatively new. It has become widely recognized and popular only since the 1990s and thus has not had enough time to mature. But now is the time for us to grow up!

To make my case I think it is first important to explain why we should have a license to practice. First, the barriers to entry for my industry are almost non-existent. Anyone (and I mean anyone), with a smidgeon of computer knowledge and no formal IT training can print a business card and pass himself off as an "IT professional." As long as they know more about technology than the guy with the checkbook, a transaction is born. Does that mean professional services will actually be rendered according to industry standards and best practices? Nope--don't bet your business on it. You may protest that my example is a bit extreme, but this illustration is a lot more common than you think. Many of my "peers" started their careers off with nothing

more than a liberal arts degree, or as a home remodeler or a stagehand for a traveling off-Broadway show. I am not making this stuff up--these are real examples of my so-called equals.

The second problem that arises in the absence of an industry standard license is obsolescence. CPAs, for instance, are required to accumulate CPE credits periodically to ensure they are keeping abreast of current practices and knowledge. Without this continuing education, they are at risk of losing their license. In my field, people can obtain technical certifications from a myriad of manufacturers like Microsoft, other product agnostic organizations like CompTIA, or a Computer Science college degree. However, the vicious cycle of technology advancements quickly make those certifications and some of that education archaic.

So what do we do about this problem? I often hear people say that their college degree was almost useless--that, they do not use anything they learned in their daily business lives. I cannot disagree more. The technical theories I learned to obtain my BS in Computer Information Science are invaluable to me. My degree, including the non-technical classes, also trained me to think. So, is a college degree the solution? Not quite, but it is a good start.

My proposal is create an analogous to the CPA. The IT industry needs to standardize on what I call the CTA, or Certified Technology Advisor. Much like a CPA, the CTA will likely need a bachelor's or master's degree in Computer Science, although passing the CTA exam does not necessarily require one. Furthermore, to maintain their CTA status, professionals will need continuing education to maintain that status. The success of this proposal will likely require the cooperation of multiple entities such as colleges and universities, technology companies like Microsoft, IBM and Intel, organizations like CompTIA and ASCII, and peer-based associations across the globe. It will also require the grassroots support of technology professionals like me. Without their cry of support, this proposal will likely fail. The CTA concept must be embraced by all in order to succeed. Perhaps a non-profit corporation such as the American Bar Association is re-

quired to set and administer the standards?

Who does this proposal benefit? There are clearly two winners and one loser. The first winners are technology professionals like me who are tired of having to swim amongst those who flounder and splash about. Having to compete with them is a double-edged sword. Although going up against an unqualified consultant is an easy opportunity to stand apart, their omnipresence creates a lot of noise, confusion and mistrust among the consumers whom we serve. The second winners are businesses and consumers. Organizations, both large and small, should take great comfort knowing the person or people they hire as an employee or consultant is actually qualified (in theory) and capable of doing the job according to industry standards and best practices. The loser, of course, is the self-acclaimed IT specialist who really does not have any business being in this business, and in my opinion, is giving our profession a bad reputation. However, those among this crowd who are smart will see this as an opening to better themselves and give companies like mine something to worry about. So, amidst this gaggle of geese, I suspect that there are many swans that just need the right framework to achieve their potential.

Should the CTA be required to practice IT? I'm not convinced it should. On one hand, without the requirement some may not support or want it. But on the other, achieving the CTA designation will give many of us the chance to truly differentiate and separate ourselves from those who do not.

Will you support me as I champion this cause? Do you think me elitist? Is this just another unnecessary bureaucracy? I invite you to comment on my blog at www.pro-comp.com/blog.html.



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