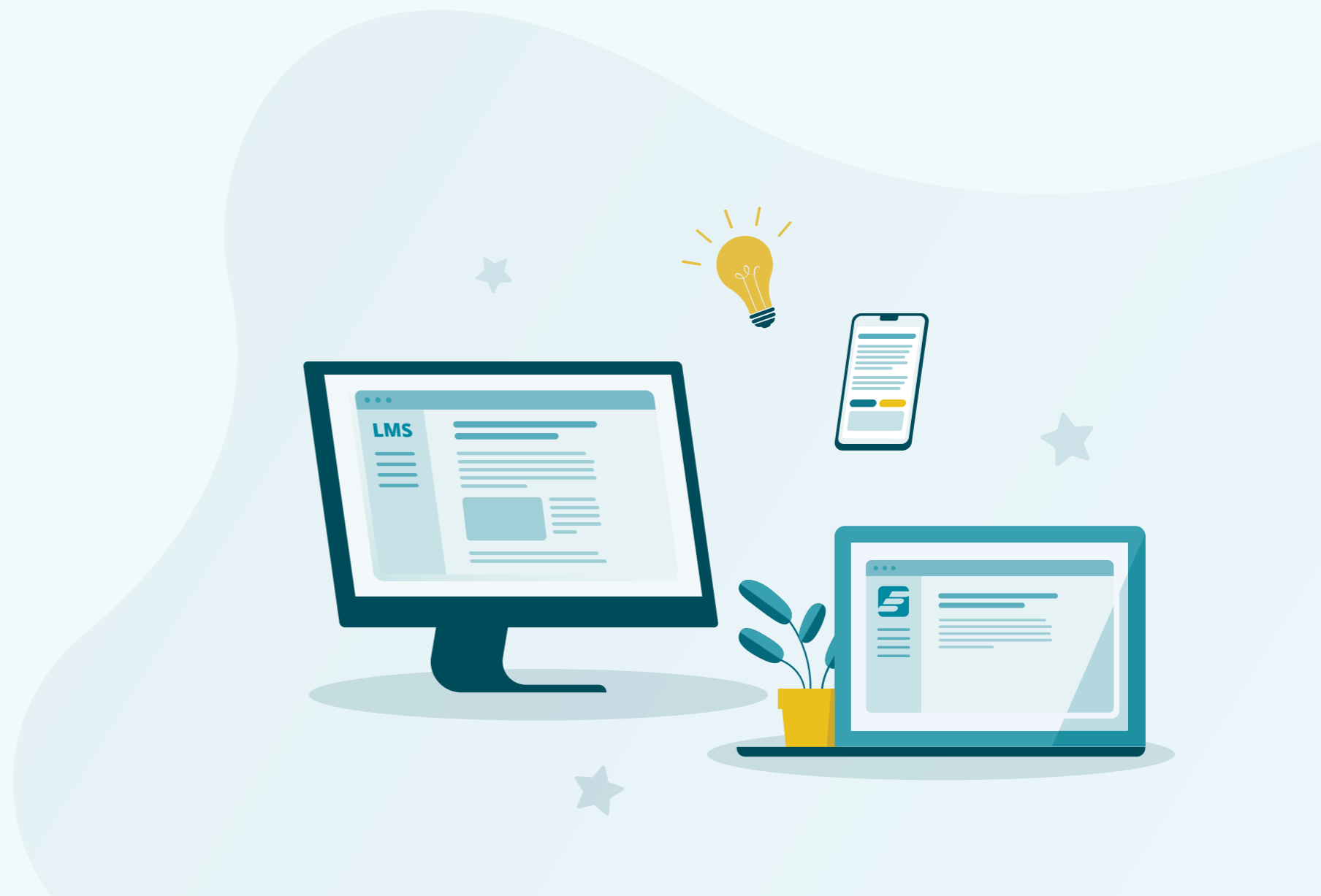


Navigating the Exam Firewall: The Ultimate Guide to Supporting Learners & Maintaining Exam Integrity



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Associations and credentialing bodies have to uphold rigorous standards to maintain accreditation and provide essential conformity assessment services to the industries and organizations they serve. One of those standards is the “exam firewall”, or the strict separation between people involved in developing exams and those involved in developing learning and preparation materials.

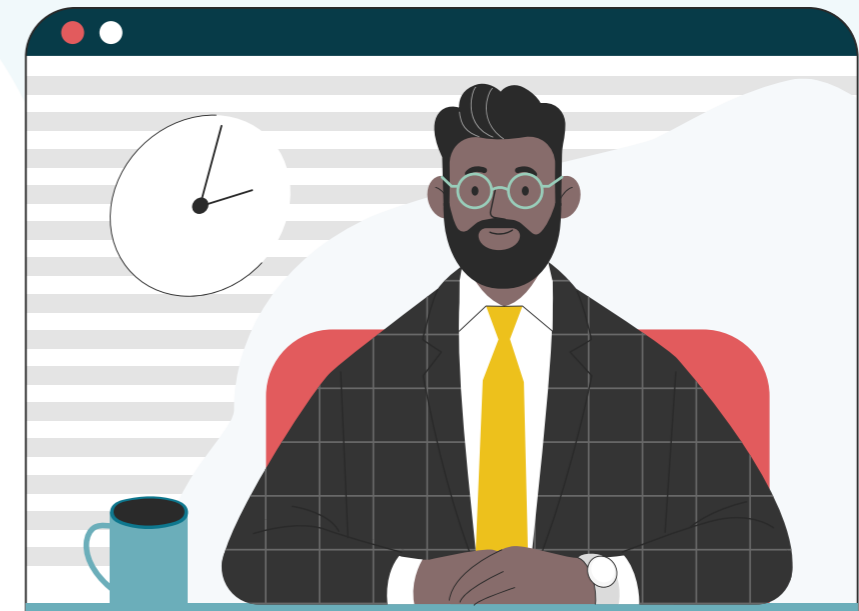
Exam firewall (n): the strict internal division between the part of the organization that develops exam or certification materials and the part that develops learning (or “exam prep”) materials

Exam firewall myth (n): the mistaken belief that because of the exam firewall, organizations that offer exam certification CANNOT also offer learning or “exam prep” materials

In many cases, the existence of the firewall has deterred associations and credentialing bodies from developing their own learning materials, for fear of violating compliance requirements and jeopardizing their accreditation status, business relationships, and more.

However, not offering resources to support learners as they prepare for career-changing certification exams is a huge missed opportunity. The global eLearning market as a whole is poised for tremendous growth, projected to be valued at [\\$1 trillion globally by 2032](#). Leaving the education of your learners up to third parties can create serious quality control issues that ultimately hurt your learners and your business—not to mention revenue going into their pockets instead of yours!

So what are associations and credentialing bodies to do?



Use this guide to navigate the exam firewall so you can get a clear sense of what's possible as an accredited association or credentialing body, including...

- Why accredited organizations need to separate the development of learning materials from the development of certification exam materials.
- The benefits of offering learning and exam prep programs.
- How to offer learning and exam prep programs while also staying compliant.
- How and why to ensure your programming caters to the full lifelong learning journey.

Let's dive in.

Part 1

The Rules—Separating Learning Material Development from Certification Exam Material Development

So what exactly is the “exam firewall”? And why does it exist?

To answer those questions, we’re going to reference some language from the [ANSI National Accreditation Board](#) (ANAB), one of the largest credentialing bodies in the world.

When a [conformity assessment body](#) seeks independent validation of its offerings (i.e., accreditation), it turns to an organization like ANAB or the [Institute for Credentialing Excellence](#) (I.C.E.).

Among the requirements that ANAB and I.C.E. lay out for bodies that wish to earn or maintain accreditation is the firewall requirement: exam development must be separate from the development of learning materials.

Specifically, this means that...

- The development of exam or certification materials must be separated from the development of exam preparation or learning materials.
- Marketing campaigns for learning materials/exam prep can neither promise passage of the exam nor guarantee certification.

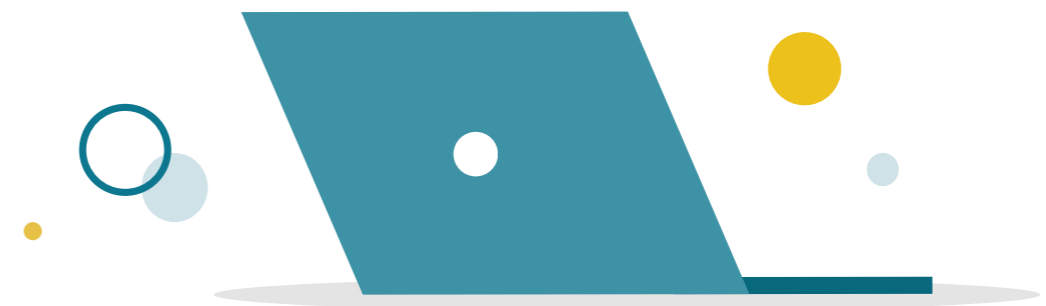
The primary reason for the firewall is to maintain the integrity of the certification or standard in question. Without an explicit firewall, for example, subject matter experts (SMEs) who helped develop exam questions could be courted by developers of exam prep resources. Their insider knowledge would give an edge to learners who chose that company’s exam prep—and the company would no doubt charge a premium for that advantage.

When that happens, [equity suffers](#): those with more resources have a greater chance of becoming certified or passing the exam.

In other words, the firewall serves as a mechanism to protect the integrity of the conformity assessment body’s certification or exam. With the firewall in place, earning a certification or passing an exam requires knowledge of the material in question versus access to more resources.

In practice, many accredited associations and credentialing bodies that don’t want to risk breaching the firewall avoid providing learning materials altogether. While this approach certainly removes the risk of a firewall breach, it introduces other risks. Eschewing learning materials also prevents associations and credentialing bodies from enjoying the many benefits of offering additional resources to their candidates and members.

Let’s take a closer look at what those benefits are, along with a look at what organizations risk when they opt out of offering learning materials.



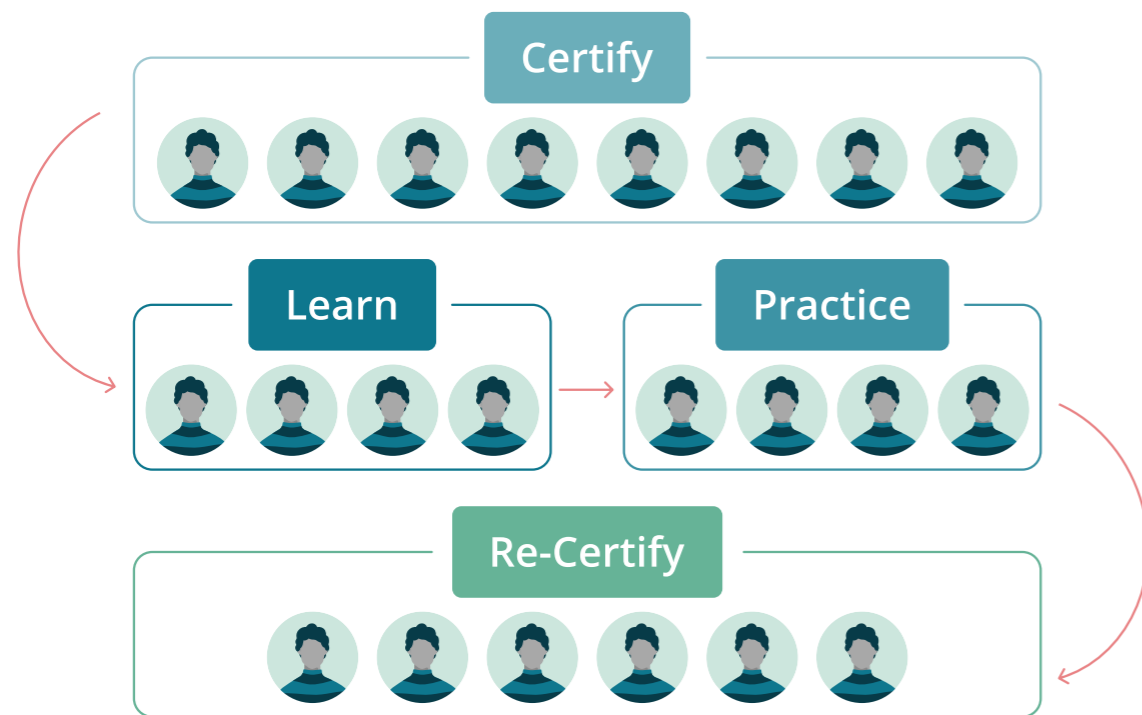
Part 2

The Benefits of Offering Learning and Exam Prep Programs and the Drawbacks of Opting Out

For associations and credentialing bodies not currently offering learning resources, that choice may feel like a safe—and even neutral—position. Avoid the complex requirements of maintaining a firewall, and you avoid the associated risks.

In reality, choosing not to offer learning resources can have negative impacts on learners, members, and even your organization as a whole.

Let's consider a scenario in which a hypothetical association for cybersecurity professionals does not offer any learning resources to support those who seek its certifications.



The Risks of Not Offering Learning Resources

This association is accredited; positions in IT, accounting, finance, and other industries require professionals to have and maintain the credentials this association offers. Because of that, its certifications and continuing education resources are in high demand, and learners are eager to prepare for the exams so they can earn or maintain the credentials they need.

You can probably see where this is going: learners want exam prep materials, but the conformity assessment body doesn't offer them, so a third party decides to fill the void.

While there's nothing wrong with a third-party provider offering learning materials for a certification it doesn't oversee, it's also true that associations and credentialing bodies have no way of knowing what kinds of quality control these third parties are doing.

It's possible, for example, that the training materials may be poorly written or edited. They may include information that doesn't actually prepare learners for the exam in question. They may be inconsistent from one year to the next or from one provider to the next.

And while your organization is not the one publishing these resources, learners may not realize that. The low quality of the learning materials could lead to a dissatisfaction that learners associate with your brand—a dissatisfaction likely compounded by the reality that learners pay money for the preparation materials. If those materials do not adequately prepare them for the exam or certification, the negative association could be strong.

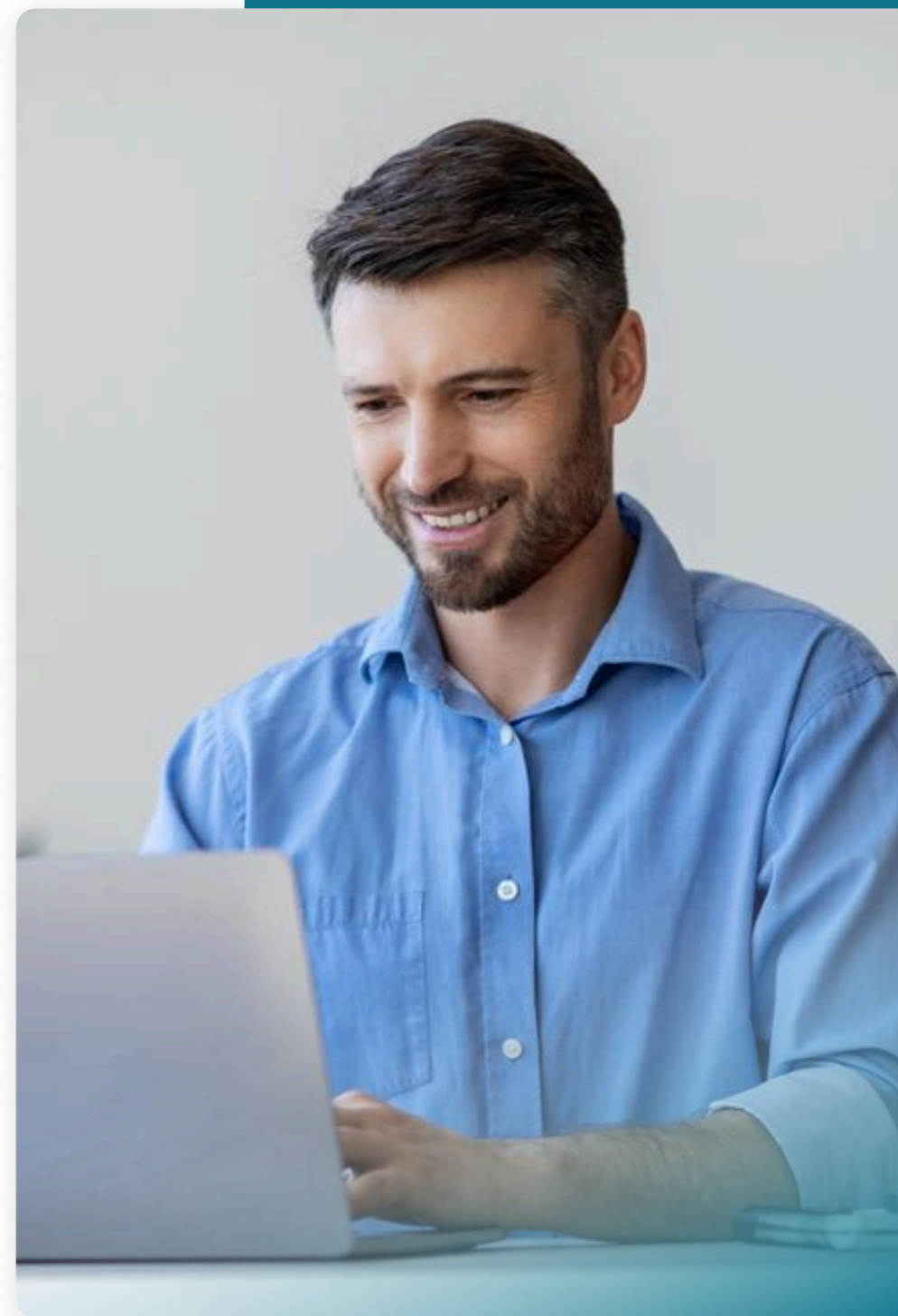


Even worse, if your goal in not offering learning materials is to maintain exam and brand integrity by avoiding 'teaching to the test,' relying on third parties to create learning materials could undermine that objective.

Then there's the revenue consideration: exam candidates are eager to perform well. Many are willing to pay for learning or preparation materials. If your organization doesn't offer those materials, another group likely will—and they will enjoy the associated revenue.

All this to say: not providing learning materials for certifications you offer is far from a neutral choice. In fact, excluding exam prep from your offerings comes with its own set of risks, including the potential to hurt your brand equity among current and future members and candidates.

The good news here is that offering learning materials does not only help you avoid these risks—it also allows you to enjoy significant benefits as an organization.



The Benefits of Offering Learning Materials

When associations and credentialing bodies decide to offer learning materials, they enjoy several benefits:

- **Quality control.** Creating and maintaining materials in house gives conformity assessment bodies full control over what materials are offered to learners, candidates, and members. It's also possible to create accreditation for learning materials so that organizations can empower third parties to take on the work of creating them without sacrificing the quality and rigor of learning resources.



- **Consistency.** Maintaining quality control for learners helps maintain consistency in the industry, which benefits everyone. For example, when more accountants are prepared for and pass certification exams, more organizations can hire accountants who understand how to manage books effectively, which means they can pursue their growth goals more efficiently. It also means they're less likely to be slowed by mistakes and oversights in their finances, caught up in legal complications in unintentional fraud, or otherwise tripped up by poorly handled accounting practices. This benefits every other employee of the organization (healthier finances = healthier incomes), its customers, and its partners. At scale across industries, the ripple effect is considerable.
- **Ownership of the lifelong learning journey.** Professional education is not a destination, but a journey (or a "learner loop"). Whether they are engaging in a certification training course or running through practice questions as they prepare for an exam, when a conformity assessment body can offer materials for each part of this journey, it has a way of delivering value to its candidates and members at all stages of their careers, thus keeping them engaged with the organization.
- **Additional revenue streams.** Adding a new line of business means adding a new stream of revenue. Associations and credentialing bodies that branch into learning materials can better support members and candidates while also [improving their bottom line](#).

It's worth emphasizing that [all of these benefits are possible while maintaining the exam firewall and staying compliant](#) with accreditation bodies.

Part 3

How Associations and Credentialing Bodies Can Offer Learning Resources While Maintaining the Exam Firewall

We've discussed why associations and credentialing bodies should consider offering learning resources. Maintaining a clear separation between credentialing and exam preparation is essential for preserving accreditation. Both ANAB and I.C.E. audits specifically check that organizations offering both are upholding this separation.

Now, let's examine what that looks like in detail.

Separation of Personnel

Briefly put, the people who work on developing certification and exam materials cannot work on developing learning materials or exam prep.

In practice, that means having two distinct teams within an association or credentialing body: the certification and exam or credentialing development team and the learning materials/exam prep team.

Further, anyone involved with developing the certification, exam, or credential must wait three years before working on any learning materials.

What might this look like internally? Let's walk through the process of how an organization might develop a certification and learning materials while maintaining the firewall.





Certification and exam development/ credentialing team's work

First, someone at the organization has an idea for a certification: say, cyber security for school administrators. The next step is to create a certification working group to create the shape of the certification:

- Who gets to say what the certification is?
- What's required to become certified or maintain certification?
- What does the certification process look like?
- What ethics standards will this certification adhere to?

Then, the organization creates an exam development taskforce to create the certification Job Practice Analysis, which includes the domains, subdomains, and task statements that represent the work performed by the person seeking certification. The members of this task force typically include volunteers, subject matter experts, industry experts, and others.

An item development working group then writes, reviews, and approves each exam item. This group also includes a variety of volunteer experts, though they must also have item writing experience (or complete a workshop to learn how to write items correctly).

The organization then defines how the certification exam will be delivered. Finally, it establishes oversight processes for certification, which include the operational aspects of the certification process, including security, fraud detection, and resolution.

Learning materials/exam prep teamwork

In a separate workflow, the organization creates a learning materials or exam prep task force.

Like the exam development task force, this group includes content subject matter experts, but not the same people on the exam development taskforce. In addition to content experts, this team also includes learning experience developers, instructional designers, and product managers.

The goal of the learning materials group is to decide what learning materials will include, based on the learning modalities and objectives it identifies. To do that, the group can look at the Job Practice Analysis created by the exam development/credentialing team. This document serves as the body of knowledge from which all learning subject matter is derived.

In addition to [developing the content of the learning materials](#), the learning materials/exam prep team can also develop or recommend methods for delivery of these materials (such as an [LMS](#) or accredited training organization (ATO)).

Over time, this group maintains learning materials, based on [metrics gathered from multiple channels](#). The goal is to continuously improve the learning materials.

The table below summarizes the roles of these two distinct groups.

Certification and Exam Development Team	Learning Materials / Exam Prep Team
<p>Certification ideation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines the certification scheme • Sets the policy and process for certification requirements • Obtains certification accreditation 	<p>Learning material ideation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product and learning teams identify learning modalities and objectives • Product development team is identified to include learning experience developers, content subject matter experts, and product managers
<p>Certification exam development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam development task force creates the certification Job Practice Analysis: domains, subdomains, and tasks statements representing the work performed by the person seeking certification • Item development working group writes, reviews, and approves each exam item 	<p>Learning material development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure experts to review learning materials who did not participate in exam or certification development • Leverage the Job Practice Analysis as the “body of knowledge” to create learning content from
<p>Certification exam delivery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and implement methods for candidates to take the certification exam 	<p>Learning material delivery methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LMS • Accredited Training Organizations (ATOs)
<p>Certification process oversight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operational aspects of certification process, including security, fraud detection, and resolution 	<p>Learning material maintenance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metrics/feedback gathered from multiple channels • Continuous improvement process for updates

Policies, Procedures, and Process Documents

How can an organization demonstrate during an audit that it maintains appropriate separation among its personnel? Policies, procedures, and process documents are one component.

For example, one common document is a contract for anyone who works on exam development certifying that they will not work on the development of learning materials for three years from their last involvement with exam development.

Auditors will likely check for this documentation and verify that a contract to this effect has been signed and dated by everyone who participated in the ideation or development of the certification exam.

Another example: organizations should have clear written policies on what materials can and cannot be used in the development of learning materials. For example, while learning teams can develop practice exams, they cannot use retired exam items for practice exams.

It's also important to ensure that any vendors involved with the development of the exam or learning materials (translation teams, exam delivery vendors, badging services, etc.) have policies and procedures to follow that maintain the firewall.

The specific policies, processes, and procedures necessary to maintain the firewall may vary from organization to organization, so it's worth working with someone knowledgeable on accreditation standards to ensure you're developing yours adequately.

Rules for Marketing Materials

One final area of consideration for organizations that offer both certification and learning materials: marketing materials.

Marketing assets promoting the learning materials must follow specific rules, one of which is that they cannot promise passage of the exam or earning of the certification. In fact, marketing materials may have to explicitly state that using the learning materials in question offers no guarantee of success on the associated exam.

Marketing guidelines should be spelled out in the documentation along with other policies and procedures. In fact, marketing teams should partner closely with compliance teams to ensure that their marketing materials stay compliant.

Think of the relationship like that of writer and editor: the marketing team develops new materials and campaigns on an ongoing basis, and the compliance team reviews them to ensure that they don't constitute a breach of the firewall or otherwise jeopardize an organization's compliance with accreditation guidelines.



Part 4

How Learning Resources Support the Lifelong Learning Journey

For many organizations, the exam firewall is the main roadblock preventing them from considering offering learning resources. Now that you have a sense of how to offer learning support while maintaining compliance with firewall requirements, it's worth taking a step back to consider how expanding your offerings to include learning resources can benefit your candidates and members more broadly as they progress on their [lifelong learning journey](#).

Let's look at the big picture.

EXHIBIT ONE

[Recent research from IDC](#) estimates that, by 2026, IT skill shortages will impact more than 90 percent of organizations, costing \$5.5 trillion globally in delays, quality problems, and lost revenue.

EXHIBIT TWO

The manufacturing industry could be [shy of two million workers by 2030](#), thanks to a skills gap. Per [recent reporting](#) from Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute, many in-demand roles require extensive training, certification, and/or licensure.

EXHIBIT THREE

By 2038, the US will have a [shortage of about 170,000 healthcare professionals](#) (including doctors, nurses, dentists, and others).

The solutions to these workforce shortages and those in other industries will likely be complex and multi-faceted; however, professional education can play a crucial role. Upskilling and reskilling, for example, will likely be central features of preparing existing IT and manufacturing workers for work that requires interacting with new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT)—and whatever comes next.

As the rate of change in technology continues to speed up, ongoing education will become an even more important component of staying up to date with the latest and most effective technologies.

When that education is available via the associations and credentialing bodies already acting as standard bearers in various industries, workers and businesses alike can enjoy a more unified and streamlined skills development experience.

In many professions, the reality is that practitioners are on a continuous, lifelong learning journey. When organizations have resources to support this journey, they can keep candidates and members engaged throughout their professional lives. This has obvious benefits for an organization's bottom line and equally important, it leads to better outcomes across the industry, such as quality and consistency in practitioner training and education.

The Exam Firewall Presents an Opportunity— Not a Barrier—for Associations and Credentialing Bodies

The opportunity for associations and credentialing bodies to grow by offering learning materials for candidates and members is significant.

By investing in the resources necessary to establish and maintain that firewall within your organization, you can establish a new line of business that drives revenue, maintains brand and exam integrity, improves engagement with candidates and members, and ripples outward to improve quality and consistency in the industries you impact.

There is no single way to offer learning resources to candidates and members while maintaining the exam firewall. If you're curious about how to begin this journey, [please reach out](#). We'd love to help you visualize how expanding into learning resources can help your organization grow while keeping your members engaged for the long term.



About BenchPrep

BenchPrep is an award-winning learning platform purpose-built for certification training, exam preparation, and continuing education programs.

BenchPrep helps learning businesses drive revenue by selling online study and continuing education courses. Learners can search, discover, and enroll in interactive learning experiences through our learner-facing application, Learning Hub.

Our powerful Data Suite unlocks insights into content and the learner experience so you can make data-informed decisions.

Many of the world's leading associations and credentialing bodies trust BenchPrep to power their digital learning programs, including AAMC, ASCM, CFA Institute, CompTIA, GMAC, HRCI, ISACA, NCBE, and more.



Experience the transformation BenchPrep can bring to your certification and continuing education programs. Visit benchprep.com today.

Additional Resources

We hope you find this eBook useful and encourage you to explore more great BenchPrep thinking and content on our [blog](#) or in the many [case studies](#), guides, infographics, webinars, and videos you can find on our [Digital Learning Resources](#) hub.



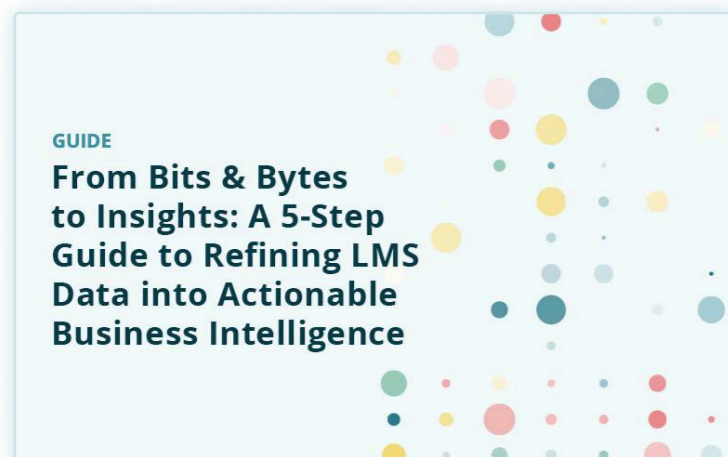
[3 Stages of Creating a Continuous Learning Journey for Your Candidates' Long-Term Success](#)



[4 LMS Superpowers Every Association Needs](#)



[Reinventing Learning: Credentialing Organizations' Golden Opportunity to Help Candidates—and Their Business](#)



[From Bit & Bytes to Insights: a 5-Step Guide to Refining LMS Data into Actionable Intelligence](#)



[How to Reduce Dropout Rates for Your Certification Candidates](#)



[CLO Secrets Revealed: 5 Learning Leaders Share Secrets to Transform Your Certification Program](#)