What’s in a Name?

Of the more than 500,000 IT workers in Canada, only a fraction are ISP-certified. David Booth wants to know why

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There are more than 500,000 technology workers in this country, yet only a fraction of them possess a professional IT designation.

In industries with more established histories, professional designations have evolved as a way of demonstrating members have achieved a level of proficiency in their field. In the world of accounting, there’s the chartered accountant, or CA, designation; in engineering, it’s the P.Eng.

In the technology industry in Canada, there are two certifications for IT workers who want to demonstrate, in a tangible way, a level of skill and commitment to their technology careers: ISP and PMP. The PMP (project management professional) designation is an internationally recognized accreditation for project managers, which has gained momentum in the past few years.

“A few years ago the PMP was considered important in the construction industry,” says David Booth, IT director for the Workers’ Compensation Board in Edmonton. “Today we see that growing exponentially because people are seeing the value. IBM wants to accredit all its project managers with the PMP.”

In Canada, more than 7,500 individuals are card carrying members of the Project Management Institute, but less than 1,800 of those are certified project management professionals, according to estimates from David Barrett, director of the Academy for Project Management at York University’s Schulich School of Business in Ontario.

Meanwhile, the ISP, or Information Systems Professional, is a broader professional designation for IT professionals in Canada. It was introduced in 1989, by the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS). But the ISP has not gained the kind of traction CIPS was hoping for, says Greg Lane, the organization’s president.

“It doesn’t carry as much weight as I’d like it to,” admits Lane. “We’re starting to see increasing interest, but a lot of that is from other countries.”

To date, CIPS has certified about 1,300 ISPs from its membership of 8,000 IT professionals.

Lane says the low numbers are due, in part, to the fact the industry as a whole has not come together to endorse a particular career path for IT workers.

“We’re relatively new in this space and we’re dealing with this maturing industry,” he explains. “We have to get people who are wrestling with the same challenges around a table and collectively decide that endorsing a career path with ISP as an element of that is the way to go.”

Booth got his ISP designation 12 years ago and says it’s one of the best professional moves he made.

“It’s a tangible way of showing I take this (industry) seriously, and I take a great deal of pride in that,” says Booth who is also a certified PMP.

What does it take to be ISP certified?

According to CIPS, the applicant must provide documentation to prove he or she meets or exceeds the criteria for academic qualifications and relevant experience. Both accredited and non-accredited college and university programs qualify, and the applicant must also have a “significant level of IT knowledge where a high level of independent judgment and responsibility are exercised.”

With less than 1,500 ISPs in Canada, one could argue the hoop jumping involved in getting the designation is hardly worth the payoff. But Booth says the professional affiliation plays a significant role in how IT professionals are regarded inside their organizations.

“In a lot of executives minds, it doesn’t have the professional clout; there’s a notion you can go out to any street corner and get a DBA,” he says. “The ISP brings real professional (level) to IT; there’s a code of conduct and ethics that says, ‘I stand behind my work,’ and that’s critical for what is a very young industry.”

For employers looking to fill a vacancy in IT, the ISP designation indicates an overall competence with technology across the board, says Bev Gooding, regional direction of CIPS’s Saskatchewan section.

“You have a designation that says you’re a professional in this field,” she says. “That means an employer can trust you have been working professionally in IT and not just designing Web pages.”

The credibility factor is a big one, says Booth.

“We as IT professionals are damn serious and damn proud, and we stand behind what we deliver.”

Why Hire an ISP?

1. The ISP designation has a rigorous certification criteria.

2. Customers are assured of quality information systems being used to develop products.

3. The perception of an organization is enhanced internationally through broad recognition of the I.S.P.

4. ISPs complete 300 hours of professional training every three years.

5. Access to the educational resources and networking opportunities are provided by CIPS.

6. More than 1,700 I.S.P holders across Canada.

7. National nature of the designation provides consistency of standards.

8. The I.S.P designation provides a competitive advantage for organizations when bidding internationally.

9. Effective self regulation of the profession provides confidence to customers.

10. Supporting staff to receive and maintain the I.S.P reflects an organization’s appreciation that its staff are professionals.