Even When Not Required, a Certification Can Boost Your Allied-Health Career

Five Reasons a Certification Can Boost Your Allied-Health Career

Pop quiz: In which allied-health support careers might you benefit from earning a certification, even though such healthcare jobs don’t always require certification?

Answer: More than you might think, including cardiovascular technicians, dental assistants, home-health aides, medical assistants, occupational therapy assistants, pharmacy technicians and others.

If you aren’t clear about which certifications are optional, it could be because the regulatory landscape is complex. Take pharmacy technicians, for example. “Requirements vary widely state by state,” says Mike Johnston, chairman and CEO of the National Pharmacy Technicians Association. “Generally you must register with the state board of pharmacy. But that could mean just filling out a form or getting a background check, while other states require certification.”

But beyond these varying requirements is one constant: Obtaining a certificate in your allied-health profession is likely a good career move. Here are five reasons to get certified.

1. You’ll Move to the Front of a Long Queue of Applicants

   Even if your skills are in demand without a certification, gaining a credential can give you the leverage to choose your employer. “It’s an advantage in this difficult labor market,” says Dennis Yee, a recruiter with Children’s Hospital Central California in Madera, California. “It certainly adds value to your application.”

   For some allied-health careers, such as medical assistant or home-health worker, a certification may be a near-necessity in crowded labor markets -- even where regulations don’t required it. “In this difficult economic era, many home-care workers have gone back to get additional education, so it’s not as difficult to find certified people as you might think,” says Emma Dickison, CEO of Home Helpers, a franchisor of home-health and personal-care services with operations in 42 states.

2. You’ll Qualify for Jobs with Employers That Set the Highest Standards

   It’s true that if your allied-health skills are in demand, you’re very likely to find a job -- somewhere. But if you want to work for a blue-chip organization -- say, a major medical center or a prestigious specialist’s office -- a certification may help set your candidacy apart. “Many employers require certification even if the state doesn’t,” Johnston says.

   Care providers tend to feel much more comfortable when their workers are all certified in allied-health occupations. “Our franchisees would much rather employ those with certification,” Dickison says. “It’s a huge differentiator, to be able to demonstrate that your staff is properly trained for the standard of care.”

3. You Can Expand Your Scope of Practice

   When an allied-health support worker gains an optional certification, the supervising practitioner may be able to expand that worker’s scope of practice substantially. Sometimes such an expansion is explicitly allowed by regulation; at other times, it’s at the discretion of the supervisor.
By Michigan law, “a dental assistant who isn’t certified or registered can set up the room, do the evacuation of saliva, take impressions,” says Brian Nylaan, DDS, a dentist in Grand Rapids. By contrast, if a dental assistant achieves state registration, she may also apply sealants and fluoride varnish, place rubber dams, and put in temporary crowns, he says.

An added certification will increase your flexibility, making you more valuable to your organization. That’s always a good thing, both for the security of your healthcare job and for your earning potential.

4. You Could Earn More

All other things being equal, when you add a certification to your resume, your compensation should reflect your expanded credentials. “Often there are pay increases associated with a certification” even if it’s optional in your job, says Johnston.

Of course, whether your pay will actually be increased in a particular position is up to your employer. “It’s the franchisees’ decision whether to link pay to certification, and some do,” says Dickison.

Depending on your allied-health job, the nature of the certification and the type of provider you work for, the increase in your compensation will vary. The pay difference between a registered or certified dental assistant and one without such a designation is about $2 an hour, says Nylaan. That small difference adds up to about $4,000 per year.

5. You Build Your Reputation in Your Professional Field

One final reason to consider going for a certification even when it’s not required: You will be admired for achieving a professional level of practice in your chosen occupation.

“Many people do it for the recognition of their peers and patients,” says Johnston. That suitable-for-framing certificate will be an important reassurance for both the people you work with and the patients you care for.