

Survey of CAEAL Assessors on the benefits of Certification

14 November 2005

Background

The National Quality Institute (NQi) sold its assessor certification business to an organisation based in the USA and in Australia. The new organisation, RAB-QSA and is a merger of the US Registrar Accreditation Board (RAB) auditor certification scheme and an Australian organisation called QSA (Quality System Auditors????).

CAEAL sought Assessor feedback on the perceived benefits of Auditor / Assessor Certification. There are currently 28 certified assessors within the CAEAL assessment program out of a total of 150 active assessors.

27 assessors were asked to provide feedback based on two questions by Wednesday 26 October 2005:

1. Did the assessor find the certification scheme to be beneficial? To CAEAL? To the volunteer assessors?
2. What were the benefits they perceived?

Results

Of the 27 responses, 21 felt that the certification scheme provided benefits to both CAEAL and the assessor. 6 perceived no benefit to either.

Stated benefits to CAEAL included the following aspects:

- Provides formal recognition of CAEAL Assessors as professionals in the field of laboratory assessments. It provides further demonstration that CAEAL is a professional organization, a team of recognised professionals.
- Provides visible demonstration of well-qualified CAEAL volunteers and staff.
- Demonstrates continued professional development for CAEAL assessors beyond the biennial CAEAL training and demonstrates their maintenance of currency in the tools and techniques of assessment.
- Demonstrates formal 3rd-party input on the monitoring of assessor skills and knowledge to enhance uniformity of CAEAL assessments delivered.
- Enhances credibility of CAEAL assessor findings when these may differ from those of other accreditation bodies which have also assessed CAEAL laboratories.

- Provides visible demonstration of continual improvement within the CAEAL Accreditation Program.
- Provides enhanced marketing opportunities for the CAEAL Accreditation Program.
- Enhances perception that accredited labs operate recognised and credible quality management systems.
- Improves CAEAL retention of volunteer assessors beyond the initial investment in training and is perceived as perk for these volunteers.
- Formalises reconciliation of CAEAL assessor requirements against international standards and requirements.
- Enhances recognition of competence of CAEAL assessors by visible association to RAB and QSA; organizations recognized by many sectors in North America.
- Enhances perception of assessor competence among CAEAL member labs. Private sector laboratories and public sector regulatory agencies perceive the assessors have reached a reasonable standard of training to perform their assessment duties.

Stated benefits to the assessors included the following aspects:

- Provides formal recognition for the quality of the work performed by assessors and the knowledge and experience they possess.
- Provides additional professional opportunities within my employer organization because of my certified assessor status. It also enhances our ability to do what we do at the labs: it brings credibility and a level of recognized professionalism to our quality functions within our labs. Provides an opportunity and credentials to take part in other internal audits at our work places.
- Enhances employment opportunities were job qualifications ask for certification as an auditor, such as “Compliance Manager.” There exists recognition of being certified.
- Allows me to continue to volunteer for CAEAL assessments because certification is provided by CAEAL and my boss sees it as a very useful credential for my employment as a Quality Assurance Officer. Outside of CAEAL, we all have full-time careers. Requesting time off from our full-time jobs to fulfil the duties of a CAEAL assessor is much easier if we are perceived as experts in the field.

- Allows my private lab employer to bear my time away for training and assessments – because of the enhanced credibility provided to our lab from my certified status. The fact that I need to do 2 audits a year to maintain my certification has been useful when convincing my managers that I should be available for more audits.
- Provides assessors with more consistency and better understanding and interpretation of the standards used in assessment.
- Provides a good balance between consistency of the service and the time requirements endured by the employers of the volunteer assessors.
- Motivates assessors to take stock of what we have done and plan for what we will do to keep our technical competence sharp and relevant to the needs of our member labs and the CAEAL site assessment program.
- Provides assessor/consultants with greater market access. I find being certified as an assessor to be helpful in my personal business deals.
- Provides assessors with ongoing increased awareness of quality management systems and ideas, sharing of such ideas, personal achievement and professional designation. I am not currently certified, but intend to pursue certification once I have gained the needed experience.
- Enhances credibility of expert testimony in court. I am a Federal government employee, and I often testify as an expert witness for the crown in environmental court cases. My experience as an assessor and certification under NQI is often used in my testimony in both providing evidence that the work in my lab meets standards and also when I am asked to review laboratory results submitted by other laboratories as evidence to state I have qualifications for assessing quality of work.

Stated reasons for lack of benefit to either CAEAL or the assessors included the following aspects:

- Certification provides me no benefit.
- NQI has never asked me to demonstrate my assessing skills, only to maintain assessing and training logs.
- If it does not help CAEAL in documenting the credibility of their assessment delivery function, then it provides no added benefit.
- The "CAEAL Lead Assessor" title provides a more recognizable qualification than the RAB Assessor certification does.
- I found the NQI paper work way too time consuming; it does not balance the advantage of the certification.

- I no longer need to be certified to ensure the continued support of my employer. They understand my need to do 2 assessments each year and the biennial training as part of my continuing professional development. I think that the only advantage for CAEAL to have certified assessors is the third party recognition of the good work.

Costs of Certification

At approximately \$300.00 per year, certification is currently provided to 28 assessors. This results in an annual cost of \$8,400.00 per year. In order to ensure eligibility, CAEAL also expends \$13,000.00 to deliver a certified lead assessor course to all CAEAL assessor candidates. This happens approximately once per year.

The total yearly cost for certification is therefore \$21,000.00. This represents two point five percent of the total accreditation program budget. If one half of the current assessor pool, representing 75 assessors, were to seek certification, the total yearly cost would be raised to \$37,000.00 or four percent of the total accreditation program budget.

While these levels of cost are significant, in and of themselves, they represent a very small portion of the operating costs of the overall accreditation program.

Analysis of the Results

Three quarters of the assessors who responded feel the assessor certification scheme provides real benefits to both CAEAL and the participating assessors. Of those who do not feel this way, the majority have either replaced the perceived benefit with another or did not have need for it in the first place. Many expressed surprise that there were relatively few assessors in the certification program.

The greatest number of those expressing a need to retain the benefits of certification focussed on the recognition provided to assessors from three different perspectives:

- Their employers and colleagues;
- CAEAL member laboratories, and
- Outsiders looking into the CAEAL accreditation program such as MRA partners, regulators and others.

In many cases, though not all, the perception of benefit included motivating employers and colleagues to support the assessment work of the assessor. This benefit accrues to the accreditation program itself and enhances continuity within the CAEAL assessor pool.

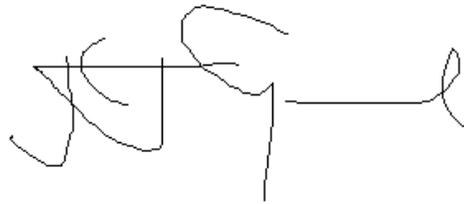
Conclusions

- The benefits of assessor certification, to both the assessors and to CAEAL are real and tangible.
- Relatively few (approximately 19%) assessors have taken the time and effort to acquire certification, although CAEAL bears all the costs.
- The cost of the assessor program is approximately two percent of the cost of the overall accreditation program.

Recommendations

It is recommended that CAEAL:

- Continue to offer a certification program to volunteer assessors as quid-pro-quo for their volunteer activities, including absorbing the costs of this program and the requisite training, within the CAEAL accreditation program, and
- Enhance efforts to promote the benefits of certification to assessors, including making the process more user-friendly for assessors.



J.E.J. (Ned) Gravel,
Quality and Training Manager.