



Management and Strategy Institute
Executive Insight

The real value of a Six Sigma certification

Abstract: Six Sigma certification has earned its place, and those who have earned a Six Sigma designation have a valuable edge in the job market. Although Six Sigma originally had a narrow industrial focus, it is now widely recognized as a valuable tool across all industries. The question is, who should seek this designation? Rather than reserving it for career managers who are already leading teams, Six Sigma certification may be even more valuable to those who have not yet achieved a leadership position but wish to advance. This paper explores who benefits most from a Six Sigma designation, and answers the question – when is the right time to become Six Sigma certified?

Introduction

That Six Sigma is a practice typically reserved for middle-aged executives in large corporations is a myth. Certainly, those mid-career executives benefit from Six Sigma, and often turn to certification as part of their own career advancement plan and to gain useful and actionable knowledge on how to lead the growing teams they may suddenly find themselves managing. But those that are in the earliest stages of their careers, or even recent college graduates that have not yet started one, may benefit even more.

A Bachelor's degree in business or an MBA by itself offers no guarantees of a successful career, or even a job at all. As much as one may value that degree and the college experience, there are hundreds of others who have the same degree.

Even once a career has been established, that degree does not necessarily put you on the fast track for advancement and promotion – it is little more than a ticket to the dance. The MBA gets you in the door, but once there, you need something more to get the choicest assignments, opportunities for promotion and an occasional invitation to play golf with the CEO. That's the real value of the Six Sigma certification.

It shows that you are not just a follower. You're a leader – and the Six Sigma certificate is proof of that.

Six Sigma: Not just for manufacturing

According to Management and Strategy Institute's latest salary survey, the national average for a Six Sigma Black Belt is \$94,539.25 a year. And it's not just about improving quality of manufacturing processes, or imposing a methodology on mid-level managers. Jack Welch said of Six Sigma, "Six Sigma is a quality program that, when all is said and done, improves your customer's experience, lowers your costs, and builds better leaders." That can apply to virtually any industry, and at any level. In fact, some of the largest non-manufacturing companies, including companies in retail, healthcare, hospitality and finance, use Six Sigma as an integral part of their culture. Any company that has a repeatable process for which data is being collected is a good candidate for Six Sigma, and as a result, the certified designation is highly relevant for nearly any job applicant.

In addition to Six Sigma certification being useful in careers across all industries, it is also useful at companies of all sizes. The second myth about Six Sigma is that it is used primarily by large companies – again not true. Small and medium-sized businesses often find themselves "hitting a wall" after an initial period of growth, and when that occurs, it becomes necessary to take a different approach. This is where staff members who have a transformative mindset become essential to taking that next step.

In almost any business, a "customer-focused strategy" is the dominant strategy for success, and understanding of that will be an important part of the hiring process, whether you have direct interaction with the customer or not. But how do you, as a job candidate and a recent college graduate with little practical experience, show that you are "customer-focused?" Everyone puts words to that effect on their resumes, but it's much more than a throwaway catch phrase, and job candidates may be hard-pressed to offer meaningful evidence that they are able to incorporate this customer focus into

every aspect of the job. Customer-focused strategy is a key ingredient of corporate success, and every part of the enterprise has some element of enhancing the quality of the customer experience. Six Sigma shows that not only do you understand the need for a superior customer experience, you have the specific management tools to make that happen. The primary focus of Six Sigma is after all, a focus on customer-centric "Critical to Quality" (CTQ) factors that go beyond back-room operations to deliver value to encourage a higher ARPU (average revenue per user), lower customer churn and greater up-sell and cross-sell.

Six Sigma certification for early career seekers and recent grads

You proudly display your college degree on your resume, and rightfully so. But that college experience only shows that you have some subject matter expertise. It doesn't show that you know how to lead, and that is the biggest challenge that hiring managers face when looking at recent grads – how to find someone with leadership ability. Faced with a hiring pool of hundreds of newly minted MBAs, a hiring manager may look at college activities, part-time jobs and volunteer work, but that's not going to tell much of a story. That you helped build homes in Haiti, held an internship in your field or participated in a start-up weekend gives very little indication that you will have the tools you need when it comes time to lead a departmental group of 50 to 100 people to accomplish something strategic to the company's success. There's suddenly a lot on the table, and the hiring manager won't want to bank the project's success on your mostly theoretical experience.

But what else will they have to look at? Corporations want to hire recent grads, but once you're there, how will the hiring manager determine who to put on the management track, who needs continued development and who would best serve the company by staying exactly where they are?

The college degree gives you the toolbox, but Six Sigma helps you take another big step in understanding how to use those tools – and prepares you for a leadership role. It may well be the best differentiator for a recent college grad in a sea of equally qualified candidates. It shows the hiring manager that you can:

- Become a "change agent" within the organization
- Improve processes within the organization
- Improve deliverables to customers

That college degree certainly has value, and in many career paths, you can't do without it. The fact is though, the degree has become much more of a commodity. US Census Bureau data¹ shows that in 1940, 4.56 percent of the U.S. population over 25 had four years or more of college, while in 2014, that percentage jumped to 31.96 percent. When about one in 20 people had a degree in 1940, the degree alone was a significant competitive advantage in the job market. But today, when one in three people have a degree, that degree has clearly moved from being a differentiator, to being a "must have" just to get in the front door for an interview. Beyond that, you need something more.

¹ US Census Bureau. Current population survey data on educational attainment.

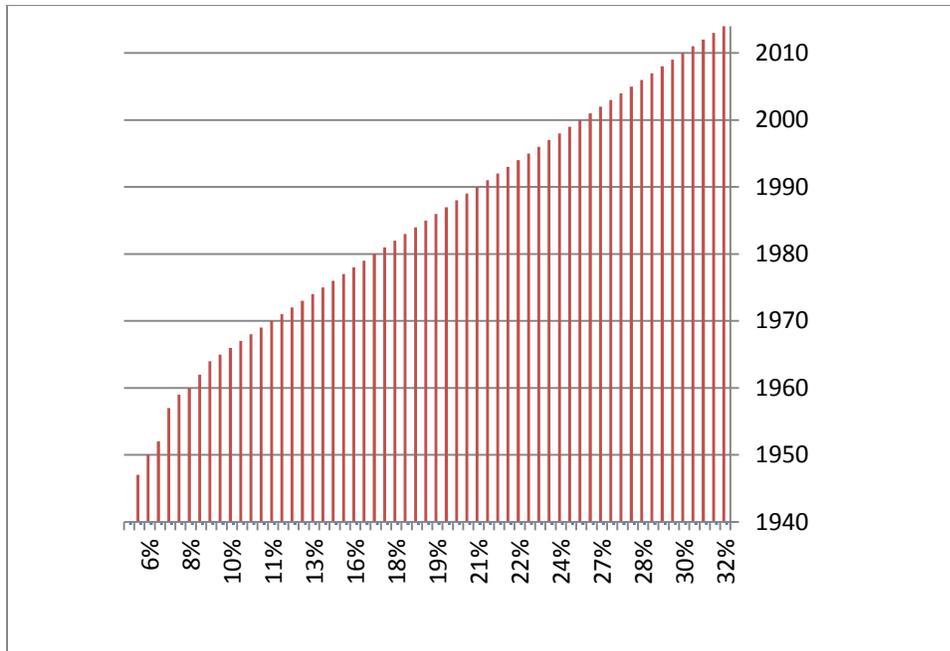


Figure 1. Percent of people over 25 with a college degree has increased, making the degree less of a competitive advantage.

According to a research study from Georgetown University², certification programs of all types have increased in prevalence and value, often serving as a value-add to a traditional degree. According to the research, one-third of certificate holders also have an Associate's, Bachelor's, or Master's degree; and the combination of a certificate and a degree is a powerful one, delivering on average a 6 percent premium at the Associate's level, and a 3 percent premium at the Bachelor's level.

Does the combination pay off? It certainly does. Quality Progress magazine's annual 2014 Salary Survey, the benefit of quality certifications is evident. According to the survey, full-time employees who responded to the survey and possess Six Sigma Green Belt training make \$8,824 more than those with no training. Those respondents with Black Belt training earn \$20,000 more than those without training, and Master Black Belt training reaps \$46,000 more than those without training.³

On the fast track to promotion – or stagnating at the water cooler?

There are a few things that determine who gets promoted and who does not, and in an environment where all candidates for a management position have equally impressive degrees, the requirements tend to get fuzzy. Good feedback and positive performance reviews don't mean much, and in fact, may only contribute to management feeling that you're "good at your job" and should therefore stay exactly where you are.

² Carnevale, Anthony P., Rose, Stephen J., and Hanson, Andrew R. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. "Certificates: Gateway to gainful employment and college degrees." June 2012.

³ Quality Magazine. "Survey: Despite flat salaries, most quality professionals satisfied with pay." December 2, 2014.

Interpreting feedback can be difficult – and the unwritten rules that tend to dominate internal hiring and advancement are hard to decode. Generally though, those unwritten rules have little to do with actual ability, experience or business knowledge. Moving from an administrative to a management position is in particular a challenge and often frustrating, because the requirements are less dependent on what you know, and more dependent on whether or not management feels you are ready to lead. Again, the Six Sigma certification contributes towards creating the perception that you are a leader in the mind of the hiring manager.

Will you be a cog in the wheel, or an agent of success?

Hiring managers are faced with difficult decisions every day, and must decide which type of person is best suited to each job. To be sure, there are jobs at every company that require task-oriented production, and at first glance, Six Sigma may not seem appropriate to such careers. That would however, be a hasty decision. The Six Sigma model of adherence to quality, adherence to customer satisfaction, and attention to "five-nines" perfection can apply almost anywhere, to any job. It is worth noting that in companies that use Six Sigma, very often all staff – not just upper management – receive at least some minimal training in six Sigma processes. A good hiring manager will understand that just because a process works today, it will not necessarily work tomorrow – or even if it does continue to work, competitors will inevitably come up with a process that works better. An employee that does his or her job as described, on time and to spec, is admirable – but that employee will never be a leader. An employee that understands the process behind the job, spots opportunities for improvement, and understands how to lead the team that executes that process, will be the one who gains the promotion every time. That is the true value of a Six Sigma certification.

About Management and Strategy Institute

Management and Strategy Institute is an accredited, authorized training provider with IASSC accreditation. MSI provides online training and certification of management and business skills for individuals who wish to advance their knowledge in the field of business. Certification includes Six Sigma, project management, and other professional development options. All exams include free training material and are competency based.