

Professional Certification and Career Development: A Comparative Analysis between Local and Foreign Certifications

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Received: 23-07-2022

Accepted: 02-09-2022

Published online: 04-09-2022

How to Cite:

Adeosun, O. T., & Adegbite, W. M. (2023). Professional Certification and Career Development: A Comparative Analysis between Local and Foreign Certifications. *Management & Economics Research Journal*, 5(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.48100/merj.2023.253>

Abstract:

Professional certification, a proficiency to validate employees' competency and readiness for career development, has recently become a subject of inquiry among researchers. There are concerns about employers' demand for foreign in place of local professional certifications in employment decisions, especially in developing countries. Therefore, this study examines the impact of indigenous and foreign professional certifications on employee career development in developing countries like Nigeria. A survey questionnaire was designed to collect data from certified and non-certified human resource professionals in Nigeria. A structural equation modelling analysis was carried out to explore the relationship between the exogenous

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and homogenous constructs. Findings revealed that local and foreign certifications influence the career development of the sampled employees. However, the model's explanatory power shows that foreign certification has a greater influence on career development than local certification. The study report suggests that both certifications benefit career development, thus, are relevant in career development and employment decisions.

Keywords: Career Development, Local and Foreign Certifications, Nigeria, Professional Certifications, Structural Equation Modeling.

JEL Codes: M10, M12, M51, M53.

1. Introduction

Over the years, an appreciably growing percentage of organisations and managers have emphasised the importance of certifications, resulting in healthy competition among practising professionals. Medical professionals, engineers, educationists, human resource management practitioners, and others are renowned for setting the primary standard for their members to ascertain their professional competency through professional certification. In the human resource (HR) management profession, employers are now making HR certifications part of the basic requirements to differentiate between certified and competent, and non-certified professionals.

There are over 300,000 HR professionals across 165 countries of the world who have attained HR certification. Having an (HR certification) demonstrates your commitment to your career and staying current in your field. Recently, there has been a proliferation of accredited training firms that provide physical and online tutorials for existing HR practitioners and interested graduates. Many publicities and advertisements highlight these foreign certifications' benefits to prospective clients. They also review LinkedIn profiles of HR practitioners and pitch certifications if you have none or pitch the one you do not have if you already have one. There are different motivations for pursuing certifications and re-certifications. Only a few years ago, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria (CIPM) introduced the Human resource practising license (HRPL), renewable every three years, to foster a commitment to continuous development. Also, there is peer pressure from professional colleagues who have titles behind their names. While many organisations support examination leaves, only some provide financial support through reimbursement for exam fees and membership subscriptions. It is worth noting that many vacancies make professional certification an added advantage and not mandatory. For senior roles, industry and practical experience get a priority.

Previous research has focused on certifications like SPHR and PHR

(Werner, 2020), both United States-based institutions. Many multinational corporations provide decent jobs but typically require relevant qualifications and credentials with a preference for international or foreign orientations. Also, the desire by many indigenous companies to expand beyond the shores of Nigeria encourages them to employ a professional who is either schooled abroad or has foreign certifications. There is a perception that foreign means quality, which also reflects consumer preferences for products and services. Some C-Level and Senior Level HR executives also encourage and motivate their colleagues to enrol for certifications to ensure a specific minimum body of knowledge within the team and align their thinking around frameworks and international best practices (Amiri, 2020). They believe this will boost the performance and productivity of individuals and the team. Professional bodies provide training and webinars around contemporary and emerging issues. These team members handle situations in a proactive and timely manner. However, this may encourage team members who become more aware of aspiring for better compensation and are more attracted to other firms' opportunities.

This research extends the discussions by looking at Nigerian-based HR certifications and juxtaposing them with foreign ones. Also, studies have yet to be conducted on this terrain. We work with a wide range of HR professionals, including those who do not belong to any HR associations, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and Chartered Institute of Human Resource Management of Nigeria (CIHRM) members (CIPM). Additionally, there still needs to be more empirical studies on the relationship between HR credentials and indicators of job success. The most notable gap in the current literature on HR certification is the need for more empirical research on the relationship between certification and objective measures of work performance in career progression (Lester et al., 2010; Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012).

2. Empirical and theoretical review

Many fields require voluntary certification, especially those in IT-oriented and HSE fields, as a way for employees to develop or upgrade themselves. In their estimation, Hansen (2006) and Luqmani (2017) approximated the number of voluntary certifications currently offered to 1,600 across different fields. Some other potential reasons or motivations inform an employee's decision to either get a particular certification or not. The 2010 Value of Certification Study, commissioned by HRCI and carried out by HR professionals and their employers, discovered that professional HR certification is highly appreciated and valued since it displays the real-world

expertise of the certified HR professional. Additionally, it fosters career progression and reflects a dedication to lifelong learning. In conclusion, human resource certification is thought to increase the marketability of HR professionals, demonstrate that they have mastered the fundamentals of the field, and boost their professional confidence among peers and superiors.

The department that acts as a meeting point regarding hiring, managing, and developing other resources must be highly qualified to do its duties dutifully. Given this, all human resource professionals must be up-to-date and knowledgeable about industry trends, as the primary goal of certification is to stay current on the most recent laws and trends effectively. According to studies, having certified HR specialists helps organisations establish standards and strict compliance to lay down regulations, reduce their vulnerability to the ramifications of non-compliance with employment laws, and enhance their credibility (Lester et al., 2010). In conclusion, many human resource professionals and their companies consider obtaining an HR certification worthwhile.

One of the fundamental prerequisites for human resource specialists is HR certification. As a result of its growing importance, the HR profession has evolved from a purely administrative or clerical function to one essential to providing organisations and businesses with a competitive advantage. When disciplines grow, it becomes vital to have a certification organisation and license to have credibility as a recognised profession and frequently compete with other connected or related professions.

To understand why workers might be required to obtain certifications and why employers of labour might use certification as a predictor in choosing applicants during the recruitment and selection process, Chams and Garca-Blandón (2019) reported using signalling theory from the work of Spence (1973, 1974). From signalling theory, it is inferred that an organisation's recruiting practices focus on credentials rather than conducting a comprehensive background check on applicants who apply for a position or a job to assess their skills and capabilities. With certification, the task becomes more manageable because they could assume that, on average, those with certification are more qualified and productive than those without it. Instead of assessing every applicant, recruiters select those with valid certifications, as this significantly saves recruitment costs, time, and energy.

The paucity of empirical studies analysing the relationship between certification and objective measures of work performance is the biggest hole in the literature on HR certification (Lester et al., 2010; Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012). Additionally, these studies have not shown that certification increases pay or promotions (Kolawa, 2002; Lester et al., 2010). Some

researchers have considered how practitioners and companies view HR certification's financial and time costs. For instance, Garza and Morgeson (2012) and Aguinis et al. (2005) explore the relationship between HR certification and organisational value. Their conclusions indicated that the degree to which organisations value HR certification would depend on the fundamental organisational principles.

Moreover, whether employees of a company obtain HR certification also depends on these fundamental organisational principles. Understanding an organisation's HR model and people's actions requires establishing the relationship between critical organisational principles and HR certification (Garza & Morgeson, 2012). According to a comparable study by Lester et al. (2011), having an HR certification was typically beneficial and advantageous and did not influence decisions regarding pay or the hiring team.

In contrast, the HR Qualification Institute discovered that about half of participating certified HR professionals had their certification recognised by their employer. Additionally, almost a third stated that their HR certification increased compensation (HRCI, 2008). By maintaining full diversity in the system approaches to HRM training or certification to fulfil diverse needs, the HR profession is preserved and optimised (Chams & Garca-Blandón, 2019). This divide between practice and science will continue to exist because there is a fundamental difference in how professionals and academics interpret and address issues unique to their field (Garza & Morgeson, 2012). The following hypotheses are postulated and tested to fully understand or determine the perception behind professional certification and its impact on career development.

H₁: Foreign certification contributes significantly to career development.

H₂: Foreign certification contributes significantly to professional certification.

H₃: Local Certification contributes to career development.

H₄: Local certification is perceived as inferior to Foreign Certification in worth and value.

H₅: Professional certification has a more significant influence on career development.

The relational socialisation theory carefully explains how employees view and reflect on their profession's world (Lakshmi & Erin, 2020). Relational socialisation starts with learning from parents, family, peers, school, and a work perspective. It is seen as essential and what is expected of all employees. Similar experiences in terms of technical breakthroughs, knowledge, education, the trend in music, globalisation, life events, and the nature of their occupations are more likely to be shared by people who share the same demographics (Grusec & Hastings, 2014; Tamunomiebi & Onah, 2019). Relational socialisation helps people to see themselves as part of society. It happens throughout the entire life of everyone, starting from birth, with primary or major influences gotten from parents that help their character and motivations due to interactions and experiences. (Grusec & Hastings, 2014). Individuals have much influence over and control over this relational socialisation process, especially as they transition from maturity to the workforce. Dania (2020) defined the socialisation of new hires as the development of moral connections between their current views or ideas and past experiences, as well as the capacity to contrast their expectations with the reality they encounter at the new place of employment.

This study supports the relational socialisation school of thinking by thoroughly evaluating the attitudes and emphasis that human resource professionals place on professional certification to advance in their jobs. It depends on their beliefs, level of exposure, prior experiences, and likely their high expectations following certification. It is a transformation based on interactions or influence from one group to another, such as from uncertified professionals to certified professionals (Grusec & Hastings, 2014). Though each generation is defined by its social, educational, and historical events, it has also been demonstrated that shifting from one superior group to another, particularly in professional training, influences employees' attitudes about professional certification. The theory also explains why employees should select local or internationally recognised training depending on their ideas, exposure, preferences, and expectations (Grusec & Hastings, 2014).

3. Methodology

This study was conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, and respondents were drawn from human resource practitioners across sectors. The location was chosen for this study because of its industrial activities and being the business hub, with most organisations having their corporate headquarters within the area. Also, the availability of internet connectivity, exposure to

western influences, and financial inclusion in the location are impressive, thus, making it easy to conduct digital marketing-related research.

A structured questionnaire was administered, and 230 responses were obtained. The respondents were strictly human resource practitioners, both certified and those that are yet to be certified. A non-probability sampling method was used to collect data due to the investigation nature, the possibility of high costs, and the timeliness of the process. The sample size for structural equation modelling, which includes numerous constructs and many items, was determined according to the criteria provided by Hair et al. (2019). After data collection, upon screening, the data showed some missing values, which were removed, and 221 valid responses were used for statistical analyses.

The questionnaire is made up of two parts. First, questions were asked regarding the respondents' demographic information, such as their gender, age, marital status, the greatest level of education attained, and the number of years in business. The last part contained the measured variables construct used in this study. On a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1- (Strongly disagree) to 5- (Strongly Agree), respondents assessed responses to a 28-item questionnaire about the human resource perspective. These items were developed by carefully reviewing past works related to certification (Abazi & Hajrizi, 2018; Dania, 2020).

4. Results and hypotheses testing

Table 1 displays the demographic breakdown of the respondents regarding gender, marital status, age, degree of education, and job experience in the sector.

The demographic characteristic of the respondents, as observed, is presented in Table 1. There is a gap between the respondents regarding gender representation; 45% are male, and 55% are Female. Most respondents fall between 40 and above, indicating that the sample size is vastly experienced and mature enough to provide accurate feedback.

Also, 59% of the sample is married, 38% Single, while others account for 3%. The educational background showed that most respondents had attained a bachelor's degree, i.e., 47% B (bachelor's degree), 40% (master's degree), while other levels of education represent 13%.

Table 1. Demographic breakdown of respondents

Category	Subcategory	Count	Percentage
Gender	Female	124	55%
	Male	102	45%
Age	20-29 years	41	18%
	30-35 years	62	27%
	36-39 years	34	15%
	40 and above years	89	39%
	Married	133	59%
Marital status	Others	6	3%
	Single	87	38%
Qualification	B.sc	107	47%
	M.sc	90	40%
	Others	29	13%
Years of experience	0-5 years	63	28%
	11 years and above	99	44%
	6-10 years	64	28%
Professional certified or not	No	45	20%
	Yes	181	80%

Source: Authors' computation

The sample is well experienced, with about 44% having over 11 years of work experience in the industry. The Table also shows that most respondents are professionally certified, with 80% and 20% yet to be certified. The demographic distribution indicates that those with the right experience (educationally and professionally) participated in the study.

Hair et al. (2019) claim that factor loadings of 0.60 are suitable for exploratory research. However, the recommended loadings start from 0.7 as they explain that the constructs describe fifty per cent above the indicator's variance (Hair et al., 2019). As shown in Table 2, most loadings fall within the acceptable range of 0.6 to 0.96. Composite reliability was used to assess the instrument's internal consistency. Due to the unweighted nature of the items, some of Cronbach's alpha fell below the precise or acceptance measure of reliability (Hair et al., 2019). According to Hair et al. (2019), utilising composite reliability to obtain internal consistency in the exploratory study, values of 0.6 to 0.7 are acceptable. When the values range from 0.7 to 0.9, these values are known to have high reliability or are satisfactorily good.

In contrast, values from 0.95 and above are problematic because they display redundancy in the items and reduce construct validity. Such values also inflate the correlation as a result of the straight-lining. The composite reliability values are shown in Table 2 and are within the acceptance region (Hair et al., 2019), thus fulfilling the internal consistency requirement.

Table 2. Composite reliability and validity for construct

Construct	Items	Loadings	Composite reliability
Career advancement	Certifications make it easier to get a promotion on the job.	0.654	0.788
	With certification, I am better than my non-certified colleagues.	0.684	
	Certification increased my productivity and value to the business.	0.645	
	I have secured a career opportunity I did not have sufficient experience with due to my possession of a certification.	0.468	
	My certification gave me an edge over other qualified colleagues during a promotion decision/exercise.	0.656	
	Preparing for certification exams helped in boosting my competencies on the job.	0.597	
Foreign certification	I prefer foreign certifications to local certifications.	0.53	0.695
	I prefer having multiple foreign certifications.	0.606	
	Foreign certification helps me get a managerial role or C-level easily.	0.82	
Local certification	I did local certification before foreign due to affordability.	0.844	0.757
	Local certification is more relevant within my country but less recognised.	0.496	
	I prefer having both foreign and local certifications.	0.776	
Professional certification	Certifications make me more employable.	0.603	0.702
	My certification increases my earning potential.	0.763	
	Certification encourages me to stand on the side of ethics and integrity relative to before my certification.	0.484	
	I have been denied a career opportunity even though I strictly have the competencies for strictly because of a lack of certification.	0.573	

Source: Authors' computation

Discriminant validity is commonly used to check whether a construct differs from all other constructs within the same study (Hair et al., 2019). This is accomplished by comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) between constructs, and the square root of AVE must be greater than the correlations between constructs. The use of the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings of items to assess construct validity has reportedly received criticism in the literature, according to Hensler et al. (2015). According to Hensler et al. (2015), the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) outperforms the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the cross-loading evaluation. As a result, the HTMT criterion was used to evaluate the constructs further. This criterion compares the average item correlations across constructs to the (geometric) mean of the average correlations for the items measuring the same construct (Hair et al., 2019). The values in the diagonal of Table 3 also show that all the constructs have HTMT values ranging from 0.5 to 0.8 (less

than 0.9), confirming discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

Construct	Career advancement	Foreign certification	Local certification	Professional certification
Career advancement	0.621	-		
Foreign certification	0.501	0.663	-	
Local certification	0.246	0.129	0.721	-
Professional certification	0.63	0.537	0.254	0.614

Source: Authors' computation

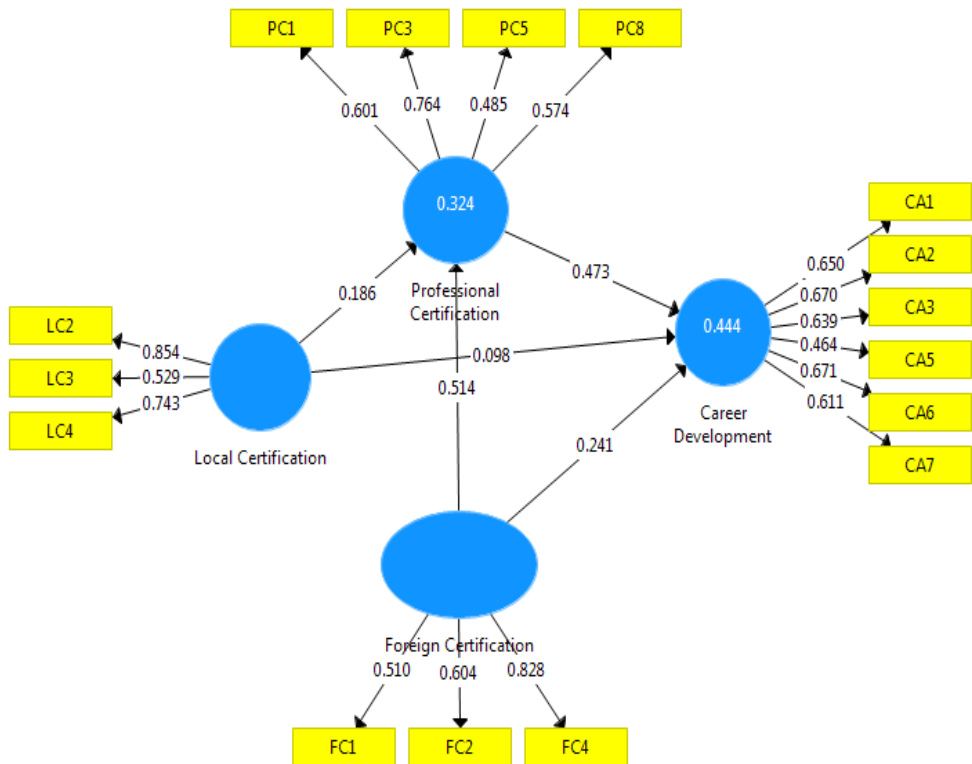


Figure 1. Structural equation model showing the relationship between certification and career advancement

Source: Computation from SmartPLS

Figure 1 depicts the R^2 value of the two endogenous constructs for the two regression equations. The R^2 values range from 0 to 1, indicating a model's degree of validity or explanatory power. The R^2 results show that foreign, local, and professional certifications had a combined explanatory power of 44.4% on career development ($R^2 = 0.444$). The two local and foreign certification constructs had a combined explanatory power of 32.4% on professional certification ($R^2 = 0.324$).

Table 4. Structural model analysis results

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P-values	Decision
Foreign certification -> Career development	0.241	0.244	0.062	3.917	0.000	Significant
Foreign certification -> Professional certification	0.514	0.524	0.044	11.693	0.000	Significant
Local certification -> Career development	0.098	0.099	0.057	1.720	0.086	Insignificant
Local certification -> Professional certification	0.186	0.185	0.055	3.358	0.001	Significant
Professional certification -> Career Development	0.473	0.474	0.056	8.392	0.000	Significant

Source: Authors' computation

Table 4 shows that both local and foreign certifications influence the professional certification of human resource practitioners in Nigeria. However, the foreign certification has a more significant influence, i.e., human resource practitioners in Nigeria adopt or prefer the foreign certification to the local one. While foreign certification also influences career development, local certification does not. Also, findings reveal that professional certification strongly influences career advancement. The country is known for its citizen's quest for knowledge. While recruiting for human resources positions, companies mainly prioritise educationally and professionally certified candidates and request recognised certifications from candidates. This has made professionals in the field opt for foreign certificates, as evident in Table 4 for local certificates, despite the affordability of local certification and easy access to meeting the trainers.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

This study explored the perception of professional certification and its impact on career development. It seeks to understand the influence of local and foreign certification on professional certification in Nigeria and, most importantly, determine whether professional certification influences

employees' career development. The first and second hypotheses examine foreign certification's contribution to professional and career development. Findings show that foreign certification contributes significantly to career development among the sample employees. The second hypothesis investigated the effect of foreign certification on professional certification, and the result was also significant according to the structural equation model presented above. The third hypothesis, which was insignificant according to the result, seeks to know whether local certification contributes to career development. According to the fourth hypothesis, foreign certification is preferred over local certification, suggesting a revamp of the local certification for it to be recognised even within Nigeria. The last hypothesis was on the impact of professional certification on career development. The result equally confirmed it does, i.e., getting certified professionally helped in their career and getting acquainted with the profession's norms.

These results correspond with Abazi and Hajrizi (2018), who summarised that the recognition gotten from certification is important for career advancement and lifelong learning. This study's theoretical framework (relational socialisation theory) explains how employees view their profession's world and reflect on it, how exposed they are, their past experiences, and their high expectations after certification. It is evident that this study empirically follows or abides by this theory. It has shown the need for professionals to study and get themselves certified to move with the trend of things in the field. It also helps the professionals fully know what is happening and improve themselves.

The findings show that professional certification strongly influences career advancement and makes HR professionals committed to lifelong learning and continuous development. However, foreign certifications are recognised more in Nigeria than in local ones. This has made professionals in the field opt for foreign certificates and, in turn, resulted in higher pay (HRCI, 2008). This study contributed to the body of knowledge by examining the current contribution of professional certifications to career development in Nigeria.

The study examined respondents' perception of local and foreign professional certifications and how it impacts career development. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design, making it a limitation. To this end, it is recommended that future studies should adopt a longitudinal research design to capture the development of personnel over a more extended period.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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