



# BEST PRACTICES IN CERTIFICATION

BY SUE REYNARD

“**W**hen we started our Six Sigma deployment back in 1998-99, we recognized that it was people who would make it happen,” recalled Don Linsenmann, vice president and corporate Champion of Six Sigma at DuPont. “We wanted to provide special recognition and rewards to those people.” Advised to certify Black Belt and Master Black Belt positions, DuPont has been doing that “practically since day one,” Linsenmann said.

The company is not alone in the way it has embedded certification in its Six Sigma practices. Certification is more the norm than the exception these days. More than half (53 percent) of respondents to an iSixSigma survey reported receiving their certification from a company. (See “Six Sigma Certification” on page 33.) It has become an important tool for ensuring and improving the quality of Six Sigma efforts. Here’s a look at certification at three leading Six Sigma companies.

## Motorola

Mike Potosky, the director of Six Sigma at Motorola Inc., was not with the company when it began using certification in 1991, five years after developing the methodology. But he does know that within Motorola, certification is seen as verification that Belts have learned the methods they need to deliver results.

“In a company the size of Motorola, there are thousands of people who can find problems and point fingers,”

Potosky said. “But there are never enough who are good at fixing problems.” He added that every manager wants problem solvers on their team, and certification helps them find those people.

Certification is also an important form of professional development at Motorola. “Getting certified is seen as a great accomplishment,” Potosky said. “People want the recognition – it differentiates them from their peers and looks good on a résumé.”

At the same time, as a deployment leader he constantly reinforces the message that certification is a beginning, not an end point. “I tell our Belts that certification is not a one-and-done process. They have to continue working on projects, and help others get their certification,” Potosky said.

Besides the general Six Sigma and Design for Six Sigma certifications it offers, Motorola is finalizing a specialized certification in software development, and is looking at offering other specializations such as sales and marketing.

While Motorola certifies many Belts itself, it also hires a lot of Belts that have been certified by other companies. “We actually like having diversity,” Potosky explained. “Some of the Belts come in stronger in Lean Six Sigma, others stronger on the Design for Lean Six Sigma side. That breadth of knowledge is good for Motorola.”

When it comes to potential employees, certification represents a level of competency, Potosky said. “The people we hire who have certifications know which tools to

employ to solve problems,” he said. Still, because Motorola places a heavy emphasis on generating results in its certification criteria, the company requires incoming Belts to complete a project inside Motorola to earn a Motorola certification.

### DuPont

At DuPont, Six Sigma certification is seen as critical for progression both within the Belt ranks and up the corporate ladder. “Green Belt certification is an expectation for salaried, professional, technical and managerial personnel. In general, you can’t get a promotion in those jobs unless you have a Green Belt certification,” Linsenmann said. (He adds that only about 10 percent of that cadre are certified Black Belts because it is a full-time job.)

DuPont’s priority is on spreading Six Sigma competency throughout the company. For that reason, when it started to develop its own Master Black Belts years ago, DuPont realized that the Belts’ energy must be on helping develop other Belts – not only getting certified. “It was more important to us that [Master Black Belts] teach Green Belts and Black Belts than do their own projects,” said Linsenmann. The Master Black Belt position is still viewed primarily as a leadership position in DuPont, and its certification requirements reflect that emphasis.

Looking forward in terms of certification, DuPont is considering going Lean. “We have a lot of people who are focusing more on end-to-end views of a process or system, and we want to certify that competency,” Linsenmann

said. “We are exploring how to treat these additional skills through certification.”

### Microsoft

Microsoft Corp. is approaching certification more from the perspective of defining career paths for employees.

Microsoft’s process improvement program, known as Quality and Business Excellence (QBE), includes Six Sigma, change management, business excellence events, Lean and other core areas of knowledge. Therefore, while Belt certification at Microsoft is based around the Six Sigma toolset, the other areas are included in the training, said Margaret Townsend, QBE general manager.

“What’s really different about certification at Microsoft is that we’ve defined five stages within the quality engineering discipline,” she explained. To be a Black Belt or Master Black Belt within the QBE community, employees have to map a career through those stages, which includes getting certifications along the way. “We want the Belt designations to reflect people dedicated to the improvement disciplines and thought leadership, people who are giving as much back to the program as they are getting out of it,” Townsend said. (She noted that Microsoft also has Belts who are not part of the central QBE infrastructure deployed within business units. Those positions do not yet have a career path requirement.)

Currently the focus at Microsoft is more on developing the QBE community than on certification per se. “Certification is important from a talent management

## Company Doesn’t Offer Certification? No Problem



Scott Laman said certification has advanced his career.

More than half of respondents to a recent iSixSigma survey said their company offers a certification program. Clearly that leaves many practitioners without an in-house option.

Scott Laman, for example, undertook Black Belt certification entirely under his own initiative. “The company I was with at the time didn’t use Six Sigma,” said Laman,

who is now manager of New Product Development Quality Engineering for Teleflex Medical Inc. (formerly Arrow International), a medical device company. “So it was mostly self-study combined with my prior knowledge and Black Belt projects I did on the job that allowed me to pass the [American Society for Quality] certification exam.”

Laman ended up leading numerous projects at his company and generating about \$2 million in bottom-line savings. Eventually he reached a ceiling. He began job hunting and saw that Arrow was looking for quality professionals with Six Sigma experience – and certification.

“I think having both of those qualifications and having a track record of projects that led to savings got me the job,” Laman said. Originally hired as a senior quality engineer by Arrow, he was promoted to his current managerial position 18 months later.

“Certification has been very valuable to me and has really helped with career advancement,” he affirmed. “It’s also given me additional job security by making me more valuable to my employers. Over the years, my skills and proven track record using Six Sigma tools to generate results have saved me from rounds of layoffs.”

standpoint,” Townsend said. “It means people get credit for their achievements.” Furthermore, each level is important. “As you move up in certification level, you are expected to move up the hierarchy and be looking at broader metrics with greater complexity of root causes.”

### Three Certification Program Tips

Certification will continue to be an expected part of Six Sigma and related disciplines, in part because it has credibility in the workplace. As Six Sigma leaders approach certification in their companies, they should consider these tips:

**1. Focus on the projects.** “I draw a pie chart showing what’s involved with becoming a Black Belt,” Potosky said.

“About 20 percent of that pie is the training, 5 percent is the test that shows you learned the methods/tools and the rest of that pie is the projects. That’s the important piece, going out there and solving problems.”

**2. Make certification a top-down issue.** “There’s a lot about Six Sigma that our businesses can determine for themselves, but certification is defined at the corporate level at DuPont,” Linsenmann said. “We wanted the criteria to be universal. It’s too important to be a ‘states’ rights’ issue.”

**3. Build a brand.** “Six Sigma was a well-established brand at General Electric that was much bigger than the toolset,” Townsend said. “So when you talk about driving momentum at a major company, being able to brand the effort makes a lot of sense.” ♦

### Comparing Certification Programs

Level	Motorola	DuPont	Microsoft
<b>Minimum number of projects completed as leader</b>			
Green Belt	1	1	1
Black Belt	2	2	Must be GB certified and lead 1 project
Master Black Belt	12 (lead or mentor)	Must be BB certified; emphasis is for MBBs to teach GBs and BBs	Must be BB certified and lead a cluster of related projects
<b>Targets for project outcomes</b>			
Green Belt	\$50,000	None	Varies by project. Targets are set for each project and aligned around key metrics. The MBB is expected to affect a metric that appears on the business scorecard.
Black Belt	\$250,000 per project	\$350,000 cumulative	
Master Black Belt	\$250,000 per project	None	
<b>Amount of training (days)</b>			
Green Belt	Varies	9	6
Black Belt	Varies	20	GB plus 6
Master Black Belt	Varies	BB plus 10	BB plus 6 to 9
<b>Time in role before certification</b>			
Black Belt	18 to 24 months	18 months	Requirements include BBs and MBBs mapping into a QBE career profile so dedication to role and results can be tracked.
Master Black Belt	24+ months	BB plus 12 months	
<b>Type of certification exam (oral, written or both)</b>			
Green Belt	Written	None	Written
Black Belt	Written	None	Written and oral
Master Black Belt	Written	Champion confirms they know content and have leadership skills	Written and oral

*Sue Reynard is a freelancer writer and frequent contributor to iSixSigma Magazine.*

# Six Sigma Certification

BY MICHAEL MARX

For many professions, certification is a credential earned by meeting a standardized set of education and testing requirements. Usually those requirements are regulated by a single authority, such that everyone in the profession seeking certification must demonstrate the same level of proficiency. Not so for Six Sigma. As survey results show, although Six Sigma certification does seem to imbue those certified with a degree of credibility, the specific requirements can vary widely.

<b>1,160</b>	Number of total survey respondents
<b>77</b>	Percentage of respondents who are Green Belt, Black Belt or Master Black Belt certified
<b>53</b>	Percentage of respondents who said their certification came from a company
<b>63</b>	Percentage of respondents who reported that their company has an in-house Six Sigma certification program
<b>15</b>	Percentage of respondents who said their company does not certify Six Sigma roles and does not encourage employees to seek certification
<b>2.1</b>	Average number of projects a Black Belt must complete for certification
<b>\$181,563</b>	Minimum financial benefit, on average, required per project for Black Belt certification
<b>11</b>	Percentage of respondents who reported that financial benefit is not a project requirement for Black Belt certification
<b>84</b>	Percentage of respondents who said their company requires an exam for Black Belt certification
<b>12.3</b>	Minimum number of months, on average, that Black Belts must serve in their role before being eligible for certification
<b>12</b>	Percentage of respondents who reported that Black Belts at their company receive a monetary reward of \$1,000 or more for achieving certification
<b>79</b>	Percentage of respondents who reported that Black Belts receive a certificate or plaque as recognition for completing certification

**1**  
**FINDING**

**Most Six Sigma professionals are certified, though not necessarily in their current role. Practitioners working as Black Belts and Green Belts, however, to a high degree do have certification that matches their position.** Overall, 77

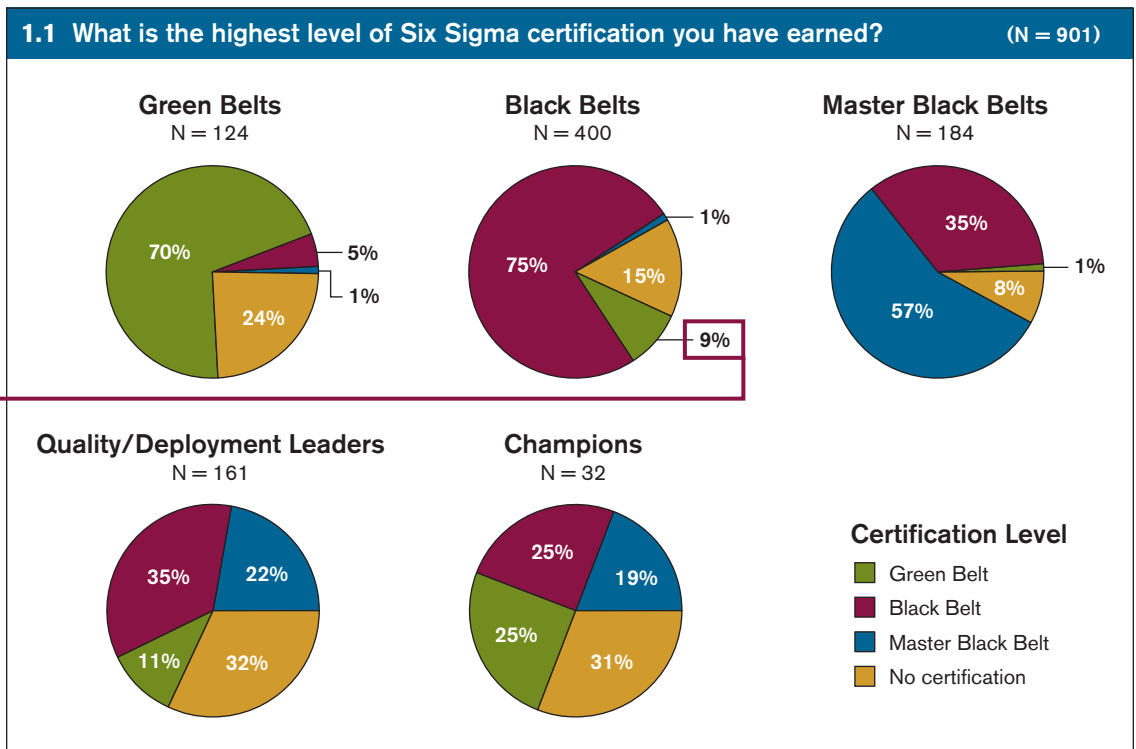
percent of respondents reported that they are Green Belt, Black Belt or Master Black Belt certified. For the most part, Green Belt and Black Belt roles are filled by employees with Six Sigma certification to match the role – 70 percent of Green Belts said they are Green Belt certified, and 75 percent of Black Belts said they are Black Belt certified.

Master Black Belts, on the other hand, demonstrate a different course. Fifty-seven percent of Master Black Belts hold a Master Black Belt certification, while Black Belt certification is the highest level achieved for 35 percent of Master Black Belts. This could suggest that Master Black Belts are often promoted from Black Belt roles in which they have already achieved that Black Belt certification.

The results might also reflect a lengthier route to Master Black Belt certification, such that at any given time, there are fewer in-role Master Black Belts who have achieved that level of certification. In fact, according to survey results, 60 percent of Master Black Belt respondents who are certified as Black Belts are currently working toward Master Black Belt certification.

Least likely to be certified are Champions and deployment leaders: 31 percent of Champions and 32 percent of deployment leaders report no Six Sigma certification.

Many practitioners without any certification are in the process of becoming certified. Of the 162 non-certified respondents in the five Six Sigma roles – Green Belt, Black Belt, Master Black Belt, Champion and deployment leader – more than two-thirds (72 percent) are currently working toward some Six Sigma certification.



**2**  
**FINDING**

**Most certifications are earned through an internal corporate program.** With

no single entity recognized as the sole authority for Six Sigma certifications, respondents cited a number of sources. The most common certifying body was corporations – 53 percent of survey respondents said their certification came from a company, such as GE or Honeywell. Trailing at a distant second with 27 percent was consulting or training firms. Six Sigma certifying bodies such as the American Society for Quality, the International Quality Federation and the British Quality Foundation accounted for less than 15 percent of all certifications.

Given the high number of respondents who reported receiving their certification from a company, it came as no surprise that well over half of respondents (63 percent) said their company has its own Six Sigma certification program.

Larger companies are more likely than smaller companies to have a certification program – 77 percent (companies with revenue of \$1 billion or more) compared to 37 percent (companies with revenue of less than \$50 million). Even more striking is the correlation between Six Sigma maturity and internal certification programs – 94 percent of respondents from a company in which Six Sigma has been deployed for 11 years or more reported an internal certification program; 14 percent of respondents from companies with a deployment of less than one year said the same.

2.1 For your highest level of Six Sigma certification, who was the certifying body?		(N = 976)
Company (GE, Honeywell, Motorola, etc.)	53%	
Consulting/training firm	27%	
American Society for Quality	9%	
University or college	6%	
International Quality Federation	1%	
*Other	5%	

50% of these respondents are Black Belt certified.

\*Other responses included: combination of company and consulting firm, Indian Statistical Institute, Institute of Industrial Engineers and British Quality Foundation.

2.2 Which of the following best describes Six Sigma certification at your company?					
	Total	Company revenue			
		≤ \$50M	\$51M to \$100M	\$101M to \$999M	≥ \$1B
N	1,031	142	141	241	507
My company has its own Six Sigma certification program	63%	37%	50%	57%	77%
My company does not certify Six Sigma roles, but has defined a certification path for employees through an external organization	23%	37%	33%	26%	14%
My company does not certify Six Sigma roles and does not encourage employees to seek certification through other means	15%	26%	17%	17%	9%

2.3 Which of the following best describes Six Sigma certification at your company?							
	Total	Number of years Six Sigma has been deployed					
		< 1	1 to 2	3 to 4	5 to 6	7 to 10	≥ 11
N	1,047	85	190	288	254	181	49
My company has its own Six Sigma certification program	65%	14%	46%	64%	77%	87%	94%
My company does not certify Six Sigma roles, but has defined a certification path for employees through an external organization	23%	45%	37%	25%	14%	11%	4%
My company does not certify Six Sigma roles and does not encourage employees to seek certification through other means	12%	41%	17%	12%	9%	2%	2%

**3 FINDING**

**Financial benefit is the most common requirement for Black Belt and Master Black Belt certification. The degree of financial benefit is the only significant difference between internal company programs and external ones.** For

Black Belts and Master Black Belts, producing a financial benefit through a Six Sigma project is a near

*continued on page 38*

universal requirement for certification, according to survey results. Eighty-four percent and 83 percent of respondents reported it as a requirement for Black Belts and Master Black Belts, respectively. For Green Belts, 68 percent of respondents said financial benefit was required. (It was neck-and-neck with “defect reduction,” at 71 percent, as a criterion for Green Belt certification.)

Survey results indicate that the only statistical difference in requirements between internal company certification programs and external ones is the value of the minimum financial benefit for projects. Respondents from companies with an internal certification program typically reported a higher required financial benefit than respondents from companies who use an external body for certification – for Black Belts, \$207,577 compared to \$128,430 on average.

Most certification programs require an exam for all the Belt roles, but especially for Black Belts, according to the survey results. Eighty-four percent of respondents indicated an exam is required for Black Belt certification at their company. Of those, 49 percent said the exam is internally developed and administered, and 43 percent said it is developed and administered by an external organization. A written exam is more common than an oral exam, though the proportion is much closer for Master Black Belts – 31 percent to 26 percent. For all roles, the certification exam is more often open book than closed book.

From write-in responses, we learned that a project-related requirement some companies use for certification is being able to demonstrate proper usage of Six Sigma tools. Other respondents indicated that one or more of the project-related criteria listed in the survey are required for certification, but the specific combination is not prescribed.

3.1 Summary of Certification Requirements						
Certification level	N	Mean	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	Standard deviation
How many Six Sigma projects must be completed (as the project leader) for certification?*						
<b>Green Belt</b>	869	1.4	1	1	2	0.7
<b>Black Belt</b>	913	2.1	2	2	2	0.9
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	593	3.2	2	4	4	1.1
What is the minimum amount of benefit the project must produce?*						
<b>Green Belt</b>	597	\$60,678	\$25,000	\$37,500	\$75,000	\$73,229
<b>Black Belt</b>	720	\$181,563	\$75,000	\$150,000	\$250,000	\$154,181
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	485	\$289,510	\$150,000	\$250,000	\$525,000	\$188,808
How many Six Sigma projects must the certification candidate mentor/coach to completion?*						
<b>Black Belt</b>	674	3.3	1.5	1.5	4	2.4
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	625	6.6	4	8	8	3.3
How many days is the training course for each role listed below?						
<b>Green Belt</b>	958	9.3	5	9	10	6.4
<b>Black Belt</b>	921	20.0	15	20	25	7.3
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	589	22.3	12	20	35.5	10.9
After training is completed, how much time (months) does a candidate have to complete remaining certification requirements?						
<b>Green Belt</b>	648	6.8	3.5	5.5	11	4.8
<b>Black Belt</b>	676	10.1	5.5	11	14	5.6
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	393	11.2	5.5	11	17	5.7
What is the minimum amount of time (months) a Black Belt or Master Black Belt must serve in their role before they are eligible for certification?						
<b>Black Belt</b>	574	12.3	9.5	9.5	15.5	7
<b>Master Black Belt</b>	435	17.8	9.5	15.5	21.5	9

\* In calculating the average number of projects completed and the average number of projects mentored/coached, the midrange was used for answer choices with a range. For answer choice “4 or more,” the number 4 was used, and for answer choice “11 or more,” the number 11 was used.

\*\*In calculating the average minimum financial benefit a project must produce, the midrange was used for answer choices with a range. For answer choice “≤ \$25,000,” \$25,000 was used, and for answer choice “> \$500,000,” \$525,000 was used.

### 3.2 To meet certification requirements, a project must demonstrate which of the following? (Select all that apply.)

	Certification level		
	Green Belt	Black Belt	Master Black Belt
N	952	967	714
Financial benefit (reduced operating costs, increased revenue, cost avoidance, etc.)	68%	84%	83%
Defect reduction	71%	74%	69%
Increase in customer satisfaction	50%	61%	62%
Decrease in cycle time	48%	56%	55%
Other*	15%	16%	21%

\* Other responses included: proper use of Six Sigma tools, at least one of the above mentioned criteria, coaching/mentoring

### 3.3 What is the minimum amount of financial benefit the project must produce? (Average values shown.)\*

	Certification level		
	Green Belt	Black Belt	Master Black Belt
All respondents	\$60,667	\$181,563	\$289,510
Respondents from companies with <i>internal</i> certification	\$65,721	\$207,577	\$316,284
Respondents from companies with <i>external</i> certification	\$53,536	\$128,430	\$223,939

\* In calculating the average minimum financial benefit a project must produce, the midrange was used for answer choices with a range. For answer choice "≤ \$25,000," \$25,000 was used, and for answer choice "> \$500,000," \$525,000 was used.

### 3.4 Please select the options below that most closely characterize the certification exam used at your company. (Select all that apply.)

	Certification level		
	Green Belt	Black Belt	Master Black Belt
N	943	941	697
No exam required	26%	16%	28%
N (Exam-requirement respondents only)	702	793	504
Internal exam (developed and administered by your company)	64%	49%	43%
External exam (developed and administered by outside organization)	30%	43%	50%
Written, open-book exam	39%	39%	31%
Written, closed-book exam	11%	14%	15%
Oral exam	15%	19%	26%

57% of these respondents are from a company with annual revenue of \$1B or more.

### 3.5 Percentage of total respondents who indicated that a given criterion is not a requirement

	Certification level		
	Green Belt	Black Belt	Master Black Belt
No project requirement	13% (N = 997)	6% (N = 976)	20% (N = 744)
No project financial benefit requirement	23% (N = 771)	11% (N = 810)	20% (N = 608)
No project coaching/mentoring requirement	N/A	32% (N = 991)	19% (N = 773)
No time limit for completing certification	29% (N = 909)	25% (N = 907)	38% (N = 633)
No minimum time-in-role requirement	N/A	38% (N = 925)	39% (N = 709)

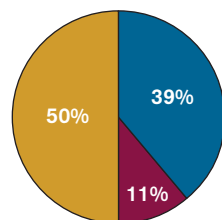
## 4 FINDING

**Executive certification is not a high priority.** Half of the respondents said executives at their company do not seek certification. The other half indicated either that executives must follow the same certification requirements as other employees (39 percent) or that special executive certification requirements exist at their company (11 percent).

Some of the special requirements cited by respondents included: Champion training, condensed Green Belt training, and participation as a project sponsor or Champion (rather than project leader). Several respondents noted that in cases where the requirements are ostensibly the same for executives as for everyone else, executives receive substantially more help from Master Black Belts.

Survey data suggests a positive correlation between executive certification and Six Sigma success. As we have seen in previous research studies, unsuccessful programs often lack senior management commitment, whereas successful ones are more likely to have that support. When there is commitment, executive certification is likely a byproduct.

### 4.1 Which of the following best describes certification of executive-level employees at your company? (N = 1,040)



- Executives must follow the same certification requirements as for any other employee
- Special certification requirements exist for executives seeking certification
- Executives do not seek certification

**4.2 Which of the following best describes certification of executive-level employees at your company?**

	Total	Respondents assessment of company's Six Sigma program				
		Highly successful	Successful	Neither successful nor unsuccessful	Unsuccessful	Highly unsuccessful
N	1,010	126	477	304	77	26
Executives must follow the same certification requirements as for any other employee	39%	57%	47%	29%	10%	15%
Special certification requirements exist for executives seeking certification	11%	13%	12%	9%	10%	8%
Executives do not seek certification	50%	29%	41%	62%	79%	77%

73% of these respondents said their company's senior management is committed to Six Sigma.

40% of these respondents said their company's senior management is committed to Six Sigma.

**5 FINDING**

**People are motivated to achieve Six Sigma certification for their own professional benefit rather than because their company requires it.**

The top two reasons people seek Six Sigma certification, according to survey results, are 1) to make them more credible Six Sigma experts and 2) to get ahead within their company. Only 10 percent of respondents said that their company's requirement of Six Sigma certification was the primary motivation.

Whether it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, we do not know, but once Six Sigma practitioners are certified, they feel the effect in ways consistent with their original motivation to get certified. Half of respondents indicated that they earned the respect of their Six Sigma peers after becoming certified. To a slightly lesser degree (40 percent), certified respondents said they gained the admiration of non-Six Sigma colleagues.

As for getting ahead, 29 percent of respondents reported receiving a promotion within a year after they achieved Six Sigma certification. This compares to 19 percent who said they made a lateral job move within the same time frame.

For all roles, the most common way to recognize employees for achieving certification is a certificate or plaque. Next most common is recognition through company communications, for which about half of respondents indicated this method was employed at their company.

Survey data suggests that a monetary bonus is the least used method of recognition. If they do receive a bonus, it is likely to be \$1,000 or more for certified Black Belts and Master Black Belts. Certified Green Belts are more likely to receive a cash bonus of \$500 or less.

**5.1 Which of the following best describes why you sought or are seeking certification?**

(N = 1,077)

I thought being certified would make me more credible	31%	
I thought certification would help me get ahead within my company	20%	
I like a challenge	12%	
My company requires it	10%	
There is prestige in being Six Sigma certified	9%	
I thought certification would help me get a new job at a different company	7%	
Other*	10%	

28% of these respondents reported getting a promotion within a year of being certified.

\* Other responses included: passion for Six Sigma, personal goal, customers' desire for Six Sigma expertise

5.2 Within a year of my Six Sigma certification, I experienced the following. (Select all that apply.)		(N = 809)
The respect of my Six Sigma peers	50%	
The admiration of non-Six Sigma colleagues	40%	
A promotion	29%	
A bonus	23%	
A lateral job move	19%	
A move to a new employer	16%	
Other (please specify)	12%	

5.3 How are employees recognized when they achieve certification? (Select all that apply.)			
	Certification level		
	Green Belt	Black Belt	Master Black Belt
N	927	920	670
Certificate or plaque	78%	79%	75%
Name published in company communication	46%	49%	52%
Non-monetary bonus	20%	20%	22%
Monetary bonus of \$1,000 or more	2%	12%	16%
Monetary bonus of between \$500 and \$1,000	4%	8%	4%
Monetary bonus of \$500 or less	11%	3%	3%
Other	11%	14%	16%

**Survey Methodology:** Michael Marx and iSixSigma Magazine designed the benchmarking survey. Six Sigma professionals were invited by email to participate. Additionally, visitors to iSixSigma.com had the opportunity to participate through a link on the website. The survey drew responses from 1,160 individuals. Some reported totals do not add to 100 percent because of rounding and survey questions that allowed more than one response to be selected.

Special thanks to Gianna Clark, managing director of Six Sigma at Dominion, for her contribution in creating this survey.

Michael Marx is research manager for iSixSigma and founder of SixSigmaCompanies.com. He is a certified Black Belt.

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