

Lean Certification - A Professional Credential

An interview with Kris Beauchamp

Over the last two plus decades, lean and its interpretations have changed considerably. No longer the exclusive mindset of Toyota-inspired automotive execs, lean has migrated across almost all types of manufacturing and into entirely new industries such as healthcare, financial services, insurance and government.

While this migration is a testament to lean's universally applicable concepts, it has fostered a varied, and sometimes diluted, interpretation of basic standards. Until a few years ago, there were no industry guidelines to define lean achievement. In 2005, realizing it was time to unify the vast quantity of knowledge and create a respected standard, the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME), the Association for Manufacturing Excellence (AME) and the Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence collaborated, through thousands of hours of work, to create the Lean Certification program, a true professional credential.

"It was a project designed by industry for industry, where practitioners not only shared best practices, but also developed competency and knowledge requirements that set a minimum standard for the profession," explains Kris Beauchamp, the Certification Product Manager at SME.

Now in its third year, the program is used by companies as a roadmap for workforce development. Certification is a three-level process based on the tactical, integrative and strategic application of lean principles, designated by Bronze, Silver and Gold Levels. Over 2500 people have taken the Bronze Level exam and SME recently certified its first Gold Level participant. With on-going feedback and continuous improvement to its process, the program is finding resounding success and acceptance.

Just as lean is not a tool to be used solely by an individual, but a methodology to be worked on for organizational change, SME Lean Certification is not a solitary pursuit. The program is supported by mentors and reviewers and promotes community interaction. It's a process, like lean itself.

"Companies are finding all sorts of ways to apply the program," says Beauchamp. "Some use the Bronze exam as an 'outcome assessment' for evaluating knowledge transfer after training, while others use certification achievement to benchmark the progress of training and development programs. Even consultants are using the certification to help them determine when to disengage from companies by measuring internal capabilities. We encourage companies to send one or two people through the program as scouts. They can experience it, evaluate it, and then see if it's right for their company."

Beauchamp references Esterline, a specialized manufacturer in Bellevue, Washington, who was one of the first companies to adopt the Lean Certification program. "The company started by having top executives sit for the Bronze Exam, and upon passing,

they received a “Knowledge Certificate.” Then, the program was cascaded out to leaders at its various business units. Each unit is adopting the program at a rate appropriate for them.”

Beauchamp recommends that potential candidates first evaluate where they are on their lean journey and review the recommended reading for the level they wish to apply. “We have consistently received feedback that the Bronze exam truly takes people back to the fundamentals of lean and the reading is critical for a refresher,” explains Beauchamp.

“I’d suggest that they look at their experience and projects to see if they can demonstrate a good depth and breadth of knowledge. If not, candidates need to determine if they can complete a broad range of projects to use in their portfolio within the three-year time period they have to achieve the certification. I would also recommend that candidates start a profile in the new Lean Registry (<http://smeconnection.leveragesoftware.com>) to seek out mentors, to mentor others, or to find individuals who are participating in the Lean Certification process. They can even start their own group to help others. It’s a new and growing service SME has launched, in part, to help those who want to achieve certification.”

SME is set to automate more elements of the program in the next two years. “We encourage every candidate to provide us with feedback on the program and process when they submit their portfolio,” says Beauchamp. “We also have an Oversight Committee that evaluates all feedback received and adjusts the program as necessary.”

Check out www.sme.org/leancert for more information and to learn about the specific exams, portfolio requirements, mentoring and interviewing required for the Bronze, Silver and Gold Levels of Lean Certification.

	Certificate Programs	Certification
Scope	Recognition of accomplishment or completion of training based on proprietary criteria.	Independent, third-party evaluation of knowledge, skills and abilities based on a known, publicly available standard, oversight by industry.
Standards Used	Proprietary criteria.	Industry input, validated through research, publicly available.
Knowledge Assessment (exam)	Sometimes. Based on proprietary training material.	Legally defensible exam content, referenced back to widely available industry accepted resources used in the field.
Skills Assessment	Sometimes. Subjective evaluation based on proprietary training.	Sometimes. Objective skill assessment through portfolio, independent of any training program.
Recertification	No requirements.	Required after a period of time, 1-5 years. Includes continuing education; may include other evidence of continuing practice.