

Professional certifications in occupational and process safety: An exploration within the oil and gas industry

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Abstract

This paper examines key considerations associated with professional certifications in occupational and process safety, with particular emphasis on their relevance and application within the oil and gas industry. In this high-risk sector, safety professionals are expected to demonstrate not only technical competence and practical experience but also a sustained commitment to professional development and internationally recognized standards of practice. Accordingly, the paper explores the principal motivations that lead safety practitioners to pursue professional credentials, including knowledge enhancement, validation of technical competence, career advancement, professional recognition, organizational requirements, and improved credibility when advising management and operational personnel. The study draws on consultations and interviews with experienced safety professionals and subject-matter experts, a review of information published by recognized certification bodies, and the author's professional experience in obtaining multiple internationally recognized safety credentials.

Keywords: Occupational Health and Safety; Professional Certification; Process Safety; Continuing Professional Development.

1. Introduction

Across professions, the achievement of recognized certifications and designations has become an important means of validating knowledge and experience. This is particularly true in occupational health and safety, fire protection engineering, and process safety management, where professional certification serves three principal purposes: better protection of people, clearer professional standards for practitioners, and a stronger signal of competence to employers and regulators (Georgia Tech Professional Education, 2026).

Understanding the motivations behind the pursuit of professional certification in safety is valuable for several reasons. It clarifies how personal motives align with the broader mission of the profession, helps practitioners avoid credentialism without competence, and supports the coherent design of professional development plans (American Society of Safety Professionals [ASSP] & Board of Certified Safety Professionals [BCSP], 2018).

This paper provides an overview of selected certifications and awarding bodies relevant to occupational safety, fire protection, and process safety. These include the Certified Safety Professional (CSP) and Associate Safety Professional (ASP) credentials administered by the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP); the Certified Fire Protection Specialist (CFPS) credential associated with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA); qualifications offered by the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH); and the Certified Chemical Process Safety Professional (CCPSC) credential administered by the Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS). Particular attention is given to the eligibility requirements, competency domains, examination processes, and continuing professional development expectations associated with these certification pathways.

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The paper also considers the potential benefits and limitations of professional certification. Benefits may include broader technical knowledge, greater professional confidence, enhanced employability, increased career mobility, access to specialized professional networks, and stronger recognition across international labor markets. Certification may, however, involve substantial financial cost, demanding preparation requirements, ongoing renewal obligations, and the risk of treating credentials as a substitute for practical competence and field experience. To support prospective candidates, the paper proposes a structured pathway encompassing the selection of an appropriate certification, assessment of eligibility requirements, development of a realistic study plan, use of authoritative reference materials, completion of practice examinations, and fulfilment of recertification and continuing-education requirements.

Overall, the paper argues that professional safety certifications can make a meaningful contribution to individual career development and organizational safety capability when combined with relevant education, practical experience, ethical conduct, and continuous learning. Such credentials may facilitate international recognition of professional competence and support more consistent safety practice across industries and geographic regions. Their value, however, ultimately depends on how effectively certified professionals apply their knowledge to decision-making, risk management, workforce engagement, and the prevention of occupational and process safety incidents. Certification is therefore presented here not as an end in itself, but as one important component of lifelong professional development and competence assurance within the global safety profession.

The strategies required to achieve certification are discussed because they can improve success rates, reduce wasted effort, and facilitate the integration of certification goals with broader organizational objectives and sustainable professional development. This paper explores the importance, rationale, and strategies associated with achieving professional safety certifications (PSC), noting that certifying bodies vary considerably in the rigor and criteria applied to their evaluation processes. A brief description of the principal certification bodies and their associated credentials follows in Section 3.

2. Methodology

This study examined the role and value of professional certifications in occupational and process safety. Data were collected through consultations with subject-matter experts and unstructured interviews with experienced safety professionals, including loss prevention engineers working in the oil and gas industry. These consultations explored participants' perspectives on certification pathways, examination preparation, professional recognition, and the benefits, limitations, and challenges associated with obtaining and maintaining safety credentials. The study also included a systematic review of relevant websites and publicly available materials issued by internationally recognized certification bodies.

The findings were further informed by the author's professional experience in obtaining seventeen internationally recognized safety certifications available at the time of the study. These credentials represented several prominent certification bodies, including the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP), the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), and the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH). The certifications and qualifications considered included the Certified Safety Professional (CSP), Associate Safety Professional (ASP), Certified Fire Protection Specialist (CFPS), ISO 45001-related certification, the NEBOSH International General Certificate, the NEBOSH International Certificate in Fire Safety, the NEBOSH International Technical Certificate in Oil and Gas Operational Safety, and the NEBOSH Certificate in Process Safety Management. This combination of expert consultation, professional interviews, documentary review, and reflective practitioner experience provided a broad foundation for examining the relevance, advantages, and potential limitations of professional safety certification.

3. Reasons for Pursuing Professional Certification in Safety

Adams et al. (2004) note that the benefits of professional certification relate to the attainment of a standard recognized by peers, which can enhance an individual's professional image, elevate membership status within an organization, and improve credibility, with potential benefits reflected in pay increases, awards, bonuses, and promotions, albeit generally accompanied by increased responsibility. Some certifications also enable firms to qualify for specific contracts. Adams et al. (2004) further observe that certifications have been treated as evidence of competence and integrity by courts and regulatory bodies in the context of legal proceedings and inquiries. More broadly, professional certification serves as a tool for signaling specialized skill when other means of establishing credibility are impractical or unavailable.

Achieving a professional certification in safety requires planning, discipline, and patience. Four requirements are typically expected of candidates pursuing a certification or credential:

- Demonstration of college-level education.
- Demonstration of relevant professional experience.
- Successful completion of one or more rigorous examinations.
- Maintenance of continuing education.

As Marcham et al. (2017) note, an examination is defensible only if it is developed through a systematic, psychometric process that objectively measures relevant skills and knowledge. A high-quality certification examination therefore exhibits validity, reliability, fairness, and practicality; for the most prestigious certifications, validity and reliability are evaluated statistically on an annual basis, with results published for public scrutiny (Marcham et al., 2017).

This raises a central question: what are the primary reasons practitioners undertake the journey toward professional certification, and is there a recognized framework for explaining this phenomenon? An explanatory framework for the main reasons and factors that professionals consider when pursuing certifications and designations should account for at least three components, classified here as epistemological, economic, and ontological:

- **Epistemological reasons:** the pursuit of additional knowledge.
- **Economic reasons:** recognition of knowledge and skill by supervisors and the broader workforce, with an associated increase in income.
- **Ontological reasons:** the personal satisfaction of demonstrating a level of experience and knowledge sufficient to undertake and complete the challenge represented by a specific certification.

The principal reasons safety professionals pursue certification in safety are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Principal motivations for pursuing professional certification in safety

Motivation	Typical emphasis in the literature
Credibility and competence signal	Independent, third-party validation against a recognized body of knowledge and code of ethics.
Career advancement and employability	Frequently preferred or required in job postings; a common pathway to senior HSE roles.
Earnings potential	Certified professionals are reported to earn more, on average, than uncertified peers.
Currency of knowledge	Structured continuing-education and recertification requirements keep practice current.
Portability and international recognition	Facilitates professional mobility and mutual recognition across jurisdictions.
Organizational and client expectations	Employers, regulators, and clients increasingly expect or require credentials.
Professional identity and ethics	Formalizes membership in the safety profession, anchored in a shared code of conduct.

4. Principal Certification Bodies in Safety

Several accredited bodies offer certification in occupational health and safety, fire protection engineering, and process safety. These bodies have demonstrated proficiency across the following domains (Adams et al., 2004):

- Appropriateness of examination content.
- Rigor of the process used to develop standards.
- Overall process quality.
- Requirements for continuing education.
- Integrity of governance and financial affairs.

A brief description of the principal certification bodies and their most relevant credentials follows.

4.1. Board of Certified Safety Professionals



Figure 1 Logo of the ASP and CSP certifications, Board of Certified Safety Professionals (Source: BCSP website).

The Board of Certified Safety Professionals administers the following certifications and designations:

- CSP — Certified Safety Professional
- ASP — Associate Safety Professional
- SMS — Safety Management Specialist
- GSP — Graduate Safety Practitioner
- TSP — Transitional Safety Practitioner
- OHST — Occupational Health and Safety Technician
- CHST — Construction Health and Safety Technician
- STS — Safety Trained Supervisor
- STSC — Safety Trained Supervisor, Construction
- CIT — Certified Instructional Trainer

The CSP examination evaluates candidates across the following domains:

- Advanced sciences and mathematics.
- Management systems.
- Risk management.
- Advanced application of key safety concepts, including:
 - Inherently safer design.
 - Engineering controls.
 - Administrative controls.
 - Chemical process safety management.
 - Redundancy systems.
 - Common workplace hazards.
 - Fleet safety principles.
 - Transportation safety principles.
 - Materials handling.
 - Hazardous materials management.
 - Human performance.
- Emergency preparedness, fire protection, and security.
- Occupational health and ergonomics.
- Environmental management systems.
- Training and education.
- Law and ethics.

4.2. National Fire Protection Association



Figure 2 Logo of the CFPS certification, National Fire Protection Association (Source: NFPA website).

The most relevant certifications offered under the NFPA umbrella include:

- Certified Fire Protection Specialist (CFPS)
- Certified Fire Inspector I (CFI)
- Certified Fire Inspector II (CFI-II)
- Certified Fire Plan Examiner (CFPE)
- Certified Hazard Recognition Specialist (CHRS)
- Certified Electrical Safety Worker (CESW)
- Certified Electrical Safety Technician (CEST)
- Certified Electrical Safety Compliance Professional (CESCP)
- Certified Emergency Power Systems Specialist for Facility Managers (CEPSS)
- Certified Emergency Power Systems Specialist for Health Care Facility Managers (CEPSS-HC)
- Certified Fire Alarm ITM Specialist for Facility Managers (CFAITMS)
- Certified Life Safety Specialist for Health Care Facility Managers (CLSS-HC)
- Certified Sprinkler ITM Specialist for Facility Managers (CSITMS)
- Certified Water-Based Systems Professional (CW BSP)
- Certified Wildfire Mitigation Specialist (CWMS)
- Certified Marine Chemist (CMC)
- Certificación de Especialista en Inspección, Prueba y Mantenimiento de Sistemas de Rociadores (CEIPMSR-LatAm)

For the Certified Fire Protection Specialist credential, candidates are evaluated through a 100-item, multiple-choice examination covering the following topics:

- Safety in the built environment.
- Fundamentals of fire and fire science.
- Fire protection information and analysis.
- Human behavior in fire emergencies.
- Fire prevention.
- Facility fire hazard management.
- System approaches to property classes.
- Organization of fire and rescue services.
- Materials, products, and environments.
- Detection and alarm systems.
- Water-based suppression.
- Fire suppression without water.
- Confining fires.

4.3. National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH)



Figure 3 Logo of NEBOSH, the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (Source: NEBOSH website).

The principal certifications offered by NEBOSH include:

- National and International General Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety
- NEBOSH HSE Certificate in Process Safety Management
- International Technical Certificate in Oil and Gas Operational Safety
- National and International Certificate in Health and Safety Management for Construction
- Certificate in Fire Safety
- Certificate in Environmental Management

The most widely held of these is the National and International General Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety, which evaluates candidates across the following areas:

4.3.1. Management of national or international health and safety:

- Foundations in health and safety.
- Health and safety management systems (plan, organize, risk assess, monitor, and audit).

4.3.2. Control of national and international workplace hazards:

- Workplace hazards and risk control.
- Transport hazards and risk control.
- Musculoskeletal hazards and risk control.
- Work equipment hazards and risk control.
- Electrical safety.
- Fire safety.
- Chemical and biological health hazards and risk control.
- Physical and psychological health hazards and risk control.

The examination is accompanied by a practical workplace assessment.

Another significant NEBOSH credential is the Certificate in Fire Safety, previously known as the Fire Safety and Risk Management Certificate, which evaluates knowledge and experience across the following topics:

- Principles of fire and explosion.
- Causes and prevention of fires and explosions.
- Fire protection in buildings.
- Safety of people in the event of fire.
- Fire safety risk assessment.
- Legal requirements.
- Environmental and international considerations.

The NEBOSH HSE Certificate in Process Safety Management covers the following topics:

- Process safety leadership.
- Management of process risk.
- Process safety hazard control.
- Fire and explosion protection.

4.4. Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS)



Figure 4 Logo of the Center for Chemical Process Safety (Source: AIChE website).

This certification encompasses a broad range of topics in process safety management, organized around the four pillars of the Risk Based Process Safety (RBPS) model: commit to process safety, understand hazards and risk, manage risk, and learn from experience. The associated topics include:

- Process safety culture.
- Compliance with standards.
- Process safety competency.
- Workforce involvement in process safety.
- Stakeholder outreach.
- Process knowledge management.
- Hazard identification and risk analysis.
- Operating procedures.
- Safe work practices.
- Asset integrity and reliability.
- Contractor management.
- Training and performance assurance.
- Management of change.
- Operational readiness.
- Conduct of operations.
- Emergency management.
- Incident investigation.
- Measurement and metrics.
- Auditing.
- Management review and continuous improvement.
- Implementation of process safety management systems.

The Certified Chemical Process Safety Professional (CCPSC) examination is administered online. It is open-book but must be completed within four hours of starting.

4.5. Certified Functional Safety Professionals and Experts (CFSP and CFSE)



Figure 5 Logo of exida, a provider of functional safety services (Source: exida website).

Companies handling hazardous materials and operating complex processes face the potential for catastrophic safety-related accidents, exemplified by the 2005 explosion at the Texas City refinery, which killed 15 people and injured approximately 180 more, and the 2005 fire at the Buncefield oil storage depot, which resulted in losses of roughly £1 billion (approximately USD 1.6 billion). These events underscore the importance of ensuring that personnel involved in the design and deployment of safety equipment are competent in safety system design. Trained and competent

personnel are a requirement for compliance with international functional safety standards, including IEC 61508, IEC 61511, and IEC 62061. The CFSP and CFSE certifications were designed to support this requirement.

Topics covered under this certification include:

- Functional safety life cycle.
- Process hazard analysis.
- Consequence analysis.
- Layer of protection analysis.
- Safety integrity level (SIL) target selection.
- Safety requirements specifications.
- Redundant architectures.
- Failure rates.
- Device and system reliability.
- Safety instrumented function (SIF) verification.
- SIF detailed design and operational requirements.

Recommended preparation materials include the Certified Functional Safety Expert/Professional (CFSE/CFSP) Study Guide (8th ed.); Practical SIL Target Selection: Risk Analysis per the IEC 61511 Safety Lifecycle; and Safety Instrumented System Design: Techniques and Design Verification.

#	CERTIFICATION (ISSUING BODY)	MAIN SPECIALTY / FOCUS	TYPICAL INDUSTRIES
1	CSP – Certified Safety Professional (BCSP)	Occupational Safety Leadership (General Safety)	All industries
2	CCPSC – Certified Process Safety Professional (CCPS)	Process Safety Management	Oil & Gas, Petrochemical, Refining, Chemical, LNG
3	CFPS – Certified Fire Protection Specialist (NFPA)	Fire Protection Engineering	Oil & Gas, Airports, Industrial, Data Centers
4	NEBOSH International Diploma (NEBOSH)	Occupational Health and Safety Management	All industries
5	NEBOSH Process Safety Management (NEBOSH)	Process Safety Leadership and Risk Management	Refining, Petrochemical, LNG, Gas Processing
6	CIH – Certified Industrial Hygienist (BGC)	Industrial Hygiene	All industries
7	ASP – Associate Safety Professional (BCSP)	Entry to Mid-Level Safety Professional	All industries
8	Occupational Hygiene Certifications (e.g., BOHS, AIOH)	Occupational Exposure Assessment & Control	All industries
9	Functional Safety Certifications (IEC 61508 / 61511)	SIS, SIL, Functional Safety Lifecycle	Oil & Gas, Petrochemical, Power, Manufacturing
10	ISO Lead Auditor Certifications (IRCA & others)	Management Systems Auditing (ISO 45001, 14001, 9001, etc.)	All industries
11	CHMM – Certified Hazardous Materials Manager (IHMM)	Hazardous Materials & Environmental Management	Chemical, Waste, Transport, Environmental
12	CEM – Certified Emergency Manager (IAEM)	Emergency Management, Business Continuity, Crisis	All industries

Figure 6 Selected professional certifications relevant to occupational and process safety.

5. Benefits of Professional Certification in Safety

Gorbell (2006) identifies several reasons certification benefits the safety profession: it raises the general level of competence within the field; it rewards and recognizes practitioners who demonstrate initiative and determination through voluntary examination; it supports the establishment of safety curricula; it serves as a source of professional pride for individuals who demonstrate their competency by meeting certification requirements; and it promotes high standards of professional conduct and ethical practice, provided the certification is applied in practice rather than treated as an end in itself.

McPeak (2012) reaches similar conclusions, highlighting additional benefits such as greater consistency in training and work practices, increased customer confidence, stronger adherence to ethical standards among staff, differentiation in marketing, and the use of certification as a benchmark for project assignments, promotions, salary increases, and career

planning. Radzikowski (2013) similarly observes that there is an almost unspoken expectation within the technical community that an expert should hold certification in their field of practice.

Many employers recognize the value of certified knowledge and skills, rewarding successful candidates with bonuses or salary increases; employers generally view certification as increasing an employee's marketability, with associated financial incentives supporting retention. Organizations also derive benefits from employing certified professionals, including greater marketing attractiveness, a more competent workforce, stronger stakeholder confidence, an enhanced corporate reputation, and improved alignment with regulatory requirements.

Practitioner experience and the literature reviewed for this study suggest that organizations employing highly qualified safety professionals tend to realize measurable benefits, including reductions in recordable injury rates following the implementation of mature safety management systems supported by competent professionals; fewer catastrophic process safety events, particularly where process safety expertise is integrated into design, operations, and maintenance; improved regulatory compliance and fewer enforcement actions; lower insurance premiums reflecting demonstrated risk management maturity; reduced unplanned downtime, equipment damage, and production losses; and a stronger safety culture, associated with higher employee engagement and operational discipline. These associations are consistent with practitioner experience and the broader literature, though the magnitude of improvement varies by organization and was not independently quantified in this study.



Figure 7 Benefits of professional certification in safety for individuals and organizations.

6. Process and Best Practices for Achieving Professional Certification in Safety

There is no single, pre-established progression path for professional certification in safety. The following typical progression, spanning foundational, intermediate, and advanced levels, together with suggested areas of specialization, may nonetheless be useful for practitioners planning a certification pathway:

- Foundation: NEBOSH General Certificate or equivalent.
- Intermediate: ASP or NEBOSH Diploma.
- Advanced: CSP, for occupational safety leadership.
- Specialization: additional certifications aligned with professional role, such as CCPSC for process safety, CFPS for fire protection, CIH for industrial hygiene, functional safety certification for SIS and SIL, or CEM for emergency management.
- Leadership: ISO Lead Auditor and related management or risk certifications, supporting strategic and governance responsibilities.

The specific process for achieving a given certification varies with the credential pursued; however, the following general pathway is suggested:

- Clarify the target role and region of practice.
- Map current education against certification requirements.
- Select the appropriate certification.
- Join relevant professional societies and build a professional network.
- Understand the structure and content of the examination.
- Plan and submit the certification application.
- Build qualifying safety experience deliberately.
- Conduct a knowledge-gap assessment.
- Develop a structured study plan and a personal knowledge map.
- Use primary reference materials.
- Close foundational knowledge gaps.
- Enroll in a structured preparation program, where appropriate.
- Structure a focused exam-preparation cycle.
- Work through practice questions, prioritizing conceptual understanding over memorization.
- Simulate the examination under realistic conditions.
- Develop an examination-day strategy.
- Maintain physical and mental readiness.
- Sit the examination under realistic conditions.
- Maintain and progressively build certifications over time.

For most safety certifications, a balanced study library should include the following:

- The official examination handbook and content outline.
- The primary standards and codes referenced by the certification body.
- A comprehensive study guide from a reputable publisher.
- Technical textbooks covering core knowledge domains.
- Practice question banks with detailed explanations.
- Flashcards or summary sheets for key formulas and concepts.
- Personal notes and concept maps.
- Study groups or professional forums for discussing challenging topics.



Figure 8 Summary of the principal steps in preparing for professional safety certification examinations.

7. Conclusions

This study indicates that professional certification in occupational and process safety is widely regarded as beneficial to both individual practitioners and the organizations that employ them. At the individual level, certification raises the general standard of competence within the profession, recognizes practitioners who demonstrate the initiative to complete a rigorous, voluntary examination process, supports the establishment of shared safety curricula, and builds professional pride grounded in demonstrated competency. It also promotes higher standards of professional conduct and ethical practice, provided the credential is applied meaningfully in practice rather than pursued as an end in itself.

Evaluating knowledge, skill, and experience through examination is not a straightforward undertaking. A defensible test must be developed through a systematic, psychometric process that objectively measures relevant knowledge and skill, and it must demonstrate validity, reliability, fairness, and practicality. Many employers already recognize the value of certified knowledge and reward successful candidates accordingly, reflecting a broader understanding that certification enhances employee marketability and that associated financial incentives support retention.

Further research is warranted to develop and test theories explaining why certification bodies promote their credentials as they do, including consideration of economic sustainability, brand positioning, business continuity, and professional-guild dynamics. Such research would complement the practitioner-oriented findings presented here and support a more complete understanding of the professional certification landscape in occupational and process safety.

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