

Proving credentials as an independent information professional

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Provare le proprie qualifiche come professionista dell'informazione

Il libero professionista dell'informazione o independent information professional (IIP) è un imprenditore esperto nella ricerca ed elaborazione delle informazioni; questa figura viene rappresentata dalla Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP), che attualmente conta oltre 700 soci in tutto il mondo. La certificazione degli IIP è stata discussa, soprattutto nella seconda metà degli anni Novanta, ma l'impressione generale è che sia difficile raggruppare con un unico tipo di certificazione le diverse attività, capacità e professioni. Questa presentazione introduce la figura dell'IIP, descrive i modi diversi in cui attualmente le credenziali vengono presentate, ed accenna ad alcune future possibilità di certificazione.

Parole chiave: Professionisti dell'informazione - AIIP [Association of Independent Information Professionals] - Profilo professionale - Qualifiche - Certificazione

Introduction

Certification is a way to validate one's credentials: it is fundamental for the career of each individual within an organization, and it favors occupational mobility. However, for persons who work outside of organizations, i.e. independent information professionals, the role of certification is less clear. In this article, I introduce the figure of the independent information professional (IIP), describe the diverse ways in which IIPs currently prove their credentials to clients, and discuss some future possibilities for certification of these information operators.

Independent information professionals

The independent information professional is an entrepreneur who offers services of research and elaboration of information. This figure is better known in English-speaking countries, especially the United States, United Kingdom and

Canada, and in countries of northern Europe. At an international level, IIPs are represented by the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP).

AIIP is an international association of persons offering a wide range of information services. The association has over 700 members, mostly from North America but with a large contingent from Europe and some members from Asia, South America and Africa. Full (voting) membership is given to business owners (80%); special membership categories are for associates (non-owners, 13%), students (6%), supporting members and retirees. The association holds an intense annual meeting and publishes a quarterly newsletter, but perhaps is most appreciated by its members for the dynamic online discussion group uniting hundreds of members around the world in a daily business discussion.

A profile of the typical IIP is offered by the annual survey of AIIP members: *The Independent Information Professional: a survey of AIIP members, April 2005*, available from the association's Website <www.aiip.org>. About 30% of AIIP members responded to the 2005 survey. Of these respondents, 75% is between the ages of 40 and 59 years, women represent 76%, and 36% are in business for more than 10 years.

IIPs offer a wide range of services that help clients find, use, archive and communicate information. The most often practiced services are (in order of decreasing frequency):

- Online research
Competitive intelligence
- Market research
Writing and editing
- Manual research
Document delivery
- Interviews
Public speaking
- Training
Telephone research
- Business consulting
Public records research
- Clipping services
Database programming
- Editorial services
Survey development
- Library consulting

- Web design
Archiving
- Private investigations
Software development
- Translations
Expert witness
- Indexing
Cataloging.

Clients of IIPs are institutes, governments, non-profit associations, and especially companies of all dimensions: 56% of respondents stated that most of their clients are companies with less than 100 employees, while 22% work prevalently with companies having over 1000 employees.

Some IIPs are generalists while others are specialists. Survey respondents have specialized in the following sectors (decreasing frequency): healthcare, informatics, manufacturing, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, engineering, finance, law, government, telecommunications, library sciences, chemistry, agriculture, aerospace, hotel industry, energy.

Approximately one-third of respondents work full time as an IIP. For these persons, annual sales vary notably:

- 9 members (18%), less than USD 40 000
- 14 members (27%), between USD 40 000 and 80 000
- 16 members (31%), between USD 80 000 and 249 000, and
- 12 members (24%), greater than USD 250 000.

The survey clearly demonstrated that the independent information industry is vital and strong, even if limited to a small number of persons who succeed in developing a niche. The success of this sector has been obtained by the perseverance of the operators, without formal recognition or certification. Still, the possibility of certification has been debated for years. Within AIPP, after much discussion, it was decided that it would be impractical for the association to develop a certification program for all the services offered by its members. Nonetheless, members do succeed in promoting their activities and making their businesses grow (51% of respondents increased their sales between 2003 and 2004, despite the economic crisis in the US): by what means do they demonstrate to clients their qualifications and skills?

Proving credentials as an IIP

Currently, an independent information professional has numerous options for proving credentials:

- Academic preparation (especially advanced degrees)
Work experience
- Membership in professional associations
Professional image
- Licensing
Certification
- Expert recognition (credentialling, chartering).

IIPs consider *academic preparation* an important qualification. Among survey respondents, 71% has a post-graduate degree. The majority of these advanced degrees (56%) is in library and information sciences (MLS, MLIS); 16% of respondents has a masters in business administration (MBA), 29% has a masters in other areas (MS), 9% has a doctoral degree (PhD), and a few have advanced degrees in law (JD) and medicine (MD).

Considering that the IIP is an entrepreneur, a degree from a prestigious university is important but insufficient for economic success. *Work experience* as an employee, before starting an independent activity, is another fundamental aspect; it develops practical skills, creates a network of potential clients, and provides understanding of clients' actual information and practical needs.

Professional associations aim to unite persons, promote a professional figure, and raise standards of quality in a field of work. Membership in itself is not prestigious because it is relatively easy to obtain. Membership in a relevant association may serve as a "reality check": an IIP active in an association is in touch with others and has a means of comparing her services (and quality) with those of others. Active participation also lends credibility and, perhaps, functions as an informal certification, especially when the association establishes a code of business ethics and conduct. Considering that many clients are concerned about maintaining confidentiality, and request IIPs to sign nondisclosure statements, it is fair to assume that these clients probably only choose IIPs who already adhere to a business code.

Since the success of an IP is judged in economic terms, developing a *professional image* is probably the most important means to demonstrate credentials; a professional image is also essential to obtaining and maintaining clients and being able to charge sufficiently high rates. IIPs develop their image by becoming a book author, editor, journalist, public speaker or expert witness at Congress, or by developing a product (e.g. database of information resources, information alert

system, online training for clients). These are the achievements that clients note; they are the most important documentation of knowledge, capability and professionalism.

A small percentage (~5%) of IPs in North America are *licensed* for private investigation (PI). This is a state license that usually involves a test of legal issues about research, a background check and the deposit of a bond or caution. Specific requirements vary from state to state. PI license is not a quality certification, but a legal authorization to obtain private information not available to the general public. Some IPs obtain a PI license as a legal coverage because the definition of private investigation is broad and may overlap with typical activities of the IIP.

At present there is no broad *certification* for an IIP. Some IIPs obtain specialist certification to work in particular sectors, for example: the Construction Specifications Institute offers certification for those who serve as expert witnesses in courts; the certification of patent researchers is becoming a reality in Europe; and some associations (Academy of Certified Archivists, Institute of Certified Records Managers) offer certification in cataloging and archiving. Whether such specialist certifications are valuable depends on the type of services offered and on the type of client targeted.

Expert recognition (credentialling) is offered by the Medical Library Association through its Academy of Health Information Professionals. Membership requires an MLS degree from an accredited university program, work experience and professional achievements. There are 5 levels of membership depending on experience and achievements: provisional, member, senior, distinguished and emeritus. According to the Academy, «Credentialling is different from certification in that certification focuses on the attainment of minimum standards and measurable competencies, whereas credentialling recognizes the time and effort that is required for professional development. It also differs from licensure because licensure is a legal requirement... in certain professions». A system of professional recognition called chartership has also been developed by CILIP (UK).

Options and issues for IPs in Europe

Many of the means by which IPs prove credentials in North America have limited value in Europe, in particular: (i) academic preparation is not uniform and the quality of work experience is also hard to judge across countries and languages; (ii) few professional associations have prestige across Europe (AIIIP is not yet well known); (iii) the many languages and cultures make it difficult to create a professional image recognizable by clients throughout Europe; and (iv) licensing

and specialty certifications are generally country-specific. Thus, in Europe there may be a role for IIP certification. This could be a global certification (such as CERTIDoc) or a specialist certification (e.g. for patent searchers and healthcare "informationists"); another approach is certification of research on a database package such as Factiva and Dialog, in analogy with Microsoft's program. I believe, however, that certification in itself is insufficient. What is needed is a strong European-wide association that: promotes the role of the IIP; emphasizes the usefulness of this work and the importance of documentation as a source of reliable knowledge; unites individuals through networking, sharing ideas and subcontracting; spreads knowledge through publications and training; develops relationships with vendors; and recognizes the unique difficulties of offering an information research service in Europe.