

# ANALYZING THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF THE NCIDQ CREDENTIAL ON INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

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## Abstract

While many professionals in the interior design profession seek certification, little information is known about the impact it will have on their careers. This study was intended to help these professionals make more informed decisions about what actual benefits they should expect when considering a National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) certificate. The primary research question addressed in this study was whether there were statistically significant differences in the perceived value of the NCIDQ certification between subgroups possessing the certification. The researchers sent a 35-question survey to 2,642 credential holders and received 606 (25%) completed surveys. The researchers utilized a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze eight dependent variables (increased recognition, opportunities for contributions, salary, promotion opportunities, job responsibilities, prestige among superiors, prestige among peers within the workplace, and prestige among peers outside the organization) based on six major groups of independent variables (years the credential has been held, reason why the respondent sought the credential, level of support received from the employer, location of practice, age group, and type of organization where the respondents are employed).

Of these six independent variable groups, three yielded statistically significant differences within and among their subgroups. Respondents holding the credential for 11-15 years perceived a higher increase in recognition than those holding it for 1-5 years ( $F=2.877$ , sig. 0.006). Respondents in the 50-59 age group perceived a higher increase in opportunities for contributions than those in the 40-49 age group ( $F=3.312$ , sig. 0.006). Finally, respondents working for firms other than interior design firms perceived a higher increase in promotion opportunities ( $F=6.898$ , sig. 0.009), job responsibilities ( $F=4.728$ , sig. 0.030), and prestige among individuals within their organization ( $F=5.788$ , sig. 0.016) than respondents working for interior design firms. It was hoped that the information garnered from this study will assist those in the profession in recognizing the value of the credential as well as encouraging those contemplating obtaining the credential.

## Introduction

The role of architects and engineers in designing the buildings and infrastructure we use each day is generally understood by the public-at-large. Most people are likely to understand the need for these professionals to be licensed by the state in which they practice – much like they understand a doctor must be licensed to protect the health, safety, and well-being of the general public. Unfortunately, the role of an interior designer in creating our built environment is much less understood [1]. For over five decades, interior design professionals have tried to define and differentiate interior design as a unique and important profession [2].

Numerous articles have been written on the transition of interior design from practice to profession [3-6]. In one such article, Martin [7] identifies seven steps to professionalization in a scathing response to criticisms of the interior design industry by the Institute for Justice [8]. She argues that interior design, like architecture, fulfills the actions prescribed by the theory of professionalization including: 1) the establishment of professional organization membership; 2) a name change to achieve legislative restriction; 3) the creation of a code of ethics; 4) the establishment of educational requirements; 5) the establishment of a comprehensive examination; 6) the creation of legal recognition/regulation; and, 7) the requirement of continuing education for professional practice [7].

Unfortunately, the fractured nature of practice and/or titling laws across North America [9] has failed to resolve the confusion surrounding the professionalization of interior design. Currently, interior design credentialing laws have been enacted in 27 U.S. states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and eight Canadian provinces [10]. Within these jurisdictions, the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) certificate exam is the predominant methodology for individuals to satisfy mandated examination requirements. As such, completing the NCIDQ certificate exam is an important step to achieving recognition as an interior design professional.

However, this same logic is not as clear in areas of North America where interior design credentialing laws have not been enacted. While an individual who possesses the necessary background in education and experience may take and

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successfully obtain an NCIDQ certificate, the requirement to do so is not mandated. Currently, little information is available as to why an individual should consider the NCIDQ credential if it is not required to practice interior design. This study addresses this lack of data by surveying current NCIDQ certificate holders for their experience on the impact of obtaining the NCIDQ certificate. The authors' intent was to explore whether or not there is a statistically significant difference in the impact the NCIDQ credential has made across various demographic groups. The answer to this question will therefore help interior design professionals make more informed decisions about what actual benefits they should expect when considering an NCIDQ certificate, no matter their circumstances.

## Review of the Literature

The National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) was originally conceived in the 1960s, but eventually was incorporated as an independent, nonprofit organization in 1974. More than 26,000 individuals have earned their NCIDQ certification since the first exam in April of 1974 [11], [12]. While the primary function of the NCIDQ is to develop and administer the NCIDQ certificate examination, the organization also conducts research, maintains resources for certificate holders to track their continuing education credits, and supports education and volunteer opportunities for active certificate holders [11].

The NCIDQ certificate exam is a two-day performance-based assessment that examines an individual's competence, mastery, and performance across the gamut of interior design knowledge areas including codes, building systems, construction standards, design applications, project coordination, and professional practice. The exam also includes an interior design practicum section [13], [14]. The NCIDQ certificate exam is regularly evaluated and modified by a collaboration of professionals, testing specialists, and consultants [13], [14]. Eligible candidates must possess at least six years of combined interior-design-specific education and experience [15]. Currently, three U.S. states require or allow alternatives to the NCIDQ certificate examination. These include the Interior Design Examination (IDEX) in California, the Council for Qualification of Residential Interior Designers (CQRID) in Illinois, and the Architect Registration Examination (ARE) in Indiana.

For interior designers, the debate over the importance of professional credentials is complicated by the countless licensing laws across the continent. However, interior design is not the only profession for which multiple types of professional credentialing exist. For architects and engineers, professional credentials for individuals can also be

attained through both state licensure and/or specialty certification. The existence of both forms of credentials has historically been a source of contention and confusion for architects, engineers, and the general public [16], [17]. While the history of professional credentialing is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to investigate the distinction between both licensure and certification in order to ascertain the reason both types exist.

Licensure involves the granting of a license, usually by a governmental entity, to practice a certain profession. Most professions that include licensure requirements (e.g., medicine, law, architecture and engineering) do so because they are deemed to be a risk to the health, safety, and well-being of the general public [16]. While licenses may also be required for those whose occupations put them in contact with the public (e.g., barbers, massage therapists, chauffeurs), the qualification and requirements are much less stringent than those for the aforementioned classifications. As such, designers are uniquely aware of the significance that licensure plays in their professional career. Unfortunately, the purpose and value of the other type of professional credential, certification, is often much less understood. This gap in awareness between licensure and certification can be explained by the relative newness of certification, the vast array of certification options, and even the variations in the definition of the term itself [17]. Thus, it is necessary to further explore the definition of professional certification.

Bratton & Hildebrand [18], in their study of technology certification in education, define certification as "the process by which a professional organization or an independent external agency recognizes the competence of individual practitioners." Similarly, Summerfield [19] defines certification for health, leisure, and movement professionals as the process of proving qualifications through education, experience, and general examination components. The reasons why an individual may obtain professional certification are numerous. For some, it may be the prestige associated with a certain credential behind their name. For others, it may be a job requirement or a necessary step to achieving a higher salary [20]. Previous research efforts by the authors explored the benefits of credentialing in both the design professions and in other sectors – specifically nursing, information technology, automotive repair, teaching, and others [21-23]. Benefits include increased customer satisfaction, increased employee recruitment and retention, increased employer recognition, perceived distinction among peers, the possibility of providing expert testimony in court, mobility, advancement, job security, credibility, higher self-esteem, and consulting opportunities [24-28]. Despite these countless motivations, professional credentials typically

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offer a baseline for understanding an individual's level of knowledge [29].

Universities also recognize this positive trend. For instance, rather than following convention and naming their 20-hour Technical Sales program a specialization, Ohio University created a Technical Sales certificate [30]. Similarly, even though the concepts were covered in their existing curriculum, Drexel University started offering Six Sigma courses to working professionals [31]. Recognizing a demand for a lifelong credential, where professionals may prove a growing understanding of a field's body of knowledge, many credentialing bodies have begun offering multiple levels of certification. For instance, the American Institute of Constructors has an Associate Constructor credential and a Certified Professional Constructor credential [22], the U.S. Green Building Council has an LEED Green Associate credential and an LEED Accredited Professional credential [23], and the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, Association for Manufacturing Engineers, and Shingo Prize Consortium have bronze, silver, and gold certifications for lean certification [32]. Unfortunately, the myriad of "alphabet soup" certifications available today can sometimes call into question the true value of particular credentials.

While legislation and the push towards interior design registration/licensure may ultimately determine whether or not an individual seeks a professional credential, the NCIDQ certificate is, for the time being, an example of a path toward differentiation for interior designers across the continent. Unfortunately, the value of this professional credential has not been as well documented. Other industries, including healthcare, information technology, and automotive repair, may provide valuable insight on different ways individuals can associate value with a particular certification. Increased credibility, recognition/prestige, and improved customer satisfaction are just some of the observations in other industries that should be examined with respect to an NCIDQ certificate. Additionally, the link between professional certification and increased salary is another area of particular importance to some who are contemplating whether or not a credential's benefits outweigh its cost.

## Methodology

As previously mentioned, only a few studies were found that addressed certification in the architectural and engineering (A/E) profession. Much of the literature found in this area has been completed by the authors of this current study. Thus, the authors modified a previously tested instrument titled *Perceptions of Certified Professional Constructors*

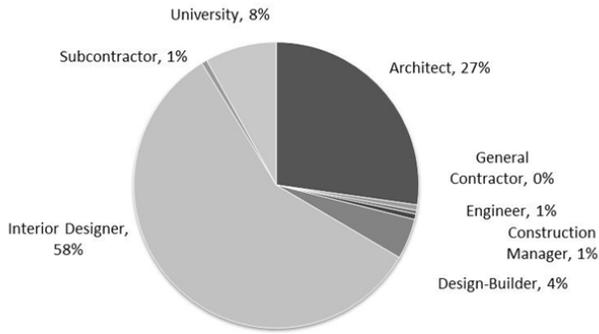
(CPC) Survey developed by Bruce et al. [22]. The instrument was constructed using Survey Monkey and included a total of 35 questions about the respondents' perceived value of the certification and their demographic information. The researchers then forwarded the instrument to four educational experts for review. The population for this study included all NCIDQ certificate holders. At the time of this study, the NCIDQ advertised that over 26 000 interior designers had passed the exam since 1974. Of these, 2,487 allowed their e-mail addresses to appear publicly on the NCIDQ website at <http://www.ncidq.org>. Once the revisions to the survey instrument were complete, an electronic link to the survey was e-mailed to these certificate holders. Of the 2,487 original e-mails, 25 (1%) were returned to the researcher as undeliverable. Upon closing, 606 of the 2,462 successfully contacted the NCIDQ certificate holders (25%) had responded.

This study addressed one main substantive research question: are there statistically significant differences in the perceived value of the NCIDQ certification between subgroups possessing the certification? This question led the researchers to create six additional research questions asking if there were statistically significant differences in the perceived value based on six independent variables: 1) years the credential has been held, 2) reason why the respondent sought the credential, 3) level of support received from the employer, 4) location of practice, 5) age groups, and 6) type of organizations where the respondents are employed.

There were eight dependent variables concerning perceived value. Questions 4 a-h on the survey were used to measure the dependent variable. Table 1 below shows the questions. Respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement—from strongly agree to strongly disagree—to the eight statements. The researchers set the value of responses such that a response of strongly agree received a value of 5, agree 4, no difference 3, disagree 2, strongly disagree 1, and not applicable did not receive a value.

## Results

Prior to presenting the results of the Analysis of Variance, it is worthwhile to note some general data. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the different organization types with Interior Designer as the most popular (58%). Table 1 addresses how the respondents felt about the impact the credential has had on their career in terms of recognition, professional opportunities, salary, opportunity for promotion, and job responsibilities.



**Figure 1. Organization Classification**

**Table 1. Survey Questions 4a-h Representing the Dependent Variable: Perceived Value**

Survey Questions	Agreed or Strongly Agreed
<b>Recognition:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of having others more fully recognize your abilities to perform your job?	72%
<b>Contribution Opportunities:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your professional opportunities for contributions?	48%
<b>Salary:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your salary?	41%
<b>Promotion Opportunities:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your promotional opportunities?	50%
<b>Job Responsibilities:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your job responsibilities?	42%
<b>Prestige Among Superiors:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your prestige among superiors within your organization?	68%
<b>Prestige Among Peers:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your prestige among individuals within your organization?	70%
<b>Prestige Among Individuals Outside Organization:</b> How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your prestige among individuals outside your organization?	68%
	<b>Yes</b>
Do you feel more knowledgeable as a result of becoming certified?	69%
Do you feel more confident in your ability to do your work?	63%

With respect to the impact the credential has had on the respondents' careers and the means comparisons of the vari-

ous sub-groups, 3 out of the 6 independent variables yielded statistically significant differences in at least one of the eight dependent variables. Tables 2 through 6 show the statistically significant differences among the various sub-groups.

Table 2 shows the mean responses for question 4a: How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of having others more fully recognize your abilities to perform your job? The bolded means are those that were significantly higher at the 0.05 alpha level. The mean for respondents who have held the credential for 11-15 years was significantly higher than the mean for those who have held the credential for 1-5 years ( $F=2.877$ , sig. 0.006). Table 3 shows the results of Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD), which confirms the original significant difference.

**Table 2. ANOVA Results for Increased Recognition by Years Certified**

	<1	<b>1-5</b>	6-10	<b>11-15</b>	16-20	21-25	26-30	>30
Mean	3.77	<b>3.70</b>	3.93	<b>4.17</b>	4.08	3.98	4.05	4.04
n	57	206	111	64	48	51	21	25

$F=2.877$ , Significance = .006

**Table 3. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) Results for Increased Recognition by Years Certified**

(I) Years Cert	(J) Years Cert	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Err.	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
					Low Bnd	Upper Bnd	
1	1-5	11-15	-0.468	0.13	0.008	-0.86	-0.07

Dependent Variable: 1. Impact

There were no significant differences between those that were required to seek the certification by the state and those that were required to seek the certification by their employer (independent variable 2) on any of the eight root questions associated with question 4a-h impact. Similarly, there were no significant differences in mean scores of professionals based on region where the respondent's office was located (independent variable 3).

Table 4 shows the mean responses for questions 4b (contributions) and 4d (promotions). For contributions, the mean for respondents in the 40-49 age group (mean=3.20) was significantly lower than the mean for those in the 50-59 age group (mean=3.65) ( $F=3.312$ , sig. 0.006). For promotions, the mean for respondents in the 20-29 age group

(mean=3.60) was significantly higher than for those in the 60-69 age group (mean=3.00) ( $F=4.363$ , sig. 0.001) and 70-79 (mean=1.40) ( $F=4.363$ , sig. 0.001) age group. Table 5 shows the results of Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD), which confirms the original significant difference.

**Table 4. ANOVA Results for Increased Contributions and Promotion Opportunities by Age**

		Age Group	Age Group	F	Sig.
		40-49	50-59		
Contribution Opportunities	Mean	3.20	3.65	3.312	0.006
	n	129	141		
Promotion Opportunities	Mean	20-29 3.60	60-69 3.00	4.363	0.001
	n	82	60		
Promotion Opportunities	Mean	20-29 3.60	70-79 1.40	4.363	0.001
	n	82	5		

**Table 5. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) Results for Opportunities for Contribution and Promotion by Age**

	(I) Age Group	(J) Age Group	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Err.	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Low Bnd	Upper Bnd
1	40-49	50-59	-0.444	0.14	0.026	-0.86	-0.03
2	20-29	60-69	0.598	0.20	0.040	0.02	1.18
	20-29	70-79	2.198	0.55	0.001	0.62	3.78

Dependent Variables: 1. Contribution Opportunities, 2. Promotion Opportunities

Table 6 shows the mean responses for questions 4d through 4f: How has the NCIDQ certification impacted your career in terms of increasing your promotion opportunities, job responsibilities, and prestige among individuals within your organization? When interior designers were compared against all other organization classifications, the mean response for interior designers was significantly lower than all

others for each of these three variables. Tukey's HSD could not be run since there were only two groups.

**Table 6. ANOVA Results for Increased Promotion Opportunities, Job Responsibilities, and Prestige by Firm Type**

		Interior Design Firms	All Other Firms	F	Sig.
Promotion Opportunities	Mean	3.17	3.44	6.898	0.009
	n	275	305		
Job Responsibilities	Mean	3.21	3.41	4.728	0.030
	n	276	305		
Prestige Among Individuals	Mean	3.53	3.77	5.788	0.016
	n	276	304		

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research study was to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the perceived value of the NCIDQ certification among subgroups possessing the certification. The researchers analyzed each respondent's answers to eight survey questions based on six independent variables. The eight survey questions involved the respondent's perception of the certification in increasing: A) recognition, B) contribution opportunities, C) salary, D) promotion opportunities, E) job responsibilities, F) prestige among superiors, G) prestige among peers within the workplace, and H) prestige among peers outside the office. The six major groups of independent variables were: 1) years the credential has been held, 2) reasons why the respondent sought the credential, 3) level of support received from employer, 4) location of practice, 5) age group, and 6) type of organizations where the respondent is employed. Of these six independent variable groups, three yielded statistically significant differences within and among their subgroups.

First, those that held the credential for 11-15 years valued the credential more than those that held the credential 1-5 years. This finding may help recent holders see that while they do not see value now, they may in the future. Also, for those thinking about obtaining the credential, this result may help them see that the results are more long-term than immediate. Second, there were no statistically significant differences between subgroups as to the reason why the credential was sought, the level of support received, and the location of practice. One might expect those required to obtain the credential would not value it as highly as those that sought it out on their own. Third, one might expect those that had no support from their employer to seek the

credential might value it differently from those that received full support. Neither of these assumptions were supported. Fourth, there were no significant differences between any of the subgroups based on location of practice. Fifth, this study suggests that older professionals value this credential more than their younger peers when considering opportunities for contributions. However, in regard to promotional opportunities, the opposite was found to be the case. Those in the 20-29 age group felt more strongly that the credential has increased their opportunities for promotion than those in the 60-69 and 70-79 age groups. Does this mean that the latter two age groups are already retired? This question needed some clarification in the original survey. Perhaps a follow-up question could have been whether they are currently retired or are still working? Sixth, in regard to the types of organizations where the respondents were employed, one would expect that those working for interior design firms would value the credential more than those working for other types of firms. This was found not to be the case. In regard to feeling an increased opportunity for promotion, job responsibilities, and prestige among individuals within their organization, respondents working for interior design firms reported lower means than those working for all other organization types. Does this mean that within interior design firms, the credential is expected to be held? With all peers having the same credential, perhaps the impact is not as great.

Given the results discussed above, one could answer the research question in the affirmative. Yes, there are statistically significant differences in the perceived value of the NCIDQ certification between subgroups possessing the certification. The researchers hope this information will help those already holding the credential see that their perception of the credential could improve in the years to come and assist those contemplating whether to pursue it.

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