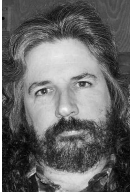


ROBERT G. FERRELL

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Robert G. Ferrell is a chronically underemployed information security geek who enjoys surfing (the Internet), sashimi (it makes great bait), and long walks (to the coffee machine and back).

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AS I TYPE THIS, I'M SITTING IN AN information security conference in Dallas. Of the two hundred or so in the auditorium where the opening remarks are being delivered, I am the only person wearing a hat. I find this odd. This is, after all, Texas, and according to the attendee list most of these folks are from some corner of the Lone Star state as well. I happen to be sporting a tobacco-brown leather "outlaw" cowboy hat with brass studs on it, which, like myself, is admittedly a bit over the top, but I'm talking about *no* other headgear in evidence at all. A sea of thinning hair, highly polished skin, and hair-simulating appliances stretches from wall to wall, a stark chiaroscuro from some febrile milliner's nightmare.

I've lived here in cowpoke country all my life, with only a few brief sojourns into the uncivilized wilds of not Texas, and never have I witnessed such a paucity of head coverings as in the past few years. Perhaps it's the influx of immigrants from the less hat-aware regions, or mayhap the threat of an explosive device nestled covertly on that sweaty bald spot is simply too great a risk in a country that spends the better part of each day jumping hysterically at the approach of imagined boogeymen. It has become abundantly clear that our national paranoia has reached pathological levels when the blinking lights on children's toys trigger EOC activations. Even sacred hat-wearing traditions are not safe when collective common sense is on protracted holiday.

I'm going to swing this literary oil tanker around now and talk about certifications, the alphabet soup for the career, as it were. There have been way too many words written on the subject of professional certs, and as I am loathe to miss my chance to chunk some verbiage on this steaming pile, I bloody well shan't.

Certifications are perfectly appropriate, in my opinion (and I'm the one with a column here, so that's a surprisingly salient point), for selected critical professions. Doctors and airline pilots immediately spring to mind. I doubt that anyone really wants drug prescriptions from, body parts modified/removed by, or themselves at 35,000 feet in the hands of, a person who may or may not have any idea what she/he is doing. Medical and air trans-

port licensure certifications take a lot of study, skill, and time to achieve, and generally they denote that the person in question is at least nominally competent to perform the job. That's what certifications were originally intended to convey: evidence that a body of knowledge had been mastered, that a degree of manual and/or intellectual skill had been demonstrated, and that the certifying body was reasonably confident this person wouldn't kill anyone unintentionally.

Then, gradually, insidiously, *certmania* crept in. I suppose at first there was a general, if unrealistic, faith that the certification process would be made sufficiently rigorous to warrant some degree of confidence being accorded to graduates thereof, but it didn't take too long to prove that trust unfounded. Certification, like virtually everything else in modern society, is subject to market forces and therefore to a chimeric form of circular argument I like to call "suborbital logic" because it never really makes it all the way around. Allow me to illustrate.

Let's say a bunch of industry folks complain that the lack of widespread enforced standards applicable to people in their profession generates bad public relations for the whole group, despite that fact that until this bellyaching hits the mainstream media the public is barely even aware of said profession. These concerned professionals decide to form a working group/intellectual black hole to come up with educational and functional guidelines for ensuring minimal competency among their current and future cohorts. A niche is born, and a flock of circling corporate predators descends to feast upon the neonate. They've evolved, after all, to smell this sort of nascent opportunity from miles away.

Quicker than you can say, "Michael DeBakey," vendors with visions of conspicuous consumption dancing in their heads bypass the ponderous industry working group and come up with their own certifications, designed more to pad the coffers of said corporations than, say, provide any meaningful measure of professional competency. Immediately thereafter, hideously overpriced and underinformative training classes spring up like weeds in a fallow pasture, dotting the landscape with false promises and shattered expectations. The offerings expand exponentially until the carrying capacity of the ecosystem is exceeded and the pack must feed on itself to bring things to equilibrium.

After the blood tide recedes, the surviving certs take on an air of seeming legitimacy that grows with each hapless recruit who swells their turgid ranks. Corporate HR managers start to take note, cautiously listing the certs in the "desired skills" area of job announcements. Eventually, if enough people get certified and enough articles are written extolling the virtues of a given cert, it creeps into the "mandatory skills" list and at that point occupies a permanent seat on the resumé lingo security council.

Once the disease reaches the tertiary phase, the mere presence of the appropriate acronym on a job application ensures that it will at minimum leapfrog the initial screening stage. Conversely, the absence of said alphabetic sputum will virtually guarantee a precipitous plunge into the round file. Many of these certs will now begin, Ouroboros-like, to require experience that companies are no longer willing to provide to applicants who don't already possess the cert. Thus is the cycle complete.

So what, you may well ask, if these certs are provided on a for-obscene-profit basis? What does that matter if the end result is a better-qualified work force? Not much, if that were true. The fact of the matter is that many of the more widely accepted certs require little more than passing a multiple-guess

test and agreeing to a code of ethics, the enforcement of which is nebulous at best. They're basically the more expensive equivalent of the cool diplomas you could order from the backs of comic books when I was a kid.

I'll leave you with this simple question: Would you trust your gall bladder surgery to a guy who took a five-day training class and passed a multiple-choice exam on the third try? Ima Quaque, CNORP (Certified Nonessential Organ Removal Professional).

Man, I hope the bar is open back at my hotel.

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