

# Assessing competencies: An evaluation of ASTD's Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) designation



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## ABSTRACT

The American Society of Training and Development's (ASTD) Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) program is purported to be based on the ASTD's competency model, a model which outlines foundational competencies, roles, and areas of expertise in the field of training and performance improvement. This study seeks to uncover the relationship between the competency model and the CPLP knowledge exam questions and work product submissions (two of the major instruments used to test for competency of CPLP applicants). A mixed qualitative–quantitative approach is used to identify themes, quantify relationships, and assess questions and guidelines. Multiple raters independently analyzed the data and identified key themes, and Fleiss' Kappa coefficient was used in measuring inter-rater agreement. The study concludes that several discrepancies exist between the competency model and the knowledge exam and work product submission guidelines. Recommendations are given for possible improvement of the CPLP program.

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## 1. Background

### 1.1. CPLP Certification

The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) created the Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) designation to provide evidence of the knowledge, experience, and standards required to be successful in the field of workplace learning and performance.

In designing the CPLP, according to Salopek (2006), the ASTD Certification Institute benchmarked against associations with both emerging and established certification programs, as they noted emerging programs made the best use of technology, while there is a great deal to learn from established programs regarding processes and procedures. The ASTD also received extensive input from a broad cross-section of individuals with a wide range of experiences who were practitioners, as well as academic and thought leaders for developing the certification program (Salopek, 2006).

The CPLP program has brought demonstrated benefits to both the profession and practitioners. ASTD (2011a,b,c) surveyed 524 ASTD members and 625 non-members and interviewed two dozen

CPLP holders, candidates, and top employers across a variety of industries. Some notable findings were:

- credentials are preferred by hiring managers, especially in tough job markets;
- 87% of CPLP credential holders report it has given them an advantage;
- 82% of CPLP credential holders report it has advanced their careers;
- 72% of the companies looking to fill positions on the ASTD job bank prefer CPLP applicants;
- 100% of employers interviewed stated that future recruiting practices for open positions will prefer the CPLP credential;
- 100% of CPLP credential holders felt more capable and more confident at their jobs, now that they have completed the CPLP program (p. 3).

The findings also showed that nearly 1000 jobs have been posted on the ASTD job bank by employers with the "CPLP Preferred" designation, and major job boards, such as Monster.com, regularly have "CPLP Preferred" job postings.

The certification is open to all applicants that have at least three years of work experience in the learning and performance field. At least five years of experience is preferable, with exposure to multiple areas of expertise (e.g. coaching, human performance improvement, managing the learning function, knowledge management, succession planning, etc.). The CPLP certification is a

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lengthy process that takes place in four testing windows each year (March, May, September, and November). During each testing window, individuals are required to take a knowledge exam. The knowledge exam consists of 150 multiple-choice questions, the themes of which pertain to the nine areas of expertise (AOE).

While the exam focus is on breadth of knowledge, some focus areas are weighted more heavily than others. Regarding the relative weighting, in 2004, more than 2050 workplace learning and performance professionals rated the competencies, areas of expertise (AOE), and roles in terms of importance in regard to effectiveness in their current jobs (Bernthal, Colteryahn, Davis, Naughton, & Rothwell, 2004). Appendix A shows the relative weighting of the topics on the exam by area of expertise.

Out of these 150 items, there are approximately 32 experimental items per test. In order to pass the knowledge exam, individuals must answer 65% of the non-experimental items correctly. From June 2005 to December 2011, 2571 exams were administered among 25 testing windows. The pass rate was 79.3%, and the fail rate was 20.7% (ASTD, 2011a,b,c).

If the applicant passes the knowledge exam, they are required to submit a work product that represents their expertise in a specific aspect of the field, along with a sample of recent project work and essay responses to general strategic and operational questions related to the field. The CPLP work product submission requires individuals to score at least 8 out of 12 total points to pass. From June 2005 to December 2011, 1731 work product submissions were scored among four testing windows. The pass rate was 72.7% and the fail rate was 27.3% (ASTD, 2011a,b,c). If the work product submission receives a passing score, the individual receives the certification. Individuals seeking the certification must pay a testing fee (\$799–\$999) as well as possible fees for various learning materials to assist with test preparation.

## 1.2. Competency model

Before creating the CPLP designation, the ASTD developed a competency model that became a set of standards by which performance professionals were to be judged (ASTD, 2011a,b,c;

Salopek, 2006). This is in sync with other professional fields like manufacturing (ETA, 2010), human resources (SHRM, 2013), health and safety (Chang, Chen, & Wu, 2012) and mediation (ACR, 2011), in which competency models have been developed by major professional associations in order to inform certification design and implementation. Competency models often serve the role of providing the criteria by which an expert in a professional field is identified (and by which they may be evaluated), and thus serves as the starting point for evaluating expertise in a field through a certification program.

The process for developing the ASTD competency model was as follows:

### Phase I:

1. Conducted 75 exploratory interviews with a combination of thought leaders and practitioners at ASTD's 2003 International Conference and EXPO.
2. Conducted an extensive literature review of past ASTD studies and more than 100 competency research studies.
3. Conducted in-depth phone interviews and focus groups with 60 subject matter experts, thought leaders, and practitioners.
4. Using the results, constructed the draft competency model.

### Phase II:

5. The draft served as the foundation of a Web-based survey to validate the model. More than 2050 respondents participated in this survey.
6. The teams interpreted the survey data and finalized the model (Davis, Naughton, & Rothwell, 2004, p. 31).

This competency model was elucidated in ASTD's 2004 book-length treatment of the subject *Mapping the future: Shaping new workplace learning and performance competencies*. See the image below for a visual representation of the model from ASTD's CPLP web site:

At the base of the model (Fig. 1) are the *foundational competencies* of the profession. The foundational competencies include personal, interpersonal, and business and management competencies. The following questions are the focus of this section

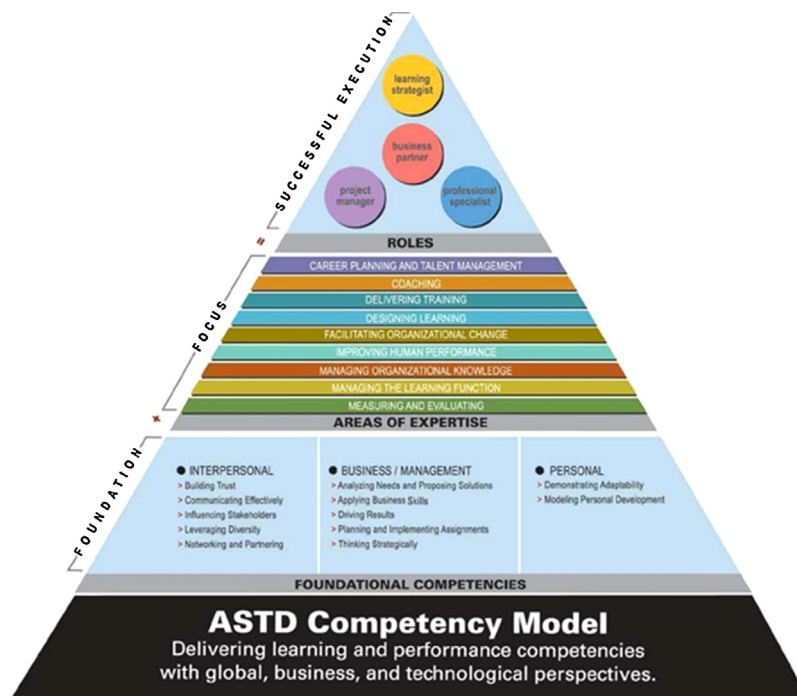


Fig. 1. ASTD Competency Model visual representation (Bernthal et al., 2004).

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