

Lean Six Sigma Online Training and Certification Due Diligence

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Michael Cyger: An historical search of jobs requiring Lean and/or Six Sigma experience shows an increasing trend, meaning -- more and more employers understand that employees with the skills to streamline processes and reduce errors is important. And job candidates are seeing these requirements and looking for training so they can apply for jobs and differentiate themselves.

How do I know? Because iSixSigma.com traffic is at an all-time peak, and many new companies have launched in the past few years and are offering online training for Lean and Six Sigma.

So here's the problem. If you're a job candidate, and you search on Google or Bing for Lean Six Sigma certification, you're likely to only see the training providers paying the most to have the highest listing on the page, or you may only be looking at the provider with the lowest advertised price.

How do you – as a job candidate who is interested in gaining knowledge and skills to solve problems – figure out if an online training course is useful and worthwhile?

That's what we're going to help you understand today.

I'm Michael Cyger, Founder and Publisher of iSixSigma.com, the leading publisher and largest community of Lean and Six Sigma professionals in the world.

Joining us today are four Lean Six Sigma thought leaders. From left to right we have:

Brent Drever, CEO and Chief learning officer of Acuity Institute

Bill Hathaway, President of MoreSteam

Peter Peterka, President of SixSigma.us

Tom Pyzdek, President of the Pyzdek Institute

Welcome, gentlemen.

Michael: There are many different training courses being offered today and I see them all advertised a slightly different way. What is the difference between Lean Six Sigma training, a Lean Six Sigma certificate program, and a Lean Six Sigma certification program?

Brent: That is a great question, Mike. When I look at it is, as a learner, you always have to explore to understand the difference between the three, and let's start out with the certificate program.

A lot of times what we see with certificate programs is it may be associated with an organization that provides certification, and all they do is provide you with a certification exam and their expectation is for you to go learn the actual content and the topics being discussed and then come back to them and take an exam and get a certificate from them. So, a lot of times we find those are low-cost options, but what you want to look for is to say what would be the cost of training on top of that.

Then you look at training organizations and where training comes into play, that is where you are actually learning the book of knowledge and whatever topic you are looking to explore. Let's say it is black belt. There is a black belt book of knowledge that says here is all the content, tools, concepts I am going to learn, and that is the training aspect. That is where you have got exercises and simulations and quizzes and online content. So, that is the foundation. That is really the learning side of it.

And then, when you think of the third component, which is the certification program, that is really the bundle of all of them, where you really start. And I like to look at it as you have got a learning component, which is what we just talked about. You have got a practicing component, which is where you do simulations and exercises and take a look at examples, and then you have exams associated with that as well. And then all of that combined with maybe some practical experience, and you bring that into play, consists of a certification program from my experience.

Michael: Okay, so that makes sense. If I have already been trained at a company, but I did not actually show that I have the knowledge, I can go someplace and take a test, and they might give me a certificate. And if I have not been trained in the past, I may go find somebody that will train me and then provide me a certificate that I completed the training and/or passed their exam. And then the third and highest option is I go through an online training course, I show that I have the requisite skills to complete Lean Six Sigma projects, and then they will award me a certification if I pass their minimum standards.

Brent: Absolutely, yeah, and I think it is good to know that there are options for you. I like how you started that out, where if somebody says, "Hey, I have gone through this for ten years. This is what I have been doing. I never got the credentials," and I get that question and I am not expecting somebody to go through the entire experience, so there are options out there for you that are a little bit lower in cost, but they are not as time consuming because you do have the experience and the background. You are just looking for that stamp of approval.

Bill: You will often see a certificate of completion, which means only that you completed the training, however that is determined, usually coursework that may involve working through the assignments and completing any online quizzes perhaps. You could equate that to the ground school portion of pile up development.

So, certification is a whole other animal and generally involves multiple requirements around project work and testing to assess the capability that you are trying to build in training to determine whether that capability is really there. So, certification is more the flight school, where you are actually getting out and flying a plane with an instructor and proving that what you learned in ground school can actually be applied in the real world.

Michael: And I want my pilot to not only show me that they have the education and can pass a test, but also the skills to execute.

Bill: Right.

Bill: But I think the pilot training metaphor really holds because there are some certification providers who do testing, certify by testing, but not by practical work. So, if you think about it, you are getting on an airplane and your pilot had gone through pilot training and taken an exam, but never actually demonstrated that he can land a plane. You would not be too confident, and I think the same thing holds in the employment market, where employers are not terribly confident about folks who are representing a certain level of capability who may have taken a test, but have not actually demonstrated that they can land the plane.

Michael: If students are going to invest hundreds to thousands of dollars for a training course, as well as spend 20, 40, or 80 hours in that course, they want to make sure it is going to be a useful course. How can an individual, looking for online Lean Six Sigma training and certification, determine if a training course is academically superficial or complete and rigorous?

Peter: I think one of the first things that someone looking online for a program should look at is, first off, what type of accreditations and where do they come from of the program. Do they provide continuing education units? Is it, perhaps, through a university? Do they offer project management credits? And then also the integrity of the organization. Are they part of the Better Business Bureau and do they have other associations that they have? That is number one.

Tom: And I think also you might ask the training provider to provide you with some references and people who have completed the training. Certainly they are going to give you references that speak well of them for the most part, but you can probe and you will find things in the conversation that are worth knowing.

Michael: Yeah. And if I was going to spend a few thousand dollars, I think it is worth reaching out to the provider and asking them for a few testimonials that you could email. I would definitely ask my friends if I were to spend a few thousand dollars on a new car or a used car whether they are reliable.

Brent: Also, learn a little bit more about the organization's background. Where did they come from? Where did they learn their Lean Six Sigma

experience? That is a good question to ask because a lot of times we see that people are promoting a product where they just do not have the experience that backs it up. So, you want to make sure that you are asking questions, and then also make sure that they have got the credibility in the industry, meaning that they have got the experience that they can talk about where they have applied lean six sigma or where they have applied process improvement to make value added improvements in an organization.

And I think sometimes on the website, you want to talk to somebody, whether it is through email or whether it is through phone, and make sure that they are available because the experience that you get from a marketing side is often is going to be similar to the experience you get on the instructor or the general support side. So, make sure that you are getting the responses that you want in a timely manner and that they do have accessibility because that is the risk you are going to run into; is you pay a tremendous amount of money, enroll in a course, and then the person or the organization disappears behind you.

Michael: And if I send in an email and I do not get a response back for two days, that is indicative of the kind of support I may receive while going through the program.

Brent: I think that is definitely going to be the case, and I think actually what we experienced, that you may get a longer time because a lot of organizations like to focus on the sales side. So, if they are giving you a two-day response on the sales side, you might get a four or five-day response on the support side, and that is not the experience that you want. So, those are the things that you can test an organization for very little effort and you might get some responses back that will help sway your decision to a positive outcome.

Bill: So, if you think of black belt training, traditionally, when delivered in a classroom, it has been anywhere from four to five weeks. Probably the predominant number is four weeks. So, an online course, while it is a little more efficient to deliver content online than in a classroom because the pace of speaking is slower than the pace of reading, for example, an online class, a black belt ought to be something in the neighborhood of 140 hours to be the

equivalent body of knowledge as what is generally accepted to be the common curriculum for black belt.

So, that is the starting point. Does this course cover the curriculum that my employer is going to expect me to have mastered? And if it does not, then you may be paying less, but you may also not be building the full scope of capability that your employer would expect.

Michael: I have seen providers mail a printed book to a student and call that online training because the quizzes and the final certification test are administered online. I have seen other online training programs that include video of a person at a whiteboard, voice reading slides, a combination of slides and some video instruction, additional readings of articles to go through, and onscreen examples while training. How does a student determine if the training they are considering fits with their learning style and is going to be captivating and beneficial for them?

Peter: Right now people can go out there and put together their courseware, change management, for example, beyond Six Sigma, and they can get up and going very quickly. And so, the disadvantage of that obviously is there are a lot of people out there and a lot of confusion.

Tom: We offer a free demo. So, the student can take an actual lesson. They can interact with our learning management system. They can see how we use the eLearning technology and they will get a very good feel of what it is like to go through our training. I would say that that is something that a student may want to ask for from a training provider.

Brent: Take a look at their demos, and if their demos are providing you with valuable information, most likely that is going to translate into the learning experience you have once you are an actual student.

Ask yourself challenging questions around how do you like to learn. So, the benefit that we have today is that we are always exposed to different video and audio and written word, and if you find yourself gravitating to I like books, well, maybe that printed course book option is going to work great for you, or if you are like: "You know what. I need that interactive nature of e-

learning that has audio by an instructor and they have got different objects or things coming on the screen, such as text and pictures and examples," that might be something you are after, or prerecorded sessions that you are like: "I am comfortable watching more of a professor style that they sit in front of a whiteboard and maybe it was a classroom session at one point in time."

Find out more about the content, and here is where I am going with this. Content that is generally rooted in two different areas. It is either going to come from a manufacturing environment or it is going to come from a service environment. And you can have the greatest delivery, but if you are not connecting with the content, let's say they are trying to teach you hardcore manufacturing techniques and you are sitting there, going: "I am trying to work on a process in a service environment," you are not going to connect with the content.

So, they might have the greatest bells and whistles around the technology they use, but then the content is going to bore you or you are just not going to relate to it. So, ask a couple different layers of questions and I think it will be helpful for you, and I think you deserve to have the content that is going to match up to what you are trying to accomplish in your organization because there are differences out there.

Bill: If you can look at how much of the content is kind of passively delivered, so reading or listening or watching a video, versus that which is interactive, where there are drag and drop exercises, simulations, quizzes, and activities, because you cannot learn this, in my opinion and in my experience, without doing it. So, content that is really passive is usually a lot less expensive to build, so therefore it is generally less expensive to purchase, but may not deliver the level of capability that you are looking for.

Michael: Does training content need to be updated frequently and how can a student determine if a training course they are considering is updated frequently enough?

Tom: I think the body of knowledge, thankfully, has started to stabilize because that used to be in such a state of flux that no one really knew what it meant to be a Six Sigma black belt or green belt. So, thankfully there is not a

core body of knowledge that is stable enough that you could actually be accredited, have your training accredited, meaning that it addresses all of that body of knowledge.

I think application is where things change. And as you say, there is a lot in service and a lot in healthcare and even Government is using Lean Six Sigma, although it is debatable how well. My personal belief is that Lean Six Sigma is a general method for improving any kind of business process and that it applies whether the processes are healthcare processes or service processes, and so we include a variety of different practice exercises, where people will see here is an application in a hospital, here is an application in a back office, and so on.

Brent: What I think is an absolute must is that your training provider is updating their content routinely to stay current. So, an example is let's say the training course you are going into is associated with some statistical analysis software, and the statistical analysis software provider brings forth a new release. You want to make sure that your content reflects that new release.

Peter: I will say one thing that they should look at is what type of software are they using. Are they using mainstream software that is commercially available or are they using something homegrown that nobody else uses? If you are trying to get a job and you say, "I have been using Peter's software and Excel that he wrote last night," I do not think that would be beneficial. And so, look at the software version. What software version are they using in their training?

Michael: Anyone watching this video knows that it is the skills that are important, not necessarily the education. The education is a means to gain the skills to solve problems. How well can you, as a trained Lean Six Sigma practitioner, use the tools to solve the business problems? So my question to you is: how can a student determine if a training course they are considering will provide a transfer of skills, and not just a cursory overview and basic knowledge of the topics?

Brent: Yeah, what is interesting about that is you have to dive into the questions, doing your homework as we have talked earlier. How are they

introducing information? And when you introduce information, you want to make sure that you are provided the opportunity to do simulations. You are provided the opportunity to do exercises, look at examples, because that is how you are going to connect with the content. That is the first step. And then the challenge is: how can you take that skill that you just learned through maybe a practice simulation and now apply it in your organization? That is the leap.

And the challenge that we are faced with, and I will give you an example because I have had the opportunity to work with thousands of Lean Six Sigma practitioners over the last 15 years, and what I can say is that let's say black belt. You may learn two hundred tools and concepts in the black belt curriculum. Now, it is not practical to accept or expect that you have transfer all of that knowledge into your next project, and I have seen really great projects execute ten tools to get to a tremendous result. And then their next project, they use five different tools on top of the ten that they already use. So, what happens with that knowledge that you actually acquired in the learning process?

Well, you want to make sure you are able to go back to it and you are able to replay some of the examples and the exercises and simulations, so when you do need it, but the transfer of skills really happens through sound learning practices, through simulations and examples and exercises that sets this really solid foundation, and then the application is where you have to have that memory recall or going back to your materials to say, "I think I need this. How do I do it again," because like statistics is a good example. You are not going to use all the statistics you learn in black belt in your first project. You may use five percent of it, so you want to be able to go back in case you do need it down the road.

Bill: There are a lot of skills that surround the more technical aspects of Lean Six Sigma and people often say the soft stuff is the hardest stuff. So, we spend a lot of time necessarily teaching the hard stuff, the statistical analysis. Ultimately, success or failures are often determined by how well you can manage the softer elements of managing change. I mean ultimately, if you are going to lead a project, you are going to have to convince people to do something they do not want to do. So, interpersonal communications are a

premium, and that is why most corporate Lean Six Sigma departments who use online learning are using it in a broader design that is mixing in elements of live workshops, coaching, and project work on top of online learning.

Tom: I think they need to look at whether or not the course requires a project and if it is a real world project. I find that even though people go through my training, they take the exam and they do quite well on it, their first project upload is, let's say, crude and in need of improvement. And they need the coaching, the personal coaching from an expert to help them understand that is needed in a project.

Michael: I remember going through green belt training at General Electric back in 1995. Without a black belt coach, I would have made error upon error in completing my first project, which would have wasted my time and made me frustrated. But training has improved in the past 20 years. Do you think that coaching of students in online training courses is mandatory today, and if so at what training levels should a coach be provided by an online training provider?

Bill: Well, it really depends on the individual. For example, let's take on extreme. An engineer, who has been in a plant and has a lot of experience working with process improvement in general then takes a black belt course, who has the context already to understand how all these tools are applied is probably not going to need a lot of coaching. Maybe some coaching on the soft skills, but on the more technical tools, their mentality is just give it to me and let me figure it out.

The other extreme would be someone who is coming from a business environment, where they have not been exposed to process improvement. Maybe they are in HR or in finance, or sales and marketing, where this is all kind of new and it is a little more difficult to see how it applies perhaps, and their learning style might be different. They may be more social by nature and they may need a little bit more coaching. And that can be accomplished a lot of different ways. It could be informal networks. It could be an informal coach. It could be a more formal coach. It could be a contractual arrangement with a consultant. It could be accomplished many ways.

Tom: When I first came up with the Pyzdek Institute, I intended to put all of my live training online and present it with a live coach. That was my plan. The problem is that a master black belt, who is an expert as well as a good coach, demands pretty good pay, and to do that we had to price the training at a level that really was not competitive. So, what we have done is, for green belt and black belt, we have optional coaching. And for those, we also have review and feedback on the practice exercises.

Brent: Well, I think I agree with you that things have evolved in the last 15 to 20 years. And I, like you, through my initial experience, needed a coach because I just did not have those references and resources readily available to me. Where things have changed is, when you are in an online environment, what you have access to is an instructor. And I want to make sure that every learner knows the importance of the instructor in that they can always reach out to instructor with questions. So, as you are going through the training component of your Lean Six Sigma journey, make sure you have got an instructor to reach out to with questions. And sometimes it is just not the instructor. Sometimes it is that general support, so that goes back to our earlier conversation around making sure support is in place, but instructor.

Michael: Right or wrong: I know that if someone tells me that they went to MIT or Harvard Business School, I think they are likely very intelligent. Is the reputation and prestige of a Lean Six Sigma training provider something that should be considered by a student?

Tom: Well, I think so because the student is generally getting this certification or skill set to obtain employment or to get a promotion or better pay on their current job. And if the employer has not heard of the training provider or if the reputation is less than stellar, they are not really going to know what you have learned or what your skill set is. So, I think, again, as you say, rightly or wrong, we all put a lot of weight on the reputation of the merchant if we are buying products or the service provider for buying a service.

Bill: This is an environment where there is no real third party accreditation that is meaningful. The folks that are out there have kind of setup shop for commercial reasons to sell online testing or to charge a fee for accreditation.

It is not like the industry came together and said let's have this member-driven kind of accreditation. ASQ fills that role to some extent, but in that environment, where there is not really anything you can point to, then the marketplace gives you a signal.

So, if you are looking for a provider, and if that provider has been successfully delivering training for large, corporate customers, it gives you some assurance that someone has really looked under the hood. So, the difference between retail or an individual in a corporate deployment is that someone who is running a large deployment for a multinational is going to take the time to really look at the online content, to really understand what the curriculum is, at what level the mastery is being developed, how the practice exercises are structured, and so it is a bit of a proxy I suppose.

Peter: One thing they have to be careful about is there is a lot of institutions out there that are offering programs and it is not even them. They are just rebranding it and they are just collecting the money on it.

Michael: Does continuing education credit matter when looking at a Lean Six Sigma online training provider?

Bill: Frankly, it does not tell you anything because anybody can offer CEUs. The Project Management Institute does at least a cursory review of content that offers a professional development unit (PDU), but it is not probably the level of assurance that you might hope that it would be to see stamps of approval of various sorts on websites.

Peter: I think you look at that, because if you do continuing education or project management, I mean there is a process to go through, and they look at it and they review it, and so forth. I think it is very important for vendors out there to address that and go through that process.

Tom: We have a lot of students who are certified PMPs and they want professional development units from their training because they need that for recertification, as do ASQ people. And I think if that is something important to you, you should certainly consider it.

Brent: When we think of Lean Six Sigma, we find a lot of individuals that are associated with project management take Lean Six Sigma courses. And so, let's take, for instance, somebody that has their PMP or they are a Project Management Professional through the Project Management Institute, and they are required to have on an annual basis a continuing education unit or professional development unit (PDUs). That is a starting point. You want to reach out to organizations that do provide PDUs and are registered with the Project Management Institute. That is a good starting point.

I find that when organizations go through the effort to get accreditation and provide CEUs and PDUs, it means they are serious about what they do and they are actually listening to their student population that say we need this because it is part of my continuing education.

Michael: As I mentioned at the start of this show, costs for Lean Six Sigma online training vary widely by provider. How should students think about the pricing options when evaluating training programs?

Peter: There are some people who feel that the more money they pay, the better. There are a few people that have a good feeling about that. I think there is some and you get what you pay for. If you pay the 29 dollars and you get your certificate, well, you get a piece of paper. I will not even give it a certificate name. You get a piece of paper. That is certainly probably not worth the 29 dollars. I think there is a range and I think the reputable vendors out there are in a similar range.

Bill: The first thing they should look at is what is the level of content. So, how much is really there? The price varies widely, but the course duration and curriculum also varies widely. So, if you do not look carefully, you may be, for example, purchasing a green belt course that is 20 or 30 or 40 hours long. And the standard, if there is one, is more like 80. Technically it has been historically a couple weeks of training, so more like 80 hours. So, if your green belt course is less than 80 hours, you may be paying a lot less money, but you may also not be getting the curriculum that an employer would expect.

Likewise, with black belt training, which has historically been four to five weeks in a classroom, so you should be looking for an online course that is something in the neighborhood of 140 hours. Online training is a little more efficient than classroom learning, just because the pace of delivery is faster, but if you are less than that, then you should wonder if you are really getting a body of knowledge that aligns with common practice. And one way to know is to look at CEUs, which actually are kind of a 1:10 relationship. So, if you get four CEUs, that tells you that it is a 40-hour course, although that is not fool-proof either because some providers will include the time taken to work on a project and give you CEUs for that, and so it is a little misleading.

So, you might see 18 CEUs and think, "Well, this is 180 hours long," but the fine print says, well, that includes the project work. Maybe it is 100 hours of project work, so you have to ask some questions to sort it out.

Tom: I have looked at programs, for example, that look like they are providing you with black belt training and certification, but they give you a 30-day window. We have 180 hours in our Lean Six Sigma Black Belt Program. If you can squeeze that into 30 days, you are a better man than I am, or they will not include software or they will not include a text book, or they will not include fill in the blank.

They charge extra for those things, so be sure that you are actually getting the entire package, what you actually need, before you consider it low cost. I was once charged by a car dealer for this spare tire. I thought that should have been included, but it was not. So, there is a lot of ways to get the cost down and it is not the true cost.

Brent: Yeah, the greatest thing about the Internet and online education is you can see costs and you can find the cost that meets your budget. And with that, you also need to understand that with cost you can have downsides or upsides. So, let's start out with where we started our conversation with a certificate. Generally that is going to be your least expensive option, and you may have great experience and you may pay a few hundred dollars to go get a certificate because you just want to put a bow on your overall experience to say I am certified in Lean Six Sigma as a black belt or a green belt or yellow belt, and so forth.

So, that is a starting point, so you can find a lower cost option there. Now, if you want to step it up a little bit and say, "You know what. I have had a little bit of exposure, but I really need to bring all of it together," and then you can say, "My cost is going to be a little bit more," and then you look at the level of support. Do they have instructors available? Is their content routinely managed, as we have discussed earlier? And those are important questions to ask, so what I find with cost is it goes up with the level of content. How well is it developed? The level of support you receive. And then, as we have talked about prestige, your cost even goes higher.

Michael: If you have additional questions about choosing the right Lean Six Sigma online training provider, please post them in the comments below this video on iSixSigma.com and I will ask our panel of industry experts to come back and answer them.

Brent Drever, Bill Hathaway, Peter Peterka, and Tom Pyzdek, thank you for coming on iSixSigma.com, helping future students understand what questions to ask and how to properly evaluate Lean Six Sigma online training providers, and thanks for helping us all become better change agents and business leaders.

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