BLACKBLOT MARKET-DRIVEN CERTIFICATION

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1.   **Introduction**

Discussions about the need for a product management certification appeared some years ago in several of the online communities that were dedicated to product management. Much of the talk centered on the lack of existing venues that would allow a person to validate their professional competency or assess it in others. Indeed, it became apparent at the time that the product management profession had reached relative maturity and acceptance as an evolving art and science, but with limited subject matter consolidation and opportunities for certifying expertise.

Product management professionals are multi-disciplinary, and as such, their titles and associated responsibilities varied throughout the different industries. This variance added further complexity to understanding the skill sets and abilities that product management professionals must possess. Aside from tenure, there was no practical way to evaluate product management professionals, and as a result, companies and their organizations were employing various criteria, tests, and interview styles in order to identify or evaluate a candidate's or an employee's product management aptitude.

In response to the growing need and as part of its continued support of the product management profession, Blackblot has developed a certification program specifically for product management professionals, which is based on Blackblot's accumulated product management body of knowledge and its product management focused training program.

Blackblot's certification program provides product management professionals with a way to earn a designation to differentiate themselves, validate skills, gain professional acknowledgment, and demonstrate a commitment to the product planning or product marketing disciplines.

2.   **Blackblot's Certification Program**

Building a true vendor-neutral product management certification is a challenging task since there are several product management styles being practiced by individuals and various corporations. Being more of an art than an exact science, it would be time consuming, and not particularly useful, to gather all known product management practices and then assess product management personnel on every possible aspect of the product management discipline. However, it is possible and feasible to teach and assess individuals on a defined set of best practices and proven methods of performing specific tasks in product management, such as the "Blackblot Product Manager's Toolkit$^{®}$" (PMTK). This is the essence and core value of the "Blackblot Product Management Professional™" (BPMP) certification program.

With the premise of examining individuals on a highly practical product management methodology, Blackblot's training and certification programs were built from the ground up and correlated with each other. The intent was to educate and then assess an individual on the level of knowledge that they have regarding a defined set of best practices and proven methods of performing the specific tasks in product management, as taught by Blackblot.

Every certification program needs to suit its audience, industry, and the challenges that await certified candidates in their ongoing job. Following careful consideration, the Blackblot certification program is positioned as a "medium-stakes" certification program with an "intermediate" rating of difficulty.

"Medium-stakes" (an industry accepted classification) certification programs are designed to enhance professional development, regarded as personal achievements, and can impact the certification candidate's career as well as the effectiveness of the organizations that employ those individuals.

Blackblot's certification program was created using an established methodical process that is designed to ensure test validity (same content is taught and tested) and reliability (certified individuals should be able to apply the knowledge directly at their workplace). The process which was used by Blackblot is advocated and described in Tracey Flynn's book, "Unlocking the Power of Certification - How to Develop Effective Certification Programs".

3.   **Being Certified Has Its Value**
Getting certified is really about investing in one's self. It is the type of non-tangible investment that demands much effort but yields a host of returns in both the short and long-term. It is also an asset that is often used by companies to assure that they have competent personnel.

The whole notion of certifying high-tech professionals began at Novell® during its heyday in the late 1980's. The burden placed on Novell's technical support staff by corporate network administrators seeking help was overwhelming. To counter the mounting pressure, Novell embarked on an education and certification program designed to produce competent network administrators who would be designated as CNEs (Certified Netware Engineers), and thus a new industry was born. Many were to follow suit and major corporations such as Microsoft®, Oracle®, Cisco® and others soon had their own certification programs.

The benefit of certifying employees quickly became obvious to employers. For companies, it can be a key element of differentiation in an increasingly competitive world as well as a very valuable marketing tool that can be used to gain customers' trust. On the performance side, employers noted that certified employees demonstrate higher productivity and provide better service. This was a major revelation and a driver for recruiters and human resource managers to include certifications as an occupational requirement in job descriptions.

Those individuals who have achieved a certification distinction have also claimed to have experienced direct benefits from doing so. In the "2002 Global IT Training and Certification Study" conducted by Thomson Prometric (a testing and assessment services company), 54% of certified respondents indicated they received some form of reward from their employer following successful completion of a certification. The breakdown was: 18% claimed a salary increase, 20% were entrusted with new responsibilities, and 9% were promoted. More noteworthy was the fact that 32% of candidates surveyed and 34% of previously certified

respondents cited that "enhanced professional credibility" as the main reason to seek certification.

The "Blackblot Product Management Professional™" (BPMP) certification program has been developed with that main reason (professional credibility) in mind.

4.   Summary

The product management profession and the related body of knowledge have already started to consolidate and mature. Professional certifications are now being recognized by organizations as a way to help standardize corporate processes and job responsibilities in order to guarantee future success.

Professional certifications also provide individuals with means to demonstrate their commitment to their profession and set themselves apart from others in that same profession. Blackblot's training and certification programs are aimed at helping both organizations and individuals achieve their goals.

The Blackblot training and certification programs offer product management professionals with a comprehensive methodology for increasing productivity in the workplace and improving the chances for career advancement. This combined and correlated offering of training and certification provides product management professionals with a unique package that holds true complementary value. The training and certification programs allow professionals to acquire knowledge they need and to officially attain validation that they understand and comprehend the relevant subject matter.

Companies will always want to hire the best people available and now they have an additional tool that allows them to locate product management professionals who have demonstrated a certain level of competence and commitment. At the same time, product management professionals now have an additional tool to show their dedication and commitment to the profession and demonstrate they have a comprehensive understanding of the profession they are in.