

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Question: *What is the role of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in a certification program?*

Answer: The purpose of a certification program is to identify the knowledge and skills necessary to perform a specific job, and to develop an instrument to assess the demonstration of “just enough” knowledge and skills to perform that job competently. Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are the people who are already performing that job and who advise the certification agency on how to best identify and measure that knowledge. SMEs may serve in many capacities, but the primary areas general to all programs are in test development (item writing and review), standard setting (cut scores), and exam committee (assuring that the exam content matches the exam matrix and blueprint, item performance, etc), and as a resource for policy decisions (eligibility, recertification, etc).

The basis of any certification exam is the job analysis, which is usually determined through a survey of a large group of practitioners representative of the certified population. Respondents to the job analysis survey are given basic instructions in completing the survey, but are not uniquely trained to answer the survey. SMEs who write test questions or participate in standard setting, on the other hand, need specific training for those processes to be valid and effective. Many professional testing companies provide training for item writers and cut score participants for certification agencies. These workshops have been traditionally done in a face-to-face setting, but are increasingly being done through webinars and conference calls. Regardless of the manner of training, SMEs need to understand the purpose and process of their task.