

# **Chapter Study Group Guide**

for the  
**NCMA Certification Program:  
CFCM, CCCM & CPCM**  
Program Year 2010-2011 Edition



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# National Contract Management Association

## CHAPTER STUDY GROUP GUIDE

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome! You are about to embark on a challenging and rewarding professional experience that will impact your career for years to come. This guide is intended to help you in organizing group studies, but it is relevant even if you are simply a group of one. If you don't find answers to your questions in the pages that follow, please feel free to call the Certification Department at 800/344-8096, fax your questions to us at 703-448-0939, or e-mail us at [certification@ncmahq.org](mailto:certification@ncmahq.org). We'll do our best to provide answers and guide you along the path to a successful certification program. Remember--we're here to help! As you read through this guide, remember that it is just a guide and not a one-size- fit-all formula. Not every chapter has the same resources and not every candidate has the same needs.

## **HISTORY OF NCMA CERTIFICATION PROGRAM**

NCMA's first professional certification designation, the Certified Professional Contracts Manager (CPCM), was established in 1974. NCMA's leadership, realizing that NCMA needed to establish a method of recognizing professional achievement, worked closely with industry and government professionals to develop a comprehensive program. The CPCM represents a hallmark of professional achievement in the field of contract management. The first CPCM exams were held across the country in 1976 with 23 successful candidates receiving their CPCM designation. Based on a set of stringent educational criteria and years of experience and service, some senior professionals were given a one-time opportunity to receive the CPCM designation without sitting for the examination. The Certified Associate Contracts Manager (CACM) designation was added in 1980 to certify the mastery of the fundamentals of federal government contracting. In September of 2002, the CACM designation was replaced by the Certified Federal Contracts Manager (CFCM) and the Certified Commercial Contracts Manager (CCCM) was introduced. Although the CPCM and CACM designations were originally developed as a method of recognizing professional achievement among one's peers, both have evolved to be much more than that. NCMA's professional designations and the standards behind them are being more widely recognized by both government and industry as a consistent measure of the skills and experience needed by successful contract managers. Look for employment requisitions and advertisements all across the nation to state "CFCM/CPCM/CCCM designation preferred."

## **NCMA CERTIFICATION PROGRAM TODAY**

Our certification program is delivered around the country at Kryterion Learning Centers and is available five days a week. Eligibility requirements for the CFCM and the CCCM are essentially identical. Candidates should have a degree at the bachelor's level from a regionally or Distance Education Training Council (DETC) accredited college or university, with at least one year of experience, and 80 hours of continuing professional education (CPE) in the business management area. Eligibility requirements for the CPCM include at least a bachelor's degree, five years of experience, and 120 hours of continuing professional education. Specific details of the certification program are posted on the website at [www.ncmahq.org](http://www.ncmahq.org)

## **BEST PRACTICES OF CHAPTER CERTIFICATION LEADERS**

Chapters vary in their organizational approach to certification. Some have a formal education and certification committee headed by either a committee chairperson (appointed by the chapter president) or an elected officer (vice president of education & certification). Under this structure, the committee chair or VP generally appoints a certification chair, as well as chairs for workshops, programs, and educational conferences. Other chapters have an elected officer, who fills all of the educational and certification posts. Whatever the structure, individuals responsible for certification should consider the following practices, all of which may not be appropriate for every situation, but all of which have merit:

- Plan, budget, develop, and implement a chapter certification program with the goal of maximizing members' opportunities to achieve professional growth and obtain certification designations.
- Coordinate with other chapter officers and committee chairs to ensure program implementation is compatible with other chapter education activities.
- Disseminate certification program information to chapter membership, local businesses, and other appropriate entities.
- Develop and implement an advertising/awareness plan aimed at educating chapter membership and the surrounding contract management community on the details and benefits of NCMA's professional certification programs, chapter certification study program schedules and course content, and other certification information.
- Develop and/or update study program modules to support current examination requirements. Provide documentation that may be transferred to the next individual responsible for certification.
- Plan and formalize a study program schedule. Build in some flexibility to deal with topics of interest that may come up, instructor or presenter schedule conflicts, inclement weather, etc.
- Recruit and staff study program modules with qualified personnel, preferably individuals who are members in good standing and have obtained NCMA certifications themselves.
- Inform program staff of course content, schedule, and individual responsibilities, incorporate NCMA educational objectives, and provide guidelines and resources to instructors.
- Provide oversight throughout study program; coordinate activities between instructors and students as required.

## **PLANNING A CERTIFICATION STUDY PROGRAM**

### **Why have a study program -- and how many make a study group?**

Can contract managers pass NCMA's certification exams without study group participation? Of course they can, but many people find it more enjoyable to work with a group. A group, even as small as two or three people, does prove beneficial to its members. Most find that exam preparation requires many hours of study on a continuing basis for several months. It's much easier to discipline oneself to that kind of effort with group support. More importantly, through sharing research and ideas, a wider range of material can be covered by a group in a more comprehensive, thought-provoking manner. The most effective group size for most study methods is between four and ten. This size allows for ample discussion time and for everyone to share information. Larger groups may wish to split up into smaller sizes and share information with the entire group on either a periodic basis, or on a one-time basis near the end of the study program.

### **Organizing the Chapter Study Program**

#### ***Study Group Structure***

The structure of a study group depends largely on the individual chapter's needs. Prior to developing a program, discuss the chapter's objectives and member demographics. It might be helpful to take a sample survey among the membership. In general, the following guidelines should be observed:

- Allot sufficient time to conduct the workshop. Workshops generally meet on a weekly basis. Sessions may be up to three hours in length and last between three to five months. Many chapters run the workshop on a schedule similar to university courses. Remember, there is a lot of material to cover, so plan accordingly!
- Work with the resources you have available. Do not plan a six-month workshop, if you do not have instructors (or candidates) who can commit to such a schedule.
- Be flexible! Remember that both instructors and candidates will have either full-time jobs or other commitments while they are participating in the workshop. Plan ahead and have contingency plans for instructor and candidate absences.

- Request a set level of commitment from both instructors and candidates up front. Nothing is more discouraging than an empty classroom for an instructor who has spent several hours preparing, or for candidates who show up and find no instructor available.
- Provide a syllabus and workshop schedule. Make sure everyone understands where the facility is, what conduct and access rules are, what dates and times the workshops will be held, and what the course content will be.
- Establish clear communication lines. Share telephone and fax numbers and both home and work addresses for all participants. Remind everyone that things can change at a moment's notice and clear communications will help everybody.
- Provide a "mock-exam" environment whenever possible. Mock exams administered in class are a good way to expose candidates to what is ahead. If time and facilities are available, plan two mock-exams that can address the content of two modules. Provide feedback so candidates can learn from the experience.
- Give reasonable homework assignments. Have candidates research and prepare multiple choice questions on selected topics. But be careful not to overload candidates— they may drop out!
- Require candidates to share their work. Have candidates bring copies of assigned research areas and the questions and answers they have developed. These can often be used as the in-class quizzes; be sure that answers are on a separate sheet.
- Be consistent. Successful candidates will be the best advertisement for chapter workshop programs. Set up a modularized program that is relatively consistent from exam to exam. (Don't forget to update the course relative to changes in the exams.)
- Leave sufficient time in the program for candidates to study on their own for at least one week (preferably two) prior to the exam. No matter what the workshop covers, they will want some time to go over areas in which they do not yet feel adequately prepared.
- Follow up! When exam results are out, call candidates if they haven't called you first with the good news. Your call may provide that extra bit of encouragement that they need to try again. Not everyone passes on the first try — but most do pass on a subsequent try.

### **Starting a Study Group**

Because the certification exams are available on demand all year long, chapters may consider having a regular year-round series of study group meetings. Topics can be selected and presented from both the federal and the commercial viewpoints, with some topics highlighting similarities between federal and commercial practice. Such a year-round series could function as the educational as well as the certification program. A certification section could be added that addresses more specific concerns related to certification and the certification examination process.

### **Leading the Study Group**

Some chapters appoint a certification chair, but others delegate responsibility for organizing the study groups to the education chair. We recommend appointment of a chapter certification chair, who can focus all of his/her volunteer time and energy on certification. Recognize that it is an important job that reflects on the entire chapter. Staff accordingly. If you wish to talk to other chapters about the certification programs they have set up, check the NCMA website for chapter listings. Most chapters have websites and use them to publicize their programs and list points of contact. If your chapter has a local college or university with a program in contract management, you may be able to develop a cooperative relationship around the certification program, and a certification leader may emerge from the educational institution.

### **Where and When to Hold Study Sessions**

Chapters have held sessions in a variety of places. Sessions are generally held at the work site. Keep in mind, however, that security issues and company policy may restrict attendance in this setting. If this is a problem for your group, it may be preferable to obtain a room at a local library

or university, or perhaps group members may volunteer their homes. Sessions are typically held one evening a week for 2 1/2 to 3 hours; depending on the circumstances, however, two weekly lunchtime sessions may work as well.

### **How Many Sessions Should Be Held?**

The number of sessions held depends largely on the format you choose. A good rule of thumb is to hold 10 to 12 sessions over a three- to four-month period. Use the appropriate study guide to construct a syllabus that meets the needs of your group.

### **Publicizing the Study Program**

Both the NCMA office and the local chapters promote certification all year long through newsletter articles, talks by CPCMs, CFCMs and CCCMs at chapter meetings, and recognition of successful candidates. You might even consider visiting the contract management leaders in your community to tell them about the benefits of certification for their work force and to persuade them to encourage their employees to become certified. Notices in your newsletter and announcements at your monthly meetings are the easiest way to publicize your study group. Direct mailing of fliers is also a powerful tool. You may want to put a press release in your local paper to reach both non-members and other contract managers. Ask local employers to support and publicize your program. The Certification Department at the NCMA national headquarters office will be happy to explain the application and registration process. Remember that NCMA membership is not a requirement for certification. In fact, participation in the certification program is a source of new members. Many individuals join to take advantage of the cost savings a member benefits, and stay after taking the exam to take advantage of the networking opportunities. Even highly motivated and qualified professionals experience a natural fear of taking a test and worry about their loss of status if they fail it. It is up to you to let them know about the study group and the high success rate of candidates who have been active participants in a group. Help your members realize that there is no shame in failure — only in not trying.

### **Should There Be a Fee?**

Whether to assess fees for study program participation is an individual chapter's decision, most chapters feel that setting up a study group is a service they can perform for their community and do not charge an attendance fee. One chapter had an innovative idea to encourage regular attendance; they had each group member write a check for \$50.00 at the first session. The checks were returned at the last meeting to those who had missed no more than three sessions. This technique not only helped motivate those with sagging energies, but also assured the rest of the group of the valued input from all members. Other chapters charge nothing or only a nominal fee for participation. Still other chapters award candidates scholarships/stipends/grants toward the cost of certification. Whatever you decide, remember to include expenses for copying, postage, refreshments, and facilities in your certification budget —whether it's done on a 'pay as you go' basis, or taken directly from the chapter treasury.

### **Gathering Materials**

An easy way to gather material on NCMA's certification program is through the website ([www.ncmahq.org](http://www.ncmahq.org)), where eligibility requirements, applications, and other certification documents are available. In addition, candidates should make every effort to keep up with changes in contracting through reading *Contract Management Magazine*. NCMA has study materials and special topic e-courses available.

## Studying for the Certification Exams

Ask candidates to fill out a data sheet about their experience, interests, and expertise, so they can consider focusing on certain areas of concentration. Each candidate should thoroughly review assigned homework and be prepared to answer questions on the content. Instructors and participants should be encouraged to engage in candid discussions. In addition, candidates may choose to develop their own questions to help the group prepare. Here are some tips for question development:

- Do not construct true-false, fill-in-the-blank, essay, or matching questions: There are none on NCMA's exams.
- Use the multiple-choice format consisting of (a) the stem which presents a problem situation or question, and (b) alternatives, one of which is the key, or the correct answer, and the others of which are distracters. Have a minimum of four alternatives.
- Do not include sketches, diagrams, or pictures.
- The wording of the question should be simple, direct, and free of ambiguity. Edit for brevity and delete unnecessary words.
- Each question should test one important idea or concept.
- Each question must have only one clearly correct answer.

If you use creating questions as part of the study group activities, have the group critique the questions in addition to answering them. Informal discussion about concepts and plausible wrong answers is also a learning tool. For example, why is option A correct? Does option B overlap option A? Is option C also correct? Does each option agree grammatically with the stem? What differentiates each of the options? What is the least number of words that can be used to ask the question? Be sure to reinforce the need for candidates to **READ THE QUESTIONS CAREFULLY**. Another tip to share is that it is usually a good idea to go with one's first impression when answering a question; second guessing yourself *can* lead you to change a correct answer. It is smart to skip questions that appear too difficult and return to them if time allows. Candidates should choose the correct answer for the question **AS IT IS STATED**. They should not make assumptions about what the question means. Remind candidates that there are study hints and information on taking multiple-choice tests on the NCMA web site (<http://www.ncmahq.org>)

## Taking the Exams

All candidates must apply to NCMA and be determined eligible to take the examinations for the program they have selected (i.e., CFCM, CCCM, or CPCM). Candidates have three venue choices for taking their exams:

1. On-demand at Kryterion Learning Centers. Upon being notified that they are eligible to take an exam, candidates will receive detailed instructions on setting exam appointments. This option is the most flexible as candidates can choose the date and time for the exam. An additional benefit is instant feedback. Candidates will know the outcome of their exams immediately upon completing the exam. The fee charged by Kryterion for this service is \$95 as of the date of this guide.
2. The NCMA Certification Department offers paper exams at selected national events. Again, candidates must have an approved application before sitting for an exam. Exam outcomes will normally be available within 72 hours.
3. Individual chapters may submit requests for a one-time authorization to proctor paper exams locally. The chapter must provide the test location and a suitable proctor. Exam results will normally be available within 10-15 working days.

## **Recognizing Your Candidates**

You and your candidates have worked long and hard together. You have built rapport. Don't lose that by losing touch. You may want to celebrate after the exam is over. Why not set a time to celebrate together despite the results? Anyone who studied hard and took the exam deserves recognition and reward. NCMA publishes the names of all the newly certified in the next available *Contract Management Magazine*. Successful candidates deserve recognition. Chapters should congratulate their new designees at a chapter meeting and in the chapter newsletter. Some chapters reimburse successful chapter members for the cost of the exam and/or application fee. Some chapters frame the certificates for members who successfully passed the exam and present them at a chapter meeting. Publishing an announcement in your local paper is also appropriate. NCMA will notify up to three people at the designee's request (with copies to the designee). You also send a letter to each new designee's supervisor. It is good practice to get the senior management of the new designees involved in the recognition/presentation ceremony. This practice not only assures that successful candidates receive recognition at work, but also promotes the contract management profession. Next, make use of your newly certified members! They have shown their dedication and proven their professionalism by studying for, taking, and passing the exam. Many are willing to help out with future study groups or to act as exam mentors. They are also good prospects to teach workshops, to be future certification or education chairs, to speak on certification or professionalism, or to become mentors. Don't forget the candidates who don't pass on the first try. Encourage them to try again. Applaud them for having expended the effort to do so in the first place – they may have learned a lot, but even the most well constructed examinations do not always ask what has been learned.