Chapter Study Group Guide
for the
NCMA Certification Program:
CPCM, CFCM & CCCM
Program Year 2018–2019 Edition

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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 or e-mail us at 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-fits-all formula. Not every chapter has the same resources and not every candidate has the same needs.

History of the NCMA Certification Program

NCMA's first professional certification designation, the Certified Professional Contract 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.

The Certified Associate Contract Manager (CACM) designation was added in 1980 to certify the mastery of the fundamentals of federal government contract management. In September 2002, the CACM designation was replaced by the Certified Federal Contract Manager (CFCM). That same year, the Certified Commercial Contract Manager (CCCM) designation was also introduced.

Although NCMA's professional designations were originally developed as a method of recognizing professional achievement among one's peers, they have evolved to be much more than that. These designations, as well as 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.

NCMA Certification Program Today

Certification reflects your professional strength. Certification is a mark of distinction and serves to reflect professionalism attained through experience, education, training, and knowledge.

The NCMA Salary Surveys have consistently shown those with an NCMA certification typically earn more per year than those with no certification. However, those with a certification and higher salary realize professionalism does not rest solely on certification. Employers want people who can make quick and accurate decisions and can solve problems with less-than-perfect information.

Professional contract managers must be proficient at solving complex problems and providing sound business advice. In addition, they must know how to influence multifunctional teams to

achieve organizational goals (whether in charge of the team or not) and must be able to establish long-term partnerships with those inside and outside the organization.

Whether you are a buyer or a seller, you are expected to perform at a high standard, and certification can serve as evidence of your professional development. However, certification is not the culmination of professional development—it is the beginning.

A means of validating the depth and breadth of a contract manager's education, training, and experience is through an examination process. When a certification candidate passes the relevant certification examination and meets the established requirements for education, training, and experience, NCMA is confident the contract manager has met the standards of professionalism required for the specific certification. NCMA's certification examinations are delivered domestically and internationally at Kryterion Learning Centers.

NCMA certification examinations are mapped to competencies addressed in the *Contract Management Body of Knowledge* (*CMBOK*). The CPCM examination is mapped directly to the *CMBOK*, the CFCM examination is mapped directly to the *Federal Acquisition Regulation* (*FAR*), and the CCCM examination is mapped directly to the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC). In conjunction with *CMBOK*, *FAR*, and UCC updates, NCMA makes appropriate changes to its certification examinations to ensure they are reflective of actual practice.

Eligibility requirements for the CPCM include:
* A degree from a regionally accredited institution at the bachelor's level. (Degrees from outside the United States must be evaluated by an independent third party, such as World Education Services, Foreign Credits, Credit Eval, Info Check USA, or SpanTran.)
* Five years of work experience in the contract management or related field.
* A minimum 120 hours of continuing professional education (CPE). (See NCMA's *Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Guide* for details.)

There are no waivers available for CPCM requirements.

Eligibility requirements for the CFCM and the CCCM are identical. Candidates must have:
* A degree from a regionally accredited institution at the bachelor's level. (Non-degreed candidates with at least 10 years of verifiable contract management experience may request a waiver. Degrees from outside the United States must be evaluated by an independent third party, such as World Education Services, Foreign Credits, Credit Eval, Info Check USA, or SpanTran.)
* One year of work experience in the contract management or related field.
* A minimum of 80 hours of CPE. (See NCMA's *Contract Management Continuing Professional Education (CPE) Guide* for details.)

Specific details of NCMA's Certification Program, as well as information concerning each of the professional designations offered by NCMA, are available at www.ncmahq.org/learn-and-advance/certification.

Best Practices of Chapter Certification Leaders

NCMA 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 (e.g., 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 the educational and certification posts.

Whatever the structure, individuals responsible for certification activities within their chapter should consider the following practices—all of which may not be appropriate for every situation, but all of which have merit:

1. Plan, budget, develop, and implement a chapter certification program with the goal of maximizing members' opportunities to achieve professional growth and obtain certification designations.

2. Coordinate with other chapter officers and committee chairs to ensure program implementation is compatible with other chapter education activities.

3. Disseminate certification program information to chapter membership, local businesses, and other appropriate entities.

4. 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.

5. Develop and/or update study program modules to support current examination requirements.

6. Provide documentation that may be transferred to the next individual responsible for certification.

7. Plan and formalize a study program schedule. (Be sure to build in some flexibility to deal with issues that may come up—e.g., instructor or presenter schedule conflicts or inclement weather.)

8. Recruit and staff study program modules with qualified personnel, preferably individuals who are members in good standing and have obtained NCMA certifications themselves.

9. Inform program staff of course content, schedule, and individual responsibilities.

10. Incorporate NCMA educational objectives and provide guidelines and resources to instructors.

11. Provide oversight throughout the 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 effective and 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, and it's much easier to discipline oneself to that kind of effort with group support. More important, 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 4–10. This size allows for ample discussion time and for everyone to share information. A larger group may wish to split up into smaller-size groups and share information with the entire group on either a periodic or one-time basis near the end of the 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:

1. Allot sufficient time to conduct the workshop. Workshops generally meet on a weekly basis. Sessions may be up to three hours in length and typically 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!

2. Carve out time for orientation to get people familiar with the logistics of the study group. Take some time during orientation to show sample questions and how to draft one or two, while also providing a sample Q&A template. Sometimes, there is a tendency to submit "True or False" Q&As. The instructor should show the group how to turn these into good multiple-choice questions and should also demonstrate during orientation how to eliminate ambiguity.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. Establish clear communication lines. Share telephone and fax numbers and both home and work addresses and emails for all participants. Remind everyone that things can change at a moment's notice and clear communications will help everyone. Create a detailed document during the reservation process and use a shortened version of it as your contact information list for the study group.

8. 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. Have a group leader that rotates through the group weekly and collects questions and answers. That way, the workload is balanced and gives the leader a more focused review of the material while taking on leader responsibilities. Being organized is key, so be prepared to develop all the materials you need to include presentations, hand-outs, registration forms, answer sheets, etc.

9. 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!

10. 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.

11. 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.)

12. 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.

13. Invite "special guest" speakers who recently passed the exam to come talk with the group and provide encouragement and useful tips and tricks with regard to exam preparation.

14. 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 his or her volunteer time and energy on certification and either lead or appoint someone to lead the study group. 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
Selecting a location is important and should be started as early in the process as possible. Reach out to your chapter officers and professional network to assist in finding space for the study group. Some organizations may be willing to sponsor the study group location if allowed to promote the company at one of the 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. A secondary option, if travel is an issue, would be hosting conference calls using programs like Zoom, AnyMeeting, or Google Hangouts—which can provide (free or low-cost) on-demand collaboration and meetings. Sessions are typically held one evening a week for 2½–3 hours, depending on the circumstances; however, two weekly lunchtime sessions may work as well. Some chapters have even held Saturday morning meetings.

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 10–12 sessions over a three- to four-month period. Use the appropriate study guide and other resources 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 workforce 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 nonmembers and other contract managers. Ask local employers to support and publicize your program. The Certification Department at the NCMA national headquarters 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, and 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 energy levels, but also assured the rest of the group of the valued input from all members. Other chapters charge only a nominal fee for participation. Still other chapters award candidates with scholarships, stipends, or 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), where eligibility requirements, applications, and other certification documents are available. Consider purchasing NCMA textbooks on behalf of your study group participants—save 10% on orders of 5–9 copies of the same title, and 15% on 10 or more. Participants should also make every effort to keep up with late-breaking contract management news by reading *Contract Management* Magazine.

Studying for the Certification Exams

Examination Format
The NCMA examination format consists of multiple-choice questions. Many people assume multiple-choice questions are easy to answer because they have had experience with tests that

are not "psychometrically sound" (i.e., every test question has undergone the full rigor of educational and statistical testing necessary to ensure it elicits the exact response desired, that it is unambiguous, and that it has only one correct answer). However, three other plausible possible answers will separate those who know and understand the material from those who do not. Furthermore, multiple-choice testing can test more than simple recall of facts and recognition of words; it can test for understanding of content and for responses that indicate application of principles to a situation.

The benefits of multiple-choice examinations lie in the objective assessment of question answers. There is no scope for alternative interpretation of results. That is not to say that every question is perfect. Rather, the multiple-choice format has the flexibility that allows NCMA, working in conjunction with psychometricians or test developers, to change the examination and make every question fair, valid, and reliable.

Using a computer-based multiple-choice examination allows NCMA to provide candidates with their results quickly, sometimes before they leave the testing site. In addition, multiple-choice questions allow for a wider sampling of the body of knowledge. On the one hand, this means that candidates are bound to find areas with which they are familiar; on the other hand, it means that candidates may be unsure exactly where to concentrate their study. However, candidates should feel confident that the examination will ask only those questions that determine whether a contract manager has the knowledge to be a good practitioner. NCMA will not be testing on extraneous or trivial matters.

Computerized testing has hastened the acceptance of multiple-choice examinations. Familiarity with this style of testing begins as early as elementary school. Because the future contract management community is in the hands of the demographic strata of the population that has either grown up with or grown familiar with computers, this style of testing will gain even wider acceptance. Furthermore, because multiple-choice examinations lend themselves to computer delivery, test developers can readily discern trends and make judgments about the examination or the underlying practice. In either case, the examination can be changed to correct or reflect the practice.

The Anatomy of a Multiple-Choice Question
A multiple-choice question has its own terminology. The question itself is called the "stem." The stem should contain all the information needed to provide the correct answer and be phrased in clear, unambiguous language that will leave no doubt as to what is being asked. A knowledgeable candidate should be able to discern the correct answer upon reading only the stem.

The answers also have specific terminology. The correct answer is the "key," and the other possible answers are the "distracters." The key is the only correct answer. The distracters are plausible to those who are unsure about the correct answer.

Hands-on Learning

Ask candidates to fill out a data sheet about their experience, interests, and expertise so they can consider focusing on certain areas of concentration. This can be also done as part of the registration process, so you have the information early on. 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:

1. Do not construct true-or-false, fill-in-the-blank, essay, or matching questions. NCMA does not use these question types for its exams.

2. 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" (i.e., the correct answer), and the others of which are "distracters." Have a minimum of four options.

3. Do not include sketches, diagrams, or pictures.

4. The wording of the question should be simple, direct, and free of ambiguity. Edit for brevity and delete unnecessary words.

5. Each question should test one important idea or concept.

6. 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 discussions about concepts and plausible wrong answers is also an effective 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? How can the question be asked using the fewest number of words? Encourage the discussions to be free of judgement; do not be overly critical with analysis. Some of the best learning comes from the dialogue created by someone else's misunderstanding.

After the Study Group

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

1. On-demand at Kryterion Learning Centers. Upon being notified of their eligibility 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, since candidates will know the outcome of their exams immediately upon completing the exam.) The fee charged by Kryterion for this service is $125 (as of the publication 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 5–7 workdays.

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 workdays.

How to Approach the Certification Examinations
For the mental side of examinations, here are a few good test-taking techniques:

- Relax. The examination is based on your profession.
- Read the questions carefully, answering those you can easily and quickly answer. It is usually a good idea to go with your first impression when answering a question; second-guessing can cause you to change a correct answer to an incorrect one.
- Skip over or flag questions that appear too difficult and return to them later.
- Don't stop. Keep going. Keep reading questions until you find one you can answer. The questions you've read will be in the back of your mind; when you return to them, you'll have a fresh perspective. Avoid overanalyzing and second-guessing the question. Choose the correct answer for the question as it is written. Do not make assumptions about what the question means. Don't regard questions as being "trick questions" or concentrate on the exceptions to normal practice.
- Keep an eye on the clock. Judge the time you have so you don't spend a lot of time puzzling over one question to the detriment of being able to answer several others.
- Don't try to "game" the system by choosing answers to ensure that an equal number of "A's," "B's," "C's," and so on are selected. In the long run (over a lifetime), this may be a good technique, but in the short run (for one examination), the statistical underpinning for this myth has not been proven.

- Try to answer the question in your mind before you read the choices. Good test questions are constructed to allow the knowledgeable examination candidate to do this.
- If you can't readily identify the correct answer, make an educated guess. Eliminate the choices you know to be false and select from those remaining.
- Look over your answers, if time permits. However, avoid trying to second-guess your answers.

Don't worry about the examination. You may feel wrung out and exhausted at the end of the examination, but that is not an indication of how well or how poorly you may have performed.

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.

Recognizing Your Candidates
You and your candidates have worked long and hard together. You have built a 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, regardless of the results? Meet outside the study group location at a restaurant at the same time as regular meetings were held a couple weeks after the exam. Anyone who studied hard and took the exam deserves recognition and reward. NCMA publishes the names of all newly certified individuals in the next available issue of *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 may also be appropriate.

NCMA will notify the successful candidate's employer of his or her new designation upon request (from the candidate). Chapters are encouraged to reach out to the designee's employer directly to notify them, and also to involve them in any recognition planned by the chapter— invite them to the recognition ceremony or celebration, forward the announcement newsletter, involve them in anything you are planning to do to recognize the new designee's achievement. This practice not only ensures 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. Also, 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.

For more information, contact:
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