

# Professional bodies and certification survey 2015: Motivations, key issues and solutions

by the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN)  
in association with Pearson VUE



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## Glossary

|     |                        |
|-----|------------------------|
| CBT | Computer-based testing |
| P&P | Paper & pencil         |



PEARSON

## Overview

This in-depth and unprecedented survey from the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) in association with Pearson VUE asked 68 senior managers from professional bodies, representing multiple sectors across the market in the UK and Australia, about the learning and assessment programmes they provide. It offers a unique insight into their motivations and the key issues they face along with potential solutions.

The results indicate the importance of certification programmes in addressing a big concern of professional bodies: attracting new members to their organisation. Indeed, learning and assessment programmes are seen as important for the future of professional organisations generally.

The emphasis placed on certification is reflected in the levels of support offered to learners, with a high proportion of professional bodies offering events, workshops and seminars. It is also reflected in key concerns about ensuring that their exams accurately measure relevant knowledge, the importance of making content more relevant, and that the curriculum is up to date.

However, the survey reveals the efforts being made by professional bodies to address these role-relevance concerns – including seeking more real-world case studies to benefit candidates, setting up employer partnerships to make content more role-relevant, and improving candidate convenience in terms of the availability and location of test centres.

## About the survey

The statistical data within this report is based on a survey of 68 staff members with job titles from manager upwards at professional bodies that have a learning and development program. These professional bodies span a broad selection of sectors including finance, market research, HR, agriculture, accounting, legal, PR, academic and aviation. They are geographically based in the UK (50%), Australia (47%), France and Austria.

The interviews were conducted between July and September 2015. Respondents were asked about the importance of their learning and assessment offering and the challenges and concerns for their membership bodies. They were also asked about their candidates in terms of what motivates them to undertake learning and assessment programmes as well as the benefits of taking these courses.

## Certification: a definition

The term certification can have different meanings depending on context, but for the purposes of this report it refers to a process by which individuals are recognised for having achieved a particular and well-defined level of knowledge or skill through formal assessment.

## Key findings

### Importance of learning and assessment for recruitment

For the vast majority of professional bodies (87%), their learning and assessment offering is perceived as important for the future growth of their organisation and recruiting new individuals to their organisation is a big concern for almost two thirds of respondents (65%).

### Support

One method of retaining and increasing membership highlighted in the survey is the use of learning and assessment offerings, with 78% stating it is an important element when attracting new members. In an effort to support their learners, more than 8 in 10 (88%) professional bodies offer events, workshops and seminars, as well as 74% offering up-to-date information on industry news.

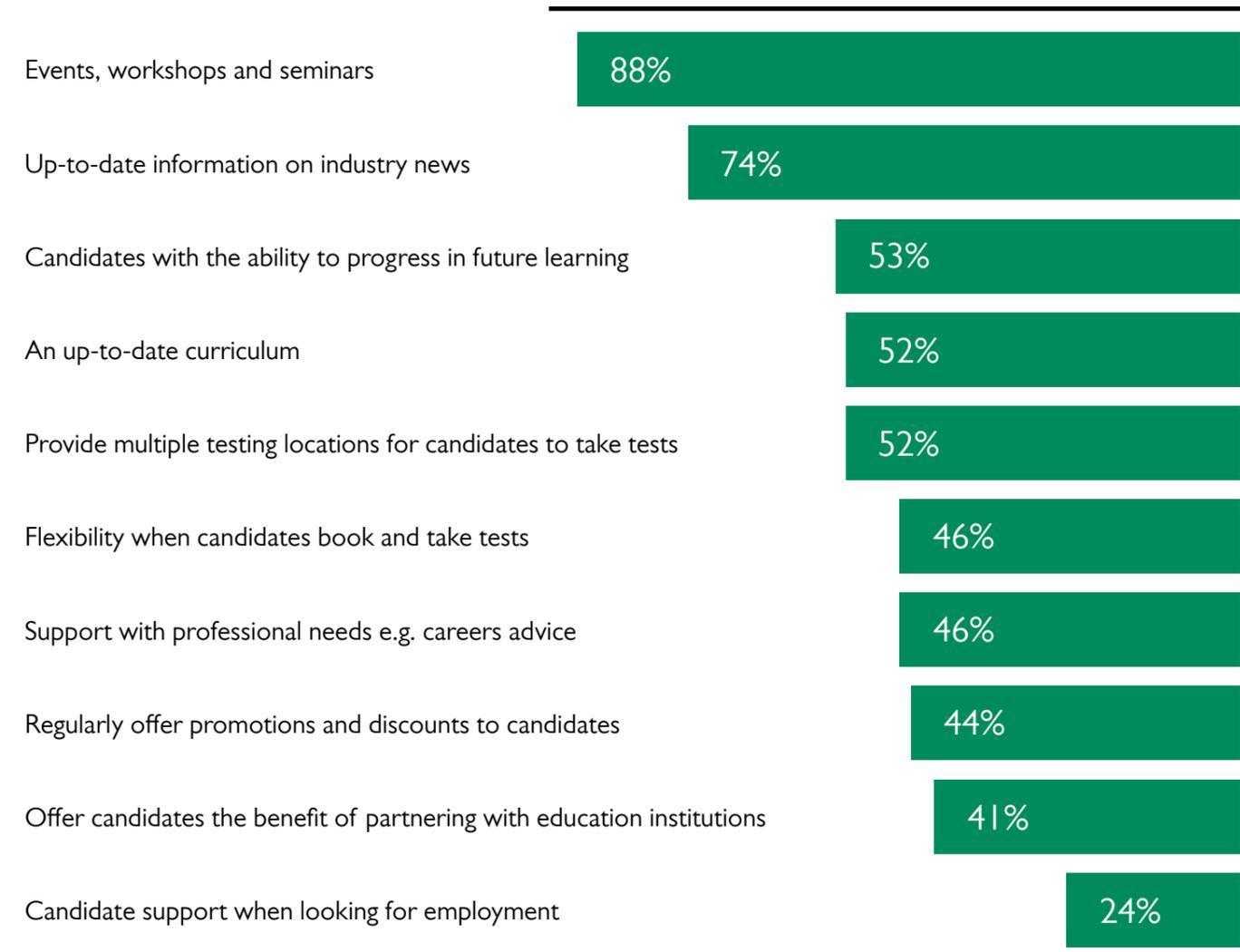


Figure 1: Outlined below is a list of some potential services offered by professional bodies. Please indicate any services you supply to your candidates. Please choose all that apply. - Base - 68 respondents

### Job readiness concerns

Despite the fact that over half (59%) of respondents believe newly certified professionals are prepared for their job roles, more than 8 in 10 (81%) are also currently concerned about ensuring learning and assessment programme content is relevant.

These concerns are particularly important when there is a discrepancy between the number of available jobs and high levels of unemployment. For example the ManpowerGroup 2015 Talent Shortage Survey found that 44% of Australian employers stated they were having difficulty filling available jobs, and yet unemployment in Australia rose to its highest level for 13 years in January 2015, at 6% according to the Australia Bureau of Statistics figures.

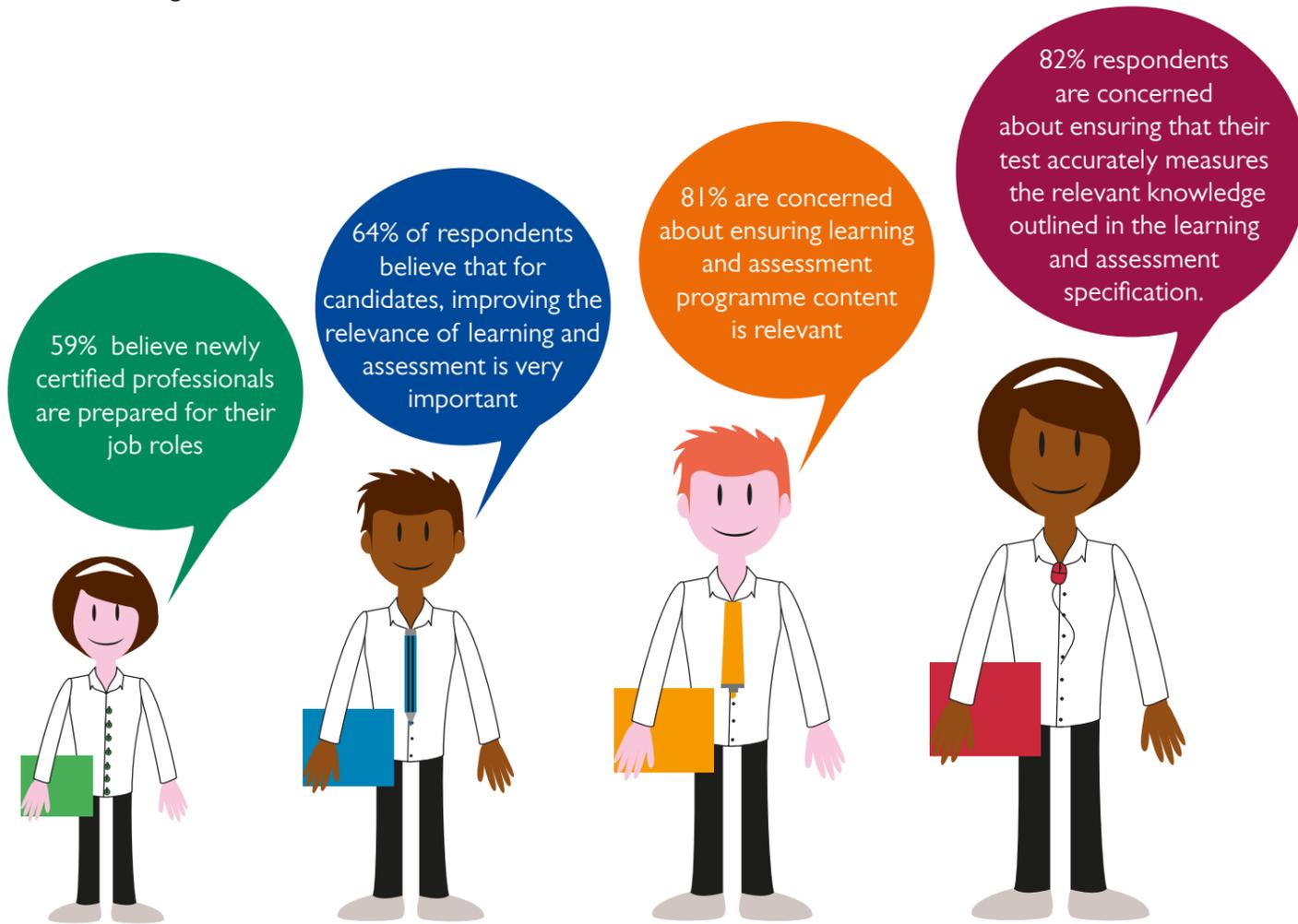


Figure 2: Thinking about your learning and assessment programme, currently how concerned are you about... - Base - 68 respondents

However, our survey indicates that professional bodies are keen to address the issue of job readiness, with more than 8 in 10 (82%) respondents concerned about ensuring that their test accurately measures the relevant knowledge outlined in the learning and assessment specification. Their commitment to this is demonstrated by the majority of respondents (52%) who ensure their learning and assessment programme curriculums are up to date.

In addition more than 6 in 10 (64%) respondents believe that for candidates, improving the relevance of learning and assessment is very important.

### Potential solutions

The issue of maintaining the role-related relevance of content may prove increasingly challenging due to rapidly advancing technology and the impact of this on our working lives. The stakes are high, not just for employers but for national economies. In Australia for example, analysis by PwC (Future-proofing Australia's workforce by growing skills in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) /April 2015) shows that 44% (5.1 million) of Australian jobs are now at risk of being affected by computerisation and technology over the next 20 years. In the UK, a survey of 91,000 employers by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills in 2014 found more than one in five vacancies were down to a poor skills base.

But professional bodies are rising to this challenge with potential solutions...

**Employer partnerships** – Almost half (48.5%) of respondents are taking the first steps to addressing this concern by partnering with employers to create curriculums more aligned with the needs of the workplace. These organisations are perhaps influenced by examples in higher education where there have been increasing examples of employer partnerships.

**Role-relevant case studies** – Professional bodies believe candidates would find real-world case studies (68%) beneficial if featured in their learning and assessment content. This makes the content more relevant to the situations exam candidates will later face in their jobs.

**Assessment delivery technology** – Over 6 in 10 (62%) professional bodies are investing in their learning and assessment programmes by creating online courses (54% paid and 22% free), while half (50%) are piloting new learning technologies such as mobile learning and 62% think this will be beneficial for candidates in the future.

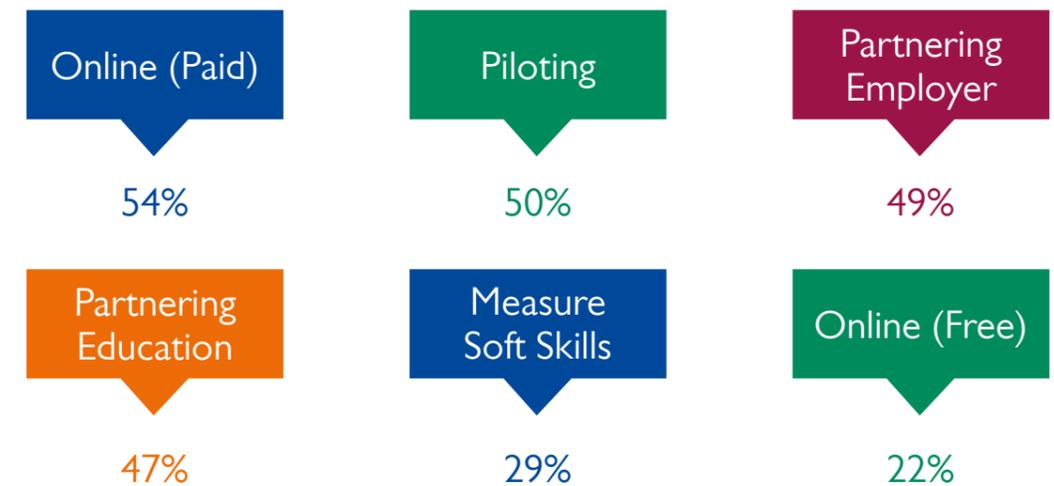


Figure 3: Please identify any actions you have undertaken to overcome any of the mentioned challenges\* about your membership, learning and assessment programme...? - Base - 68 respondents

\*External challenges you are concerned about as asked, and listed, in question Q27.

**Convenience** – 76% of professional bodies say it is important to improve the convenience of their learning and assessment programme for their candidates. This often means allowing candidates to schedule and re-schedule exams on demand rather than having to attend on one particular day.

### The importance of certification for candidates

The survey suggests that the motivation for certification in many professional fields is reputation. 66% of respondents believe that professional reputation is a dominant motivator for candidates to certify. Additionally, a recent study of candidates in the HR sector, The Perceived Value of HRCI Certification commissioned by the HR Certification Institute in November 2014, found that 94% of those who became certified experienced an increase in professional credibility. And in the IT industry, the Pearson VUE 2015 Value of IT Certification Survey found that 65% of respondents said achieving their certification had a positive impact on their professional image / reputation.

A third (34%) believe that their candidates received a pay increase within the first 6 months of completing their learning and assessment. However only 4% of respondents to our survey stated that candidates' main motivator is a higher salary and just 2% believe that they are mainly motivated by the possibility of a promotion.

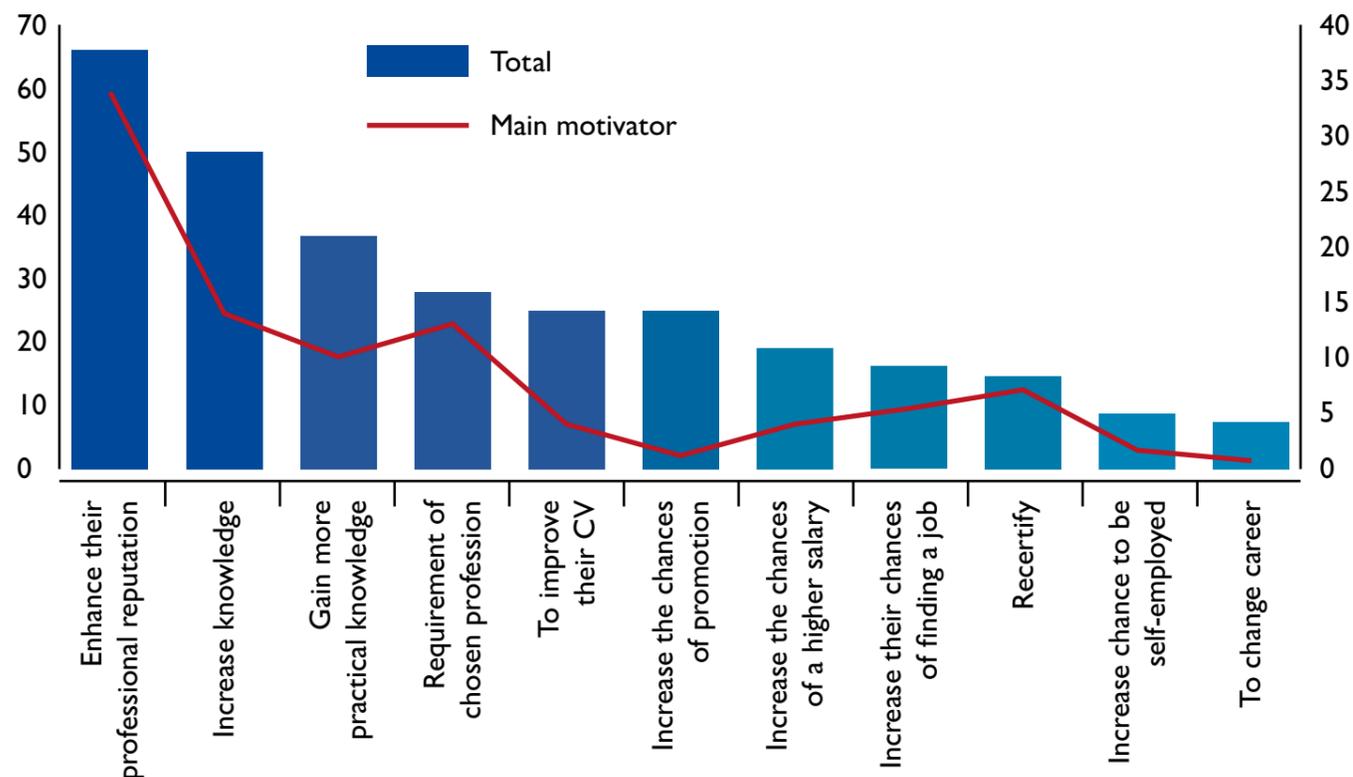


Figure 4: Please rank the top three reasons you think candidates choose to embark upon your learning and assessment programme. - Base - 68 respondents

### The importance of soft skills

Soft skills are important to our economies, adding £88 billion in gross value to the UK economy alone each year according to the Value Of Soft Skills To The UK Economy report published by Development Economics in January 2015. Professional bodies identify problem solving (63%) and communication (62%) as soft skills their learning programmes improve (using aggregated ranked results from our survey).

Over a third (35%) of respondents believe candidates would like to improve the relevance of learning experiences by being assessed on their soft skills, and 74% of those who assess them believe this could be improved.

But it is important that employers do not just assume candidates have these skills, with more than 57% of respondents stating they actively assess these skills, often using other assessments completed during the learning course (67%).

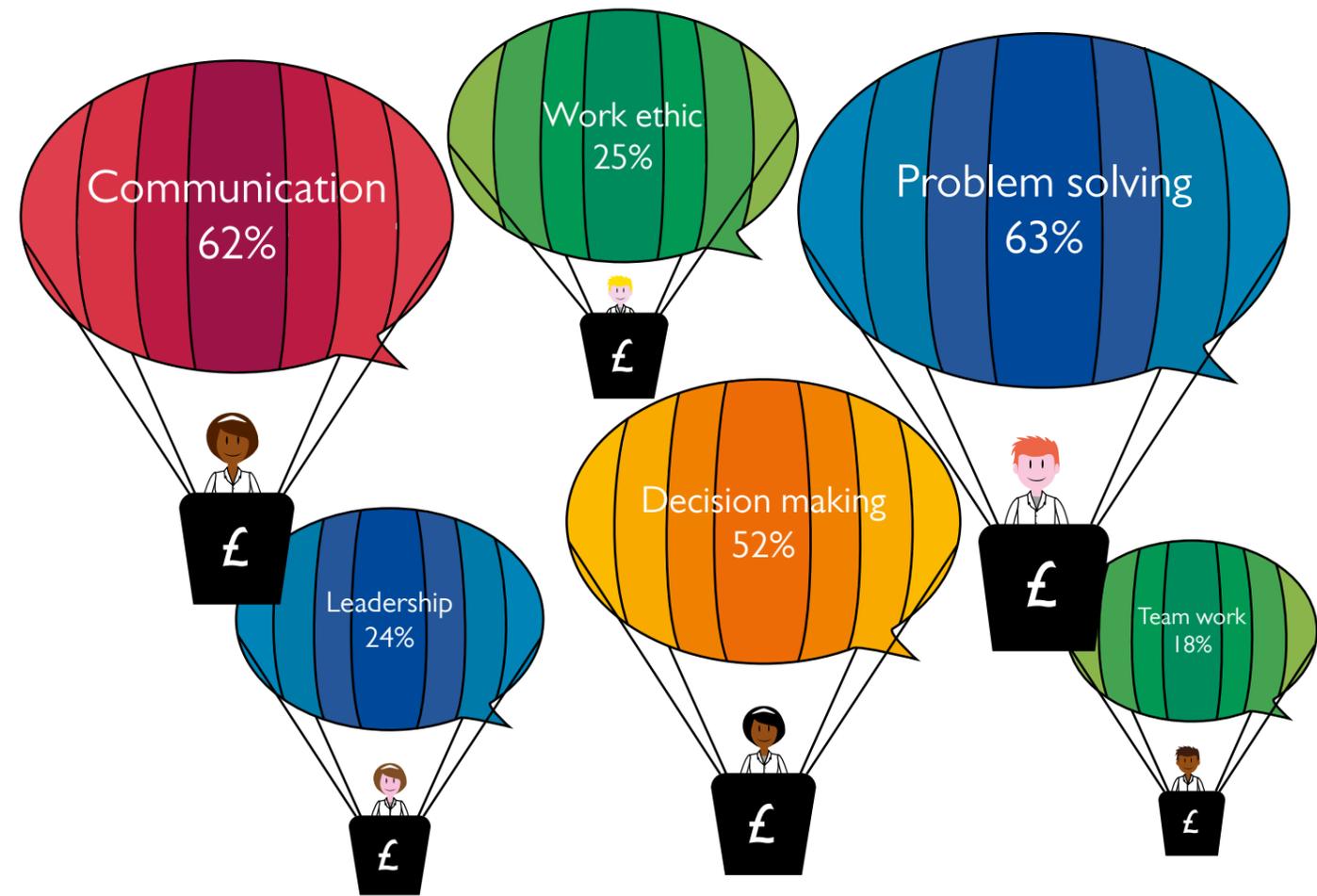


Figure 5: From the list below, can you identify 3 skills which your learning programme improves the most? - Base - 68 respondents

## Methodology

We conducted an online survey of chief members and directors (53%) and managers (44%) working in the learning development teams of professional bodies. They were asked about their learning and assessment offering and challenges, and concerns about membership bodies. Respondents from professional bodies were also asked about their candidates, including what motivates them to take learning and assessment programs and the benefits of taking these courses. The online surveys were conducted between July and September 2015.

## Future research: testing perceptions

Given the importance of certification for professional bodies, and their concerns and proposed solutions regarding the job-relevance of content, it would be helpful if the perceptions of professional bodies could be tested against the opinions of candidates in a future survey.

## About Pearson VUE

Pearson VUE ([www.pearsonvue.com](http://www.pearsonvue.com)) is the global leader in computer-based testing for high-stakes certification and licensure exams in the healthcare, finance, information technology, academic and admissions markets. We offer a full suite of services to develop, manage, deliver and grow test programmes for over 450 clients via the world's most comprehensive network of highly secure test centres in 180 countries, and through online solutions. Pearson VUE owns Certiport, the global leader in foundational IT certification solutions, and is a business of the world's leading learning company Pearson (NYSE: PSO; LSE: PSON).

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