

Why It Matters to Hire a Certified Economic Developer

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Many of you may have had one of these experiences:

- You see a job advertisement seeking a person to fill the role of economic developer, but the announcement didn't even make it to the state economic development association newsletter or website, let alone to IEDC.
- Or, you are introduced to a community's new economic developer. I'm thinking of one example about 10 years ago when an eager, very enthusiastic former newscaster introduced herself to me. First she stated that the chief elected official had named her to the brand-new economic development department at a very high salary. Then, she asked what classes she should take to learn *how* to be an economic developer. (Okay, I admit I was a bit jealous about the high salary offered to someone with no training or experience. She did sign up for the Basic Economic Development Course.)
- Try this one: your city's management is seeking an economic development person, and simply reassigns an entry-level planner. Unfortunately, that planner sees economic development as a career side-step, and therefore, shows little motivation to learn about economic development and waits for a promotion back into planning.

Sound familiar? Let's get to the subject at hand – why it's important to hire a Certified Economic Developer (CEcD).

Having related skills is not enough.

While running my first public-private partnership, I worked with a great guy who was the village administrator. He was very insightful and saw the need for a professional economic developer, as well as the value of stakeholders.

One evening after a very long village board meeting (extended by a controversial proposed development), he commented, "Chris, my board members are all experts in their fields. They make great doctors, lawyers and CPAs, but none of them have a clue about how to do my job. As a village administrator, I have to know about a lot of areas, including ethics" (referring, for his field, to the International City/County Management Association's code of ethics).

His point was not lost on me: Having related skills is not enough. Like being a successful city manager, the truly professional economic developer has specific knowledge in six or more skill areas.

Economic development is highly multi-disciplinary.

Economic developers come from a variety of disciplines, but someone aspiring to be at the top of the profession acquires a broad base of knowledge. Most typically, this knowledge base includes business retention and expansion; credit analysis; real estate development and reuse; marketing; managing EDOs, and small business development (and often, other areas as well).

Which knowledge base a person develops, I have found, often depends as much upon the needs of the economic development organization as one's professional background. For example, a business degree and knowledge of small business finance may be adequate for a position as a Small Business Development Center coordinator, but it won't be enough to manage an EDO.

In another instance, knowing about commercial real estate provides extensive insights into a community's business parks, downtown real estate, and 'closing the deal.' But it is unlikely to prepare a person to put together a long-term economic development strategy.

But someone who has small business finance expertise, understands how a regional planner thinks *and* how real estate works – now that person has the bigger picture that an economic developer needs. That's what a CECD has, and what someone with basic training can aspire toward.

An effective economic development program requires a person trained in economic development.

An economic developer who has earned the CECD designation offers the ideal balance of theory and practice, and can provide the higher quality of service a community needs (even if the local officials and advocates don't yet know it).

To sit for the exam, candidates must have both experience and professional training. The requirements are stiff, but if they weren't, the designation wouldn't carry the value it does. (A friend who has earned both the American Institute of Certified Planners designation and a CECD found the CECD the more challenging of the two.)

The CECD exam covers 10 competency areas:

- Business retention and expansion
- Strategic planning
- Marketing/attraction
- Technology-led economic development
- Real estate development and reuse
- Economic development finance / credit analysis
- Workforce development
- Neighborhood development strategies
- Management economic development organizations
- Entrepreneurial and small business development strategies

Candidates must have at least four years of consecutive, paid, full-time, economic development-related experience to be eligible to sit for the exam. And in order to ensure exposure to the various aspects of economic development, exam candidates must have taken a minimum of six professional development courses (those with more than five years of experience can take three electives instead). More information on training course requirements and availability can be found at IEDC's ["How to Become Certified"](#) webpage.

Why re-invent the wheel?

A candidate who has earned his or her CEcD sends a clear message to the hiring organization and its constituents. A CEcD credential signifies that a person has learned proven and new techniques – and will continue to upgrade his or her skills through recertification. It signifies that the candidate has gained competence in several disciplines and has a broad-based knowledge of the profession. And it signifies professionalism and aspiration to continual improvement.

It comes down to this: Professional training helps shorten the learning curve. Likely, the CEcD will be more successful satisfying the expectations of his or her board or directors, city or county council, or others up the chain of command, by being trained.

And for economic developers, earning CEcD status boosts confidence by providing the tools to be successful, offering insights into board management and governmental politics, and providing the basic language of communicating with engineers, bankers, planners, and many more.

We all need a competitive edge. The CEcD is one of them.

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