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Certification pays off

Financial professionals find employers, public value CFP designation

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By **NOBLE SPRAYBERRY** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Trudy Turner helps people tend and build wealth, and the formula differs with each client's needs and circumstances. Charting a proper course requires knowledge that spans many complex disciplines, such as investments, estate planning, retirement strategy and insurance.

For Ms. Turner, a certified public accountant with Robertson, Grieg & Thoele in Dallas, honing her ability included becoming a certified financial planner.

"The designation gives you a very broad overview," she said. "The education and criteria help you understand how all of the areas interrelate. You aren't just making a blind recommendation without knowing how it can affect, negatively or positively, on another area."

For financial professionals, the CFP designation represents an increasingly popular mark. For some companies specializing in financial planning, it's almost mandatory, and other fields report growing interest.

Ms. Turner, the 2007 chairwoman of the Dallas/Fort Worth Chapter of the Financial Planning Association, said some CFPs operate independently, but others work in stock brokerage firms, with banks and with insurance companies. "There are many different avenues to have a career," she said.

And consumers who are more savvy about the world of finance pay more attention to certifications, Ms. Turner said. "The consumer is being educated and looking for a designation," she said. "It is certainly a mark of professionalism."

The Denver-based Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards administers the certification. Professionals with the CFP designation must attain a four-year college degree and must meet criteria set by the board.

A successful applicant must have three years of financial planning-related work experience. The planner must agree to follow the board's code of ethics. And each certified financial planner must complete 30 hours of continuing education every two years.

Certification also requires completion of an exam testing knowledge on various key aspects of financial planning. It's not an easy measure. For example, in November 2006, just more than half of the 3,650 people who took the exam passed.

The board can revoke certification from professionals who violate the group's code of ethics or who don't meet other required standards. Information on disciplinary actions is available at the group's Web site, www.cfpboard.org.

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LAWRENCE JENKINS/Special Contributor
Trudy Turner, chairwoman of the Dallas {ndash} area chapter of the Financial Planning Association, says, 'There are many different avenues to have a career.'

Also, the public has a heightened awareness about the program. Information about the designation often appears in news stories about financial planners. The board last year offered a free financial planning clinic at the Los Angeles Convention Center, and a similar event is scheduled this year in Boston.

A robust Web site, informational brochures and an emphasis on self-regulation help make the mark increasingly visible and demanded by consumers, said Jina Martingano, a board spokeswoman. "They need advice, but they don't know who to turn to," she said.

"The CFP is the best at marketing itself," said Tait Cruse, managing partner of the Northwestern Mutual Financial Network's Texas Financial Group-Dallas.

Financial professionals can also attain other certifications, such as that of Chartered Financial Consultant, or Chartered Life Underwriter, which carries an emphasis on insurance.

Each mark shows the professional's commitment, said Mr. Cruse, who manages an office of 110 full-time workers. About 14 percent have a CFP designation and about 5 percent earn the mark annually, he said.

The company pays for the classes needed for the accreditation programs, and he factors designations earned into hiring decisions. "I look for self-motivated team players who can make a difference," he said. "If that person is looking to attain high goals for themselves, that's going to translate to the client."

While the CFP mark fills a niche for some companies, others consider it mandatory. "In our world, it's a critical piece," said Kathy Muldoon, a senior vice president with Carter Financial Management in Dallas. "We won't hire anyone to work on client matters who isn't a CFP or who isn't in the process of getting it."

Growth in the numbers of certified financial planners reflects the interest in the profession. In 1990, about 20,300 professionals carried the mark, according to the CFP board. By February 2007, the number climbed to more than 54,500. In Texas, more than 3,500 people can use the designation.

A survey by the CFP board found that just more than 67 percent of certified financial planners are licensed in the insurance field. The 2005 Financial Planners Association Compensation & Staffing Study identified the CFP as a designation considered desirable by companies seeking new staff.

When asked what degrees or qualifications they considered most desirable in new hires, 48 percent of firms participating in the survey named CFP as the most important. A bachelor of arts or a bachelor of science degree ranked second, at 39 percent.

Companies searching for professionals often consider certifications, along with a proven track record of performance, said Chad Kooiman, the Dallas branch manager of Robert Half International, a professional staffing firm. "Nothing beats experience," he said. "And a certification can put a candidate over the top."

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