

The Indoor Climbing Industry Needs Certification

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Posted By: **Heather Reynolds** in [CWA Blog](#)



When this writer started in the climbing world, there was no local indoor climbing gym and there was no Climbing Wall Association. I learned how to climb from someone from Utah with what I understood to be a lot of experience. I was given use of a seventeen-year-old harness, some nuts and stoppers, and a few hexes with cord that was over a decade old. I climbed for a season using that gear and feeling amazing.

In the following year, I had the opportunity to participate in an instructor certification for outdoor climbing. During the course, I learned extensively about knots and why the figure-eight rethreaded was the best knot for climbing, I learned about the Munter hitch, and I learned about retiring old gear. I also learned how lucky I had been that my gear hadn't failed me.

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The climbing industry is still growing and expanding and while there are new indoor climbing gyms opening at exponential rates, the diversity in operational practices can be surprising. Working in one facility will not necessarily mean the same policies and practices are in place in another facility.

Certification by a third-party provider, like the CWA, verifies a person's knowledge and skill in a specific arena, and generally empowers the certified person to work in a variety of different work environments. Certification is specific to the type of work a person will be doing. For example, a person certified to work at height has competency in maintaining their personal safety when working at height. A certified instructor's expertise lies in maintaining the safety of their students, how to impart knowledge, and develop the skills of their students. In other words, one of the most valuable aspects of certification is knowledge.

Knowledge is Power

Certification programs offer the participant an opportunity to deepen their knowledge about equipment, tricks, and tips, how to instruct in a multitude of ways, and most importantly, they provide an opportunity to meet others in our industry who have had different experiences. As a climber learning the traditional style of climbing on single-pitch routes, I greatly lacked experience with multi-pitch logistics. Although climbing is climbing whether you are on granite or sandstone or a Kilter board, what we gain experience about when we walk into a climbing facility will be limited to what that one facility has to offer.

For the new climber coming through the doors of a climbing facility, they get an introduction to the risks of climbing, a tour of the facility, what the rules are and where to find things. Then they are left to their own devices to use the auto belay or boulder. They will get a top rope belay lesson if they want to rope climb, but typically they want to get through the lesson and onto the climbing. Many lessons do not offer much on buying your own equipment. New climbers typically will not learn more about equipment unless this person loves climbing and decides to spend time doing Internet searches or they work in retail selling equipment.

It is not until someone decides to pursue a course beyond the basics that they will be exposed to a greater depth of understanding about climbing equipment, risk management, how folks best learn information, and a broader knowledge of operational practices. Knowledge is a powerful tool.

Open Doors

Imagine you decide you love climbing so much, you want to subsidize your climbing by working in a climbing gym and helping others get excited about climbing. Before you put together the resume, what do you think are the most important skills for someone working in a climbing facility?

In many indoor climbing gyms, there is the role of instruction, handling sales, and offering orientations. Skills required include risk management and customer service, instruction, and sales. If you have participated in a certification course, a climbing facility operator knows you have met a standard competency that is deemed appropriate for these roles. Certification programs have standards that are determined by a committee of industry professionals who support the certification program. A climbing facility operator can investigate the certification requirements, and rather than training you as a new employee and bringing you up to a level of

required competency for the job, they know you have the experience and competency. This can make getting the job easier for you.

As a facility operator recovering from the impacts of COVID-19, it can be challenging to find competent and capable staff to cover the operational hours of a facility. Spending time training staff can become a very time-consuming endeavor. Encouraging staff and/or prospective staff to participate in certification can take on that training role, leaving more time for other responsibilities.

Certification is also an excellent motivator for staff. As humans we like to progress, and progressing requires that we learn more and become more skilled by being challenged out of our comfort zones. Well-trained and skilled staff who are rewarded with opportunities to grow, and to be compensated appropriately for the skills they have acquired will increase their job satisfaction and retention.

Self-protection

When something goes terribly wrong in a climbing facility, the result can be considered catastrophic. The injured person can suffer life-altering physical ability or even death. The big question is: What happened? The next question is: How did this happen?

This is a review of the risk mitigation strategies that a facility has in place and a review of who witnessed the event or was involved in the event. This will extend to the staff, and what they were doing or not doing when the incident occurred. Having staff with a certification doesn't completely protect a facility from a lawsuit, but certification can protect the facility by demonstrating a high level of due diligence in operational practices.

Lawyers for a defendant will look to find where staff may have erred in their responsibilities. They will check the equipment and want to know if the equipment was inspected, cared for, and used properly. They will look for discrepancies in policies compared to industry standards. **A certified instructor or staff person will have already demonstrated to a third-party observer their competency. The documentation of this competency provides a level of protection from scrutiny.**

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Certification doesn't prevent terrible things from happening. Having certified instructors, or folks qualified to work at height, does mean that your staff knows what to do, and the knowledge they have may be greater than someone not certified. Your staff can identify, and perhaps even predict risks and implement strategies to prevent negative events. They are trained specifically to do just this.

While there are compelling reasons to get certified, there are two very compelling reasons not to. Certifications require a time commitment and money.

Time and money can create barriers to participation, but generally, a demonstration that one is willing to commit the time and money pays back exponentially. The certified instructor has demonstrated their commitment to the work, they act with more professionalism, and their knowledge is more apparent. This goes a long way in creating trust with clients. When we know someone has met a standard for certification, we believe they know what they are doing until they do someone wrong. New climbers coming in the door will have a better experience when they are met by a knowledgeable instructor who takes good care of them and makes the learning engaging. They will tell their friends... and so on.

Learn More from Heather in a CWI Certification Course!

Entering 2023, Heather Reynolds has spearheaded a redesign of the CWI offerings through the CWA. Don't miss your chance to get certified and take the next step in your career.

About The Author



[Heather Reynolds](#) is a licensed kinesiologist, High Five Trainer (Sport, PCHD), CEC Climbing Coach, and CWA Climbing Wall Instructor Certification Provider Trainer. She blends her knowledge of movement, physiology, and education to develop a multitude of successful climbing programs designed to support and engage youth. Having worked with youth for over 30 years as a recreation instructor, leader and educator, Heather supports the values and expertise available in the High Five Program, bringing quality assurance to youth-based sport and recreation programming.



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January 20, 2023

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