

## The Value of Information Security Certifications

Trends in information security certification as reported by the information security professionals themselves

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Certifications are a difficult topic within our industry. Almost everyone that we speak with has an opinion on them, and most people's opinions are to one extreme or the other.

Regardless of that diversity of opinions, certification is the default within our industry. Of the over 1300 survey respondents, over 75% of the respondents hold a certification, whether they believe in the value of it or not.

The reasons that people attain certifications are wide and varied. A large number hold certifications to enhance their market value or their status among their peers.

The certification holds value in large part as a signal of that status. We believe that the certification should entitle us to be more competitive against our peers and pay us more money.

This belief is only unidirectional, however. We do not afford our peers or those who we are hiring the same level of respect for their certified status as we believe that they afford us.

This is especially true as we climb the organization – the executive suite places less value on certification than the industry as a whole

Unfortunately, whatever you believe personally about certifications, their perceived value makes them a required investment for those in the information security industry..

# Methodology

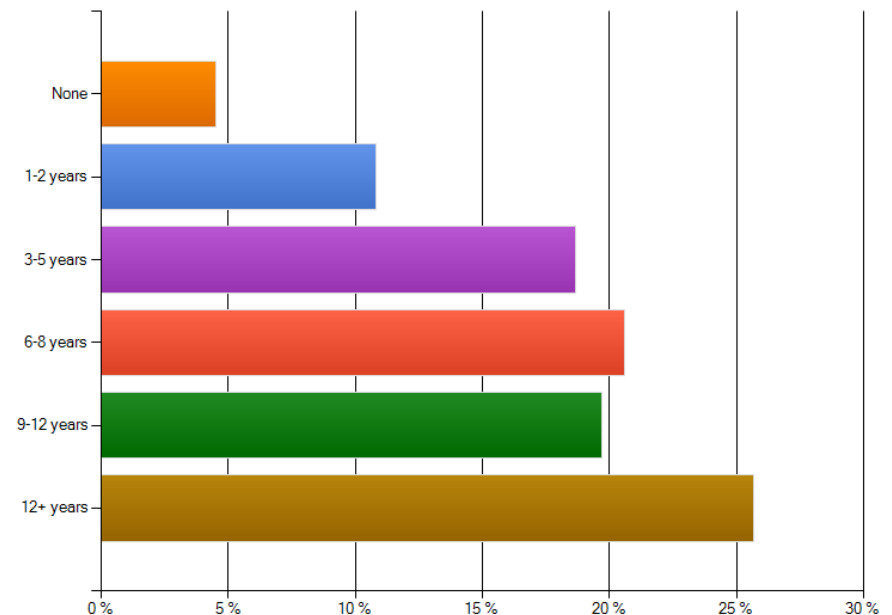
This survey was launched on February 14, 2011. The survey was left open until June 1, 2011.

General information about the survey:

- 1349 total respondents
- 53 total questions
- Promoted to the ISL Mailing List, Facebook page and on Twitter

The survey managed to cut a wide swath across the information security professional landscape – data was collected from those at all walks of their careers and at wide experience levels.

How many years have you been working as an information security professional:

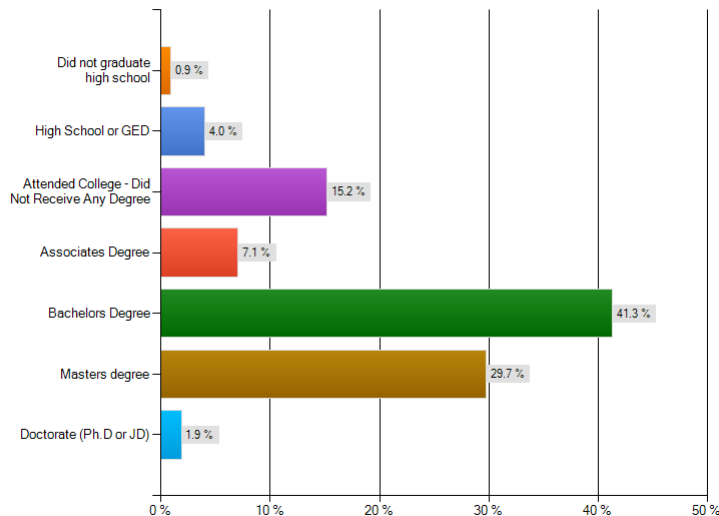


# Demographics

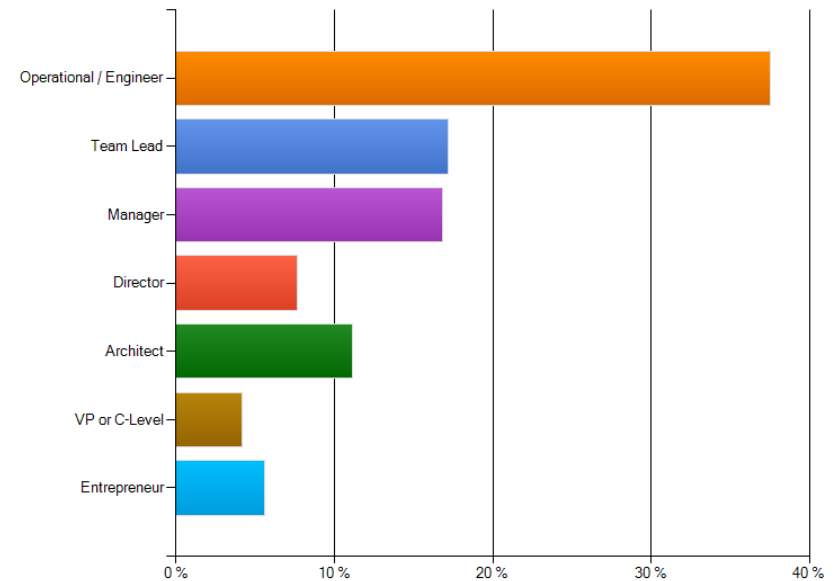
The respondents appeared like those in an org chart – a large number of individual contributors and a smaller number of executive level respondents.

Survey respondents were well compensated – 44% reported that they make more than \$100K annually, while 6% reported that they make over \$175K.

What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?



How would you define your current role?

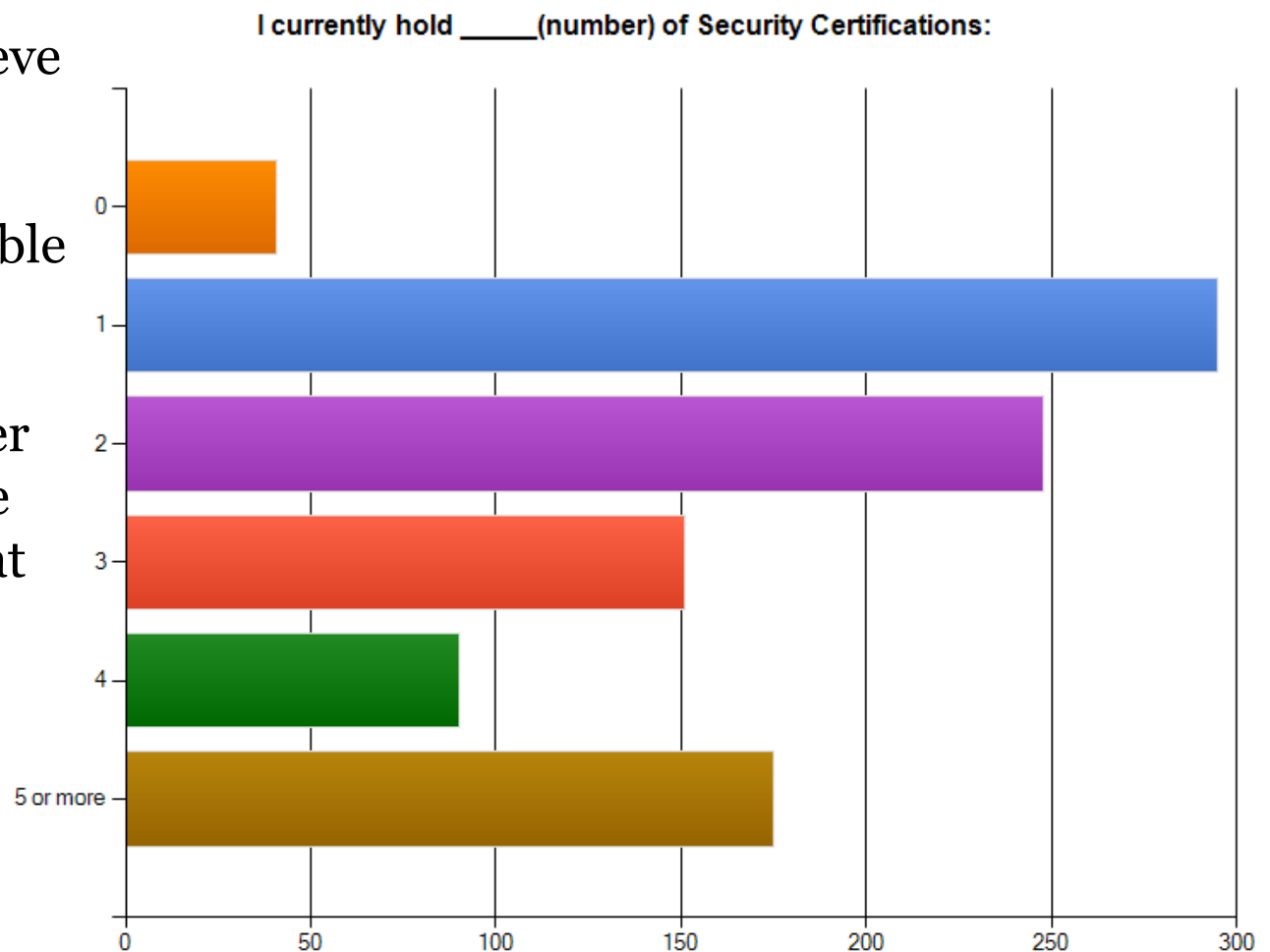


Higher education was also prevalent among respondents. Around 80% reported having some formal degree, with 30% of those having a graduate (master's, Ph.D.) degree.

# Certifications are the Default

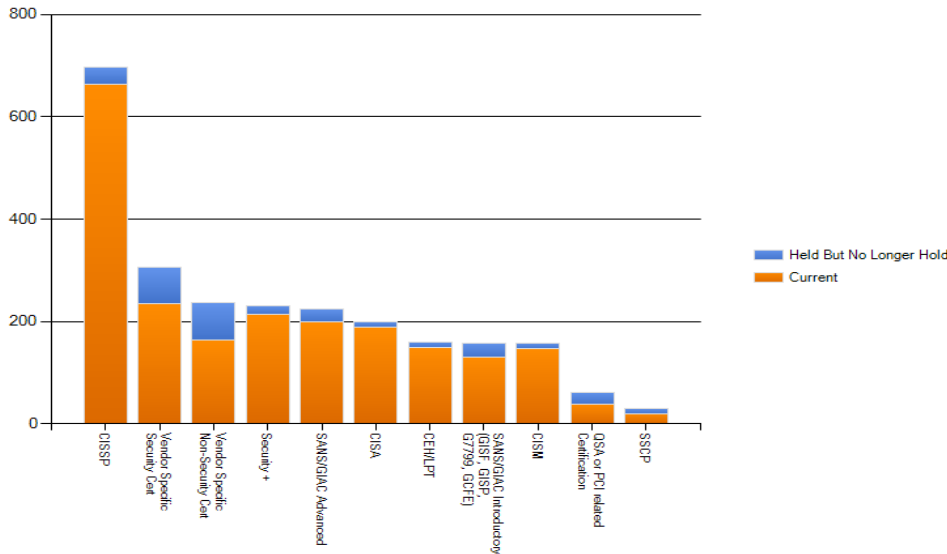
Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  (76.1%) of the respondents to the survey currently have or have held an information security related certification. Of those, 17.5% currently hold 5 or more certifications.

The respondents believe strongly that certifications are becoming more valuable – 55.2% believe that certifications have increased in value over the past 5 years, while only 18.1% believe that they have decreased.



# The Certifications We Hold

The Certification(s) that I have or have held include the following:

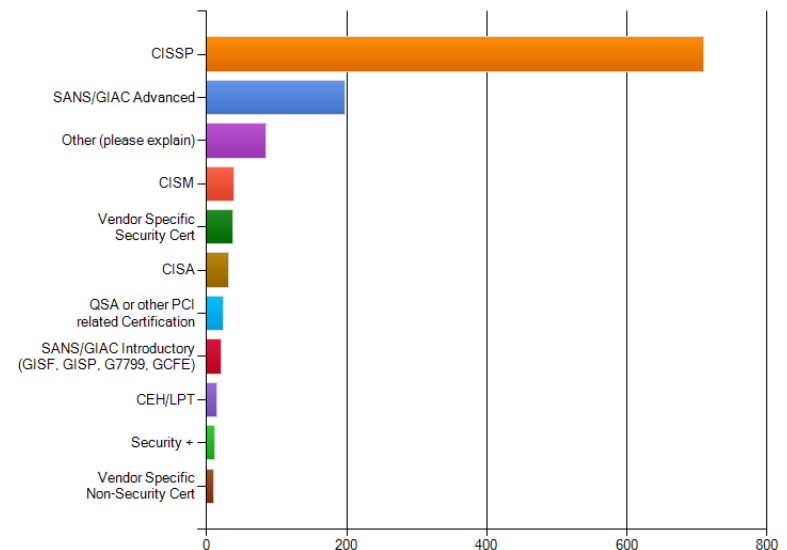


Of certifications held by our respondents, the CISSP was far and away the most popular. This is also reflected in that the respondents believe that the CISSP is the most respected certification in the industry.

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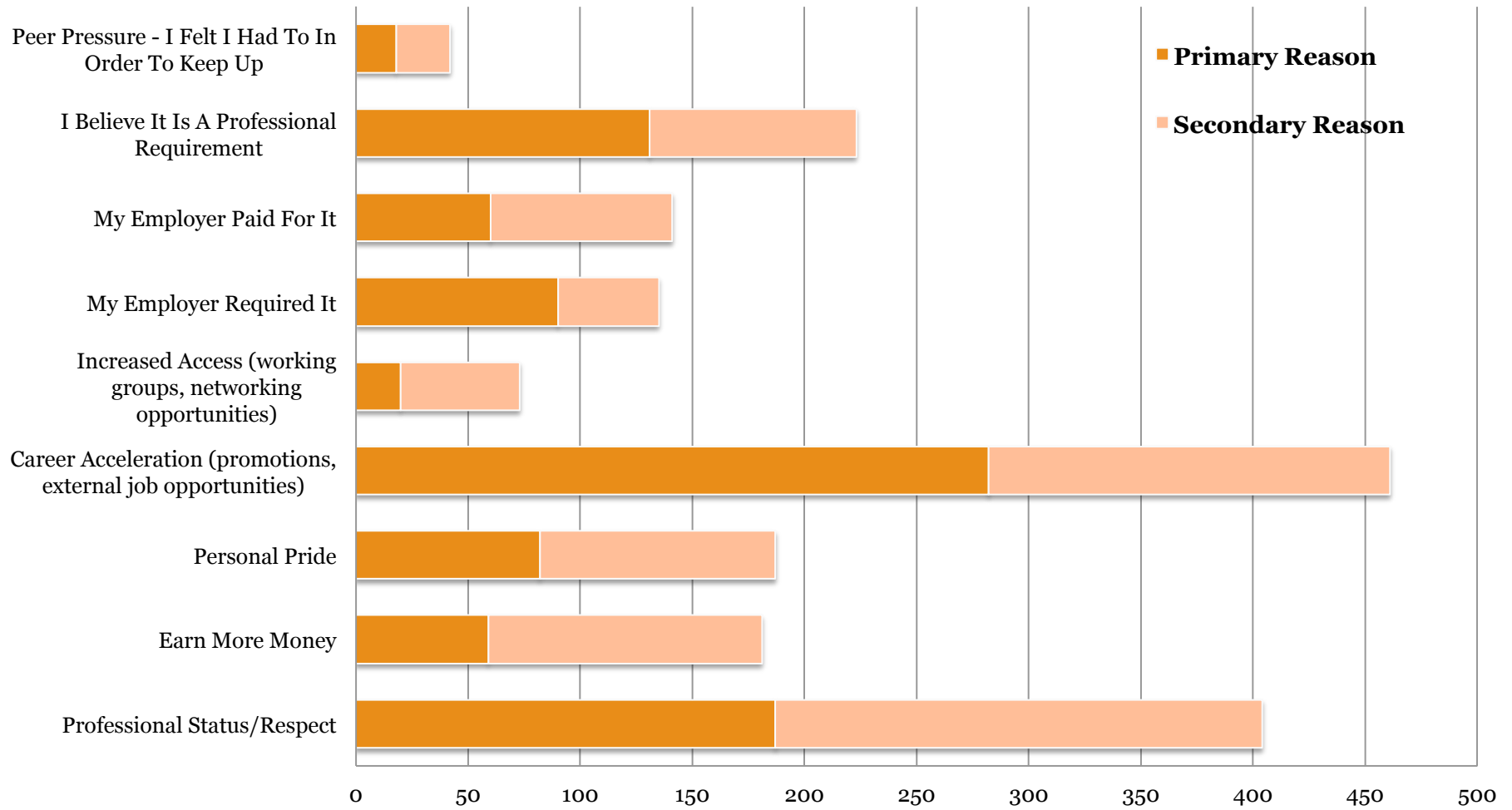
Note that, despite far fewer respondents holding a SANS certification, it placed as the second most respected among respondents and second (**21%**) in the “if you could get only one certification” field.

I believe the security certification that has the most overall value in the market place is:



# Why We Hold Certifications

## The Reasons For Being Certified



# The Value of Certifications



# Certifications Provide a Competitive Advantage

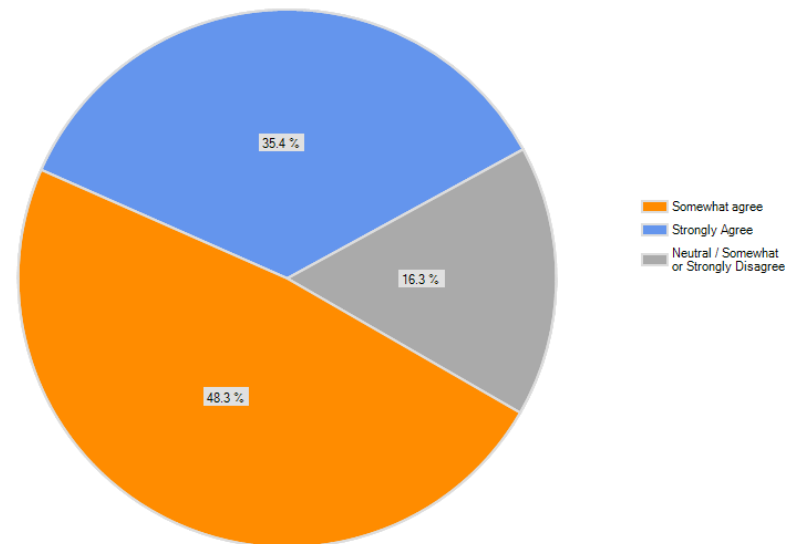
In our minds, certifications provide a significant competitive advantage in our job search. **More than ¾ of the respondents (77%)** somewhat or strongly agreed that holding a certification gets them access to more job opportunities **and over half (54%)** reported that they have received a job or a promotion because they held a particular certification.

**Over 80% of us** believe that holding a certification provides us a leg up in competition with our similarly qualified peers.

Beyond this, **nearly half of our certified respondents (46.1%)** believe that certifications provide an advantage **even when competing with those who have greater experience** (but are uncertified themselves).

A large number of those who do not hold a certification also believe in this competitive advantage - 50.5% believe that they are at a competitive disadvantage when competing for a position and 49.5% believe that their access to certain jobs and positions is restricted.

Having an information security certification provides me with a competitive advantage when competing for a position against someone with similar experience who does not hold a security certification:

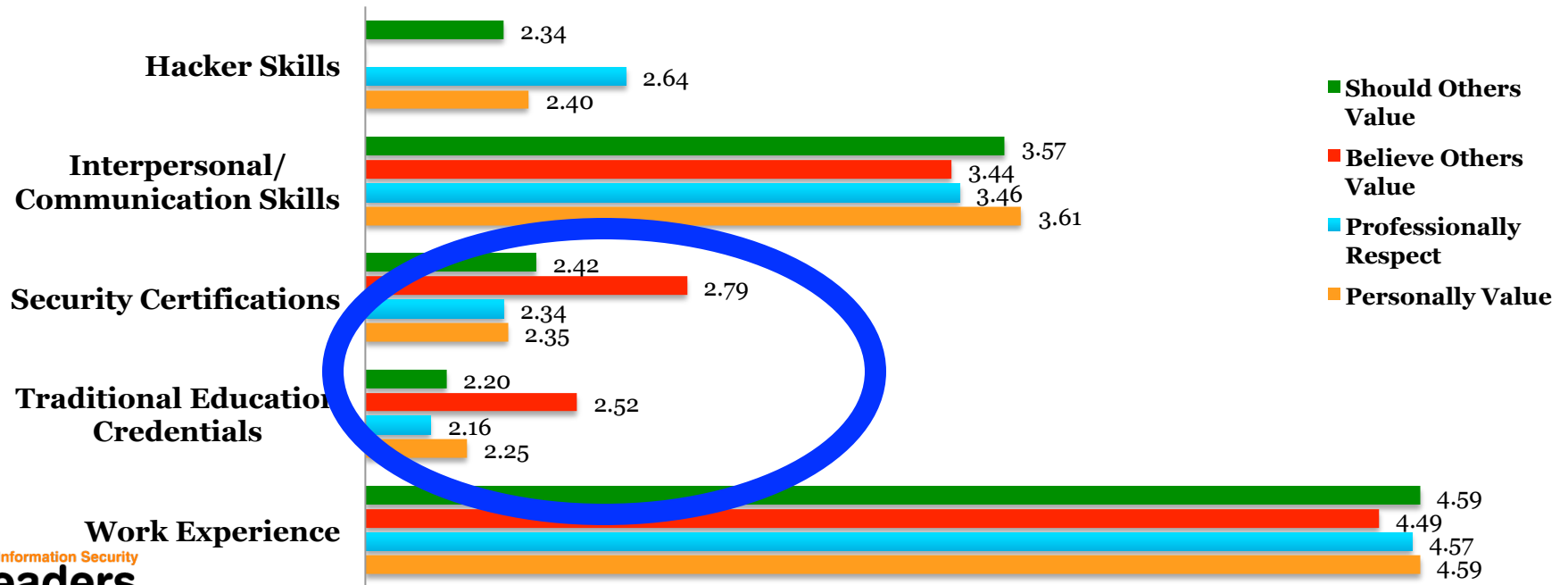


# But We Massively Overvalue Them

We **significantly** overvalue education and certifications in what we believe others value when evaluating our career. This is only true when talking about what others think of us – we don't have the same evaluation when looking at ourselves or others. The blue circle below shows how we overvalue certifications and educations in what we believe others think rather than what we think. Note that our belief in what others value is significantly higher than the relatively similar values for the other questions.

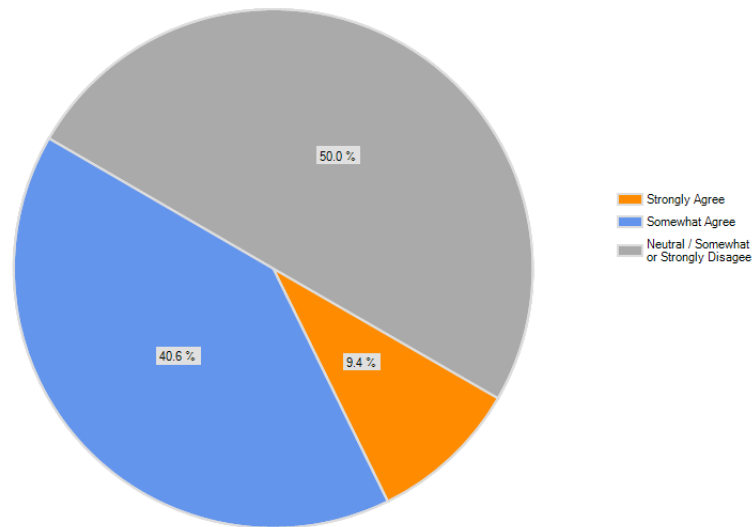
This can also be seen in our motivations for attaining certs in the first place. 55% of our respondents who have certifications reported that peer pressure (i.e. the fear of being surpassed) motivated their acquisition of certifications in the first place.

**When evaluating your own/others' information security career, which of the following attributes/skills/credentials do you \_\_\_\_\_ the most:**



# We Don't Fully Trust the Certification Bodies

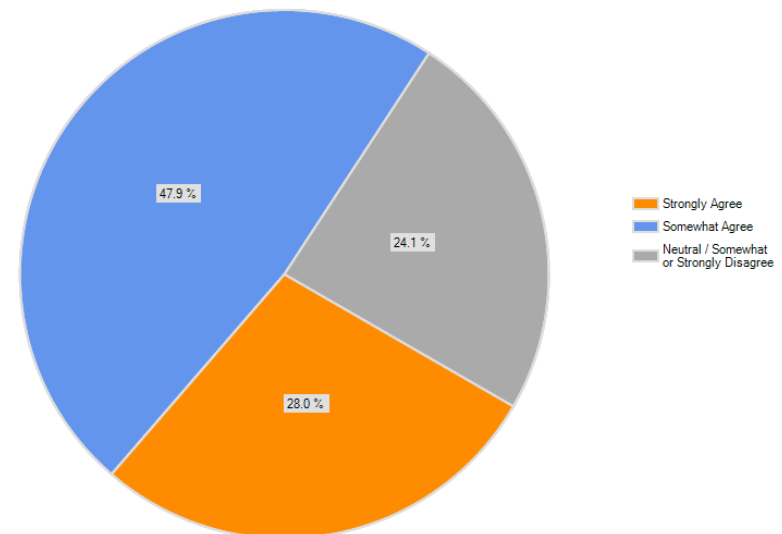
Outside of the actual certification itself, I believe that the certification bodies provide additional services that enhance the careers of their members as information security professionals:



Beyond the belief in the value that others place on our certifications, we don't intrinsically see the value that these certifications hold. **Only half of us** believe that the certification bodies provide additional services that enhance the careers of their members.

Overwhelmingly, we believe that the certification bodies are only in the certification business for themselves.

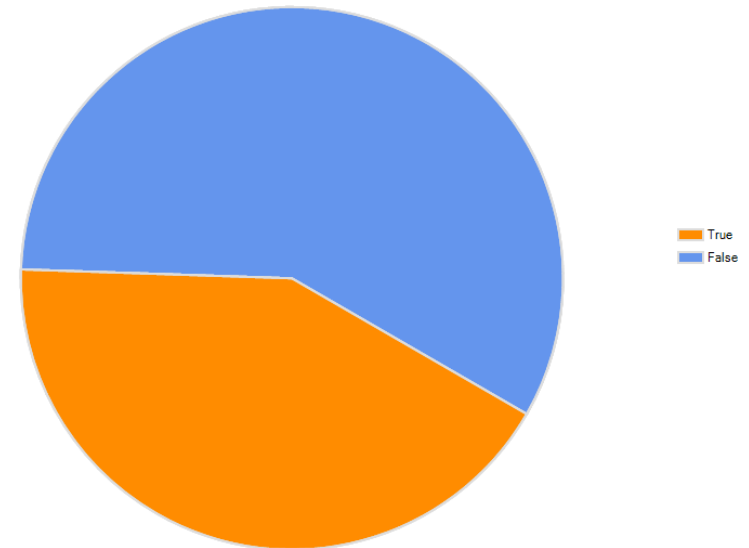
I believe that the certification bodies are marketing organizations that are primarily concerned about the advancement of their organization's brand and proliferation of their proprietary certifications:



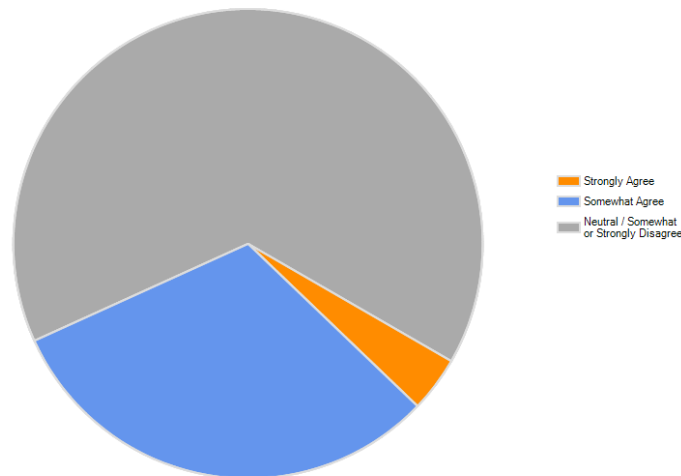
# From the Other Side of the Desk

This same value gap is present when we're hiring. Though we believe (as shown earlier) that certifications provide us a significant competitive advantage, we don't see the same advantage from the other side of the desk. This effect is even more pronounced as we go up the organization – where around 57% of the general respondents answered “false” to this question, nearly 2/3 of executives or entrepreneurs did.

If I was in a position to hire someone for an Information Security position, I would always require them to hold at least one security certification:



If I hired an information security professional who held an Information Security certification, on that basis alone, I would expect to pay them more:



Where a majority of us believe that certifications should (by themselves) garner more pay, this is far less true when we're hiring others. This is similarly skewed by organizational rank – only 27.8% of executives / entrepreneurs agreed that more pay was appropriate, vs. 35.7% for the general respondents.

# Certifications are Ultimately Worth Investing In

An overwhelming number (**80.3%**) of those who have obtained a certification believe that the time/money spent was a good use of their resources, and **39.7%** of respondents believe that certification is the most important investment that they can make in their careers.

Further, this value is increasing – more than half of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that certifications have increased in value over the past 5 years.

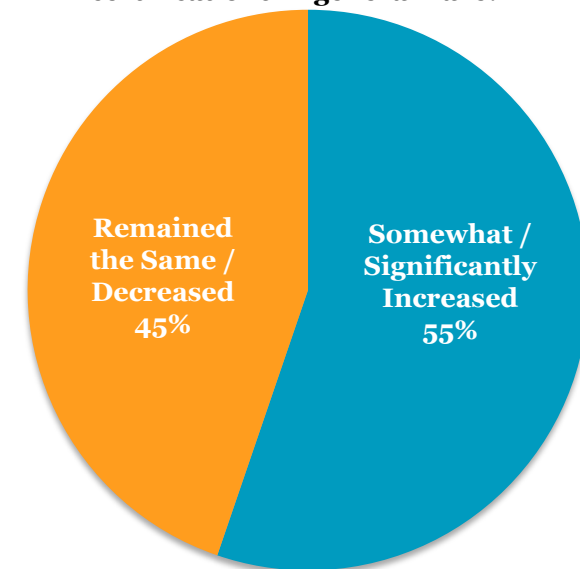
This value leads those with certifications to a sense of entitlement around the certifications.

About half (51%) of the respondents believe that they are entitled to earn more money because they are certified, with 46.5% of those reporting that they should earn more than an additional 10% (and 7% reporting that they should earn more than 21% additional compensation based on their certification).

This sense of entitlement is likely out of step with market reality, but speaks to the power that the certifications have in the minds of those who are certified.

However, as certifications continue to proliferate and market, their value can only increase in the minds of those in the industry. This makes them a required investment for those who want to improve their career in the security industry.

Over the Past 5 Years, I believe that the market value of certifications in general have:



# Information Security Leaders

[InfoSecLeaders.com](http://InfoSecLeaders.com) is the best source for career guidance for information security professionals. A place to learn, grow, ask and share about the difficulties of navigating this difficult industry.

Lee Kushner is the President of [LJ Kushner and Associates](http://LJKushner.com) , LLC, an Executive Search firm dedicated exclusively to the Information Security industry and its professionals. Throughout his career, he has provided career management and career coaching to information security professionals at various stages of their professional development.



Mike Murray is an information security professional and career coach who has held diverse positions throughout his career. Co-Founder of [MAD Security](http://MADSecurity.com), he has run security consulting organizations and information security research teams, served in corporate Information Security functions, and has helped guide a number of information security professionals in their career. He has a passion for the human side of the industry and career development.

# Additional Resources

Check out previous year's surveys:

- <http://www.infosecleaders.com/research/>

Ask us your career questions

- We'll answer them on the blog <http://www.infosecleaders.com/ask>

More audio series, surveys and reports coming up soon.

- Keep an eye on our blog at: <http://www.infosecleaders.com>

Become a fan of our Facebook page to get the latest info:

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# Appendix: The CISSP



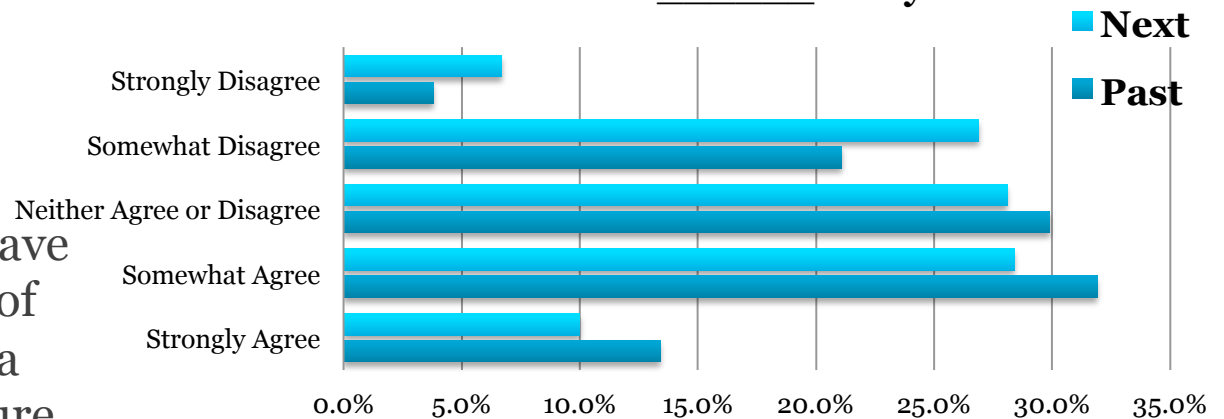
# The CISSP

Because of the wide proliferation of the CISSP and its clear importance in our results, we had specified that a subset of questions be asked only of those who have (or had) a CISSP, to find out what the world thinks of the CISSP itself. Of our respondents, 66.7% currently have a CISSP, while an additional 3.2% had a CISSP at one point but no longer.

Respondents believe strongly that the CISSP has been increasing in value and will continue to do so.

Over 45% of the respondents agreed that the past 5 years have seen an increase in the value of their CISSP, and 38% expect a continued increase in the future.

**I believe that the market value of my CISSP has/ will increased over the \_\_\_\_\_ five years:**



Those with a CISSP clearly believe in the value that it provides. 62.5% say it differentiates them from other security pros, 47.2% believe that it entitles them to more compensation, and 39.9% call it the best investment they have made in their career.

# CISSP - Areas for Improvement

Those that hold the CISSP have, by and large, bought in to the value of the certification. A full 25% go so far as to say that, without the CISSP, you shouldn't be recognized as a security professional\*, and 30.5% wouldn't hire a candidate who didn't possess a CISSP.

However, the CISSP has some places that our respondents see a need to improve.

Of those who have a current CISSP, 30% of respondents disagree that ISC<sup>2</sup> has done enough to police the certification and keep non-CISSPs from getting in and 1/3 (33.1%) believe that ISC doesn't really have an interest in their professional development.

And among those who no longer have a CISSP, 40.6% say they just no longer saw the value for their career.

The primary reason that I am no longer a CISSP:

