



# HR Club

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## To Certify Or Not?

Certification refers to the confirmation of certain characteristics of a person, organization or object. This confirmation is often, but not always, provided by some form of external review, education, or assessment.

One of the most common types of certification in modern society is professional certification, where a person is certified as being able to competently complete a job or task, usually by the passing of an examination.

The purpose of any professional certification is to provide official and public recognition of an individual's competencies and capabilities in a professional subject area.

However, it is important understand that certification is not licensing or registration and does not provide legal authority to practice a profession.



### ■ Definition of the word "Certification"

The word "certification" is used in a lot of different contexts, but there are distinct differences between the most common uses of the term:

**Certificate:** This is not certification; attending a course and receiving a certificate (of completion) is not certification.

**Certification:** This term is often misused to describe what is better understood as a certificate of completion. There are private groups that provide training, and then claim to issue a certification. Don't be fooled. Sometimes, however, such organizations will go one step further and provide an exam; usually immediately following training that was tailored to that exam. Others may even do some follow-up work-product review. While this may technically fit some definitions of certification, the value and credibility of that certification in the marketplace rests entirely on the strength and rigor of the examination and review process, and upon the market's recognition and respect for that organization. There is nothing wrong with this type of certification, but it should not be confused with professional certification. Do your homework before pursuing these types of certificates or certifications, and recognize that the easier it is to attain, the less rigorous it will be, and the less value it will bring you in the marketplace.

**Associate Certification:** This is usually a certification designation that is offered by a certification body that also offers professional level certification. It can either be a level of certification that demonstrates that the candidate has achieved a defined level of competency in a given field, but that he or she either does not practice in that field on a full time basis, or that he or she practices with or under the direction of a professional level certified individual. Associate certification may also be designed as a stepping stone to a professional certification as an individual progresses in a field of practice. Associate certifications should include the same process rigor and ethical requirements as professional certification, but require a lower level of knowledge and experience than the professional level.

**Professional Certification:** This requires a rigorous evaluation process, and it requires an organization whose sole focus and goal is to ensure that the people to whom it issues certification designations have demonstrated a defined minimum level of competency and experience in a given field of practice. It also requires adherence to ethical codes of conduct. It should not be "easy" to achieve professional certification through organizations that establish strong, credible professional certification systems. Professional certifications must also incorporate requirements that a certificate holder remain active and continue to learn and stay up to date in their field (this is often called recertification, or continuance of certification).

### ■ Types of Certifications:

Many certification programs are created, sponsored, or affiliated with professional associations, trade organizations, or private vendors interested in raising standards. Many of those programs completely independent from membership organizations enjoy association support and endorsement.

The growth of certification programs is also a reaction to the changing employment market. Certifications are portable, since they do not depend on one company's definition of a certain job. Certification stands about the resume and the professional reference by being an impartial, third-party endorsement of an individual's professional knowledge and experience.

There are three general types of certification. Listed in order of development level and portability, they are: corporate (internal), product-specific, and profession-wide.

Corporate, or "internal" certifications, are made by a corporation or low-stakes organization for internal purposes. For example, a corporation might require a one-day training course for all sales personnel, after which they receive a certificate. While this certificate has limited portability – to other corporations, for example – it is the most simple to develop.

Product-specific certifications are more involved, and are intended to be referenced to a product across all applications. This approach is very prevalent in the information technology (IT) industry, where personnel are certified on a version of software or hardware. This type of certification is portable across locations (for example, different corporations that use that software), but not across other products. Another example could be the certifications issued for shipping personnel, which are under international standards even for the recognition of the certification body, under an International Maritime Organization (IMO).

The most general type of certification is profession-wide. Certification in the medical profession is often offered by particular specialties. In order to apply professional standards, increase the level of practice, and protect the public, a professional organization might establish a certification. This is intended to be portable to all places a certified professional might work. Of course, this generalization increases the cost of such a program; the process to establish a legally defensible assessment of an entire profession is very extensive. An example of this is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA), which would not be certified for just one corporation or one piece of accountancy software but for general work in the profession.

### ■ So, Certify or Not?

There is no doubt that someone can be very competent and ethical in a field of practice, yet not be certified. We all know examples of such people. And there is no guarantee that someone who has achieved professional certification will actually practice in a competent or ethical manner. We all know examples of that, as well. However, a good certification system should "raise the bar" for practice, continually improving and updating its requirements to match the needs of the marketplace and the state-of-the-art in the field of practice. It must also not stifle innovation, but instead allow the field to mature and meet the ever changing demands of the marketplace.

Professional certification should not be a system devised merely to protect those who have achieved it from their competition. Instead, it should be inclusive, yet also exclusive, in that there will always be some candidates that are unable to meet the requirements.

### ■ References:

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