

What's the Difference Between a Certificate and a Certification?



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Two words in the association and professional development space continue to cause confusion—certificate and certification. But when applied and used correctly, both models are important, relevant, and

useful for assisting organizations in defining and refining a profession.

Certificate and certification may sound the same, but really there's a big difference—and often a lot of confusion—in the association and professional development community about what these two terms mean.

Part of the issue is the widespread belief that a certification is a catch-all term for education-based training. In reality, it's much more narrowly defined. My organization, the Institute for Credentialing Excellence, says that a certification is “a process by which individuals, who have demonstrated the level of knowledge and skill required in the profession, are identified.”

ICE has maintained that certifications should have their own unique properties, purpose, and functionality. However, based on the many calls and emails I receive, many individuals misidentify what a certificate or certification might be. This confusion only adds to the blurriness in the marketplace of learners and the people who hire them. Employers need to clearly understand what skills an applicant has with a certification or what content was learned with a certificate.

Accreditation standards exist from multiple sources for each model. Here are two free tools from ICE that can help associations avoid any confusion:

- A [defining-features document](#), which lists the attributes typically associated with a certificate and certification
- A video that explains the difference between certificate and certification programs



Certification Program

The primary purpose of a professional or personnel certification program is to provide an independent assessment of the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies required for the performance of an occupational or professional role or specific work-related tasks and responsibilities. The requisite assessment is independent of any specific educational event or learning opportunities provided.

Certification is also intended to measure or enhance continued competence through recertification or renewal requirements. Recertification can include any combination of requirements including mandatory continuing education hours, reassessment, or some type of portfolio approach.

The certification designates that participants have demonstrated the requisite, work-related knowledge, skills, or competencies and met other requirements established by the certification program provider (e.g., an academic degree, specified number of years of occupational experience, or professional experience).

Certificate Program

Meanwhile, the primary focus of an assessment-based certificate program is to facilitate and accomplish intended learning outcomes from a specific educational event/course. Although assessment is an integral part of the certificate program, the primary purpose of the program is to provide education and training which supports learning.

The certificate awarded designates that participants have completed the required education or training and demonstrated satisfactory accomplishment of the learning outcomes and objectives.

As association and PD professionals, we must work together to overcome confusion and clarify the important distinction between certificate and certification programs.

Tags:

 **CREDENTIALING**

 **EDUCATION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

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