

NOCA Standard 1100: “Certificate” vs. “Certification”

By Adam Andrews, CIEC

Many holders of private, IAQ-related credentials may be surprised to learn that according to one of the premier standards setting bodies in the industry, their credentials are not actually certifications.

The National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) has published a new standard for the development and delivery of “assessment-based certificate programs.” Standard 1100, published in September 2008 and recently submitted for ANSI accreditation, carefully distinguishes these programs from professional certifications and explains key differences between the two.

The standard clarifies an important point of confusion that has plagued the IAQ industry for years, causing considerable friction between competing industry certification programs.

What’s the Difference?

According to the NOCA standard, an “assessment-based certificate program” is a non-degree granting program that does three things:

1. Provides a course of instruction with intended learning outcomes
2. Evaluates participants’ achievement of these learning outcomes via an examination
3. Awards a certificate ONLY to those who have taken the course and passed the examination

A professional certification program, on the other hand, is a non-governmental program that does two things:

1. Delivers an assessment based on industry knowledge, independent from training courses or course providers.
2. Grants a time-limited credential to anyone who meet the assessment standards.

As the standard explains, it is the role of TRAINING and its relationship to credentialing that sets these two types of credentials apart. On the one hand, assessment-based certificate programs exist to deliver education and training. Each credential is linked to a training course by necessity – the credential is proof that its holder took the course. The purpose of a certificate program is to educate participants, and the examination is used as a mirror to show students their progress toward the learning outcomes.

Professional certifications, on the other hand, are independent of training courses. In the words of the standard, “Whereas the primary focus of a ... certificate program is on the provision of education/training, ... the primary focus of professional or personnel certification is on assessment. Moreover, the assessment conducted by a certification program is independent of a specific class, course or other education/training program and also independent of any provider of classes, course or programs.”

With professional certification, the examination is used not as a mirror but as a screen – to separate those who meet the assessment standards from those who do not.

Does It Matter?

The distinction between certificates and certifications is important when you consider NOCA's view of the implications: In section 8, Standard 1100 stipulates that holders of assessment-based certificates may NOT use letters or acronyms behind their names, nor may they use the word "certified" in describing their credentials. The use of letters, acronyms and the word "certified" are reserved to holders of professional or personnel certifications as defined in the standard.

This is an extremely important development for the IAQ industry, given the fact that many IAQ organizations today offer "certifications" that do not qualify as such according to Standard 1100.

Most IAQ certification programs were developed by training organizations – a logical arrangement for a young field whose practitioners were still defining its limits and introducing the country to their discipline. And yet, NOCA's standard suggests that those organizations may have been using the term "certification" too loosely and moving too quickly to add their acronyms to the IAQ alphabet soup.

NOCA's standard does not condemn all IAQ certifying bodies, however. In fact, it confirms and codifies decisions that some IAQ groups have been making for years. Certifying bodies whose policies qualify them as certification programs under Standard 1100 include the American Board of Industrial Hygiene (ABIH), which offers the CIH designation, and the American IAQ Council, which offers the CIEC/CIE, CMRS/CMR and CMC/CMI designations. Neither of these organizations develops or requires specific training courses as prerequisites to certification.

Certification and Accreditation

Predictably, ABIH and the American IAQ Council are also among the only IAQ groups to achieve third party accreditation for their certification programs. That's partly because NOCA's standard represents a growing trend in certification accreditation in the United States and overseas. With Standard 1100, NOCA has joined ANSI and CESB in prohibiting accredited certifying bodies from developing, approving or delivering certification prep courses. Since these are the only national accreditation bodies serving IAQ-related industries, it is now virtually impossible for a so-called "certifying body" that develops or requires specific training courses to earn national accreditation.

A Self-Test

Those who are unsure whether their credentials are compliant with Standard 1100 can ask the following questions of their certification body:

1. Is this organization involved in the development, accreditation or delivery of certification prep courses?
2. Does this organization require its own prep course as a prerequisite for credentialing, or imply that such a course is the only way to certification?

If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then the organization should not bestow titles, initials or the word “certified” on its certificate holders, because according to NOCA Standard 1100, such credentials are not certifications.



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