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# Cleaning & Restoration

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## **INFECTION CONTROL & CLEANING: A BALANCING ACT**

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**Credibility Issues of  
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**“INSTANT  
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**LACK  
CREDIBILITY**

*By Adam Andrews, CIEC*

Candidates for indoor air quality (IAQ)-related certifications have grown accustomed to a familiar process. First, they take a two- or five-day training course from a certifying body. Immediately following the course, they take a certification exam administered by the trainer.

The exam covers the same material as the course since the trainer typically has access to exam content during course development and has taught the course “to the test.”

If students pass the test, they are automatically certified. It’s a one-stop shopping experience that can turn out certified “professionals” at an alarming rate—so fast, in fact, that the credentials are often known as “instant certifications.”

A quick survey of other, more established industries (industrial hygiene, engineering, architecture, law, medicine, etc.) will show a vastly different pattern. Here, candidates for certification must pass a standardized exam administered independently of training organizations.

Why the difference? Professionals in the more established industries will not settle for instant certifications because they lack both of the critical components necessary to a strong credential: independence and accreditation. The first problem with instant certifications is that they are administered by training organizations. Although training and certification may seem to be intimately related, the two are in fact quite distinct.

### TRAINING VERSUS CERTIFICATION

Teachers or training organizations work for the good of the student to prepare him as completely as possible for success. They function as a kind of advocate for the student, helping him master a certain body of knowledge. It is a legitimate goal of any training organization to advocate in this way for as many students as possible—to open the door to knowledge, as it were, as widely as possible.

Certification is quite another matter. If training organizations act as advocates, certifying bodies act as judges. Their reason for existence is to distinguish between qualified and unqualified candidates, drawing a line between acceptable and non-acceptable applicants.

While training organizations exist to include as many students as possible regardless of their qualifications, certifying bodies exist—at least in part—to exclude people. To put it bluntly, a certifying body must turn away a certain percentage of its applicants, or it isn’t doing its job. You might say

that while a training organization opens a door, a certifying body holds up a bar. For the IAQ industry to have qualified professionals in the field, these two functions should operate separately.

### A CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Just as it would be absurd to have the same person act as advocate and judge in a courtroom, it is self-defeating for the industry to have one organization perform training and certification. No advocate is qualified to judge a case that he himself is arguing. This is the definition of the term “conflict of interest.” Yet in the field of IAQ, it happens all the time.

Pass/fail ratios for organizations that administer both training and certification are usually very high compared to those of independent certifying bodies. This is because the training interests of such organizations conflict with their interests as certifying bodies.

Especially in cases in which training organizations charge fees for their services, they have little incentive to create a certification exam that draws a line between qualified and unqualified candidates. Because their overriding interest is in certifying as many candidates as possible, their examinations tend to be “curriculum-based.” This phrase means that the material covered by an examination is identical to the material covered in the associated training course.

Trainers for curriculum-based exams typically have access to exam content when they’re creating their courses and usually display a strong tendency to “teach to the test.” The resulting certification is therefore limited by the knowledge and experience of the trainer. Though he may draw upon various perspectives in the course of his lectures, in the end it is the trainer’s own perspective that becomes normative by necessity. After all, he knows what will be on the exam—indeed, in many cases he has written the exam himself.

In some fields, curriculum-based exams like this are perfectly appropriate. An entire range of “assessment-based certificates” is currently attracting the attention of various industries in which practitioners must be proficient in a well-defined set of technical skills. Accrediting bodies such as the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA) have recognized the importance of training certificates and have standards for developing and operating them.

At best, however, curriculum-based exams demonstrate that certificants remember course content. They testify to attendance and perhaps to knowledge but not necessarily to

broad expertise. Indeed, organizations such as NOCA that accredit such exams are careful to forbid use of the word “certification” in describing the credentials offered.

The effective practice of IAQ investigation, remediation and consulting requires much more. A true professional certification in the field of indoor air quality should rest on knowledge-based, rather than curriculum-based, examinations.

### **THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE-BASED EXAMINATIONS**

Knowledge-based examinations are drawn from a variety of industry reference texts rather than the details of a single course. The significance of this distinction can hardly be overstated. Authors and organizations producing reference texts may disagree on any number of issues important to the field of indoor air quality. Knowledge of these disagreements deepens a candidate's understanding of the field and better prepares him for success.

Where curriculum-based exams often ask the candidate for the “right” answer to a general question about the field, knowledge-based exams ask the candidate to recall the perspective advanced in a particular text. Each exam item references the relevant text explicitly, reminding the candidate that it is his knowledge of the reference that is being tested.

An examination cannot test a candidate's ability to deal with IAQ problems “correctly” if there are honest disagreements on the subject. An examination can only test his knowledge of the recognized authorities and his ability to apply their answers to the case at hand.

Expertise may be defined as the ability to observe, interpret and remediate problems in the indoor environment effectively. Knowledge of the full range of research and educated opinion on these issues is necessary for such observation and interpretation. A candidate cannot be called an expert until he knows what the experts say. Only an examination that tests this knowledge is able to distinguish the expert.

Curriculum-certified professionals have been taught what to think about indoor air quality. Knowledge-certified professionals, because of their familiarity with a variety of perspectives, have been taught how to think about indoor air quality. This is the essential difference between a two-day wonder and an expert.

### **INSTANT CERTIFICATIONS ARE NOT ACCREDITED**

The second problem with instant certifications is that they typically operate without oversight from outside sources. No one is checking up on them to see that they are run fairly or meet industry standards. In short, they are not accredited.

Accreditation is the process by which a certification program seeks a stamp of approval from another organization specializing in certification administration. An accredited program has been

examined by an outsider and found to comply with standards for organizational structure, program operation, eligibility requirements, examination development, security, confidentiality and quality management.

Third-party accreditation occurs when the accrediting body is entirely independent of the certifying body. Third-party accreditation is almost universal in well-established fields that rely on certification. In medicine, for example, degree-granting institutions are accredited by the American Medical Association (AMA). In engineering, degree programs are accredited by the American Board of Engineering Technology (ABET).

In the industrial sector, third-party accreditation is equally widespread. The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) accredits a variety of certification programs, as does the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the Council for Engineering and Scientific Specialty Boards (CESB) and the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

Third-party accreditation is so important that accrediting bodies themselves rely on it. Some examples of these “accreditors of accreditors” are the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the U.S. Department of Education.

This arrangement illustrates an important principle applicable to all certifying and accrediting bodies: Third-party accreditation is the foundation of credibility.

### **THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION**

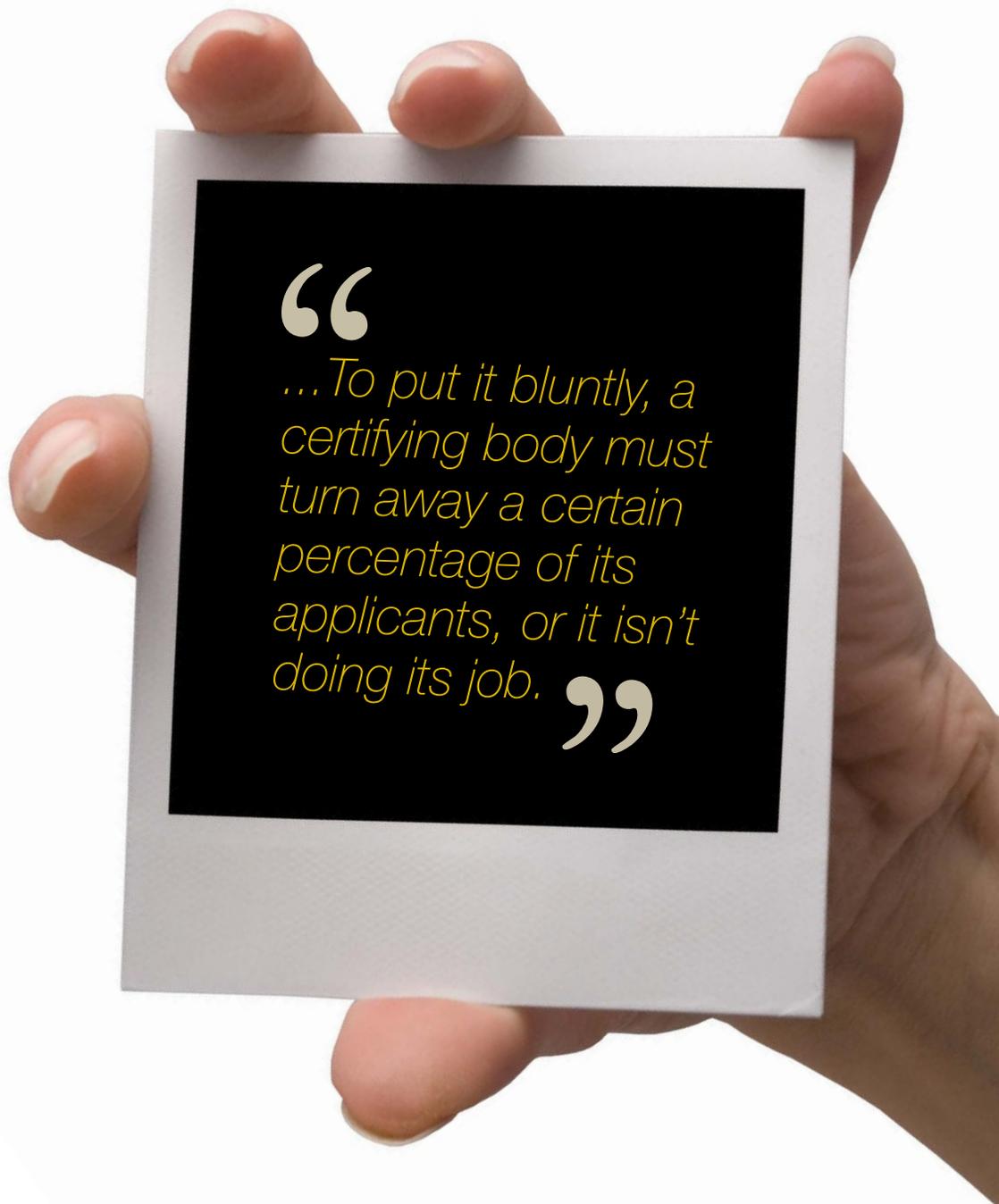
Third-party accreditation is invariably a rigorous process.

Certifying bodies must:

- Demonstrate that their programs are operated independently of all vested interests, such as training providers, curriculum developers or manufacturers
- Submit their exam development procedures for review
- Demonstrate that their exams represent the current state of their industry
- Demonstrate impartiality and fairness in their eligibility requirements and certification decisions
- Submit minutes of staff and board meetings that prove their compliance with accreditation standards
- Allow for public input into their policies and procedures

In short, an accredited certification program is minutely examined by an impartial judge and declared to be fair, independent, impartial and relevant to its field.

It is easy to see why instant certifications cannot qualify for third-party accreditation. They lack the basic ingredients common to all worthy certification programs: integrity, credibility and independence. They must ask their certificants to accept on faith that



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their certification is worth the paper it's printed on, while providing no evidence to prove the point. Third-party accredited certifications, on the other hand, carry the most dependable guarantee of integrity possible: the independent affirmation of a respected outsider.

This is the cornerstone of a certification's credibility in the marketplace. Without third-party accreditation, a certification is very vulnerable to legal challenge and its long-term practical value is questionable.

Many non-accredited certifications are inexpensive to acquire and maintain, but they are often not worth the savings. They are useless to the certificant when it comes to buying professional insurance; they can also become a liability if they are challenged in court. With third-party accreditation, however, a certification can be

a reliable measure of knowledge, skill and expertise. Professionals who obtain such certifications rightly regard them as the foundation stones of a successful career.

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*Adam Andrews, CIEC, is the assistant director of the American Council for Accredited Certification, a non-profit certifying body founded in 1993 to serve the indoor air quality industry. The ACAC operates independent, third-party accredited certification programs for indoor environmental consultants, microbial consultants, microbial remediators, indoor air quality administrators and residential mold inspectors. The ACAC certifies more than 3,000 professionals in the United States, Canada and overseas. For more information about the ACAC and its programs, visit [www.acac.org](http://www.acac.org).*