



MSSC BOARD-SUGGESTED QUALITY ASSURANCE GUIDELINES AND RATING SYSTEM FOR INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CERTIFICATIONS

BACKGROUND

Industry recognized certifications (IRCs) are being used increasingly in the workforce development arena at both the national and state levels. They are the main tools through which industries communicate their skill needs to the education and training community and against which potential certificants are assessed. Since they can be easily counted, IRCs also provide clear accountability data for federal and state agencies.

For many years, IRCs were associated with well-established, national, typically non-profit IRCs that represent entire industry subject sectors, subsectors or well-known occupations. Examples:

- Manufacturing: MSSC, AWS, NIMS
- IT: CompTIA, Microsoft, Cisco
- Construction: NCCER
- Energy: API
- Auto Servicing: ASE
- Supply Chain Logistics: MSSC, APICS
- Health Care: Professional Societies for Medical Specializations

More recently, the definition of “post-secondary credentials” in the 2014 federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) includes a large group of categories: industry-recognized certifications and certificates, apprenticeship, licenses, BA and AA degrees. The result is that many are interpreting this definition to apply “industry-recognized” to all these categories, with the effect that there is now a plethora of literally thousands of credentials that organizations are claiming to be “industry-recognized,” but bear no resemblance to the relatively small number of well-established national industry certifications, examples of which are provided above.

This situation creates a dilemma for federal and state agencies that need to determine how to identify those credentials that are most supported by industry and thus qualified for training and assessment funding. There are currently no clear guidelines from any federal agency against which to assess the quality of IRCs.

The guidelines provided below are designed to distinguish high quality, well-established, national IRCs with strong nationwide industry support from those local, academic, and state credentials that are not nationally portable and offer less value to companies, students and workers. These proposed guidelines apply only to “industry-recognized certifications and certificates,” the first category in the WIOA definition of “Postsecondary Credentials.” This paper does NOT address the question of quality assurance for the other categories that definition, i.e. apprenticeships, licenses, BA and AA degrees.

These guidelines are also rooted in a distinguishing feature of IRCs in terms of quality assurance: the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has already approved a quality standard for personnel certification: ISO 17024. ISO is the quality standard accepted by industry globally and is used by the leading accreditation bodies in the U.S.

The MSSC is forwarding these suggested guidelines to federal and state agencies by virtue of its own authority as the only industry-led, non-profit national certification body:

- whose industry-defined, industry-wide nationally validated skill standards were officially recognized in 2001 by the federal National Skill Standards Board and are updated annually by subject matter experts to ensure that they are keeping pace with technological change;
- is accredited under ISO 17024 for both manufacturing—MSSC-Certified Production Technician (CPT)—and logistics--MSSC-Certified Logistics Technician (CLT);
- has been vetted and used by the U.S. Departments of Labor, Education, Justice, Defense, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the VA, Job Corps, a host of state agencies; and
- endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers for both manufacturing and logistics.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES AND RATINGS FOR IRCs

Meets the Definition of "Industry"

For purpose of quality assurance of IRCs, the first step should be a clear definition of "industry." At the federal level, the DOL already defines "industry" by using the North American Industrial Classification System. For example, NAICS uses Codes 311-339 to identify the principal 21 sub-sectors of manufacturing. The U.S. Department of Education and the Career-tech Ed (CTE) community has long used "16 Career Clusters."¹ Any entire industry or industry sector identified in the NAICS or CTE "Career Clusters" system or any major occupation with large numbers of jobs and found commonly throughout the nation could qualify. Some forms of certification address skills requirements for multiple occupations in widespread national use (IT, Project Management, etc.)

Are National

There should be documentation that the underlying skills for these industries are accepted by a broad, cross-section of the industry that the certification body claims to represent. This is best accomplished by proof of **nationally validated** skill standards defined by the industry. There should also be documentation that these IRCs are accompanied by an **infrastructure to deliver nationally** the related instructional services and testing. In **all** these cases, the underlying skills should apply nationally and the certification should be nationally portable, since these skills are defined by industry needs, technologies

¹Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources; Architecture and Construction; Arts, A/V and Communications; Business, Management and Administration; Education and Training; Finance; Government and Public Administration; Health Science; Hospitality and Tourism; Human Services; Information Technology; Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security); Manufacturing; Marketing, Sales and Service; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math; Transportation, Distribution, Logistics.

and practices, not by state, regional or local boundaries. In other words, the skills needed to service a car, make a widget, build a bridge, or sew an artery are, by definition, national.

Have Third-Party "Recognition"

The prerequisite for "recognition" should be demonstrated recognition by bona fide third party organizations. Within that form of recognition, there are two categories that should be used for rating purposes. The first tier is "Accreditation" and the second tier is "Endorsement."

FIRST TIER - THIRD-PARTY ACCREDITATION:

ISO standard 17024 is used in the U.S. by three nationally-recognized accreditation bodies to accredit organizations that provide IRCs:

National Commission for Certification Agencies (NCCA). To date, NCCA has accredited 330 certifications for 130 organizations and offers ISO 17024 accreditation in partnership with the International Accreditation Service (IAS). For details: see www.credntiallingexcellence.org

American National Standards Institute (ANSI). To date, ANSI has accredited 170 certifications for 56 certification organizations. For details, see www.ansi.org

International Certification Accreditation Council (ICAC). To date, ICAC has accredited 108 certifications for 7 organizations. For details, see www.icanet.org.

These accreditations are *based on direct audits by well-qualified quality experts* in the personnel certification field. Under ISO Standard 17024, the accreditations protect the integrity and ensure the validity of individual certification programs. The 17024 standard addresses the structure and governance of the certifying body, the characteristics of the certification program, the information required to be available to applicants, and the recertification initiatives of the certifying body. This global standard is designed to help accreditation organizations conduct well-planned, structured evaluations and audits to ensure the impartiality, sustainability, financial stability, transparency and legal defensibility of the certification and certification body.

For *legal defensibility* purposes, IRCs accredited by these bodies also provide direct confirmation that their assessments are consistent with federal civil rights laws and all federal regulations.

For further details on accreditation of certifying bodies, see "Industry Recognized Certifications: Third Party Accreditation, A Guide for Educators" published by GSX. (www.skillsdmo.com and go to "our services")

SECOND TIER - THIRD-PARTY ENDORSEMENT

Well-established national professional societies and national business associations often endorse certifications, typically non-profit, for their key personnel. This is common practice, for example, in the health care, IT, financial, construction and manufacturing industries. The National Association of Manufacturers has met the WIOA call for "stackability" by endorsing a series of non-profit stackable certifications, including those offered by the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council (MSSC), the

American Welding Society (AWS), the National Institute of Metalworking Skills (NIMS), the Association for Quality (ASQ), and the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME).

As another form of authoritative endorsement, some industry-defined, nationally validated standards, which provide the best substantive foundation for IRCs, are also endorsed by federal and state skill standards agencies or workforce boards. Another rating metric for these organizations is their documented success in helping their certificants with the two major success metrics: securing employment or continuing their education within the same field.

State and federal agencies should exercise caution in supporting any IRCs that do not meet the required guidelines and definitions above for "industry-recognized certifications"

Special Cases

While the guidelines and ratings above apply to most well-established, national, and largely non-profit IRCs, state and federal agencies will always preserve the right to deal with exceptions on a case-by-case basis. A couple of examples of potential exceptions are the following:

- **Proprietary Corporate Certifications:** Some leading multinational corporations (MNCs) have created "education" programs that provide certifications for high-level competencies within their respective industry sectors, but may not have third-party accreditation or third-party endorsement. These are all global leaders with high levels of expertise who often lease, license or sell their equipment or software to educational institutions and businesses and who operate on a national--indeed, international--scale.

These certifications serve individual corporate interests by strengthening brand awareness and assuring users of their products and services are able to leverage and meet their individual interests. At the same time, they provide value to learners and professionals by demonstrating evidence of high technical skills attainment and improved access to employment opportunity by virtue of affiliation with globally recognized and respected brands. Examples of providers include: Microsoft, ESRI, Cisco, Snap on Tools, and Trane.

- **Certifications Unique to a Single State:** Some states may conclude that they have specific niche industries in which they play such an exclusive or predominant role that they wish to support that industry's certification. In that case as well, however, the state should expect that the certification body be "recognized" through either third-party accreditation or endorsement as described above.

For further information on MSSC, see www.msscusa.org or contact Neil Reddy, MSSC Executive Director, at reddyn@msscusa.org or at 703-739-9000.