

Certificate vs. Certification: How are They Different and Which is Best?

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If you are in the association industry, no doubt you have heard the terms certificate and certification, and often these terms are used interchangeably. Are they the same and, if not, how are they different and which one is best for you or your organization?

Certificate

First, let's talk about certificate programs. Even within the realm of certificate programs, there are two types with key distinctions between them:

- **Certificates of Attendance or Participation:** Certificates of Attendance or Participation are often provided to individuals who have attended or participated in classes, courses or other education/training programs or events. The certificate signifies that the participant was present or otherwise actively participated in the program or event. Demonstration of accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes is NOT a requirement for receiving the certificate.

- **Assessment-Based Certificates (ABC):** An Assessment-Based Certificate is a non-degree granting program that:

1. Provides instruction and training to aid participants in acquiring specific knowledge, skills, and/or competencies associated with intended learning outcome
2. Evaluates participants' achievement of the intended learning outcomes, and
3. Awards a certificate only to those participants who meet the performance, proficiency or passing standard for the assessment(s).

An example may be that you receive a Certificate of Attendance by participating in a roundtable discussion or education program provided by the [Florida Society of Association Executives \(FSAE\)](#). This certificate signifies your attendance and/or participation. You may also complete FSAE's [Qualified Association Specialist \(QAS\)](#) Certificate Program. This is an assessment-based program and earning a certificate signifies achievement of the intended learning outcomes of that program.

Certification

Now, let's explore certification. The [Institute for Credentialing Excellence \(ICE\)](#) defines professional certification as a voluntary process by which individuals are evaluated against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, or competencies. Participants who demonstrate that they meet the standards by successfully completing the assessment process are granted a time-limited credential (aka the alphabet-soup after someone's name). To retain the credential, credential holders must maintain continued competence. The credential awarded by the certification program provider denotes that the participant possesses particular knowledge, skills, or competencies.

For instance, individuals who have achieved the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) [Certified Association Executive \(CAE\)](#) have met eligibility requirements related to higher education, qualifying nonprofit professional experience, and association management continuing education, as well as passed a rigorous exam designed to assess the ability to apply fundamental knowledge to scenarios drawn from real-world association management challenges.

One who has earned the CAE credential has not received a one-time pass; however, they must renew every three years by demonstrating ongoing adherence to professional conduct requirement and completion of professional development activities, or a combination of professional development activities and contributions to the profession, such as serving on an SAE board of directors, chairing a committee or authoring articles in an industry publication.

The [American Society for Quality](#) sums it up nicely in *Quality Magazine* (November 1, 2016), "it comes down to this: a certificate is a piece of paper; a certification is a process for demonstrating proficiency and comprehension in your given field. In other words,

you *receive* a certificate, you *achieve* a certification.”

As a side note, from a provider standpoint, certification programs are much more comprehensive as well. Applying for accreditation is time-consuming and costly but shows that your certification program adheres to national standards. In January 2016, the [National Commission for Certifying Agencies \(NCCA\)](#) implemented Standards for the Accreditation of Certification programs, providing the credentialing industry with updated Standards for sound practice in development, implementation, and governance of professional certification programs.

As you can see, certificates and certifications are very different programs designed to meet very different needs; however, there is a place for each of them in organization and in your career. Which certificate or certification program have you set your sights on? Share with us in the comments or email me at dkring@executiveoffice.org.

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Dee is an association professional with over 22 years experience in state and national trade and professional organizations. Her experience covers all facets of association management, including meeting planning, continuing education, membership recruitment and retention, fundraising, marketing, advertising, staff development and supervision, and more. She has earned her Certified Association Executive (CAE) and Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) designations and hold memberships in local, state and national SAE's. She served as President of the Tallahassee Society of Association Executives in 2013 and currently serve on the board of directors of the Florida Society of Association Executives.