Competence vs Qualification: What Really Matters in Personnel Certification?

By Dr. George Anastasopoulos

PJLA, Technical & Intl. Business Development Manager

About PJLA

Perry Johnson Laboratory Accreditation, Inc. (PJLA)

Established in 1999 by Mr. Perry L. Johnson

Headquartered in Troy, Michigan.

More than 2200 accreditations globally in 32 countries.

Perry Johnson Laboratory Accreditation NP, Inc. (PJLANP)
Michigan nonprofit organization established in 2016.

Member and signatory of APAC, ILAC MRAs

Perry L. Johnson

PJLA's Global Network

PJLA Accreditation Programs

ISO/IEC 17025
Testing/Calibration Labs

- FCC OET Equipment Authorization
- FDA ASCA
- ENERGY STAR
- Cannabis Testing
- Hemp Testing
- Horseracing Laboratories Program
- CPSC
- AS6171A Testing
- Food, Feeds, and Pharmaceutical: *AOAC, AAFCO, LAAF*
- Environmental Testing: *TNI-NEFAP, DoD ELAP, DOECAP-AP, EPA NLLAP* TNI-EL: *MNELAP, CA ELAP, LELAP*

ISO/IEC 17020 – Inspection Bodies

ISO/IEC 17065 – Product Certification Bodies

ISO/IEC 17043 – Proficiency Testing Providers

ISO 17034 – Reference Material Producers

ISO 15189 – Medical Laboratories

ISO/IEC 17024 – Personnel Certification Bodies

ASTM E2659– Training Providers

Definitions

Competence is defined as *"the ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve intended results."*
ISO 19011, Guidelines for Auditing Management Systems

Qualification is defined as *"an official record or document (such as a degree, certificate, or diploma) which shows that you have completed a course of study or training and are qualified to do something"*
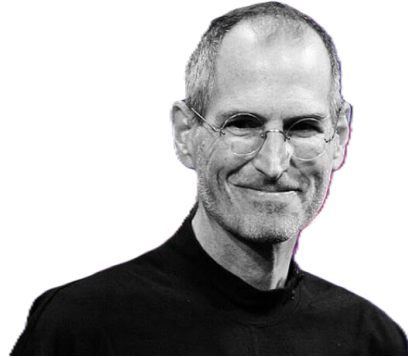**The Britannica Dictionary**

Example

Examples

Steve Jobs
Co-founder & former CEO, Apple Inc.

- **Dropped out** of Reed College after one semester.
- Revolutionized the personal computer, digital music, and smartphone industries.
- Demonstrated unmatched competence in product design, user experience, and market intuition.

Bill Gates
Co-founder, Microsoft

- **Dropped out** of Harvard University to start Microsoft.
- Built one of the most influential tech companies in history and led it for decades.
- His competence in software development and business strategy overshadowed the absence of a degree.

History is filled with examples of individuals - college dropouts among them - who rose to executive leadership roles not because of their academic records, but because of their demonstrated competence.

Qualifications alone do not guarantee competence

PJLA

ISO/IEC 17024

ISO/IEC 17024, *"Conformity assessment – General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons"*,

- *initially issued 2003*

- *Previously* EN 45013:1989 and ISO Guide 62 and 65

- Sector-specific schemes *(Pre-ISO)*
  - ✓ *IATCA (IPC since 2004, now IAF endorsed)*
  - ✓ *ASQ*
  - ✓ *API, AWS, PMI etc.*

PJLA

ISO/IEC 17024

ISO/IEC 17024:2012, *"Conformity assessment – General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons"*.

- Certifications of persons must be based on demonstrated competence, not just possession of qualifications
- Introduces scheme ownership and scheme validation to define competence
- Provides a comprehensive framework for assessing competence through valid, reliable, and impartial examinations, practical tests, or other evaluation methods
- It allows flexibility in assessment methods
- Clear core principle: Competence must be measurable, observable, and independently verified

PJLA

Key Comparison Table

Element	Qualification	Competence
Definition	Formal recognition of education or training	Ability to apply knowledge, skills, and attributes to achieve results
Basis	Degrees, diplomas, training attendance	Demonstrated performance in real or simulated conditions
Evidence Required	Certificate of attendance, transcript	Practical tests, examinations, job task observation
Verification Method	Document review	Independent assessment (oral, written, practical)
Assessment Focus	Completion of learning process	Achievement of intended outcomes

PJLA

Key Comparison Table

Element	Qualification	Competence
ISO Relevance	May support initial eligibility	Required by ISO/IEC 17024 for certification
Stability	Static – once acquired, rarely changes	Dynamic – must be maintained and updated
Recognition Value	Limited in high-risk or regulated environments	High – valued by employers, regulators, and accreditation bodies
Surveillance/Recertification	Not required	Mandatory under ISO/IEC 17024
Risk of Misuse	Credential inflation, over-reliance on formal education	Requires rigorous oversight but directly linked to job readiness

PJLA
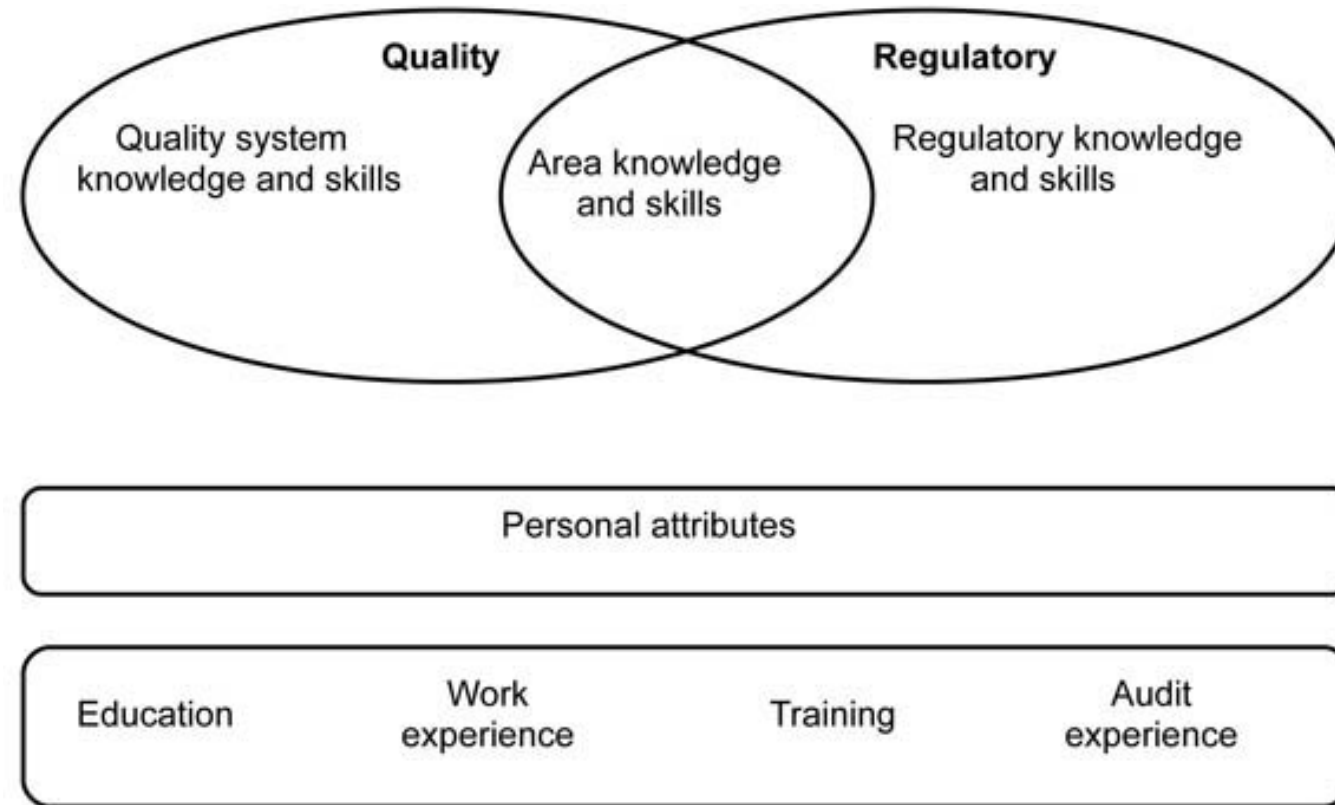
Example

Example: IPC/IAF endorsed Management System Auditor (ISO 19011)

The Pitfall of Qualification-Based Certifications

- Based on training and experience only
- Assumes that a person's educational background is a sufficient indicator of capability
- Falls short in professions where actual performance, judgment, and applied skill are critical
- Non-accredited, limited value

Such programs contribute to confusion among employers, regulators, and candidates.
More importantly, qualification-based programs cannot be accredited under ISO/IEC 17024, since they do not meet its requirements for competence assessment.
As a result, they offer limited value in environments that demand objective proof of ability.

- Why?
- Cheap, fast and easy

IAF Rule

"A certification body shall not issue both an accredited and a non-accredited certificate for the same certification scope under the same certification scheme."
IAF Resolution 2013-15

Why This Rule Exists:

- To prevent misleading clients and the public
- To maintain the integrity of the IAF Multilateral Recognition Arrangement (MLA)
- Mixing accredited with non-accredited equivalents undermines trust
- To ensure impartiality and consistency

PJLA

Accreditation is the key

ISO/IEC 17024 accreditation safeguards value on a personnel certification:

- Defines Competence as the Core Requirement
- Ensures Fairness and Impartiality
- Requires Valid and Reliable Assessment Methods
- Accreditation Adds Independent Oversight
- Enables International Recognition
- Aligns with Employer & Regulatory Expectations
- Requires Ongoing Surveillance and Recertification

How to Recognize a Competence-Based Certification

PCB accreditation to ISO/IEC 17024

The applicable certification program is included in the PCB's accredited scope

PCB is accredited by a reputable AB

PCB is MLA signatory of the International Personnel Certification Association (IPC).
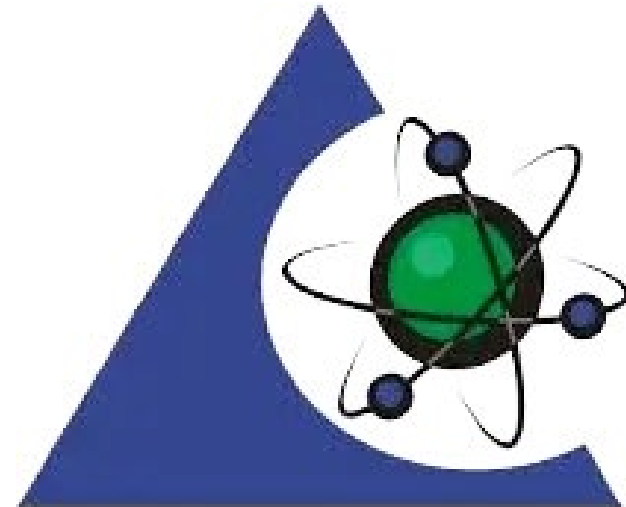
International Conformity Assessment Structure
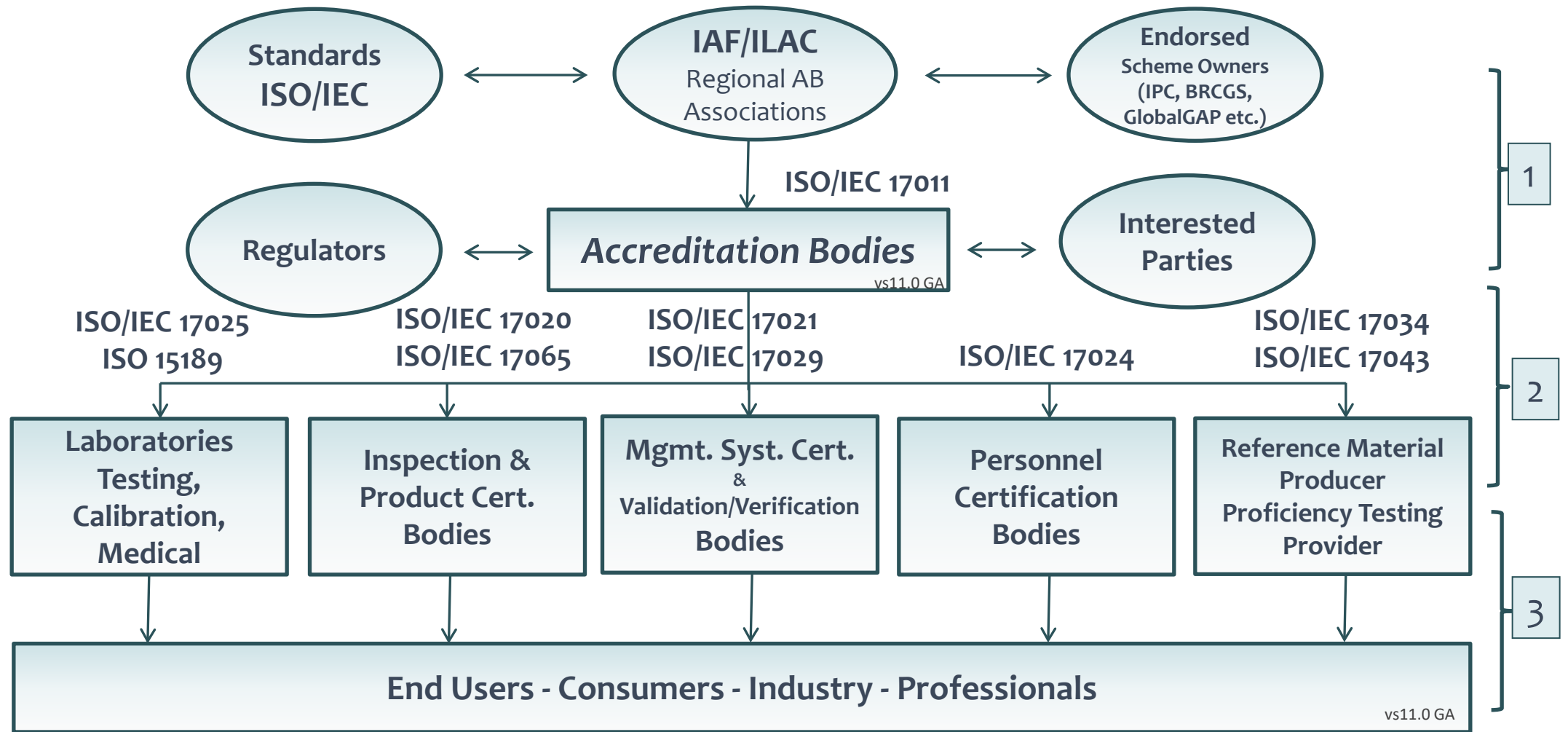
Thank You!

- Questions
- Discussion

ganast@pjlabs.com

PJLA
pjlabs.com