Accreditation: What It Means

By Judith A. Hale, PhD, CPT, CACP, CIDD, ibstpi Fellow

An accreditation is a credential, a mark of excellence, that is given to organizations, programs, and products that meet standards.

For comparison, certifications are given to people who can demonstrate they know or can do something to standard. In both cases, the standards must be derived through a consensus process, and earning either credential requires successfully completing a test designed to measure compliance with or competence in the standards.

Some people think accreditation applies only to elementary and high schools, colleges and universities, and trade and professional schools. However, accreditation, as a mark for meeting standards, goes way beyond academia. One of the earliest and widely known credentials goes back to the 1800s. It is the UL mark put on products that meet the Underwriter Laboratory’s Safety Standards. Today, UL applies 750 standards to more than 18,000 products manufactured by some 60,000 firms in more than 70 countries. The UL mark has become the mark of safety.

ISO (International Standards Organization), founded in 1947, is the world's largest developer of voluntary International Standards. It has published 21,654 International Standards covering almost all aspects of technology and business. The ISO 9000 Quality Management series is widely known and accepted. Standard 17024 is for assessment-based certificate programs. Another popular credential was Mr. Goodwrench, started in 1974 by
General Motors. Auto service companies put the mark on their windows to tell customers their technicians were GM qualified.

In 1977, the National Commission for Health Certifying Agencies (NCHCA) was created by a congressional mandate under President Jimmy Carter. NCHCA’s purpose was to develop standards and accredit programs in health care that met those standards. In 1987, NCHCA changed its name to the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA), became a membership organization, and established the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) whose mandate became the accreditation of certification programs for all professions.

In 2009, the NOCA became the Institute for Credentialing Excellence and retained NCCA’s certification program accreditation body. ISPI followed NCCA standards when it established the Certified Performance Technologist (CPT) certification.

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) was established in 1979. It reinforced the independence of institutions of higher education, accrediting organizations, the federal government, and state governments. The USDE has a mandate to protect the rights of state and local governments and public and private educational institutions in the areas of educational policies and program administration. The 10th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was adopted to prevent the federal government from overstepping its authority. The amendment guarantees that any rights and responsibilities not specifically assigned to the federal government belong to the states and the people. The 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act affirmed this position by requiring accrediting agencies be independent of education providers.

The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPC), established in the early 1990s, has approximately 100 members who accredit specialized education programs. ASPC has developed standards and guidelines that parallel those of ISO requiring accrediting agencies to follow a consensus process when setting standards.

ISPI is the only organization that accredits functions and programs designed to improve organizational and workforce performance. ISPI’s accreditations require outcomes or results as evidence that ISPI’s standards have been met.

About the Author
Judith Hale, PhD, CPT, CACP, CIDD, and ibstpi Fellow, is the CEO of the Institute for Performance Improvement, Lyc, a hybrid LLC and C3 created by the state of Illinois to encourage entrepreneurs to take on social issues. She is the author of nine books on
performance improvement. The Performance Consultant’s Fieldbook: How to Improve Organizations and People, 2nd edition, is used as a text by numerous universities. Performance-Based Certification: How to Design a Valid, Defensible, Cost-Effective Program, 2nd edition, received the Outstanding Communication Award from ISPI in 2014. Judy has served as president and director of Certification for ISPI. She can be reached at Judy@TifPI.org.