Certification vs certificate: what is the difference?

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A certificate shows that you took part in a course or programme. A certification shows that you were assessed against a defined standard and passed, and it usually has to be kept current. The two are often confused because the words look alike.

TL;DR The short version

- A certificate shows you completed a course; a certification shows you passed an assessment against a defined standard.
- A licence is different again: legal permission to practise, granted by an authority.
- Employers can tell them apart by asking what standard was assessed, whether passing was required and whether it renews.

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What is a certificate?

A certificate of completion or attendance records that you finished a course. It says what was taught, not how well you can do the work, and passing an assessment is often not required.

What is a certification?

It is the result of an assessment, such as an exam, set against a published standard and graded pass or fail. It normally has a validity period and a renewal route, so that holders keep their knowledge current, and the result can be checked by others.

What about a licence?

A licence is legal permission to practise, granted by an authority. Some professions require one. Most technical roles do not, which is one reason independent certifications exist: they give employers a common, checkable signal where there is no legal one.

Which carries more weight with employers?

A certification generally says more, because it involved an assessment against a standard. A certificate can still be valuable if the course was rigorous, but the employer has to judge the course itself. Neither replaces a record of real work.

How can an employer tell which one they are looking at?

Ask what standard it was assessed against, whether passing was required, and whether it expires and renews. Then check whether the holder appears in a public registry. IICTP holders can be checked on the public registry.

> Related credential: Associate Technical Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. IICTP. Certification FAQ. iictp.org/certifications/faq.
2. IICTP. Public registry. iictp.org/verify.

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