Vendor-neutral technical certifications for software engineers: what exists and what each tests

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Short answer: the best-known vendor-neutral IT certifications are CompTIA's (A+, Network+, Security+ and others), ISC2's CISSP and ISACA's CISM for security, the Linux Foundation and CNCF Kubernetes exams, and the IEEE Computer Society's software engineering certifications. Most of these test infrastructure, security or one platform. For software engineers and technical leads specifically, IICTP's credentials test vendor-neutral technical judgement: architecture, delivery, applied AI, infrastructure and security, and engineering leadership.

TL;DR The short version

- Vendor-neutral certifications are set by bodies that do not sell the products they test, such as CompTIA, ISC2, ISACA, the Linux Foundation and CNCF.
- Most of them test infrastructure, security or one platform rather than software engineering judgement.
- IICTP's credentials cover five domains of technical decisions with scenario questions; check current exam details before booking.

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What "vendor-neutral" means

A vendor-neutral certification is set by a body that does not sell the products it tests. It examines principles that apply whichever cloud, language or tool you use. That makes it portable between employers, but it also means it does not prove you can operate any one product.

The main options, by focus

- **IT foundations, networking and security:** CompTIA's certification suite.
- **Security leadership and management:** ISC2 (CISSP and others) and ISACA (CISM and others).
- **Hands-on security:** GIAC certifications from SANS, which cover specialist areas such as web application security.
- **Kubernetes and cloud-native operations:** CKA, CKAD and CKS from the Linux Foundation and CNCF, plus CNCF associate exams on topics such as OpenTelemetry, GitOps and Prometheus. Kubernetes is open source, so these are not tied to one cloud.

- **Enterprise architecture:** TOGAF certification from The Open Group, a framework for organisation-wide architecture rather than system design.
- **Software testing:** ISTQB certifications, from foundation to advanced test roles.
- **Software engineering knowledge:** the IEEE Computer Society offers software engineering certifications based on its body of knowledge.
- **Technical practice across the stack:** IICTP's ATP, CTP and six specialist credentials, based on the TPBOK.

How IICTP differs

- **Scope:** five domains covering the decisions technical practitioners make, not one technology area.
- **Format:** scenario questions that ask for the best decision, not a memorised definition. See how to prepare for a scenario-based exam.
- **Openness:** questions, time, pass mark and domain weights are published for every credential, with a blueprint PDF for each.
- **Verification:** every credential is listed in a public registry.
- **Honest limits:** IICTP launched in 2026 and is not yet as widely known as the established bodies above.

Which to choose

- Support, networking or security operations: start with CompTIA.
- Security management with several years of experience: CISSP or CISM.
- Hands-on Kubernetes work: CKA or CKAD.
- Testing roles: ISTQB. Enterprise architecture roles: TOGAF.
- Software engineering and technical leadership across tools: an IICTP credential, alongside any vendor certification your employer uses.

Before you book

Certification bodies rename, update and retire exams often. Check each issuer's own page for current versions, prerequisites and fees before you book.

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

Sources and further reading

1. CompTIA. Certifications. comptia.org/certifications.
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