

Technical Bulletin: Validating Management System Certificates

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How to differentiate the fake from the valid

Accreditation is a vital tool for procurers when looking to purchase products and services, providing them with confidence that they have been confirmed as valid from an independent authoritative body.

During times of crisis, such as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there is a greater demand for products and services, particularly Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and it is important that procurers are confident that what they are buying is fit for purpose and meets the necessary safety standards.

Due to the demand, such products often need to be sourced from overseas, but with no knowledge of the vendor how does the procurer know that the products are of the correct quality?

In recent times UKAS has become aware of a rising number of counterfeit certificates, making false claims over holding quality standards. The certificate being supplied to provide confidence may appear to tick all the boxes and to meet the required standards, but what can be done to make sure?

If the supplier of the products or services is reputable and legitimate then the following simple checks can be made to validate the certificate, enabling the purchase to be made with confidence.

Step 1

Check that the certificate has been provided by a certification body that is accredited by an internationally recognised accreditation body. There is no restriction on who can become an accreditation body and therefore it is vital that you check that the accreditation body in question can demonstrate its competence and impartiality through compliance with the requirements within the international standard for operation of accreditation bodies – ISO/IEC 17011.

For assurance that the accreditation body is compliant, you should look for one that has undergone peer evaluation and been accepted as a signatory to a recognised Multilateral Recognition Agreement (MLA): For international trade, the MLA operated by the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) is fully recognised and therefore procurers should be checking that the certification body has been accredited by an IAF MLA signatory.

The IAF MLA is split into sub-scopes, including coverage of individual management systems such as for quality management systems (ISO 9001), medical devices management systems (ISO 13485), food safety management systems, etc. Therefore, you must ensure that the accreditation body is a signatory for the sub-scope that relates to the certificate in question.

The validity of the accreditation body, including appropriate sub-scope can be easily checked by visiting the IAF website (iaf.nu/en/home/). All signatory accreditation bodies together with the scope of their MLA are clearly listed, with this data being maintained up-to-date.

Step 2

Check that the claims by the certification body that they hold the appropriate accreditation from the accreditation body are valid. This should be possible by visiting the accreditation body's website where you should find the scope of the certification body's accreditation (take care: the certification body may hold accreditation but it may not include the service or management system relevant to the product or service being provided).

If the certification body claims to hold UKAS accreditation then this can be checked and confirmed by using the search function in the 'Who's Accredited' page of the UKAS website.

Step 3

Validation of certificate. If it has been established that the certificate has been issued by a certification body that holds the appropriate accreditation from an IAF signatory accreditation body, then you need confirmation that the certificate itself is valid. This can be achieved through the certification body, either through a search function on their website or through direct contact: Contact details of all UKAS accredited certification bodies are presented on their schedule of accreditation, available here.

IAF CertSearch

UKAS is currently (2021) in the process of developing a database that will contain up-to-date information on all management system certificates covered by UKAS accreditation. In the interim, a similar database has been developed by IAF: IAF CertSearch (www.iafcertsearch.org).

This would be a useful first port of call to validate a certificate although it is not comprehensively populated, and therefore the information you seek may not be available. If the information on certificates has not been uploaded to the IAF CertSearch database but it is clear that they do hold appropriate accreditation, then you would be advised to progress directly to Step 3 above.

Note: Although it is mandatory for IAF accreditation bodies to populate IAF CertSearch with data on their accredited certification bodies it is not mandatory for certification bodies to upload data of their certificates.