

Certified or Certificated? How to Verify an Applicant's Credentials

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While perusing a mound of resumes, looking for the most qualified candidate for a paralegal position, you notice a candidate claims to be “certified”. So, what does “certified” actually mean?

If a paralegal is certified, the individual has successfully passed a certification exam offered by at least one of the three national organizations which offer such exams. With all three of these exams, eligibility requirements include education and experience. The three major organizations and the certification each allows are as follows:

- **National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA)** - offers the Certified Legal Assistant “CLA” exam in order to become a CLA or Certified Paralegal “CP”. Advanced certification is also available to earn the Certified Legal Assistant Specialist “CLAS” or Advanced Certified Paralegal “ACP” designation. (www.nala.org)

- **National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA)** - offers the Paralegal Advanced Competency Examination “PACE” in order to become a Registered Paralegal “RP”. (www.paralegals.org)

- **National Association of Legal Professionals (NALS)** - offers the Professional Paralegal “PP” exam and designation. (www.nals.org)

So now you know what being certified means, but how do you verify the legitimacy of the claim? There are several ways:

First, notice the designation which is being used. Is the applicant using CLA, CP, CLAS, RP, or PP behind his or her name? A paralegal who is truly certified will be proud of this designation and will display one of these credentials behind his or her name.

Next, look at the applicant's education and experience. Has he or she attended a program of study or had enough experience to qualify to take a certification exam? If the applicant has very little or no education and/or experience, he or she will not meet the eligibility requirements

to take a certification exam.

Another way to verify a certification credential is to check with the organization providing the certification. A call to any of the three organizations listed above will allow a potential employer to verify certification. A free search is available on NALA's website as well.

You can also ask for proof of certification. Upon successfully passing any certification exam, the examinee is always given proof of certification.

Why would a candidate claim to be certified if he or she is not? Other than the obvious reason, which is to make themselves look better, another reason may be that it was an honest mistake. Individuals sometimes think they are certified but, in fact, are not. They may actually be "certificated" and not certified. There is a big difference in the two terms.

What does "certificated" mean? It means, simply, the individual has received a certificate. It could be a certificate of completion from a short course of study or it could be a post-baccalaureate certificate. A certificate earned upon completion of a course of study does not mean the individual is "certified". They are "certificated". Paralegal certification only comes from successfully passing one of the national exams listed above.

Those who pass national certification exams are proud of their certification and should not be confused with those who are certificated. Certification only comes with the passing of a rigorous exam and successfully maintaining a credential will require proof of continuing legal education.

The next time a job candidate claims to be certified, check the applicant's claim. Ask for proof of certification from the applicant or call the organization awarding the certification. There is a big difference between being certified and being certificated, and being aware of the difference can save some confusion.