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# THE HIGH ROAD TO ACCREDITATION

BY NICOLE CARROLL, CROSSFIT INC. DIRECTOR OF CERTIFICATION

Nicole Carroll explains how ANSI accreditation reflects CrossFit Inc.'s dedication to the highest standards of excellence in the fitness industry.





Certification programs, such as the Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT/CF-L3) credential, are commonly used to evaluate and recognize the qualifications and competence of individuals. When a certification program is of high quality, it can be an effective way to distinguish those who are qualified from those who are not; however, not all certification programs are of high quality.

How does one determine the quality of a certification program? Accreditation of certification programs is one way. During accreditation, a certification program is evaluated to determine if it meets recognized industry standards in such areas as impartiality of program governance and the reliability and validity of assessment.

Currently, certification programs can seek accreditation through two primary organizations: the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). Many certification bodies in the training industry have opted for accreditation by the NCCA; CrossFit Inc. has chosen ANSI. This article describes the two accreditation programs and highlights why CrossFit chose ANSI accreditation.

## ANSI and the NCCA

### ANSI

ANSI is a nonprofit federation of government agencies, organizations, companies, academic and international bodies, and individual members. In addition to its national activities, ANSI is the sole U.S. representative to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Through ANSI, the U.S. has direct access to the ISO standards-development processes.

### NCCA

The Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE)—formerly the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA)—is a professional membership society that provides educational, networking and advocacy resources for organizations and individuals who work in and serve the certification industry. The NCCA is the accreditation arm of ICE.

*CrossFit believes ANSI's international stature and focus are of significant value given our global reach. As an ANSI member and an accredited program, CrossFit has access to ANSI's worldwide network. ANSI accredits organizations such as the Department of Defense, the Food and Drug Administration, and more. Even ICE, the parent arm of NCCA, is accredited by ANSI.*

While many fitness companies choose NCCA accreditation, CrossFit Inc. was drawn to ANSI's more rigorous process.

## Standards

### ANSI

ANSI accreditation is based on the international standard ISO/IEC 17024 (general requirements for bodies operating certification systems of persons). The standard was published initially in 2003 and revised in 2012 by the international committee of the ISO. Certification and testing professionals from over 20 countries (representing six continents) came together to develop this global benchmark for personnel-certification agencies. The standard's development followed the ISO's rigorous process for developing a global precedence based upon four principles.

### ISO standards:

1. respond to a need in the market.
2. are based on global expert opinion.
3. are developed through a multi-stakeholder process.
4. are based on consensus.

In addition to its status as an International Standard published by the ISO, ISO/IEC 17024 was also formally adopted as an American National Standard.

### NCCA

The NCCA accreditation program uses NCCA Standards for Accreditation of Certification Programs as its basis. The standard was initially developed by the NCCA in the 1970s, was updated in 2002 and is currently under revision. To develop the standards, the NCCA uses a peer-review process involving its members and NCCA-accredited organizations, with an opportunity for the public to participate through an open comment period.

*CrossFit finds value and trust in the fact that the ISO/IEC 17024 standard has been adopted as both an International Standard and American National Standard. Those stamps of approval mean it was developed through an open and rigorous process involving the critique and ultimate approval of experts and stakeholders, not only from the U.S. but also around the world. In contrast, the NCCA's standards-development process is self-governed. Its standard is self-published with no oversight or approval of its processes and final standard by any third party.*

## What Areas Do the Standards Cover?

### ANSI

The ISO/IEC 17024 standard covers the certifying body's organizational structure and management, the development and maintenance of the certification program, the assessment tools used initially and for recertification, and the policies and procedures related to documentation, confidentiality, security, and more. Emphasis is also placed on quality management that includes a strong customer focus and the motivation of top management toward continual program improvement.

### NCCA

The NCCA Standards cover the certifying body's organizational structure and management, responsibilities to stakeholders, assessment instruments, and recertification.

*CrossFit was drawn to the quality-improvement focus of the ISO/IEC standard. The NCCA and ISO/IEC 17024 standards both address having a sound governance structure and a valid and reliable exam, but the ISO/IEC standard also emphasizes quality throughout the entire certification process and requires organizations to employ such efforts as documenting a management system, conducting annual audits of its operations, implementing preventive and corrective action where needed, and controlling critical documents throughout their use. We believe a strong certification program goes beyond its governance and test, and the ISO/IEC 17024 standard has helped CrossFit strengthen its overall certification operations.*

## Accreditation Process

### ANSI

In the ANSI process for accreditation, the certifying body submits an application with documented evidence of how it meets each of the standard's requirements. This documentation is reviewed by two ANSI assessors, one a certification management specialist and the other a psychometrician (a testing and measurement specialist). Then a site visit is conducted, during which the assessors interview agency personnel, review records and see demonstrations of how processes work. The purpose of the site visit is to validate the information described in the application.

At the end of the two-day on-site visit, the assessors report their findings to the certifying body. These findings might include nonconformities (meaning a standard's requirement was not met), opportunities for improvement (a requirement was met, but there are potential concerns that it could turn into



ANSI's international stature benefits CrossFit, whose affiliates and trainer courses can now be found in countries all over the world.

a future nonconformity) or commendations (the requirements were exceeded). Any nonconformity that is identified must be corrected by the certifying body within a predefined timeframe for the organization to be accredited. The assessors continue to work with the certifying body in reviewing and approving plans of action for corrections.

Once the nonconformities have been corrected, the assessors meet with two or more representatives of ANSI's Accreditation Committee (called an Evaluation Task Group) to review the status of the certifying body. Then the full Accreditation Committee reviews the recommendations of the assessors and the Evaluation Task Group and makes the accreditation decision.

An accredited certifying body must submit an annual report for review, and in alternate years a one-day on-site visit is required. Every five years, the organization starts the accreditation process over.

This process used by ANSI to accredit certification bodies is based on an international standard (ISO/IEC 17011). Adherence to an internationally recognized accreditation process ensures that the ANSI process conforms to the highest accreditation standard and represents the best practices in accreditation. ANSI is the only personnel-certification accreditation body in the United States to meet these globally accepted practices for accreditation bodies. It voluntarily undergoes audits from peer agencies across the globe to ensure its conformance to ISO/IEC 17011.

#### NCCA

In the NCCA process for accreditation, the certifying body submits an application with documented evidence of how it meets the standards. A commission reviews the application and makes accreditation decisions at its regular meetings. Two commissioners are designated to complete a standard-by-standard review, one focusing on compliance with program-administration standards and the other on compliance with psychometric standards. The written results of the two reviewers' feedback are shared with the full commission. At the commission meeting, the full commission discusses each application. After discussion and consideration, the commission makes a decision by majority vote. The decision may be to approve accreditation, deny accreditation or delay a decision pending receipt of further information.

Once accredited, the organization is required to submit an annual report form attesting to the status of the certification program at intervals throughout the accreditation period. Accreditation lasts for a period of five years, after which a new application must be submitted and the process starts again.



**ANSI and the NCCA are not staffed by fitness experts. Accreditation agencies merely ensure the legitimacy of credentialing systems.**



Many organizations issue certificates based on test results only. CrossFit leads the industry by insisting on practical application of learning.

CrossFit is impressed with ANSI's rigorous process. While the NCCA process begins and ends with a paper application, ANSI requires an on-site assessment during which organizations have to prove they are doing what their application says. In addition, ANSI conforms to an International Standard, ISO/IEC 17011, and even voluntarily undergoes review by third-party global accreditation organizations to ensure it is following best practices in its administration of the accreditation program. The NCCA does not comply with any such global standards, nor does it undergo third-party review.

## Isn't NCCA Accreditation Required or Preferred by the Fitness Industry?

This is the elephant-in-the-room question, and yet it is based on a widespread misconception. While most fitness certifying bodies have chosen accreditation by the NCCA, it was their

choice to do so. Both NCCA and ANSI accreditation focus on the certification process, not the content of the certification. In other words, neither have subject-matter experts to review the certification's content, be it fitness, accounting, medicine or anything else.

"It is imperative to understand here that accrediting organizations do not make judgments on the quality of the content tested. There are no fitness professionals within the NCCA making judgments about how good or bad a test is. The NCCA is simply there to ensure that the assessment and credentialing system meets a set of guidelines the NCCA created and applies to all professions it accredits ... . As with the NCCA, ANSI staff are not exercise experts; they are experts in ensuring organizations can carry out their business fairly, equitably and according to a set of general standards," as stated by Lon Kilgore in the CrossFit Journal article "[Certification and Licensure: Benefit or Liability?](#)" In reality, cost and rigor most often affect the choice of accreditor.

*The cost of NCCA accreditation is significantly less than ANSI accreditation, but CrossFit believes the value of ANSI accreditation is worth that extra cost. Most believe ANSI accreditation to be more rigorous for two primary reasons. First, its scope is broader. While ANSI accreditation includes governance and psychometric requirements just like the NCCA, it also has expanded requirements for a quality-management system, among other things. Secondly, ANSI accreditation requires on-site assessments (three every five years) during which certifying bodies are "put to the test" to prove to expert assessors that they are doing what their paper documentation states. The NCCA's accreditation is based on a paper review alone—no interviews of personnel, no record reviews and no demonstrations of systems. CrossFit believes the in-depth ANSI audit benefits our program in the long run by ensuring we are operating in the most efficient and effective way and continually improving with the ongoing feedback. We are so confident in our systems and procedures that we welcome scrutiny and review. Scrutiny and review elicit trust and ensure fairness and quality; we have nothing to hide.*

## CrossFit and ANSI: A Better Fit

CrossFit and ANSI share the same values with regard to rigor and integrity of processes. We believe the only route to developing and validating anything is through practical education and assessment. An organization that wants integrity must not only talk the talk but also walk the walk. The proof is in the verified execution. This is consistent with CrossFit's being the hallmark accredited certificate and certification organization that requires practical application to ensure trainers have comprehended, have internalized and can demonstrate what they have learned. Historically, fitness trainers have had to prove themselves only through book reading and regurgitation of information on a written exam. CrossFit wanted to distance itself from the National Strength and Conditioning Association and the American College of Sports Medicine, two groups that have taken advantage of this gap in quality assurance.

For CrossFit, the choice became simple: Take the high road. The high road is not the road less traveled but in fact the one that has never been traveled in the fitness industry. Ours is the only path to ensure the community of fitness professionals and their clients will be represented by the best standards of practice.

Choosing ANSI as the accrediting body best suited for CrossFit was easy. The higher cost, increased rigor and painstaking effort required for ANSI compliance reflect CrossFit's values, which are reflected by our trainers, affiliates and athletes around the world. ■

## About the Author

Nicole Carroll began training in 2004 at the original CrossFit Headquarters in Santa Cruz, California, with CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman. From 2005 to 2008, she traveled with Coach Glassman and assisted in delivering the CrossFit methodology, fundamentals and movements to Level 1 attendees across the world. Carroll is largely responsible for developing the Level 1 Trainer Course into the formalized and accredited curriculum it is at present. As Director of the Certification Department and Co-Director of the Training Department, she currently oversees all of the CrossFit curriculum, testing, and staff development for the Level 1 and 2 Certificate Courses and the CCFT/Level 3 and Level 4 Certifications.