

LET'S TALK ABOUT ACCREDITATION!

Inspection is an essential part of ensuring that a product (and for instance a PV module, a PV inverter, or a battery system) conforms to general or project-specific requirements. It involves examination conducted by competent personnel using very specific techniques. To avoid costly delays in manufacturing, there is no room for improvisation.

A company might decide to perform its own inspections or call for the services of companies referred to as "third parties". But before commissioning a third-party inspection provider, it is highly recommended to consider whether the service provider has the required technical competence, resources, adequate management system, and ways to safeguard impartiality, confidentiality and to effectively process complaints and appeals. But how do you find this out?

What exactly is accreditation?

Inspections are performed every day on a wide variety of products and services from clothing to building structures or trading practices. Although we often don't realize it, we couldn't live without these inspections: we would not be able to trust what we buy, eat, wear or use.

Accreditation is the **formal recognition of the competence to perform these inspections. It is the first link in a chain of confidence.**

Accreditations are delivered by accreditation bodies, themselves appointed by the states (one accreditation body per country). In order to deliver an accreditation, the accreditation body will perform a series of thorough audits of the company to be accredited, including staff qualification, training, and work experience, inspection methods, suitability of equipment used, impartiality, confidentiality, code of conduct and processes for safe work, and quality assurance procedures to ensure that they are in continuous compliance with the requirements.

How to identify an accredited inspection body?

Accredited inspection bodies are authorized to issue inspection **reports or certificates bearing a given mark** indicating their accreditation by the national accreditation body. (ANSI mark for inspection bodies accredited in the United States, COFRAC mark for inspection bodies accredited in France, DAKKS mark for inspection bodies accredited in Germany, CNAS mark for inspection bodies accredited in China, etc.)

No compromise on impartiality

Small or large conflicts of interest are omnipresent in today's economy. Firms in many industries continuously have to navigate these conflicts, which can sometimes even take the form of bribery attempts. Inspection firms, because they issue judgments on how industry players perform, are even more exposed to these unethical, if not bluntly illegal practices. That is why customers relying on the results of an inspection to take business decision should always demand the credentials of the inspection firm they hire. Hiring a non-accredited inspection firm is in this context a risky decision.

Mutual recognition

One additional benefit of using services from accredited bodies, is the recognition of the work performed by these entities. Under the umbrella of ILAC, regrouping over 120 accreditation bodies and more than 90,000 accredited bodies, entities recognize the work performed by any member, simplifying trade and related authorizations and saving time for different stakeholders.

Table 1: summary of differences between ISO17020 and ISO9001

Type		ISO 9001 certification	ISO17020 accreditation
Quality assurance procedures		●	●
Competences	Training	●	●
	Technical competences	○	●
	Experience	○	●
inspection methods	Appropriateness	○	●
	equipment		
Safeguarding	Maintenance	●	●
	Calibration	○	●
	Impartiality	-	●
Subcontracting	Confidentiality	○	●
	Code of Conduct	-	●
	Regulations	○	●
International recognition	Emitted certificates	-	✓

- Fully cover
- Partially covered
- No requirement



For instance, prior to or after commissioning, a buyer undergoing verification on its power plant equipment by local regulatory bodies may be required to provide evidence that conformity assessment was conducted on imported equipment. A Certificate of Conformity issued by an accredited Inspection Body can be swiftly acknowledged and accepted by such regulatory bodies.

As a mark of its membership, **an accredited body's report or certificate will bear the ILAC mark.**

Accreditation vs. certification

Although these terms are often mistakenly used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Unfortunately, some companies maintain the confusion to serve their interests by misleading customers about the differences.

A certification represents a written assurance by a third party of the conformity of a product, a service, a company or a person to specified requirements. The certification against ISO9001 standard, for instance, provides assurance that the certified organization has a management system in place that meets the requirements of the standard. This potentially applies to any company, and is no proof of either competence, absence of conflict of interest, or impartiality. ISO9001 certification is necessary, but certainly not enough for an inspection firm.

Accreditation, on the other hand, is the formal recognition by an authoritative body of the competence to perform the work to specified standards. Accreditation standards such as ISO17020 for inspection bodies go much beyond ISO9001, and for instance require demonstrating the technical competence of the inspection body to perform the work as required, impartiality, and the existence and the enforcement of an adequate Code of Conduct: no conflict of interests, no freelance inspectors, qualified staff, adequate procedures, etc.

Accreditation in PV industry

Surprisingly, there are not many ISO17020 accredited Inspection Bodies active in the PV and Energy Storage sector. This is all the more surprising that ISO17025 (the "sister", equivalent ISO accreditation for measurement labs) is a fully-enforced requirement throughout the PV industry. No developer would rely on business-critical measurements that were performed by a non-accredited lab. Nonetheless, and surprisingly, some non-accredited companies offer today inspection services to PV and storage developers.

Without accreditation, however, there is no assurance that the firm will deliver the business-critical inspection in full impartiality. Can they really demonstrate and ensure impartiality among their entire staff, in all factories, workshops and production lines where they are inspecting products? Can they demonstrate that they never enter into a commercial agreement that would jeopardize their integrity or create a conflict of interests? How will their staff (or one of their freelance inspectors) react when subject to an attempt of bribery?

There is today only one way to demonstrate both competence and impartiality: presenting an up-to-date ISO17020 accreditation certificate.



THIBAUT LEMOINE,
VP, - Global Operations, STS