



Reasons to be trusting

A gauge of credibility for suppliers and of trust for buyers, accreditation provided by official bodies is a measure of the capacity of companies to provide particular services. At present, almost 50,000 French firms are accredited.

"Accreditation must be used intelligently"

In France, there are nine main accreditation bodies (OPQCM, OPQF, OPQIBI, OPQTECC, Qualibat, Qualifelec, Qualipaysage, Qualiprope and Qualisport), each covering a specific industry. However, they all share a single goal: to make relations between clients and suppliers more dependable.

A process based on voluntary work

Accreditation depends on a number of factors, including a nomenclature of activities defining the technical contents and services covered by the certificates to be delivered; a checklist of criteria to be satisfied by applicants; and, lastly, attribution, monitoring, and renewal procedures.

Accreditation bodies examine applications and organise a certification committee made up of authorised experts. "The way in which the body functions coupled with the certification procedure should guarantee the impartiality

of decisions concerning whether companies are accredited or not," says Jacqueline Fauchery, General Secretary of Qualiprope (cleaning and associated services). The refusal rate varies from one body to another, from as low as 5% (OPQG) to as high as 30% (Qualibat).

The accreditation process, which is in no sense obligatory, leads eventually to a certificate. "A decision-making tool for contractors, accreditation means that suppliers can provide proof of their skills and professionalism. A company's solidity, ability to respect the terms of a contract, financial sound-

ACCREDITATION, which started in France with a meeting between a private sector industry and the State, is not a new concept. After the Second World War much of the country lay in ruins. In 1949, with the national rebuilding programme underway and the construction industry under immense strain, the government set up an accreditation body, Qualibat, an entity governed by private law, to ensure that it had a list of reliable companies at its disposal. The system gradually attracted the interest of other sectors of the economy and the concept of accreditation was extended to private sector buyers.

Certification bodies have three characteristics in common. "They each represent a specific industry; they have all signed protocols with the government with a view to carrying out a mission deemed to be in the public interest; and they are run by representatives of the industries to whom they provide accreditation: clients, suppliers, and institutional investors," says Qualibat's Secretary General, Marie-Dominique Monségur.

Moreover, as Stéphane Mouchot, Director of Communication of the OPQIBI (engineering), explains, the mission of accreditation bodies is twofold: "Our role is not only to help clients – contractors and buyers – to choose their suppliers, but also to raise the level of professionalism in specific industries."

The main accreditation bodies

OPQFC:

Accreditation for continued professional training, and management and recruitment consulting

The OPQFC (Professional Accreditation Bureau for Training and Consultancy Firms) delivers OPQF (continued professional training) and OPQCM (management and recruitment consulting) certificates.

The OPQF (Professional Accreditation Bureau for Training Firms) set up in 1994, receives more applications than its management counterpart. "This is due to the attitude of the government ministry that sponsors the OPQF. The General Delegation for Employment and Professional Training is very demanding in terms of accreditation. This encourages a large number of companies to apply," explains Hervé Barbotin, General Secretary of the OPQFC, which has awarded certificates to 700 companies accounting for 37% of the turnover of the entire industry.

Since 1979, the Professional Accreditation Bureau for Management and Recruitment Consultancy Firms (OPQCM) has been delivering certificates to management and recruitment companies in the following areas: company marketing and commercial strategy and policy; production and logistics; human resources; IT and management systems; technology; financial and insurance risk auditing, management and consulting; project management; SMEs; integrated management; communication/public relations; market research; recruitment; ergonomics; and international markets. The OPQCM has granted certificates to some 500 companies including market leaders such as Accenture, Ineum Consulting, and KPMG. However, most companies with an OPQCM certificate have only two or three consultants, a figure more representative of the industry as a whole.

Both certificates have a three-year duration.

OPQIBI:

Engineering

Founded in 1976, the OPQIBI (Engineering Accreditation Body) delivers certificates to companies for whom engineering is either a primary or secondary activity (engineering consultancy companies, design offices, engineering firms). The OPQIBI provides 180 certificates divided into six different categories: infrastructure; construction; environment; energy; industry; and leisure-culture-tourism. The work of the OPQIBI – whose management structure includes engineers, buyers and representatives from major companies – has been recognised as being in the public interest in protocols signed with the Ministries of Public Works, Industry, and the Environment. Presently, 1,000 firms accounting between them for an annual turnover of 3.15 billion euros and employing over 25,000 people hold an OPQIBI certificate.

Accreditation valid for 6 years, with two biannual reviews.

ness, references, and professional attitude are all witnessed by the certificate," says Arnaud Debove, Secretary General of Qualifelec (electricity). Certificates have a limited duration and are reviewed on a regular basis.

Companies are encouraged to seek certification not only by the accreditation bodies, but also by buyers, procurement advisors, professional associations, and insurance companies. "The government ministries that sponsor us also provide encouragement in that what we do is officially deemed to be in the public interest," says Geneviève Barbaste, Secretary General of Qualisport (sport and leisure).

A shared concept, a common cause

Since 1993, the accreditation bodies have pooled their promotional resources and have even set up a shared internet site, www.qualientreprises.com. "Our positioning relative to other accreditation systems – ISO, for example – has prompted us to implement a common communication strategy in order to promote certification in France. It is an intelligent approach that creates a positive synergy," explains Hervé Barbotin, Secretary General of the OPQFC (continued training and management consulting).

The accreditation bodies may be responsible each for a specific industry, but the service they provide is of interest to a certain category of professional present in every sector: the buyer. Buyers in the public sector have long been reticent when it comes to using accreditation as an aid to choosing suppliers, but attitudes are changing. Indeed, the Public Procurement Code included in the Decree of January 7, 2004 now makes it possible for a government procurement officer to ask candidates for tender to produce a professional certificate if the object of the tender justifies it.

In order to reinforce the credibility of their certificates, the French accreditation bodies have played a contributory role in the project of the AFNOR (French Normalisation Association) Normalisation Commission to set up a framework guaranteeing transparency, independence, and impartiality. Up and running since January 2005, the framework enables the accreditation bodies to work in conjunction with COFRAC (the French Accreditation Committee).

Qualibat: Accreditation for companies in the construction industry

Set up in 1949, Qualibat, a private law body under the control of the State to which it is linked via a number of protocols, provides accreditation to all sectors of the construction industry with the exception of electrical firms.

Qualibat covers all those involved in "the act of building", to use the terminology of the body's General Secretary, Marie-Dominique Monségur. It acts as an umbrella organisation for the main professional associations representing construction companies, architecture firms, and public and private contractors, as well as design, auditing, and research bodies. Qualibat's 92 departments examine company dossiers and advise purchasers, providing help with company selection and litigation during or at the end of projects. Around 37,000 French firms generating a combined turnover of nearly 80 billion euros are Qualibat accredited.

Accreditation valid for 5 years with an annual review.

Qualifelec: Accreditation for companies in the electricity industry

Because electricity represents a risk for both users and installers, the official accreditation body, Qualifelec – which, although governed by private law, is under State control – was set up in 1955. Qualifelec is administered by representatives from all sectors of the electricity industry. Out of the 35,000 companies in the French electricity sector, 8,000 are Qualifelec accredited.

Qualifelec has subdivided its 23 certificates into five categories: electrical engineering; electrothermics; aerials; public lighting; and light-current electrical engineering. The organisation caters to a similar range of companies as that dealt with by Qualibat, from sole traders to firms of 1,500 employees. It should also be noted that 80% of public tenders (95% in the "public lighting" sector) involve Qualifelec accredited companies. Qualibat boasts similar figures.

Accreditation valid for 4 years with biannual reviews.

QualiPaysage: Accreditation for landscaping companies

Founded in 1970, QualiPaysage, which falls under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture, delivers 30 certificates in eight separate sectors: design; maintenance of gardens and open spaces; sports grounds; forestry and reforestation; interior landscaping; integrated watering systems; revegetation; roads, motorways and infrastructure; and golf courses.

Of France's 12,000 landscaping companies, 1,000 boast QualiPaysage certificates. However, these firms account for 45% of the annual turnover of a dynamic industry that is growing 10% at an annual rate.

Accreditation valid for 3 years (annual reviews).

Qualiprope: Cleaning and associated services

Qualiprope has been delivering certificates to companies in the cleaning industry since 1996. Divided into 30 different categories, Qualiprope's certificates cover, notably, industrial cleaning (for example in the agri-food, health, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics industries), as well as office cleaning and associated services. Qualiprope-accredited companies are worth 1 billion euros a year and employ 60,000 people.

Of the 330 companies which presently lay claim to Qualiprope accreditation, an equitable 50% have more than 100 employees. The fact that relatively few firms can boast a Qualiprope certificate is due to the organisation's strict evaluation criteria, which may well discourage certain candidates. But the choice is a strategic one. As Jacqueline Fauchery, Qualiprope's Secretary General, explains, "We have no intention of watering down our certificates to attract more applicants."

Accreditation is valid for three years with annual reviews.

Qualisport: Leisure and sport accreditation

Set up in 1976, Qualisport, which has signed a protocol with the Ministry of Youth and Sport, delivers certificates to firms operating in the sport and leisure industries. At present, 250 firms, generating a combined turnover of 640 million euros, are Qualisport accredited.

Six fields are covered: recreational and play areas; sports engineering consultancy; covered facilities; specialised sports equipment and ice rinks; private swimming pools; public swimming pools; and sports flooring installations.

Accreditation valid for 1 year.