

Choosing Your Certification Body: A Buyer's Guide

Your choice of registrar affects the audit experience, the credibility of your certificate, and whether the process adds value or just checks a box.

What a Certification Body Is (and Isn't)

A certification body - also called a registrar - is the independent organization that audits your management system and issues your ISO certificate. It is not your consultant: ISO rules require strict separation between consulting and certification. Your consultant helps you build and improve the system; the CB independently verifies it. That independence is what gives the certificate its credibility.

The wrong choice has real costs. An auditor with personal biases about how your processes "should" look can burn half a day questioning records that are perfectly conformant. You'll still pass - and question whether the process was worth it. It doesn't have to go that way.

Accreditation: The Non-Negotiable

Before pricing, industry experience, or audit style, one threshold requirement: accreditation. Accreditation bodies oversee certification bodies - ANAB and IAS in the US, UKAS in the UK, DAkkS in Germany, JAS-ANZ in Australia and New Zealand - and all are members of the International Accreditation Forum (IAF), whose mutual recognition agreements make an accredited certificate recognized worldwide.

Unaccredited certification bodies exist, and their certificates often aren't recognized by customers, procurement departments, or government solicitations. When a customer requires ISO 9001 certification, they typically mean accredited certification - an unaccredited certificate can leave you having spent the money without satisfying the requirement. Verify accreditation status in ANAB's or UKAS's searchable online directories before engaging any CB. It takes five minutes.

What to Evaluate Beyond Accreditation

FACTOR	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
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Industry experience	A CB that regularly audits your sector assigns auditors who understand your processes, risks, and regulatory environment - less time explaining basics, more useful observations. Ask directly: how many audits in our industry, for our standard? Smaller or niche CBs sometimes provide more relevant auditors than the large global players.
Audit style	Some registrars are stricter in their interpretations; others take a practical, improvement-focused approach. Neither is inherently better - a highly regulated business may want rigor, a first-time certification may want practicality. Ask around your industry for reputation.
Auditor consistency	Ask whether you'll get the same auditor for surveillance audits, and whether you can request a specific auditor. An auditor who already knows your system, culture, and trajectory conducts a more efficient and valuable audit.

Understanding the Full Cost

Certification isn't a one-time expense. The initial certification audit (Stage 1 documentation review + Stage 2 implementation verification) is your largest single cost. Then come annual surveillance audits in years one and two, and a recertification audit in year three that renews the cycle. When comparing quotes, compare the full three-year cost - some CBs price the initial audit low and recover it in surveillance fees, travel, or administrative charges. Ask whether they have local auditors or fly people in; travel varies significantly between registrars.

ON PRICE SHOPPING

Don't simply pick the cheapest option. A cut-rate audit can mean inexperienced auditors, rushed timelines, or a CB cutting corners on its own processes. A bad audit experience costs more in wasted time and frustration than the price difference between a budget and quality registrar.

Red Flags

WARNING SIGN	OBSERVED?
They offer both consulting and certification services - a direct conflict with the independence requirement for certification bodies.	☐ Yes ☐ No
No accreditation, or accreditation from a body that isn't an IAF member.	☐ Yes ☐ No
Unusually low pricing with no clear explanation - possibly unaccredited, abbreviated audits, or inexperienced auditors.	☐ Yes ☐ No
Can't provide references in your industry.	☐ Yes ☐ No

Pressure tactics or guaranteed outcomes - no CB can promise certification before the audit.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Questions to Ask Before Signing

Bring this list to your first call with any registrar you're evaluating:

QUESTION	ASKED	ANSWER / NOTES
Are you accredited by an IAF-recognized accreditation body? Which one?	☐	
How many audits have you conducted in our industry and for our specific standard?	☐	
What does the full three-year cost look like - surveillance audits, recertification, and travel included?	☐	
Will we get the same auditor for surveillance audits? Can we request a specific auditor?	☐	
What is your typical timeline from Stage 1 audit to certificate issuance?	☐	
Can you provide references from organizations similar to ours?	☐	
What happens if we need to reschedule an audit?	☐	
How do you handle corrective actions and nonconformity close-outs?	☐	

Already Certified and Unhappy? You Can Switch

Changing certification bodies after certification is called a transfer audit, and it's more common than most people think - declining auditor quality, unreasonable price increases, or the need for deeper industry experience are all normal reasons. The new CB reviews your current certificate and recent audit reports, conducts a transfer audit (similar in scope to a surveillance audit, usually cheaper than initial certification), and issues a new certificate. Your certification remains valid throughout - no gap, no lapse.

MARKET CONTEXT

The market includes large global registrars, well-regarded mid-tier players with strong industry-specific expertise, and smaller regional CBs that can be excellent for particular sectors. The right choice depends on your industry, size, geography, and standards - use the criteria in this guide rather than brand recognition alone.

Planning your ISO certification?

Whether you're responding to a customer requirement, a corporate mandate, or a contract opportunity that won't wait - Kaizen simplifies, streamlines, and expedites the path to certification. 200+ certifications, zero failed audits. Get a free consultation and a straight answer on what your system needs.

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About Kaizen ISO Consulting. Kaizen has guided organizations through ISO 9001, ISO 14001, and ISO 45001 certification since 2017, working with clients across most major registrars - and helping them ask the right questions before signing.

200+ certification projects

Zero failed audits

100% first-try pass rate

3-6 month typical timeline

Consulting since 2017

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