

When Certification Is Required vs Optional

Understanding when certification is mandatory, strategically advantageous, or not required is critical to bidding efficiently and avoiding wasted effort.

Certifications are not universally required to pursue contracts, but in certain contexts, they can be the deciding factor between eligibility and disqualification.

This guide is intended to help businesses understand common certification requirements and strategic considerations. Actual requirements depend on the specific solicitation, agency, or buyer.

When Certification Is Required

Certification is required when the solicitation explicitly states that the contract is set aside for a specific category of business.

Common Required Scenarios:

Federal Contracts

- 8(a) set-aside solicitations
- HUBZone set-aside solicitations
- SDVOSB/VOSB set-aside solicitations
- WOSB/EDWOSB set-aside solicitations

If you are not certified in the specified category at the time of bid (or by proposal deadline), you are not eligible.

State & Local Government Contracts

- DBE participation requirements on federally funded projects
- MBE/WBE set-asides at the state, city, or county level
- Utility or authority contracts requiring certified vendors

Certification is often required either to bid as a prime contractor or to meet participation goals as a subcontractor.

Corporate & Utility Contracts

- Supplier diversity contracts restricted to certified vendors
- Corporate programs requiring proof of certification for Tier I or Tier II credit

Certification may be required to be onboarded into a supplier diversity program.

When Certification Is Optional but Strategic

Certification is not mandatory in these cases, but it can significantly improve competitiveness, scoring, or access.

Strategic (but Optional) Scenarios:

- Open competition solicitations with diversity participation scoring
- Contracts where certification provides proposal evaluation points
- Opportunities where primes seek certified subcontractors
- Corporate RFPs that strongly encourage diverse suppliers
- Long-term vendor pools or prequalified lists

Certification may not be required to submit a proposal, but uncertified firms may score lower or be less attractive partners.

When Certification Is Not Required

Certification is generally not required in the following situations:

- Open-market federal contracts with no set-aside
- Commercial or private-sector contracts with no supplier diversity program
- Corporate contracts where diversity is optional or informational
- Early-stage market research or pre-solicitation engagement
- Subcontracting roles where the prime does not require certification

In these cases, capability, pricing, experience, and responsiveness typically outweigh certification status.

How Quin-Z Helps You Decide

Not every business needs every certification, and pursuing the wrong ones can waste time and resources.

We help clients

- determine which certifications are required vs optional for their target markets,
- align a certification strategy with actual bid opportunities,
- avoid unnecessary or premature certification applications,
- sequence certifications based on readiness and growth goals, and
- track certification timelines and renewal requirements.

Disclaimer: *We provide strategic guidance and documentation support, **not** legal interpretation.*