

International Accreditation Day



June 9th 2009 will mark International Accreditation Day, a global initiative jointly established by the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and International

Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) to raise awareness of the importance of accreditation-related activities.

Building on the success of the inaugural international accreditation day in 2008, which saw the hosting of major national events, seminars, and press campaigns in over 50 countries, an even greater level of activity will take place this year to communicate the value of accreditation to Regulators, businesses and the general public.

The theme of the day this year is 'competence'.

Accreditation provides an independent and authoritative attestation of the competence, impartiality and integrity of conformity assessment bodies (CABs). Accreditation that is internationally accepted and meets international standards, thereby providing confidence in the accuracy and reliability of testing, inspection and certification.

Standards and accreditation play an increasingly important role in improving the operations of the marketplace and promoting growth and trade. Many factors have contributed to this such as mass production, a growing demand for interchangeable parts, globalization, manufacturers' concerns about litigation, demand for cheaper and safer goods, public demand for product safety and concerns about technical compatibility between products.

In such a complex and highly competitive market, a level of confidence is required when procuring products or services. Such reassurance is underpinned by accreditation. Specifiers, like Government regulators, have come to appreciate the importance of credible accreditation programs that are based on internationally-recognized standards. With restricted budgets, many Regulators can no longer do it all themselves and increasingly, they must rely on third-party organisations to support their regulatory efforts. When they do so, they need a fair and meaningful basis for identifying qualified and competent providers. Accreditation provides this declaration of competence.

Trinidad and Tobago Laboratory Accreditation Service promotes local exports

International Trade and Test data

International trade plays a vital role in improving the quality of life and overall development of countries. The world has become even more dependent on international trade due to increasing globalization and trade liberalization. But what is it that makes it possible for countries to buy and sell goods and services to each other without undue delays, conflicts and excessive costs? One of the key factors that facilitates global trade is the supply of valid test data from accredited laboratories for goods being traded in the global marketplace.

Valid test data produced by accredited labs provide the assurance and confidence to buyers and sellers that goods and services traded meet specifications and requirements with respect to health, safety, welfare and the environment. For example, test data about goods include information such as toxicity of drugs, safety of food additives, measurements of environmental pollution, design and performance of products, materials and processes. Purchasing decisions are made on the basis of this information.

Countries are increasingly demanding test and other technical data about goods entering their borders as a means to regulate goods entering their markets. This is reflected in the growing demand for cross-border acceptance of test data among countries. This is facilitated by Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), an instrument to confirm acceptance of test data among nations. MRAs may be bilateral or multi-lateral and based on the technical evaluations of each partner's conformity assessment and accreditation procedures and practices.

Cross-border acceptance of test data is also becoming popular because it helps exporters and importers to avoid expensive re-testing as well as it makes international trade more efficient.

Validity of test data for international trade depends on the competence of the testing laboratories supplying such data. There is need for independent evidence of the competence of testing laboratories especially in light of increased product liability litigation. Independent confirmation of the competence of laboratories provides the confidence and assurance for acceptance of test data across national borders.

The Trinidad and Tobago Laboratory Accreditation Service

The Trinidad and Tobago Laboratory Accreditation Service (TTLABS) provides a range of services to help local testing laboratories produce valid test data that are internationally recognized thereby facilitating domestic exports to other countries.

The revised Standards Act (Act No. 18 of 1997) provided the legal framework for the creation and the operation of the Trinidad and Tobago Laboratory Accreditation Service (TTLABS) as a function of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards.

Laboratory Accreditation

Laboratory Accreditation is a process whereby an independent assessment by a recognized third-party affirms that a laboratory has the technical competence to perform specified tests in accordance with internationally accepted procedures.

The accreditation process mandates the maintenance of a documented quality management system and

the identification of personnel qualified and authorized to perform tasks related to the scope of accreditation. The process is an independent method of monitoring laboratory competence and performance to ensure the validity of results to users.

Training

Since its inception, TTLABS has worked extensively with local laboratories to provide training for laboratory personnel to equip them with the skills to conduct internal audits in their laboratories. Through its participation in an Inter-American Development Bank/Multilateral Investment Fund Project (IDB/MIF), TTLABS has sourced training in "Interpreting the Standards", "Internal Auditing" and "Documenting Laboratory Quality Management Systems" for local laboratories. These programmes were well attended and redounded to the benefit of the laboratories and their clients.

As a result of participation in the project, two local laboratories have been accredited to the requirements of ISO/IEC 17025 and one regional medical laboratory has been favourably assessed and will soon be officially notified of official recognition for its assessed scope. Two other laboratories are currently undergoing gap analyses as a precursor for formal assessment.

Laboratory Quality Improvement Programme

Additionally, the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards offers the Laboratory Quality Improvement Programme (LABQUIP). LABQUIP gives laboratories an easily managed mechanism for incremental advancement towards meeting the requirements of the assessment standard, taking cognizance of present differences in operational levels of quality systems by laboratories in Trinidad and Tobago.

The program is open to laboratories of all sizes. The immediate benefits of participation in the LABQUIP programme are:

- (1) National recognition of technical competence;
- (2) Improvement of the capability to produce accurate, reliable, and consistent results, which can boost customer confidence help to generate increased business;
- (3) Facilitation of the implementation and maintenance of an effective quality management system;
- (4) Familiarity with the requirements for international accreditation; and
- (5) Strengthened competitive position to maintain or increase market share.

International Membership

The Trinidad and Tobago Laboratory Accreditation Service retains active memberships in international accreditation groups namely International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and Inter-American Accreditation Cooperation (IAAC). TTLABS also participates in the work of the committees to ensure that the concerns and the unique challenges of the small and developing economies are brought to bear in the international decision-making forum. This affords TTLABS the opportunity to collaborate, network and establish strong links with accreditation bodies in other countries. In so doing, TTLABS ensures that it is always kept up-to-date on the latest developments on trading arrangements, which may affect the conduct of regional and international businesses for our stakeholders. TTLABS is poised to deliver a level of service which ensures that users of its service can withstand international scrutiny.

TTLABS continues to source international proficiency testing programs for local laboratories and through cooperation with the Caribbean Laboratory Accreditation Service Project, training programs have been and will continue to be made available for laboratory personnel.

Laboratories recognizing the benefits that may accrue from accreditation, are invited to call to discuss the procedure or to clarify any concerns.