



COACH ACADEMY

# ICF Coach Certification Search Guide

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Everything you need to know about ICF coaching certification

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# Your path to ICF coaching certification

Considering becoming an ICF certified coach? People seek the ICF seal of approval to gain professional credibility and earn the next level of credibility and alignment.

Credentials give you the confidence to build the career of your dreams. They help build trust, providing frameworks, strategies and science to back your discipline. And at Coach Academy, you become part of a global community of coaches walking the same path, learning and growing together through peer insights, shared experiences, and professional collaboration.

Walking the path of ICF certification takes time and awareness. Common questions include: How do I know a program is ICF accredited? What makes a program credible? Other things you want to pay attention to: training hours, assessments, and coaching experience.

So, where do you start?

This guide takes you through every aspect of becoming ICF certified. By the end, you'll know exactly what to prepare, what it costs, what you can expect to earn, and how to pick an education program that truly works for your personal and professional goals.

## What is an ICF-certified coach?

An ICF certified coach is a professional who has completed a coach-specific education program that meets the International Coaching Federation (ICF) standards. They have met ethical, educational and practical requirements, demonstrated proficiency in core coaching competencies and have undertaken a minimum of 10 hours of ICF mentoring.

The International Coaching Federation is the world's leading regulatory body for coaching standards, with over 60,000 credentialed members across more than 145 countries. Earning an ICF certification credential signals adherence to the highest standards in qualified coaching.

The ICF stamp is a mark of coaching excellence and professionalism.

### KEY DISTINCTION

The ICF accredits training programs, and grants credentials to individual coaches. Completing an ICF-accredited program is a *prerequisite* for earning a credential. The credential itself is issued by the ICF.

# What to know before you start

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If you want to explore what's ahead as an aspiring ICF coach, take note of these important details:

- **The ICF does not deliver coach education directly:** It approves programs who demonstrate compliance to ICF Standards, ICF Coaching Ethics, and ICF Core Competencies.
- **Expect high standards:** An ICF accredited program is held to regular checks and balances to meet strict quality measures.
- **Expect to be evaluated:** Coaches must complete hours of mentor coaching, submit performance evaluations, pass quizzes, log coaching hours, and write an ICF Knowledge Assessment.
- **Certifications expire:** ICF credentials must be renewed every three years to stay current and demonstrate ongoing competence.

## Specifications to get certified

If your goal is to become an ICF certified coach at any level, these are the specifics you need to prepare for:

- ☐ Complete a coach education program accredited by the ICF
- ☐ Log a minimum number of coaching hours with clients
- ☐ Log a minimum number of mentor coaching hours with a qualified mentor coach
- ☐ Pass a knowledge assessment to demonstrate your understanding of ICF core coaching competencies and ethics
- ☐ Submit recorded coaching sessions for review

You are also required to keep records and documentation of your client hours to maintain your ICF certification over time.

# ICF coaching certification levels

The ICF offers three main levels of credentials, each reflecting increasing depth of training, experience, and demonstrated coaching competence:

## 1. Associate Certified Coach (ACC, Level 1)

This is the entry-level certification, best for coaches starting their coaching career or other professionals who want to integrate coaching into their work.

**Requirements:** 60+ hours of accredited training, at least 100 hours of coaching experience, 10 mentor hours, and performance evaluations.

## 2. Professional Certified Coach (PCC, Level 2)

The PCC is a more comprehensive credential most commonly held by full-time professional coaches, high achievers and people who want to qualify for both Level 1 and 2 credentials with one program. It signals significant commitment to professional development while demonstrating experience and advanced skill. Many corporate coaching contracts require PCC-level credentials or higher.

**Requirements:** 125+ hours of coach training, 500+ hours of coaching experience, 10 mentor hours, and a higher standard evaluation.

## 3. Master Certified Coach (MCC, Level 3)

This is the highest level of ICF certification, held by a small percentage of coaches worldwide. It reflects mastery of coaching competencies, extensive experience, and a sustained commitment to the profession. MCC coaches are often sought for executive coaching, coaching supervision, and mentor coaching roles.

**Requirements:** 200+ hours of coach training, 2,500+ coaching hours, 10 mentor hours, and completing an advanced evaluation.

## Credential comparison at a glance

| REQUIREMENT         | ACC         | PCC       | MCC        |
|---------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|
| Training hours      | 60 hours    | 125 hours | 200 hours  |
| Coaching experience | 100 hrs     | 500 hrs   | 2,500 hrs  |
| Mentor coaching     | 10 hours    | 10 hours  | 10 hours   |
| Performance eval    | ACC level   | PCC level | MCC level  |
| Credentialing exam  | Required    | Required  | Required   |
| Typical timeline    | 6–12 months | 1–3 years | 3–5+ years |

# ICF core competencies

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The ICF Core Competency Model defines the skills and behaviors expected of all professional coaches. These competencies form the basis of ICF's performance evaluations and credentialing exam. There are eight core competencies organized into four domains:

## A. Foundation

- **Demonstrates Ethical Practice:** understands and consistently applies coaching ethics and standards
- **Embodies a Coaching Mindset:** develops and maintains a mindset that is open, curious, flexible, and client-centered

## B. Co-creating the relationship

- **Establishes and Maintains Agreements:** partners with the client and stakeholders to create clear agreements about the coaching relationship, process, plans, and goals
- **Cultivates Trust and Safety:** creates a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely

## C. Communicating effectively

- **Listens Actively:** focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand what is being communicated
- **Evokes Awareness:** facilitates client insight and learning by using powerful questioning, silence, metaphor, or analogy

## D. Cultivating learning and growth

- **Facilitates Client Growth:** partners with the client to turn learning and insight into action and promotes client autonomy

### WHY THIS MATTERS

These eight competencies are the exact framework used to evaluate your coaching performance during the credentialing process. Understanding and embodying them is essential for passing your performance evaluation.

# The ICF credentialing exam

The ICF Credentialing Exam is a standardized, scenario-based assessment that tests your understanding of the ICF Core Competencies and Code of Ethics. It is required for all credential levels.

- **Format:** computer-based, multiple-choice, scenario-driven questions
- **Duration:** 3 hours
- **Delivery:** administered through Pearson VUE (online proctored or at a testing center)
- **Retake policy:** you may retake the exam if needed, with a waiting period and additional fee

## EXAM TIP

The exam tests judgment, and questions present coaching scenarios that ask you to choose the best response based on ICF competencies. Practice applying the core competencies to your coaching conversations rather than studying definitions.

## Credential renewal

ICF credentials must be renewed every three years. This ensures that credentialed coaches continue developing their skills and staying current with evolving standards.

- **Continuing Coach Education (CCE):** minimum 40 hours, including at least 24 hours in core competency development and 16 hours in resource development
- **Renewal fee:** varies by level and membership status, paid to the ICF
- **Timeline:** must be completed within your 3-year renewal window

Coaches who wish to advance to a higher credential level (e.g., ACC to PCC) can do so during their renewal period by meeting the additional requirements for the next level.

# ICF coach certification cost

The costs to become a professional certified coach vary depending on the level you're targeting and the training provider you choose. Here's a comprehensive breakdown:

| COST COMPONENT                       | TYPICAL RANGE      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Foundational courses (ACC / Level 1) | \$3,500 – \$7,000  |
| Advanced courses (PCC / Level 2)     | \$8,000 – \$19,500 |
| Specialized / premium programs       | \$20,000+          |
| Mentor coaching (10 hours)           | \$2,500 – \$4,500  |
| Performance evaluation / portfolio   | \$500 – \$800      |
| ICF credential application fee       | \$200 – \$500      |
| ICF credentialing exam fee           | \$200 – \$375      |
| ICF membership (not required)        | \$300+/year        |

## TOTAL ALL-IN COST

**Expect to invest between \$6,500 and \$15,000+** to earn and keep your ICF professional coach status, including ongoing fees for renewals, maintaining and elevating skills.

*Note: mentor coaching fees are normally included in foundational course fees.*

## Is ICF certification worth it?

If you value self-improvement, professional development, additional revenue sources and investing in yourself: yes, it's worth it.

ICF certification gives instant credibility, ensures you're trained to the highest standards, and often means diversified opportunities to earn income.

According to the ICF Global Coaching Study, credentialed coaches earn on average 31% more than their non-credentialed peers.

Beyond income, the credential provides a framework for ethical practice, access to a global professional community, and a powerful signal of professionalism and quality.

*All prices are approximations and fluctuate.*

## Salary and earnings expectations

Coaching income varies widely based on credential level, specialization, geographic market, and whether you work independently or as a contractor. Here's what current market data shows:

| CREDENTIAL | AVG. HOURLY RATE  | EST. ANNUAL INCOME     |
|------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| ACC        | \$100 – \$175/hr  | \$50,000 – \$90,000    |
| PCC        | \$150 – \$300/hr  | \$75,000 – \$180,000   |
| MCC        | \$250 – \$500+/hr | \$120,000 – \$300,000+ |

An important consideration: independent coaches typically spend 30 to 50% of their working time on business development, marketing, and administration rather than billable coaching.

Coaches who diversify their portfolio with Team and Group Coaching specializations have a higher earning potential. Adding specializations like grief or motivation also increases coaching confidence and broadens a coach's target market.

Many coaches also opt to work as contractors for established coaching agencies or institutions, benefiting from a guaranteed client pipeline and zero marketing costs, which can result in higher effective earnings per hour of effort.

There are many ways to establish a strong coaching practice, and coaching is experiencing a growth trend.

### Factors that influence coaching income

- **Specialization:** professional and leadership coaches command the highest rates.
- **Geographic market:** coaches serving corporate clients in finance, tech, and healthcare earn more per hour.
- **Delivery model:** group coaching and team facilitation will scale income beyond the one-on-one hourly model.
- **Credential level:** each step up (ACC to PCC, PCC to MCC) typically correlates with a 20–40% increase in achievable hourly rates.

*All prices are approximations and fluctuate. Earning potential is based on personal efforts and cannot be guaranteed.*

# Why choose ICF-accredited training

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Picking an ICF-accredited coach education program is about more than a credential. These programs ensure your training actually meets ICF standards. You'll be prepared to give clients the support they need and build a sustainable career.

## 5 benefits of joining an ICF training program

1. **Credibility as a coach:** clients and companies recognize the ICF as the gold standard. It's like wearing a badge of honor.
2. **Earning potential:** ICF credential-holders feel confident charging higher rates.
3. **Networking opportunities:** being part of a global community of professional coaches with chapters around the world offers collaboration and partnering opportunities.
4. **Continued growth:** you have access to ongoing education, advanced training, and relevant industry events.
5. **Ethical standards:** you commit to a code of ethics and professional conduct that sets you apart and protects the consumer.

## Common misconceptions about ICF certification

Let's bust some common myths:

- **"It's just a title."** Coaches who undergo ICF-accredited programs earn their certifications through hours of practice, supervision, mentoring, receiving and working on feedback, and lifelong learning.
- **"I'll take the cheapest program and get it done."** Programs are far from alike: look for experienced and skilled facilitators, backed by a founder who is involved and credentialed, with a robust curriculum. Be sure to look at Google reviews and LinkedIn recommendations. Protect your time and investment by asking to speak to graduates of the programs, read testimonials and ask if there is a high-touch community embedded in the program to support you after your training is done. Coach certification is a lifelong endeavour.
- **"ICF is only for coaches."** ICF credentials are all about professional and personal development. Many individuals choose coaching certification to become better communicators and differentiate themselves while bettering themselves. People also choose Coach Academy certification to be part of a community of like-minded people who value continuous learning and growth.

## 5 benefits of ICF coach certification

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A coach is someone who partners with others to co-create what they want and what is important to them. Coaches support others to work through resistance and to make progress. Think of a coach as a guide or mirror, helping people increase awareness, while also taking responsibility and ownership for their impact.

1. **Learn proven coaching frameworks:** a robust program will offer frameworks, tools, strategies and techniques.
2. **Gain client trust:** with ICF attached to your credentials, it's easier to signal trust, stand out in a crowded market, and attract committed clients.
3. **Set clear boundaries:** ICF trains you in ethics. When it's time to clarify what the client-coach relationship is and what coaching is, you know what to do.
4. **Demonstrate progress clearly:** ICF standards equip you with tools for tracking progress, setting measurable goals, and helping clients reflect on achievements.
5. **Protect your confidence:** community is an essential part of adult learning. Access resources, mentors, unlimited peer coaching and active learning groups to ensure you feel confident to coach anyone.

### How many ICF coaches are there?

In 2026, there are over 60,000 ICF-credentialed coaches across more than 120 countries worldwide. The ICF is a global organization with chapters around the globe. When you get ICF certified, you become part of a strong, established network of professional coaches.

### How to choose the right training program

Undergoing certification is an investment. That's why you need to pick the right program that will be worth it. Here's a step-by-step guide:

1. **Identify what kind of support is important to you:** certain certifications can benefit you more depending on what kind of learner you are and what you need to feel well supported.
2. **Align with your values:** make sure the program you choose supports your values around ethics, community, learning flexibility, and evidence-backed programs.
3. **Check the program accreditation:** verify it's ICF-accredited (Level 1, 2, or 3) on the ICF website.
4. **Review faculty bios:** look for faculty who are practicing, ICF-credentialed coaches with relevant experience.
5. **Compare formats:** online, in-person, or hybrid. Pick the flexibility you need and deserve.

6. **Continuing support:** look for programs that offer community around ongoing mentorship, feedback, and collaboration opportunities.
7. **Clarify hidden fees:** before you enroll, plan ahead for additional fees such as evaluations, exams, etc.
8. **Ask for testimonials:** read feedback from alumni about their experiences post-graduation. Look for Google reviews and active social media accounts. Check for podcasts, LinkedIn pages and look up the founder: who are they? What do they stand for? How involved are they?
9. **Support after program ends:** what do they have in place for ongoing continuous learning? Coaching does not stop after certification. It is just beginning.

## 7 factors for choosing ICF programs online

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There are many ICF-accredited certifications out there, but which one will actually help you build your business? Consider:

1. **ICF accreditation level (Levels 1–3):** the higher the level, the more advanced the course. Note, you do not need an ACC Level 1 credential to enter a Level 2 program. Level 2 programs save time and money when they offer a pathway to Level 1 and 2 certification combined.
2. **Training hours:** how much time are you willing to devote to this? Choose a program that matches your availability.
3. **Mentors:** are there several mentors to choose from, or just a couple? Variety means different perspective and broad experience to draw from.
4. **Live practice:** choose programs with real coaching practice beyond theory, ones that offer demos and extra-curricular skills building, clinics and round tables.
5. **Program structure:** do you prefer solo or group coaching? One-on-ones give you personalized support, but peer support adds to your learning.
6. **Business-building workshops:** aspiring coaches who want to build a business can learn about how to get started, networking, referrals, marketing, and sales.
7. **Coverage:** there's a wide range of certifications available in the market, from basic to niche specializations. Choose a school that will add to your skills and help you gain confidence.

# Become an ICF certified coach: 10-step guide

Ready to make it official? Here's the typical path to become a professional ICF certified coach:

1. **Get clear on your goals**
2. **Choose an ICF certification program level**
3. **Complete the requirements**
4. **Complete the mentoring** (minimum 10 hours)
5. **Practice coaching:** coaching hours: 100 for ACC, 500 for PCC, 2,500 for MCC
6. **Prepare your performance evaluation**
7. **Apply to the ICF**
8. **Pass the ICF exam**
9. **Receive your credential**
10. **Leverage and maintain your certification**

## READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

Earning your place as an ICF certified coach takes commitment, and each step helps you grow. Visit [coachacademy.com](https://coachacademy.com) to explore ICF-accredited certification programs designed to set you up for success.

*This guide is provided for informational purposes and is current as of 2026.*

*Always consult [coachingfederation.org](https://coachingfederation.org) for the most up-to-date requirements.*

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