



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Associate Qualified Security Assessor (QSA) Program

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A QSA Company is a data security firm certified by the PCI SSC to perform on-site assessments of a company's PCI Data Security Standard (PCI DSS) compliance to ensure that robust policies and procedures are in place to protect cardholder data. The QSA Program plays a critical role in the adoption of PCI Security Standards.

The PCI SSC has introduced a new Associate QSA Program for 2018, with the goal of attracting new cyber talent to the QSA Program and easing the resource constraints felt by QSA Companies. The Associate QSA certification will provide a professional path for new entrants to join the payment card industry and gain experience to qualify as a QSA.

This project is part of a broader initiative to evolve the QSA Program to ensure its sustainability and quality in a changing payment environment. Additional changes to the QSA Program will focus on supporting future standards and technologies and attracting new cyber talent to develop the next generation of QSAs.

Q 1 Why did the PCI SSC create the Associate QSA Program?

- A** *An overall shortage of cyber security talent is making it difficult for QSA Companies to find suitable new assessors. As a result, assessors are increasingly expensive to hire and retain, driving assessment costs up for merchants that rely on their services. The Associate QSA certification program is designed to bring new cyber talent to the QSA Program, easing the resource constraints for QSA Companies, and ensuring high quality QSA services are available for merchants and service providers into the future.*

Q 2 How is the Associate QSA certification different than the QSA certification?

- A** *The Associate QSA certification is designed for employees of QSA Companies that do not yet have enough experience to be a QSA but who are interested in achieving QSA certification in the future. It provides a professional path to gain the necessary experience to become a QSA.*

Q 3 What is an Associate QSA eligible to do?

- A** *Associate QSAs can assist in conducting PCI DSS assessments with the oversight of a QSA Mentor at their QSA Company. They are not qualified to confirm PCI DSS compliance or sign off on Attestations of Compliance (AOC) or Reports on Compliance (ROC). This is further detailed in the QSA Qualification Requirements and Program Guide.*

Q 4 What are the pre-requisites to become an Associate QSA?

- A** *Associate QSAs must be employed by an eligible QSA Company. Pre-requisites also include a college or university degree in an IT or security-related field or two years' experience in IT or security. It is the QSA Company's responsibility to nominate appropriate candidates for Associate QSA training.*

Q 5 When will the PCI SSC begin accepting applications for the Associate QSA Program?

- A** *Applications are now being accepted for the Associate QSA Program via the PCI SSC website.*

Q 6 What is involved in the application process for the Associate QSA program?

Companies that have been in the QSA program for two years or more are eligible to submit applications for their employees to become Associate QSAs. There are three key steps to the application process:

1. Applications must be submitted by Primary Contacts via the PCI SSC website. Applications must fulfil all of the Associate QSA Qualification Requirements, which include attesting that a QSA Mentor will be assigned and a Mentor Manual will be submitted to PCI SSC.
2. QSA Mentors must take the PCI SSC one-hour online training module..
3. Associate QSA applicants must successfully complete the Associate QSA online prerequisite PCI Fundamentals course and the two-day instructor-led course and pass the exam. Upon certification, they will be listed on the PCI SSC website.

Q 7 What is a QSA Mentor?

- A** A QSA Mentor is a QSA employee designated by their QSA Company employer to provide guidance and support to an Associate QSA. Some examples of QSA Mentor responsibilities may include onboarding, evaluation of skills and ensuring Associate QSAs are given appropriate assignments to expand their skills and experience. QSA Mentors must be experienced QSA employees. Pre-requisites include having at least three years' QSA experience as a QSA and having managed several PCI DSS Assessments resulting in ROCs.

QSA Companies participating in the Associate QSA Program are required to implement and maintain a formal mentor program to support development of their Associate QSA Employee's assessment skills and techniques. The mentor program must be documented in the QSA Company's Mentor Manual.

Q 8 What is a Mentor Manual?

The Mentor Manual tracks the development of the Associate QSA. It contains template forms available on the PCI SSC portal, which track the experience and skills being acquired by the Associate QSA on their path to becoming a QSA. The forms are maintained by the Associate QSA, the Mentor and the Lead QSA.

Q 9 What is the process for becoming a QSA Mentor?

- A** The QSA Mentor is assigned by the QSA Company Primary Contact or designate and must take the PCI SSC one-hour online training module. There can be no more than three Associate QSAs assigned to a given QSA Mentor at a time.

Q 10 What happens in the case of a failed exam?

- A** It will be the same exam retake process as for QSAs.

Q 11 What does the Associate QSA training cover?

- A** The Associate QSA training equips trainees to perform assessments of merchants and service providers that must comply with the PCI DSS. Associate QSAs complete the same training as QSAs, which includes the online pre-requisite PCI Fundamentals course and two-day instructor-led course.

Q 12 When will Associate QSA training be available?

- A** The training calendar for 2018 is available on the PCI SSC website. Prospective Associate QSAs can sign up for training as soon as they have submitted a program application.

Q 13 How much does it cost to be trained and certified as an Associate QSA?

- A** The pricing is the same as QSA training, which varies by location. The training schedule on the PCI SSC website lists current prices.

Q 14 How long is the Associate QSA certification good for?

- A** *The certification is good for 12 months. At that time, Associate QSAs will need to recertify to maintain status as an Associate QSA and listing on the PCI SSC website.*

Q 15 What is involved in the Associate QSA recertification process?

- A** *The recertification process is the same as the QSA recertification process, requiring completion of an online training and passing an exam and reporting annual Continuing Professional Education (CPE) credits.*

Q 16 Can Associate QSAs take their certification with them from QSA Company to QSA Company?

- A** *Yes. Associate QSAs are able to take their certification with them from QSA Company to QSA Company, subject to the terms of the program being met.*

Q 17 How does an Associate QSA become a QSA?

- A** *Once an Associate QSA can fully meet the QSA Qualification Requirements they are eligible to apply to PCI SSC to become a QSA. Progression from Associate QSA to QSA will not involve re-training or re-taking the QSA exam.*