

An Introduction

Throughout history, humankind's environment has dictated the necessity for every workable system to include a means of checks and balances. This need has long been recognized in various professions to ensure the moral character, integrity, and competence of the individual practitioners.

Until recent years, however, the latent print identification discipline has been divided over the means and types of checks and balances which should be utilized. Many believed that control should be maintained on the local level, thus allowing each individual laboratory to set its own standards of conduct and professionalism. Others have contended that one is an expert only after having been accepted by the court as an expert. Neither view is acceptable, primarily because the examiner is not being judged by their peers, but rather by individuals who in most cases have limited knowledge of the latent print discipline.

The courts have had ample occasion to rule on the matter of an expert's qualifications and their decisions often served as a guide. Generally, it is left to the discretion of the trial court to determine whether the qualifications of a witness are such as to bring the witness within the class of fingerprint expert and its ruling will not be disturbed on appeal unless a flagrant abuse of that discretion is shown.

Nevertheless, in many cases the trial court will determine expertise based solely on the witness's sworn statements while answering qualifying questions. To qualify as an expert on fingerprint comparisons, the witness must show that they have practical experience as well as formal training in the subjects of recording known prints, processing evidence, and the comparison of latent prints. Very little, if any, independent background investigation into the witness's qualifications is conducted.

The need has been recognized to objectively and unequivocally identify latent print examiners qualified to provide essential professional services for the criminal justice system. In response to this need and to a professional mandate, the Latent Print Certification Board was established at the 62nd Annual Conference of the International Association for Identification in New Orleans, LA., on August 4th, 1977. The Board was to establish, implement, and revise as necessary, standards of qualification for those who conduct latent print examinations and to board certify as qualified those voluntary applicants who comply with the requirements of the program. In this way, the program can make available to the judicial system and the public a practical and equitable method for identifying those persons who possess the required qualifications and competence to be considered qualified latent print examiners. In purpose, organization and function, the Latent Print Certification Board is analogous to the certifying boards of other scientific specialties and fields.

Board certification of latent print examiners is based upon the candidate's personal and professional record of qualifications as reviewed by the applicant's peers as well as on the results of a formal examination. This examination contains two sections, including a

latent comparison test to assess the applicant's ability to compare latent prints and arrive at appropriate conclusions, and a written test to assess the applicant's knowledge base, which is critical for understanding the science of fingerprints and being able to testify in court effectively.

Given the successful operation of this certification program since 1977, the first question asked of a latent print examiner prior to their offering expert testimony should be whether the individual is, in fact, board certified. If the answer is "no," it is the right and obligation of the criminal justice system to request a satisfactory explanation as to the reason the witness has not been board certified.

Honesty, integrity, and expertise in this way may be promoted and the system of checks and balances may be utilized to its fullest extent, as well as providing courts and defendants with the assurance of a minimum acceptable standard of an individual's training, education, and expertise. Board certification as a latent print examiner should be the goal of every practicing latent print examiner.

The title, Board Certified Latent Print Examiner (or CLPE) is certainly one to aspire to if you are a latent print examiner working in the field today. Although it is not necessary to be board certified to be an excellent examiner, the IAI certification program is presently the only yardstick available to measure skills and abilities, compared to one's peers.

The decision to apply to become a Board Certified Latent Print Examiner should not be taken lightly, as the test is very challenging. Although recent changes to the test have provided for more time to complete the various portions of the test, it is strongly recommended that you have an appreciable level of experience in comparing latent prints before deciding to apply. Historically, the pass rate has been at, or below 50%. However, recent changes made by the Latent Print Certification Board, along with improved training opportunities in preparing for the test, have yielded a significant increase in the pass rate to now over 70%.

A listing can be found by name or location on the Latent Print Certification section of the IAI's website of those in the latent print field who, having applied for certification, having met all the obligations of education, training and experience, and having satisfactorily completed necessary examinations, were issued certifications and are qualified to be considered "Board Certified Latent Print Examiners."