

AISC Certification: Getting Started and Planning for Success

BY BRIAN W. MILLER

A thorough understanding of the process of becoming AISC Certified goes a long way towards making the experience a valuable one.

IF YOU'RE AN AISC CERTIFIED FABRICATOR OR ERECTOR, YOUR QUALITY SYSTEM RECORDS provide a great deal of the information you need to identify trends, assess customer feedback, and make informed business plans that increase profit and keep you ahead of your competition. If you're not Certified, a review of your returns and the business climate in your area might lead you to conclude that your firm really could benefit from becoming so.

Savvy owners, specifiers, and contractors appreciate the value of first-time quality, and cost and schedule risk mitigation, as well as the innovation of firms committed to quality principles. Building officials value AISC Certification as a means for prequalification and to increase their confidence that the public will be protected with work that adheres to the appropriate building codes. And, owners of Certified firms find that their commitment to quality increases profits by producing higher-margin work and reducing waste and inefficiency in their operations.

AISC Certification often enhances fabricator and erector employee performance as well. Morale improves and turnover declines when everyone understands that they all contribute to the success of the organization. The internal audit process and annual audit by Quality Management Company, LLC open the channels of communication, enhancing knowledge and

understanding through the exchange of ideas and exposure to quality professionals.

Getting started on the AISC Certification track can be a hurdle for some firms. For those of you who have made Certification a goal for 2007, the suggestions offered here may help you to get started on the course to successful achievement of an AISC Certified quality system.

Commitment

Start with a charter, a commitment from top management, to making AISC Certification happen; all successful quality management systems depend on a commitment from top management. Craft a quality policy with quality objectives. The executive management commitment and established organizational priorities provide the framework for the quality policy and goals that are required as part of AISC Certification.

Communication

Executive management must establish and demonstrate by example a policy of open communication, because AISC Certification depends on open communication at all levels. From the bottom to the top of the organization, individuals must be able to communicate defects, inefficiencies, and resource needs in a constructive environment without fear of reprisal. One way to support open communication is through "management by walking around." Talking

with individuals at all levels of an organization builds communication networks and trust. It provides executive management with an avenue to assess and reinforce understanding of organizational goals and AISC Certification requirements. It's an opportunity for a first-hand assessment of challenging areas, as well as an opportunity to celebrate interim success on the road to Certification.

Resources

Perform a management review with your currently available resources. You will likely have more resources to work with if you have a functioning quality system than if you are using AISC Certification as a framework for establishing a quality system from scratch. Become familiar with Certification program criteria before conducting the management review, and identify strengths and weakness in available resources. Section 5.2 of the *Certification Standard for Steel Buildings* and the October 2006 edition of *Quality Corner* offer guidance on management reviews.

Roles

A range of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities are required to establish, maintain, and continually improve an AISC Certified quality system. These characteristics are seldom found in a single individual, and it is risky to try to concentrate them into a single role. A better approach is to identify

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the required characteristics in a number of people serving in the following roles. Establishing and maintaining an AISC Certified quality system requires certain internal core competencies in these roles. Individuals may serve in more than one role, but if at all possible, the functions and responsibilities of these roles should not be outsourced.

Executive management. An AISC Certified quality system functions from the top down. Executive managers must have a thorough understanding of the requirements to achieve and maintain AISC Certification. With this understanding, executive management allocates the resources needed for AISC Certification, resources that can include personnel, facilities, equipment, training, and capital.

Management representative. The management representative serves as the caretaker of the quality system—an extremely important responsibility. This individual will use his or her skills, knowledge of Certification criteria, and quality tools and techniques to bring components of the quality system together and assure that they are working effectively. Executive management should assign this role after careful consideration to a person who has these specific characteristics:

- 1 Familiarity with the organization's processes and products.
- 2 The ability to access and influence individuals at both executive and operational levels.
- 3 Knowledge of quality system elements, tools, and techniques.
- 4 In-depth knowledge of statutory and industry standards and regulations.
- 5 The ability to establish and support two-way communication between executive and operational areas of the company.
- 6 The ability to translate quality system data into the language of management: risk and cost.

Overtaxing the management representative is a serious misstep. Regardless of an operation's size, overseeing the quality system and evaluating quality system information is a big task that requires focus and an extensive skill set. Particularly in smaller operations, there is a temptation to assign the management representative role to the "go-to" individual at the facility without consideration for how existing responsibilities will be managed. The situation can be made even worse when the management representative is expected to produce—as well as be fully responsible for—all aspects of the quality system.

Functional or operations management. Functional managers handle the day-to-day operations throughout an organization, including production. Because production contributes so directly to revenue generation, there may be reluctance to "trouble" functional managers with participation in AISC Certification or the development of a quality system. This approach jeopardizes the Certification effort, because production is generally where the greatest need for process control and quality lies. Functional managers are the key interface between executive management and the workforce. They need to be able to translate management goals and direction into procedures and work instructions that workers will use. Functional managers also need to be able to translate data into the management concerns of cost and risk.

A substantial amount of process documentation may be needed when a relatively new quality system is being AISC Certified. Functional managers are responsible for process control, and for that reason should be fully engaged in developing procedures, work instructions, records, and forms, and ensuring that they are adequate, appropriate, followed, and documented. If the management representative or another external resource develops quality system documentation related to process control, without the direct involvement of functional managers, the documentation is less likely to reflect the actual practice, and the success of the Certification effort will be jeopardized.

Quality assurance and control. The responsibilities of quality assurance and quality control need to be well-defined and understood to succeed with AISC Certification. Quality assurance personnel may be responsible for a broad range of activities within a quality system, including:

- Qualifying and evaluating suppliers and subcontractors.
- Quality planning, goal setting, and determination of metrics.
- Analyzing quality data and information.
- Overseeing quality audits.
- Developing acceptance criteria and performance metrics.
- Developing inspection sampling plans.

Quality assurance personnel have the ability to evaluate, analyze, and modify processes to make them more effective and efficient.

Quality control is appropriately defined as a subset of quality assurance concerned primarily with inspection, testing, and acceptance activities. Quality control per-

sonnel should be skilled and knowledgeable inspectors with excellent record-keeping skills.

Timetable and Progress

Generate enthusiasm and set an aggressive timetable for becoming AISC Certified—no more than six to eight months, even for a new quality system. An aggressive schedule will reinforce top management's commitment to the Certification effort and will keep enthusiasm and focus high. Apply strong project management skills to chart and communicate progress and to keep the effort on track.

The scale of the effort may be daunting, so have the management representative break the Certification process down into manageable pieces and outline the tasks (e.g., documentation, training, auditing) required for Certification. Use a process-based approach supplemented by strong project management to accomplish each task:

- 1 Estimate the effort required for each task.
- 2 Assess the expertise required to accomplish each task.
- 3 Establish a progress scoring system.
- 4 Set a goal for the delivery date of each task.
- 5 Assign leadership and support personnel to each task.
- 6 The management representative should assemble and coordinate input from individual tasks, but should not prepare the input.
- 7 Select an internal audit team from the personnel assigned to the various tasks.

What About Outsourcing?

"Wait a minute," you say. "I don't have the personnel needed to accomplish these tasks in an eight-month time frame. Can't I just hire a consultant and outsource the entire process?"

AISC Certification requires continual support, evaluation and adjustment of your quality management system. If resources are not available internally, consider outsourcing task components, but don't blindly hand over responsibility and control of your quality management system. Keep the four core roles, defined above, internal. If you do outsource, thoroughly evaluate and qualify consultants before hiring. Here are some factors to consider in your evaluation:

- Document evaluation criteria.
- Match experience with need.
- Conduct interviews.

- Get references.
- Establish communication protocol.
- Agree on deliverables.
- Develop an understanding with respect to availability of and access to personnel and expertise.
- Establish a schedule and means for periodic evaluation of the consultant.
- Retain evaluation records for management review and future decision making.

Celebrate Success

Recognize, share, and celebrate progress toward becoming Certified. Charts displaying progress of documentation development, training, and internal auditing can be posted and progress shared and celebrated with newsletters and flyers.

Plan and conduct a successful pre-assessment audit with your internal audit team with guidance from the December 2006 and January 2007 editions of Quality Corner. Exercise your Corrective Action process to correct your internal audit findings, and succeed on your external audit with the Quality Management Company (keep in mind that findings can usually be corrected with the QMC Corrective Action Request process and are a common part of becoming Certified).

When you achieve AISC Certification, celebrate your accomplishment with everyone in your organization. Reinforce its importance and train everyone in your organization how to explain to your customers why it is so important. Remember: Every employee in your organization is a salesperson.

Finally, promote your Certified quality system by announcing your achievement to your customers and clients with advertisements in local trade publications and public media. **MSC**

Brian Miller is AISC's director of certification.

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