

AISC Certified Quality: In Their Own Words

BY KIMBERLY A. SWISS

Certified fabricators share their thoughts on how the program is benefiting their firms.

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PARTICIPATING in or following the AISC Certification program for steel fabricators and erectors, there is no denying that the program is experiencing some very serious growth. In today's economic climate, this expansion is even more remarkable. With AISC Certification appearing in specifications now more than ever, it shows that more project decision makers also realize the importance of certified quality systems. This recognition is one huge factor in what is driving the increase of participants in AISC Certification.

Who can comment any better on the value of AISC Certification than participants who have experienced the benefits firsthand? Consider these comments from Brad Mannstedt, president of steel fabricator Ted Mannstedt & Sons, Inc., La Crosse, Wis. "With

the current economy and the lack of projects bidding on the 'open building exchange markets,' there seems to be an increase in fabricators becoming AISC certified, and even more fabricators desiring certification."

The concern, of course, is that the "value add" of AISC Certification may be diluted if the primary focus of obtaining certification is to acquire work. "If the only reason behind the energies and steps necessary to successfully complete an AISC audit are inspired to enable a fabricator to bid AISC certified work, then they may just be missing some of the best values they can offer their companies," Mannstedt says. "Fully implementing the *Standard for Steel Building Structures* into our fabrication process has increased fabrication accuracy and control, improved our maintenance program for major pieces of equipment, provided consistent material traceability and more. This is achieved by streamlining our operations to become more efficient and profitable, and has also greatly reduced our fieldwork back-charges. We have less downtime on the shop floor because of equipment failures and fewer scheduling conflicts than ever before."

In contrast, what is the experience like for fabricators and erectors who are beginning the AISC Certification process? When confirming that systems are in place, procedures are written, personnel is involved, projects are moving, and processes are flowing, it is then that the "value

add" of having a solid quality management system in place really shows its worth and significance.

That was true for Jennifer Hennessy, AISC coordinator/project manager at Standard Supplies, Inc., Gaithersburg, Md.

"Very early, we found how helpful it was for our company to put together a quality management system for AISC certification," Hennessy says. "The program really helped our company put a genuine focus on quality for both our products and services. We always thought we did a good

job, but when we implemented our [certified] program, we had the ability to find areas where we could improve either our quality or our processes to become a better company. It helped guide us to be a more efficient and productive steel shop; and that makes everyone happy.

"By becoming AISC Certified, our company has learned much more about our industry and how to operate using the best methods and practices," Hennessy continues. "The certification program required us to take a hard look at our documenting processes, or more importantly, the lack thereof. Once we implemented our documenting into all the functions of our business, we saw immediate results. We finally had a record of non-conformances which instantly helped us fix problems and devise strategies to curb them. We finally developed and implemented a material tracking system to accurately track exactly where material is at all times. It was incredible how much we learned when we just wrote things down. Who knew!"

Mark Trimble, P.E., works at Huntington Steel, Huntington, W.Va., a well-established fabricator, and relatively new to AISC certification. "We have completed our first

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year as an AISC certified fabricator,” Trimble says. “Though we had talked about it for years, we really got serious about becoming certified in January 2008. What a difference two years can make! Being in business for 105 years, our company has some built-in credibility, but experiencing the certification journey has really boosted our expectations for quality and customer service.”

Becoming certified has provided Huntington Steel with numerous benefits:

- The company has a marketing advantage over non-certified fabricators.
- The company bids “AISC Certified” projects without needing to request a waiver of the certification requirement.
- Because its procedures were developed using input from team members who would actually be using the procedures, the company staff enjoy a deeper understanding of its Quality Program and reportedly show more “buy-in.”
- Regular evaluation of its Quality Program has resulted in a consistent search for ways to improve.

“Being certified is just a certificate that hangs on the wall,” Trimble says. “The process of becoming certified is where the real value is found. Back when we were still trying to decide if certification was for us, we knew that there were marketing reasons to be AISC certified, but that alone wasn’t enough. We knew we wanted to become a better company and we felt that the process of becoming certified would take us in that direction quickly.”

Appreciating the value of an effective quality management system (QMS) is not limited to AISC Certification newcomers. Steel fabricators and erectors who have been certified for some time are constantly and consistently trying to advance their current processes, streamlining their quality systems, and recognizing different ways to benefit their organizations. For these companies, benefit ties into the concept of continual improvement and seeing if their organization can do that much better.

“Jeffords Steel and Engineering Company has been certified for 10 years,” says Larry Jeffords, president of the Plattsburgh, N.Y.-based firm. “The biggest ‘eye opener’ for me was how many procedures in our production process that we took for

granted could actually have been compromised by suppliers or the workforce. We never had a ‘quarantined’ material pile until we were certified, and for the first few months of certification, I swear the quarantine pile was bigger than most job piles. Little things, like drawing logs and written

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welding procedures, seemed like wasted time, but after instituting the new operating procedure, I don’t know how we ever existed before certification. It is very comfortable for me to say that we are a much better fabricator after certification than we were before. And now I can prove it!”

Keith Corneau, vice president of sales for United Steel, Inc., East Hartford, Conn., offers an interesting perspective as a participant in the two types of AISC certification. “As both an AISC Certified Fabricator and an Advanced Certified Erector, we find that having both provides an overlap that benefits United Steel in its entirety, creating a consistency throughout,” Corneau says. “AISC certification provides a structure that allows for continuous improvement at United Steel. The yearly audits reinforce the importance of safety and quality control, which helps us in providing the best possible service to our customers.”

Seth Bransky is the senior estimator, project manager and QA manager at Munster Steel, a company going into its 17th year of AISC certification. “I think the biggest payoff from our quality system has been the honest look at how our company processes operate,” Bransky says. “A good QA system exposes the gaps, the extra steps, the inefficiencies that you probably did not realize were occurring in your everyday processes and communication. As you analyze your own processes, you can trim away the wasteful steps you do not need and become more efficient. Suddenly, your QA system is saving you money.”

The same analysis process can also show where you may be leaving your company exposed to risk and liability, Bransky notes. “Good documentation and communication are vital for protecting your work, as well as for your customer. When you can dem-

onstrate to your customer that you have a QA system in place that offers good documentation practices, you reduce their risk as well. This is a strong endorsement for keeping that repeat customer.

“I don’t know who to credit for this quote—I saw it on the Internet—‘Quality does not occur by chance... Quality is the result of intelligent activities.’ I believe this is true, and a good QA system can set in place the framework for ‘intelligent activities’ that ultimately benefit your company.”

Continual improvement is a concept that AISC embraces as well. The AISC *Standard for Steel Building Structures*, for example, written in 2005 experienced clarifications and updates in 2006. Moving from a checklist to a standard-based criterion is helping many participants incorporate quality throughout their organizations, because it is an effective resource for supporting customer-focused, management-driven, process-based quality management systems.

“I am very excited about the progress made by the AISC certification program,” says David Harwell, president of Central Texas Ironworks, Inc., Waco, Texas. He notes that until the introduction of the *Standard for Steel Building Structures*, there was no requirement for any fabricator to possess an operating procedures manual, which made it very difficult to make uniform and meaningful audits.

“One of the primary objectives of any certification program is to announce to the marketplace those companies that have achieved the level of quality expected,” Harwell says. “The development and implementation of the building standard was no easy task but it has formed a basis for many fabricators to better understand how their business functions. By identifying the fundamental operating elements of a quality organization and defining their role in the process, fabricators are much more aware of how each element can affect their ability to produce a quality product.

“It is the responsibility of the certified company to place responsible and qualified individuals in their respective roles. By doing so and following an acceptable quality procedures manual the end product will meet the expectations of the customer. Focusing on the importance of providing a quality product to our marketplace is one more reason steel remains the framing material of choice by owners, developers, and construction professionals. At CTIW we continue to embrace the program and have found it very useful in the daily operation of our business.”

The sense of pride that AISC certification participants have is also a tribute to the merits of their efforts. Bruce Basden, CEO

of Basden Steel & Erection, Inc., Burleson, Texas, comments, "AISC certification in both fabrication and erection affords our company something that we have never been able to sport in the past, bona fide credentials. With the certification, I now have instant recognition as a legitimate member of a qualified team. Just as an architect is AIA, or an engineer is P.E., this certification affords the holder a more professional stature."

These testimonials should be music to the ears of all the new participants of the AISC certification family, and those considering joining. Even if the initial reason for becoming AISC certified is to get more work, benefits will come through the process of becoming certified. For some, it takes longer for the advantages to reveal themselves, however, if you look hard enough, you can see it on the wall even before the certificate is printed. **MSC**