

quality corner

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

BY TODD ALWOOD

If they have questions about AISC Certification, you probably do, too; here are some helpful answers to common inquiries.

RECENTLY I WAS IN PHOENIX for a conference where I crossed paths with several construction professionals from different parts of the industry, several of whom had questions about AISC Certification. Besides enjoying the Phoenix weather—decidedly better than midwinter in my hometown of Chicago—I also enjoyed reflecting on the interesting overlap in their questions. The answers to some seem self-evident to one group while being totally unknown to another. Each group is interested in different advantages and requirements of AISC certification programs, but all can learn from considering the questions of different points of view. Below are four examples that represent typical areas of interest for an owner, building code official, certified and non-certified fabricator or erector.

What Do I Gain from AISC Certification?

This question comes up quite often and can point to a variety of interests or concerns, depending on who is asking. In this case it was asked from the owner's perspective. For owners the most significant advantage of dealing with a certified facility or firm typically is that the final project and construction experience are going to be of high quality with fewer mistakes, schedule delays, and change orders. This owner then asked, "Aren't those a given? What else does Certification bring to the table?"

Those are certainly fair questions, but actually there are additional benefits. AISC Certification is seen by many jurisdictions and municipalities as sufficient to waive the special inspection requirements located in *IBC* Chapter 17, which in its 2012 version

defer to Chapter N of the AISC *Specification*. Additional information on Chapter N can be found at www.aisc.org/2010spec, or in the article "Quality Time" in the March 2010 issue of *MSC* (available online at www.modernsteel.com/backissues).

Note that this does not mean that the actual inspections are waived. Rather, it means the fabricator can use in-house personnel to perform the inspections in lieu of an independent third party special inspector, thus saving the additional expense the owner would otherwise incur. The program also shifts risk from the owner (and design professional) to the certified participant and its quality management system (QMS).

Finally, certification offers the owner (and design professional) the ability to have a pool of prequalified bidders for a project. Often owners may be building a project in an area where they do not have a relationship with a specific structural steel fabricator or erector. Certification can help determine that the steel team will have the expected level of quality and will help eliminate from consideration those that do not. The easiest way to find a certified fabricator or erector is to visit www.aisc.org/certsearch, which happens to be one of the top five most visited pages on the AISC website.

What is the Difference Between Certification and Special Inspection, and is One More Beneficial?

This question came from a building code official. Where inspection typically deals with only a company's bolting and welding procedures or final product inspection, QMS certification requires a comprehensive administrative review, documentation audit and an on-site audit to evaluate a company's QMS. The program focuses on the entire process of fabrication and erection—which will *prevent* errors from occurring instead of only inspecting and correcting them after the fact.

Certification requires the company to be accountable for all aspects of its organization, including such items as management responsibility, employee training, material purchasing and handling, and site-specific erection plans. In addition, it requires that these same processes continually improve and evolve each year, so the participant does not remain stagnant but keeps growing, developing and improving.

Even the best and brightest company—regardless of size—can benefit from having its quality procedures reviewed and audited on a regular basis. For additional information on this subject, see "100% Inspection Is Not Quality Assurance" in the January 2010 issue of *MSC*, available at www.modernsteel.com/qualitycorner.



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How Long? How Much?

These two questions came from a non-certified participant who was looking to begin the certification process. The time element is generally a function of their current QMS, because every fabricator or erector is different. If the applicant has a healthy and active QMS, then the typical timeframe will be anywhere from 6 to 10 weeks, depending on the number of applicants and ability of scheduling the onsite audit.

A resource that visually oriented readers may find useful is the Certification Process Outline/Flowchart available on the AISC Certification website at

www.aisc.org/certprocess.

This identifies in a clear and effective graphical presentation all the aspects of certification and their approximate timeframes.

As for the question of cost, fees are different for fabricators and erectors. Fabricators have the option of becoming full members of AISC and receive a fee discount as a membership benefit. The fabricator fees are based on the category of certification desired and the number of com-

pany employees, whereas the erector certification is based on category only. Fees can vary, but if you are a domestic, member fabricator with less than 99 employees, the program cost of certification is going to be less than \$5,000 a year, which includes all standard certification services and resources for that calendar year. More information on certification fees, as well as other resources, category criteria and applications, can be found at www.aisc.org/certdocs.

How Do We Protect the Requirement for Certification?

Another conversation, this time with a certified participant, had to do with the issue of the certification requirements being

waived by project teams. AISC's "No More Waivers" program resource is intended to help specifiers and certified participants respond when a project's quality requirements are under pressure to be waived. Since its inception, the program's goal has been to educate project owners and designers about the value of AISC Certification, and that their overall risk will be reduced by using a quality participant. The program currently relies on specifiers and our participants (participant names are kept confidential) to identify potential projects and engage AISC as a partner to counter waiver efforts and maintain the quality requirements.

During the third quarter of 2011, for example, 35 projects came through this initiative. Typically when a project comes to our attention, it is by way of a certified participant and there is a 33% possibility the certification requirements have already been waived by the specifier or the GC has awarded the project to a non-certified participant. If the project has not been waived, we typically have a 60% possibility of maintaining the certification requirements by

reaching out to the project owners and designers about the value of AISC Certification.

Regardless of when a project comes to our attention, we strive to educate the project team about the benefits of the certification program. During the most recent quarter, we made 197 waiver contacts—phone calls, emails, letters and other contacts—to promote the program on a person-to-person basis. Of course, the earlier AISC is involved, the better the chance of maintaining the certification requirements.

As always, if you have additional questions or comments on these or other items related to AISC Certification, you are encouraged to contact us at certification@aisc.org. **MSC**

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