

What's All The Fuss About Certification?

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

Question: My firm just submitted a proposed design to an authority having jurisdiction for pre-construction review. The AHJ responded asking to see evidence that we were certified to do this type of work. What gives?

Answer: Welcome to the year 2000. You have become a part of an ever-growing movement in the United States and throughout North America that seeks to assure competency. In virtually every walk of life, federal, state, or local jurisdictions now require persons who perform professional services to provide assurance that they can competently provide those services.

Consumer advocacy groups have jumped on this bandwagon as well. "How do you know your service provider has the proper qualifications?" Purchasers of professional services ask this question with daily regularity. In response, everyone from trial lawyers, to neo-natal nurses, to highway construction forepersons, to landscape gardeners, to meeting planners, to, well, just about any job task, have begun to implement certification programs to help assure the competency of persons performing that job task.

No wonder more and more authorities having jurisdiction have begun to seek assurance that those providing fire alarm systems in their jurisdictions have some tangible proof of competency.

They have learned that competency springs from knowledge. Knowledge springs from education and training. Education acquired by attending seminars and studying the requirements of such documents as NFPA 72-1999, *National Fire Alarm Code*. Training acquired by on-the-job experience and by receiving guidance from an experience and competent mentor.

IMSA has long held a position at the forefront of competency assurance. Hundreds of individuals who seek to have some documentation of their competency have participated in one or more of IMSA's certification programs.

And, IMSA has not limited its efforts merely to providing a means of certification. Indeed, IMSA has developed a training program for persons seeking certification that offers a broad range of information. Well-respected moderators teach these courses. They offer not only expertise in the knowledge-base of each course, but they also offer many years of professional experience.

Answering tough questions often becomes the highlight of an IMSA training session. With the collective wisdom of those who attend, guided by a knowledgeable moderator, no question goes unanswered. And, with each answered question, competency builds.

In this column for the last two issues of the 1998 *IMSA Journal*, I suggested a game plan to assure that every fire alarm installation achieved competency. Those of you who remember those articles will recall that I stressed the importance of personal competency.

That's what certification is really all about: personal competency. Assurance that YOU, as an individual, can perform a job task competently in every situation.

Well-designed certification programs, such as those created by your fellow members of IMSA, has the ability to measure a number of variables that help assure competency. They can measure your knowledge and understanding of important concepts. They can measure your ability to take somewhat abstract requirements and apply them to specific field applications. They can

provide an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to use information in a variety of problem-solving activities.

Truthfully, one activity exists that even the best certification program cannot assure. Will you choose to use the knowledge and skills you have acquired. That's right. Seems almost silly to think about. Doesn't it?

Yet in job after job, authorities having jurisdiction encounter skilled craftspersons who have failed to use the knowledge and skills they possess to make certain a fire alarm installation provides a competent level of protection. The reasons for this failure may well vary widely. Just as the personalities and proclivities of individuals vary widely.

Does the purchaser of a fire alarm system expect competency? Do authorities having jurisdiction count on competency to minimize false alarms and assure a continued level of protection? Does someone who strives to perform in a professional manner want to demonstrate competency? The answers to these questions is, of course, a resounding "YES!"

So let me encourage you. Yes, you! If you have not taken the opportunity to avail yourself of the certification programs offered by IMSA, I urge you to do so today. Contact IMSA Headquarters. Sign up for the next training class your Chapter offers. Complete the requirements for certification. And enjoy this mark of professionalism.

You will benefit. Your customers will benefit. The jurisdictions where you install systems will benefit. Or, if your job requires you to review the design work others, your competency will also contribute significantly to the professionalism and competency of fire alarm systems in your jurisdiction.

Certification helps achieve competency. Not as a future dream; but as a present reality.

IMSA member Dean K. Wilson, a licensed professional fire protection engineer with an office in Windsor, CT, serves as a Senior Engineer with the fire protection engineering and code consulting firm, Hughes Associates, Inc. (www.haifire.com). The opinions expressed in this article are strictly his own. You can reach him by phone at (860) 687-1009; by FAX at (860) 687-1308; or by e-mail at dwilson@haifire.com.