



Scott L. Melnick

This past summer I had what I hoped would be a nice fence installed along the side of my house. I thought I had thoroughly vetted the company I hired—I checked references, interviewed them, and even took a peek at a couple of their other jobs. But when my fence was finished, I was very unhappy. We had considered a vinyl fence, but my wife much preferred the look of wood, so we specified a western red cedar fence. Unfortunately, our installer purchased the material from a major national chain—and their product was inferior. It was so bad that we had a rep from the chain come out to look at the fence. They agreed it was of poor quality, but they said that it met their quality standards so they wouldn't replace the material.

In retrospect, my problem was that I wasn't an expert of fences or fence installation. I didn't know the right questions to ask. In this case, I should have asked my installer where they were buying the material—and then I should have talked to that company about quality. Frankly, though, I'm still not sure if I know the right questions to ask (grade of wood, spacing between planks, and probably a whole lot more).

A lot of engineers and contractors are faced with a similar situation when they deal with specialty steel contractors. Fortunately, there is a solution. The AISC Certification program is a rigorous examination that evaluates a company's quality management system (rather than the specific product). Auditors review the company's entire system from receipt of contract through final delivery, review project requirements and project records, interview personnel, and observe practices and equipment to confirm the proper quality standards and procedures are in place.

Increasingly, structural engineers are specifying AISC Certification. However, they also are frequently asked to waive the specification. Why do some contractors pressure the engineer and owner to waive the requirement? Bobbi Marsteller, AISC's Vice President of Certification reports that there are numerous myths about the program.

For example, one common misconception is that certified companies are more expensive. But Marsteller believes that in reality a good quality program will actually make a company more efficient—and therefore can often result in more competitive bids.

Other contractors think they can save money by simply hiring an inspector later for a couple of thousand bucks. Often, however, this is a false economy. Finding—and fixing—mistakes after they're made is expensive and time consuming. It's important to remember that special inspection costs are covered directly by the owner. Often the increased costs of using non-certified fabricators are overlooked and result in inaccurate bid comparisons.

And some contractors will claim there aren't any certified fabricators or erectors in the area. In reality, most specialty steel contractors work in a multi-state region. So just because there are no certified companies in the same city as the project, there are usually plenty among the more than 700 AISC Certified fabricators and erectors who perform work in that city.

Finally, some contractors mistakenly equate length of time in business with quality. While there are good companies that are not certified, it's difficult for an engineer to assess and evaluate a specific company. The AISC Certification program audits against real codes and contracts and requires the fabricator or erector to demonstrate that they can follow current code and contract requirements. AISC Certification ensures that even a good firm doing quality work for longer than you or I have been alive is up-to-date.

This issue includes a listing of certified fabricators and you can always find the most current information about certification at www.aisc.org/certification. And if you have any questions about certification—and especially about waiver issues—I urge you to contact the AISC Certification Department directly at 312.670.7520 or email info@qmconline.com.

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