

## Five Questions I'm Asked Every Day

BY KIMBERLY A. SWISS

**Quality Management Company's manager of certification administration answers five important and frequent questions about AISC certification.**

**YES, I'M AN INTERNET JUNKIE.** I will do anything that I can online—from ordering groceries to reading the newspaper. I look for the answers to life's tough questions via the Internet.

At times, I become incredibly disappointed with web sites that don't provide solutions or can't predict my needs, and lately I have become aware of the limitations of canned, one-size-fits-all responses that are available on the Internet.

Quality Management Company (QMC) has posted more than 100 frequently asked questions (FAQs) about AISC fabricator and erector certification on our web site ([www.qmconline.com](http://www.qmconline.com)) so that you have the answers you need at your fingertips. And although I think that our FAQs are a great tool, I realize that it isn't always that simple; some questions may require a conversation or two. So, as I share the top five questions I get asked everyday (and their answers, of course), I hope the message is clear: We want you to have the information you need when you need it, but if you don't find it online, just ask.

### What is the difference between AISC Certification and AISC Membership?

AISC certification and AISC membership are separate, and certification is not required for membership, nor is the reverse. AISC membership helps support the Association's technical and marketing activities, ranging from the development of the *Specification for Structural Steel Buildings* to the AISC Steel Solutions Center to our efforts to promote the use of fabricated structural steel. For more information on becoming an AISC member, visit [www.aisc.org/membership](http://www.aisc.org/membership) or contact Carly Moore at [moore@aisc.org](mailto:moore@aisc.org) or 312.670.5442.

Companies that become AISC Certified, on the other hand, do so to demonstrate to their customers that they have the personnel, knowledge, organization, equipment, experience, capability, procedures, and commitment to produce the required quality of work per AISC's certification standards. Certi-

fied firms are audited annually by QMC in order to verify the effectiveness of their quality management system. AISC certification signifies that quality is built into a project, and not inspected for after the fact. While a certified quality management system is a very significant benefit, AISC Certified companies also receive support from AISC via our "No More Waivers!" Program; are able to use the AISC certification logo for company letterhead, business cards, and websites; and are listed on the AISC web site in the certified fabricators directory with a direct Internet link to the company's web site. For more information, including application and fee information, please visit the AISC web site at: [www.aisc.org/certification](http://www.aisc.org/certification).

While a company does not have to participate in one of these programs in order to participate in the other, many participate in both. Approximately two-thirds of AISC fabricator members are certified, and approximately one-third of AISC Certified companies are not members (this includes companies located outside the U.S. who are not eligible for AISC membership).

### How long does it take to get certified, and/or what does it take to become certified?

I get this question more than once a day, and I always say the same thing: "How long it takes to become certified is more contingent on you than it is on us." I say this because QMC always wants to meet a company wherever they are currently at in the quality process and work with them to reach the finish line. For example, if a company already has a quality system implemented and has documented what they are doing, they might get through the process faster than a company who is just beginning to write their quality manual. Having said that, see our July 2005 Quality Corner article "Good Things Take Time" at [www.aisc.org/quality-corner](http://www.aisc.org/quality-corner). This article contains a timeline that details how long it takes to become certified and can be



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**Quality Corner** is a monthly feature that covers topics ranging from how to specify a certified company to how long it takes to become a certified company. If you are interested in browsing our electronic archive, please visit [www.aisc.org/QualityCorner](http://www.aisc.org/QualityCorner).

very helpful to those entering the program for the first time.

This is such a popular question because many first-time applicants are on a tight schedule and need to become AISC Certified in order to bid on a job that requires it. The urgency of this situation is significant, and we work diligently to get companies where we they need to be. In fact, we even offer an expediting option where an auditor can be at a domestic facility within three weeks of the completion of the documentation audit.

In order to start the process, we do require full materials, an application, and payment. Documentation requirements depend on which certification category you are applying for. Please visit the AISC website at [www.aisc.org/become\\_certified](http://www.aisc.org/become_certified) for the specific requirements.

### Is Certification only for large companies?

Absolutely not. All shops should be concerned with quality. To date, there are nearly 90 certified companies with 20 or fewer employees. There is a basic level of quality that all AISC Certified companies meet, regardless of shop or project size. Obviously, at a smaller company employees wear many hats, but that's both expected and acceptable within the certification program.

### How do audits get scheduled?

With nearly 800 audits to conduct each year, scheduling can be a little tricky for QMC. The goal is to visit as many fabricators as we can in one area at a time, allowing us to pass the savings on to our customers.

QMC audits annually on what is considered a three-year cycle. The first audit is what we refer to as the *Initial*, and we do an audit of all the required criteria. The year that follows is what is referred to as an *Annual Review 1 (AR1)*, where we audit approximately half of the required criteria. On year three, we perform an *Annual Review 2 (AR2)*, where we audit the rest of the required criteria. The year after that is the *Full* audit, where we look at all the criteria again.

When a company takes the beginning steps toward becoming AISC Certified and has submitted payment and passed their documentation audit, the process of scheduling their on-site audit begins. I start by asking the certification contact when they would like to have their on-site audit, and then I look at auditor's schedules to accom-

modate the proposed time frame. After this, the auditor takes over, sending an audit plan and introduction letter, and eventually conducting the audit.

Once a fabricator passes their initial audit and becomes AISC Certified, I immediately plan for future audits. The first step is to look for other companies that will be audited in their area, since we put each fabricator in a "scheduling package" with other fabricators in their vicinity. I also try to choose a package that is as close to one year from the initial audit as possible, since we audit on an annual basis and want to give the customers a year before being audited again. Most times, I am successful, but for certain locations, we only visit once a year and may have to have a time frame of eight or nine months between the first initial audit and the first annual review audit. In subsequent years, we send out the audit date notice to all the fabricators four months prior to the certification month. Having each company in a package helps to ensure that our customers can forecast a time frame for their audit and we can see as many clients as we can while in one area. All of this becomes more complicated by the fact that the auditors live all over the country and audit all over the world.

Scheduling erector audits is slightly different, since job site locations for erectors can vary, and certified erectors are more dispersed; it is difficult to put them in the same package system that the fabricators are in. So instead, I put them in a month package, October for instance, and ask that the auditor contact them to set up their audit based on when they are erecting steel during that month.

Occasionally, it is possible that a company's certification month can change. Every three to four years it becomes necessary to adjust our audit schedules in order to evenly distribute the number of audits conducted each month, particularly when the program grows as much as it has in the last year. Should your company be impacted by this process, you will receive notice several months in advance of your audit.

### Why don't I have the same auditor every year?

We strive to send a different auditor to a given facility whenever possible and practical. The contract auditors who audit for the AISC certification program go through continuous training with QMC and AISC in order to stay updated on program goals, criteria, and industry trends. This training

could be viewed as a type of calibration, but since the contract auditors are human beings, calibration can not truly be expected. And while we strive to achieve consistency, we also find great value in the differences between the auditors due to their professional and personal experience and knowledge, which they can share with each participant, thereby enriching the value of the program. We find it to be a positive aspect when one auditor sees something that the previous auditor did not.

We certainly appreciate hearing from you and welcome your questions in order to better serve you. Knowing your concerns and our ambiguities is important to QMC's continuous improvement, and it helps us to be as effective as possible for our customers. Please call me at 312.670.7521 or email me at [swiss@qmconline.com](mailto:swiss@qmconline.com) whenever you have a question, and be sure to visit [www.qmconline.com](http://www.qmconline.com) for valuable resources.

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