



Compliance Services & Assessments

Contractor Qualifications

“Without Assessments, all you have are Assumptions!”

Are you an Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) who requires NICET certification? Are you an AHJ who administers your own contractor tests? Are you an AHJ wanting to ensure contractors are qualified? Are you a specifying engineer wanting qualified contractors on your jobs? Are you a contractor who needs to be able to demonstrate to an AHJ or engineer that you are qualified? If you answered yes to any of these, we can help.

In 2002 a Fire Protection Engineer working for a large municipal fire department founded Codes & Standards Assessments (CSA), now known as Compliance Services and Assessments, LC. Having had over twenty years in the fire service in addition to construction experience, the founder was determined to find a high quality, easy to implement, low cost, and politically favorable approach to evaluating contractor qualifications. As a result CSA developed assessments related to fire alarms, sprinklers, fire extinguishers, kitchen hoods, underground fire mains, and more. These tests were primarily developed to assist AHJ's who for various reasons could not enforce NICET certifications or who were not able to develop, administer, or maintain in-house testing programs. As more AHJ's recognized that NICET is geared around designers rather than installers, they recognized the need for an installer based program focused on fire protection and life safety. Over the years, a number of contractors have started using our assessments for internal development and promotions even when the AHJ did not require it.

CSA is frequently contacted by contractors who are trying to help their local or state AHJ establish a fair and effective means of evaluating contractor qualifications. Contractors dedicated to the installation and service of life safety systems are often very supportive of implementing fair qualification policies. However, contractors will often resist the implementation of qualification requirements that do not appropriately address the needs of all involved. Examples of inadequate programs that contractors regularly discuss include:

- Expecting installers to follow a long and costly qualification path that was developed and is still intended for career designers rather than for field installers.
- Allowing low voltage installers to attend a three-day seminar that barely mentions fire alarm systems, and take an exam (with the support of the instructors) at the end of the seminar.
- Requiring contractors to take a test that has been thrown together in-house by the local AHJ with poorly worded questions, and often out of date.
- Requiring nothing of contractors demonstrating qualifications, and letting anybody install life safety systems.
- Quality contractors want a level playing field. In a low-bid market it is hard to be competitive spending time and money to train employees if the competition is not held to the same expectations.

BASIC CONCEPT BEHIND ASSESSMENTS:

CSA assessments are Internet based. CSA performed an extensive search and even switched software until we found the software developer that could meet our standards of security, flexibility, customer support, and a proven record of excellence. The reason we chose Internet service from the start was to provide flexibility using the latest technologies. Our large



assessment database is maintained on dedicated secure servers maintained by the software manufacture. This assures the most current software and dedicated support. It also allows our assessments to be delivered daily anywhere in the world. Our assessments can usually be taken within one to two weeks of submitting request. Assessments are delivered at professionally monitored proctoring centers.

OPTIONS TO QUALIFICATIONS:

Compliance Services and Assessments fully supports any qualification program that effectively evaluates installers of life safety systems to national standards and codes. Some jurisdictions recognize certification through agencies such as the National Institute for Certification in Engineering Technologies (NICET), or industry related associations that target life safety applications. Although these certifications can be effective, many have limitations.

- Limited testing dates (local locations may only offer a few test dates per year)
- Limited testing locations (there may not be any local test locations)
- Long and detailed application process (application and experience may not be reviewed until after test is passed)
- Long wait to get results and certification (3 months or more)
- High costs including application fees, testing fees, proctoring fees, travel expenses, etc.
- May require years of experience to reach a technician level
- Tests cannot be tailored to allow for local amendments or local interpretations
- Some agencies do not allow use of books with highlights or tabbed pages. This requires dedicated test books from those used by the contractor on daily basis. This can be expensive.

CSA assessments are intended to see if the contractor is qualified. Not how long it took them to learn the material. Not how they learned it. Not how many references or forms they can provide. Rather our goal is to establish if installers know the material and the code requirements. To ensure contractors stay up to date with codes, we require re-testing every three years. Our questions are reviewed and exams updated every three years. No PDH's, CEU's, or other training records for contractors to keep up with.

Because CSA assessments are generally one-half to one-third the cost of alternate certification programs, it is an easier sell to the contractors and city council members. Electrical contractors who frequently install most of the fire alarm systems can be effectively evaluated to minimum qualifications. Sprinkler pipe fitters can be evaluated to assure they can properly address common field conditions. Decreased cost, flexible test scheduling, and ease of administering makes our assessments fill the voids left by other assessment programs. We support inspectors being held to the same accountability. Ask us how we can support an inspector's performance evaluation at little to no cost to the jurisdiction.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Nearly every code already requires that installers be qualified for the work they perform. Therefore, you likely do not need to make any changes to your adopted codes, or city ordinance. All that is needed is for the AHJ to enforce the codes they have already adopted. We suggest



that the fire marshal or building official develop a written regulation / policy that clarifies how they expect the contractors to demonstrate their qualifications. The AHJ should discuss the concept with local trade associations to gather their feedback and explain that they are trying to establish means of enforcing their adopted codes while ensuring that all life safety contractors are being held to providing qualified employees. Most AHJ's will want to run the concept by their council members to explain the reasons for compliance and get their support. CSA can provide information and pamphlets to help with this effort. Then we recommend that AHJ's establish an enforcement date with six months of notice so that contractors can start training and testing their employees.

It is important to get the support of those contractors who want to do things right. Because you will help to level the market with qualified installers, they are usually very supportive in your efforts. The individuals who will likely complain are often the lowest bidding contractors that may not even own the code books you enforce. You would be amazed at how many calls our office takes from contractors complaining about having to take a test, only to ask us where to purchase the code books needed for the test. CSA has several sample ordinances and regulations that have been used to achieve enforcement of your adopted codes. We can also provide contacts with other AHJ's who have successfully raised the bar of their contractors.

DISPLAYING QUALIFICATIONS:

Not only does CSA pride itself in questions and material that actually relates to the expectation of installers, our quality ID card is like no other. Our qualification card incorporates:



- The individuals picture from the test center
- Up to five qualifications and expirations on a single card
- The contracting company name so the AHJ can verify the employee actually works for the company on the permit.
- PVC credit card quality with protective laminate to resist scratches
- A bar code that could be used with field inspection equipment
- Low cost replacement card within a few days
- Background images often representing features of the contractor's home state.
- Unique ID number that can be incorporated onto inspection reports and service tags.
- Have been required by general contractors on jobs to avoid getting a stop-work order issued.

Take a closer look at CSA. If we do not currently meet your needs, just ask. We are here for you. There is no cost to the jurisdiction to enforce their codes and keep the public safe.

For additional information visit www.CSAexams.com, email info@csaexams.com, or call 501-679-3345.