

The Necessity of Becoming NICET Certified

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Fire technicians from one end of the United States to the other are likely to know the NICET name. Little by little, during the course of two decades, NICET certification has gained considerable recognition as a means of assuring the knowledge and skill level of fire technicians and system designers in the fire alarm industry.

As fire marshals and code enforcement officers from a growing number of states and local communities seek innovative ways to improve fire safety in their jurisdictions, many are turning to NICET. The simple fact is NICET certification does help assure quality control.

"Right now there are probably somewhere around 12 or 13 states that have a NICET requirement for fire alarms. But there are even more municipalities that want installers to have it," says Charles Aulner, president of National Training Center (NTC) of Las Vegas. "The exact requirements imposed will vary from state to state, city to city."

NICET certification programs are created and administered by the National Institute for Certification in Engineering Technologies (NICET), based in Alexandria, Va. Following is a discussion of the value this program offers, along with specifics about how to best prepare for, take and pass the testing required to become certified.

NICET Becomes Institutionalized

If there's a single reason that should compel fire alarm technicians and system designers to become NICET certified, it's probably the fact that more and more jurisdictions are making it a prerequisite to the bid process.

"Professionalism is one reason why fire alarm professionals need to be NICET certified," says Aulner. "But another one is related to job requirements. For example, in government jobs we're seeing NICET required more often. It's getting to the point where just to bid a job you must be NICET certified."

According to one NICET official, many federal agencies and departments are actually requiring NICET for their own technicians and designers.

"We're seeing a lot of movement toward certification in government," says Dr. Louise Wehrle, certification program developer with NICET. "The DoD [Department of Defense] is accepting certification for certain personnel and we think it will filter down through the [government] contractor community once DoD and other agencies begin to require it."

As in other areas of society where new technologies and legislative procedures are involved, when such a requirement becomes commonplace at the federal level, state and local governments usually draft similar legislation.

The bottom line is that at some point in the future, as stated by a growing number of building department and fire officials, "if you want to work in my jurisdiction, you'll be NICET certified."

Certification Assures Competency

NICET has been around for several decades. The organization was an outcrop of the Institute for Certified Engineering Technicians (ICET).

The membership of NICET's parent organization, the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), came to realize the technicians who installed their firm's fire alarm systems were not themselves licensed or certified. As a group, it was then decided to create a certification program whereby these technicians could be tested and certified as competent.

"Michigan adopted licensing for fire alarm technicians in 1992, and NICET Level II in fire alarms is a prerequisite for taking the state licensing exam. Fire alarm installations are treated like all other electrical installations, requiring electrical permits and inspections," says Dan Decker, president of Safety Systems Inc. of Jackson, Mich.

No longer is it enough to know how to stick a fire alarm panel on the wall and fasten and wire smoke detectors to the ceiling. Installers must understand code issues as well as the technology behind system components.

"In my opinion, requiring NICET certification has been a positive step. I believe that having NICET-certified staff is another layer in our risk mitigation. We work in an industry with more than its fair share of risk, and having technicians trained by the manufacturer and certified by NICET is not only responsible, it is good for the future of our business," says Decker.

Decker believes technicians who attain NICET certification demonstrate familiarity with NFPA 72 and NEC, two essential code documents. Not only that, but he says that educated personnel who install fire systems are less likely to make the same high level of errors that occurred prior to licensing requirements.

Certification Takes Determination

According to a recent NICET press release, "The number of certificates for fire protection professionals passed 20,000 in February 2007. NICET attributes this milestone to the fire protection industry's commitment to public safety."

Today, support for NICET among the fire protection industry is increasing as awareness grows concerning common problems and failings in past fire system installations.

"Many of the people who are listed by NICET have helped us a lot in terms of providing expertise to the program content. Many of them we have alliances with because they are in the field or they train people in particular in the area of fire alarm technology," says Wehrle. "Many of these people are listed on the NICET Web site."

The fact is the NICET testing program is not easy to navigate and pass the first, or even the second, time around. In fact, according to NTC's Aulner, Level I can be attained in a single test, but the process can take up to six months from start to finish — from registration through the study process to taking the test.

"Level II generally takes two or three tries [tests] to pass it. So for most dealers with a typical work schedule who cannot test every cycle, it will probably take a year to a

year-and-a-half for them to attain Level II — that's start to finish," says Aulner. "A lot of people think that it's just a matter of going in and passing the test when it's given in their area, but it's not like that at all."

With this in mind, if NICET has already issued 20,000 certificates to qualified fire alarm technicians, and if it's not an easy test to pass, then just how many individuals fail to achieve NICET certification? It would seem that the number must run high.

"Not so," says Wehrle. "Most of the people who begin working their way through the program stick with it until they are successful in attaining the level of certification they need."

The Basic Mechanics of Levels I-IV

There are four levels of certification available through NICET. Level I requires a minimal amount of field experience. Level II requires six to 18 months, and Level III requires at least five years. Level IV requires 10 years with the addition of supervision of a major project.

NICET testing is arranged in what is called work elements.

"Work elements are a series of five to 15 multiple-choice questions on specific fire alarm or fire alarm-related subjects. You must pass at least 60 percent of the questions in order to pass the work element." ("Brown Book, Fire Alarm Systems, Design and Installation," NTC, Las Vegas)

The way it works in practice is in order to pass a specific NICET level, a specific number and type of work elements are required, in addition to the work experience requirements cited above.

Work elements are classified as General and Special. The technician/designer must pass a given number of each to achieve certification. According to Aulner's "Brown Book," General work elements are further broken down into Core and Non-Core elements. The Core elements are required for certification at any of the four NICET levels.

For more information on NICET certification, go to www.nicet.org, or for a list of Core and Non-Core elements and other necessary information, download the "Fire Alarm Systems Program Detail Manual" at www.nicet.org/nicetmanuals/alarms.pdf. You can also interact with NICET-certified fire alarm installers and system designers at www.firenetonline.com.

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