

Certification Drives Excellence

Tim Brink

It's my belief that certifying personnel is the best way to ensure quality and safety in the plumbing systems we build. Although expensive, a measurable form of education ensures the level of technical expertise required to design, build, and install safe plumbing systems. Certification is certainly a form of measurement that can guarantee reliable and well-built sanitary systems.

In much of the world, disease prevention via safe sanitary plumbing and water treatment systems is an established fact. The development of modern plumbing systems was the one innovation that brought mankind out of the dark ages of poor sanitation into a world of safe water and sanitary systems. This transformation was made possible, in part, due to an established set of plumbing codes that constantly are monitored and updated to protect us. Those who plan, design, and install plumbing systems require knowledge of these plumbing codes to maintain the population's health.

Safety Starts With Education

Education in the plumbing industry is carried out on a number of levels: traditional apprenticeship programs and continuing education programs for journey-level craftspeople, contractors, inspectors, and engineers. Education for special applications—backflow prevention, medical gas piping, welding, brazing, thermoplastic fusion, instrumentation, and calibration, to name a few—is also common in the industry.

While no rational person would dare argue (at least publicly) that education of professionals in the plumbing and piping industry is not necessary, personnel certification often is opposed, mostly for economic reasons.

It seems reasonable to argue that the groups that give unqualified support to education and training also should support certification for quality assurance reasons. Almost everyone in the industry has witnessed the waste of money and sometimes even the loss of human life that result from a lack of education.

Carrying the Process Further

Although education plays a key role in the plumbing and piping industry, it is unrealistic to expect plumbing and piping professionals to take on the burden of formal study without some incentive. Certification provides a tangible reward and sets a standard for each job title. Once certified, the engineer, plumber, plan reviewer, or inspector has recognized proof of his competency. This symbol of achievement validates the practitioner and her function in the eyes of colleagues, business contacts, purchasers of construction services, and the public.

The model code organizations, the United Association, the Mechanical Contractors Association of America, and many other employer associations support the concept of personnel certification as an essential step in maintaining and upgrading the qualifications of industry professionals. Many local, state, and even national governments have found that certification of personnel improves the level of service.

Government Plays a Vital Role

A California plumbing contractor once told me: "My main area of work is east of the city of Los Angeles. When I get a project in L.A., I know I have to send my best plumbers to that job because the city has a journeyman license law." This is an excellent example of the role government can play in upholding quality in the industry.

Most governments at all levels have administrative divisions that oversee the approval of the design, permitting, and inspection processes. The approval process is an area in which governments can advocate personnel certification. By mandates in the form of ordinances, bills, or public laws, governments are able to affect quality. When laws requiring certification are enacted and enforced, they have a direct effect on causing a high quality of work.

I believe that governments should enact and enforce laws that require engineers, contractors, craftspeople, and inspectors to be licensed and/or certi-

fied. This will complete an often-missing section of the circle of professional qualifications for plumbing and piping personnel, thus providing an extra and necessary level of quality in the protection of the public's safety and health.

Working Together

Voluntary adoption of international standards by private industries as a means of reducing risk and assuring quality is already in practice. Manufacturers of plumbing products have long embraced standards as an effective and necessary way of doing business. What does it say about an industry that produces products made to certain standards but ignores standards of qualification for its practitioners? Now that the ISO/IEC 17024 standard is available, private industry, unions, and associations should commit to adopting personnel certification as aggressively as they have adopted other standards.

A determined effort by governments and private industry to demand education and certification in the plumbing and piping industry can make societies safer. Water conservation and the expanding use of recycled water require the development of new technology, which results in new educational requirements. Personnel certification will play a key role in meeting the industry's continuing need for education.

We have the means to make personnel certification a mandatory part of our industry. Now all we need is the will to make it happen. ■



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