



Certification  
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# Certification...It's not Training

Being prepared for a certification session is critical for success

by Michael Morrison

Certified personnel are around us in all aspects of our lives. Accountants, mechanics, x-ray technicians, IT staff, and teachers are all examples of certified personnel. In the construction industry, there are many layers of certification, from welders, concrete truck drivers, inspectors, craftsmen, and project managers to safety managers, QA/QC managers, and laboratory and field technicians. Certification is a widely used practice and is an important part of our industry's efforts to maintain a high level of quality. For some, it's a requirement of employment, specified in a code or project specs; for others, it's required for the business to be eligible for accreditation; and lastly, for some it's a marketing tool to assert, "Look, we have the best-qualified staff for your project!"

Certification provides independent verification that a person possesses an appropriate level of competence to perform specific responsibilities. Certification is something to strive for, allowing you to proclaim, "Hey, I'm a competent person in this field of work, and here's my credential. I earned it!" That credential verifies that you studied all aspects of a focused practice area, were mentored, practiced the procedures and methods, became confident in your ability and knowledge, and then proved that competency by taking an examination.

Whether you send your employee or register for a program yourself, the certifying agency's expectation is that candidates have invested the time to prepare and are ready to demonstrate skills and knowledge.

Interestingly, ACI Certification examiners are finding all too often that firms are sending employees (or individuals registering themselves) with little to no experience or preparation, yet they expect to become certified simply by attending a session. That is not the case with ACI Certifications, as knowledge and ability are assessed through individual examination. Candidates must earn certification, and preparation is critical to a successful outcome.

Here are a few examples of inadequate preparation:

- An individual is new to the industry and has never touched or tested fresh concrete in the field or laboratory, and yet attends a Concrete Field Testing Technician Certification session;
- A concrete inspector has no knowledge of or experience with anchorage to concrete, yet attends a Post-Installed Concrete Anchor Installation Inspector Certification session; and
- A concrete laboratory technician has no experience or knowledge in masonry testing yet attends a Masonry Laboratory Testing Technician session.

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## Frustrations and Failure

Registering for an ACI Certification session without any of the required knowledge or experience can be a risky and costly endeavor. Candidates are wasting valuable time and money if they fail. Sending an inexperienced employee to “get certified” without spending any time preparing and training them sets up the employee for failure; it's not fair to them or the ACI Sponsoring Group (SG) hosting the session. Unprepared candidates are typically uncomfortable, nervous, and tend to not ask questions in a review session. They also might feel pressure from their employer to pass the exams.

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“We really need you to get this certification” adds another layer of pressure to a situation that may be a stressful endeavor even for a fully prepared examinee.

Some ACI SGs offer review sessions ahead of an exam session, while others offer exams only. These review sessions typically consist of a half-day session or meeting a couple



Self-Consolidating Concrete Testing Technician Certification



Certification examiner overseeing an EN flow table test

evenings during the week for 2 to 3 hours. A key fact is that it's a review session, not a training session.

Some ACI Certification programs contain six, eight, or even 10 ASTM, AASHTO or EN test methods, and an inspector program can have upwards of 10 to 20 referenced documents in its study pack. Review sessions provide a brief overview of specifics related to each test method, practice, or code for said program. Sessions are presented in an expedited format with the expectation that the attendee is familiar with the content, and the presented specifics are refreshers for them. Sessions are also designed to provide an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions on specifics they might not fully understand when preparing on their own. In many instances, a hands-on practice session is also offered for those programs with performance requirements. Again, these sessions provide another opportunity for questions and answers for a prepared candidate.

### How to Prepare

Making sure you're prepared to attend a certification session is critical to your success. To prepare for ACI Certification programs, visit [www.concrete.org/certification](http://www.concrete.org/certification) and select the program of interest (ACI has 32 now). Each program page clearly details what the program covers, and in most cases, there is a short promotional video in support of the specific program. Most importantly, each program has a very specific job task analysis (JTA), which I liken to a “body of knowledge.” Based on the program's reference document(s), each JTA calls out specific items that the candidate must know, understand, or demonstrate.

A JTA is a road map/study guide that's designed for candidates to prepare to earn that certification. Before you begin your journey, you must purchase or procure the necessary referenced documents. You should ask questions of your co-workers and supervisor, and, when applicable, you must practice methods in a lab or in the field. Look for quality training videos. If you have a friend that has earned the certification you are after, ask them for help and guidance.

The best case scenario is to look for a mentor. Multiple mentors are needed over the course of a career, simply because we encounter new and different practice areas through the years. I know I did. Multiple mentors helped me develop my inspection skills, laboratory testing methods and interpretation, and yet another with project management and reporting skills. Connecting with a knowledgeable and generous mentor can be a key to future success.

### ACI Can Help

In addition to seeking assistance from employers, other options for learning/training are available through the ACI University and the ACI Resource Centers.

ACI University has six training courses in support of ACI Certification programs. Following along with the program-specific study pack will help candidates develop



knowledge and serve as a refresher of some of the necessary knowledge  
**Demonstration of ASTM C900, Standard Test Method for Pullout Strength of Hardened Concrete**

for that program. Most of the Laboratory and Field Technician programs also include training videos. Additionally, ACI University has educational/certificate programs in Basics of Concrete, Fundamentals of Concrete Construction, and Materials in Construction that can help build your concrete knowledge. Note that although certificate courses require passing short quizzes to validate retained knowledge, certificate courses are an educational tool and do not carry the same weight as certification, which requires a rigorous and comprehensive assessment of knowledge and/or skill. Purchased courses reside in a customer's ACI University account for 90 days and can be a useful tool in the preparation process.

ACI Resource Centers regularly offer scheduled training only programs for all Laboratory and Field Technician programs and Specialist programs (12 currently). During an ACI Resource Center Training Course, attendees spend a day with ACI's Certification team and learn the ins and outs of test methods to understand why the test is being done and what the test result means. Attendees will learn techniques as well as best practices and tips relative to the practice area of interest. An ACI Resource Center Training Course prepares individuals to then go back to their company and practice more, read through all the required test methods, then register for a



session with the nearest ACI SG to take the exam(s) and try to earn that certification. ACI Resource  
**Cement Physical Tester Certification**

Centers also offer custom on-demand training programs for new employee onboarding or for new practice areas a firm has decided to offer.

ACI Certification has been supporting the concrete and masonry industry for 40+ years, starting with the Concrete Field Testing Technician program in 1983. Continuing that support, ACI Certification offerings have evolved into four practice areas: Testing Programs, Inspection Programs, Construction Specialist, and Design (outside of the United States), currently offering 32 different certification programs. Visit [www.concrete.org](http://www.concrete.org) for detailed information on all ACI Certification programs.

Selected for reader interest by the editors.



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