



Safety

Competent vs. Qualified: OSHA Requirements for Safety Pros

James Langford | Sep 21, 2023

You might think you know what the term “competent person” means, but in workplace safety compliance, the definition isn’t as straightforward as in everyday conversation.

And failing to understand the subtle differences can be costly.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires companies in manufacturing and a variety of other industries to designate a competent person to address jobsite hazards and can impose fines for failure to do so.

A **competent person** isn’t merely someone whose job performance is acceptable, according to the agency. It’s a worker who’s “capable of identifying existing and predictable hazards in surroundings or working conditions” and “has authority to take prompt corrective measures to eliminate them.”

Think of the difference between the two requirements this way: A machinist might spot a safety hazard in a manufacturing facility but lack the authority to correct it while the company’s CEO, who would have the authority to fix the situation, might not recognize the problem even when seeing it in person.

The type and extent of the knowledge required “will vary with what is necessary to supervise the task required of the competent person,” an OSHA official explains in a letter of interpretation.

‘Making It Home Safely’

While there’s no single rule governing the role, OSHA cites the mandate in standards for **jobs** from hot work to construction, operating powered platforms for building maintenance, and welding and painting in shipbuilding.

Making sure workers in those fields can perform their duties safely often requires job- and jobsite-specific knowledge that may not translate to work in other areas. OSHA acknowledges that, basing its capability requirement for a competent person on demonstrated knowledge rather than education level or certification.

“Safety should be cultivated by the attitudes of the competent person,” Peter Lasavage, a former OSHA

compliance officer, told *Safety + Health magazine*, a publication of the National Safety Council. "The competent person should lead by example. If the competent person shows a genuine attitude of making sure everyone makes it home safely at the end of the shift, then the workers will usually share that genuine concern for one another's safety."

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3M

Lasavage, who's the founder/president of Lighthouse Safety LLC, told the magazine he recommends designating both a competent person and a backup in situations where the requirement applies.

While working for OSHA, he often watched to determine whether workers followed appropriate procedures on *ladders and scaffolds* and checked out the condition of electrical cords to gauge the effectiveness of competent persons.

Often, he asked employees the name of the jobsite's competent person to check whether they knew.

When interviewing the competent person directly, Lasavage told the magazine, he would inquire about daily inspections and review documentation of toolbox meetings including sign-in sheets that recorded worker attendance.

While companies often need competent persons for a variety of operations, someone with the necessary skills and authority can handle more than one. Training, though not required, can help employees master the information needed for the role.

Competent Person vs. Qualified Person

3M, a safety supplier with which MSC partners for competent person training, offers *a number of classes* at worksites as well as its own facilities. *The courses*, summarized on the company's website, typically take a half day to two days of in-person instruction.

"Competent person status is not conferred just by completing the training classes," 3M notes. "Employers must give their employees the authority to take corrective measures and then declare them to be a competent person. Without this authority, an individual who takes the competent person classes possesses the knowledge, but not the necessary authorization, to be a competent person."

While competent persons have the authority to order the use of certain safety equipment, that doesn't mean they're authorized to design or install it themselves.

Under OSHA standards, design and installation requires a "*qualified person*," someone who has demonstrated the knowledge and skill required, possibly through training or a certificate or degree.

Distinguishing between the two terms often proves confusing.

To explain the difference, 3M cites the example of a construction site where a competent person might halt work because of insufficient fall protection equipment.

Setting up the needed equipment, however, would require a qualified person—one who understood the gear and the regulatory requirements governing its assembly, installation and use.

It's possible for the same person to handle both roles, 3M says, but he or she would have to fulfill the requirements for each.

“The appointment of qualified and competent persons is the responsibility of employers, so it is crucial that they understand the roles and when each is needed,” 3M says. “By better understanding the key differences and similarities between competent and qualified persons, employers can ensure that their worksite is safe and OSHA-compliant.”

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