

ETCP POV: Why certification isn't just nice, but necessary in venues

BY JASON BLACKWELL

ETCP HAS EVOLVED from an ambitious idea in 2005 (the kind discussed over lukewarm coffee at industry conferences) into the industry standard for rigging and electrical safety. Today, many convention centers, tradeshow venues, hotels, and event facilities across North America mandate ETCP-certified supervisors for all rigging and electrical installations, and for good reason. When something weighing thousands of pounds hangs over human heads, you really want the person responsible to have more knowledge than what is available in a YouTube tutorial.

The safety imperative

The entertainment industry handles some of the most complex and dangerous technical work in any profession. Equipment weighing thousands of pounds hangs over performers, crews, and audiences. Electrical systems distribute massive amounts of power throughout temporary installations. When something goes wrong, the consequences range from embarrassingly expensive to catastrophically tragic.

Think about it for a second. With ETCP, venue managers have a way of measuring the knowledge of riggers and electricians in our industry. This is a far cry from the old days when we relied on the industry rumor mill or a great nickname to find the best people.

ETCP certification evaluates and validates the knowledge and skill base of the upper third of riggers and electricians working in the entertainment industry—professionals who understand not just how to do the job, but why safety protocols exist and how to apply them correctly when they're 60 feet in

the air and the phone is ringing.

The certification encompasses critical competencies, including comprehensive knowledge of OSHA regulations, understanding of load distribution and beam formulas, proper installation and maintenance of rigging systems, electrical theory and safe installation of portable distribution equipment, and emergency response protocols. These aren't just checkboxes on a form. They're life-saving competencies that protect everyone who walks through your doors.

The liability shield (a.k.a. how to keep OSHA inspectors calm)

Beyond safety, certification provides venues with critical liability protection. ETCP-certified technicians meet the legal definition of "qualified persons" under OSHA regulations: individuals who have demonstrated their competency through rigorous examination and continued education.

Want proof? Picture this: An OSHA inspector shows up at your venue for a surprise visit. (Always a delightful way to start the day, right?) During the tour, you introduce them to your Lead Rigger and casually mention that your Lead Rigger is ETCP Certified. That's all the Inspector needs to hear. No more conversations are required about rigging. You're off to investigate other parts of the venue.

Phew.

This designation matters when insurance claims are filed or lawsuits emerge. Venues that require ETCP certification can demonstrate they took reasonable precautions to ensure qualified supervision of high-risk work.

Industry leaders setting the standard

Major venues across North America have recognized ETCP certification as essential. Here's who's leading the charge:

The IAVM factor

The International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM) has been instrumental in driving ETCP adoption across member venues. Why? Because "public safety is paramount," and venues need riggers certified in proper knowledge of rigging principles, technical skills, equipment, and related engineering. Translation: When something heavy hangs over someone's head, we want the person responsible to actually know what they're doing.

IAVM's position reflects a broader industry recognition that certification isn't bureaucracy. It's professionalism. Member venues across North America have followed suit, creating a new baseline for safety standards.

McCormick Place, Chicago

McCormick Place, North America's largest convention center, doesn't mess around when it comes to rigging safety. As an IAVM member facility hosting some of the world's most prestigious conventions and tradeshow, from the Chicago Auto Show to the National Restaurant Association show, McCormick Place has implemented comprehensive certification requirements for rigging installations. When you're managing 2.6 million square feet of exhibit space and welcoming three million visitors annually, having ETCP-certified riggers isn't just best practice; it's the only practice that makes sense.

Orange County Convention Center, Orlando

The Orange County Convention Center—the second largest in the nation with 7 million square feet of space—takes certification seriously. OCCC has been at the forefront of implementing in-house rigging training programs that prepare technicians for ETCP certification. During major industrial exhibitions, OCCC has even brought in ETCP-certified riggers from other markets to ensure installations meet the highest standards. When Florida doesn't have enough people with specialized skills, they import them. That's how seriously they take this.

West Coast Pioneers

The Los Angeles Convention Center revised their criteria for companies to qualify for placement on their list of approved rigging contractors, requiring that all rigging supervisors be ETCP Certified. Other California

venues quickly followed suit, including the Anaheim Convention Center, San Diego Convention Center, and the California Academy of Sciences.

The economics of certification

Some venue managers initially worry about certification requirements limiting their contractor pool or increasing costs. The evidence suggests these concerns are misplaced.

Since 2005, ETCP has certified over 1,000 arena riggers alone, with thousands more holding theatre rigging, entertainment electrician, and portable power distribution certifications. That's not a limited pool. It's a robust workforce of proven professionals.

ETCP-certified technicians work more efficiently because they understand systems intuitively rather than learning on the job. They catch potential problems before they become emergencies. Yes, they may cost

more per hour, but when they complete the job faster, with fewer mistakes, and without triggering your insurance company's anxiety response, the math works out favorably.

Consider also what uncertified labor actually costs: longer installation times, higher error rates, increased incident reports, elevated insurance premiums, and the unquantifiable expense of lying awake at 3 a.m. wondering if that overhead installation was done correctly. Nobody wants that.

Implementing certification requirements without alienating everyone

Start with leadership positions. Require certification for lead riggers and head electricians, while allowing uncertified technicians to work under their supervision. Think of it as having a designated driver. Someone needs to be responsible and verifiably competent.



HAPPY 20th ANNIVERSARY

ETCP is celebrating our 20th Anniversary by bringing you the latest in technology:

- Online applications
- Testing via the PSI Bridge Remote Proctor
- New social media channels to connect technicians and other industry professionals
- Innovative virtual training techniques developed by ETCP Trainers and Training Programs

Advance your career and make a place for yourself in the future of the industry by becoming an ETCP technician. Find out more at etcp.esta.org.

Since 2005, ETCP has granted over 4000 certifications across North America.

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Give advance notice. Announce the policy change 6 to 12 months in advance, allowing current contractors time to prepare for certification exams. Surprises work great for birthday parties, less so for major policy changes.

Partner with recognized training providers. ETCP Recognized Trainers and Training Programs can help your regular contractors prepare for certification, strengthening relationships rather than disrupting them. Find them at <https://etcp.esta.org>.

Update contracts and vendor agreements. Clearly specify certification requirements in all new contracts, with verification procedures for confirming current certification status.

Use the ETCP directory. The free searchable database of certified technicians at <https://etcp.esta.org> makes it easy to verify credentials and identify qualified professionals in your area.

Looking ahead: The new normal

As ETCP celebrates two decades of advancing industry safety, the certification has evolved from progressive idea to industry standard. The program now offers four certification tracks: Rigger – Arena, Rigger – Theatre, Entertainment Electrician, and Portable Power Distribution Technician, each addressing specific technical disciplines that directly impact safety.

It's exciting that after two decades, ETCP has gained true support from almost every aspect of the entertainment industry. Employers recognize that there are inherent risks in this business and hiring qualified personnel shouldn't be one of those risks. The five-year recertification requirement ensures certified technicians stay current with evolving standards, technologies, and best practices. This isn't continuing education for its own sake. It's recognition that our industry evolves, equipment changes, and yesterday's best practices may be tomorrow's liability.

Taking action

It is never too late to evaluate your venue's policies. Start by reviewing your current contractor requirements and incident reports. Talk to your insurance carrier about how certification requirements might impact your coverage and premiums. (Hint: They'll probably like the idea.)

Most importantly, recognize that ETCP certification isn't about adding bureaucracy. It's about ensuring that when equipment hangs over someone's head or electrical systems power your events, the professionals responsible have proven they know what they're doing. Really, isn't that what we should all be striving for as venue managers?

So, here's the challenge: Become a Recognized Employer and/or a Recognized Contractor (<https://etcp.esta.org/findrecognized/becomerecognized.html>) and pledge to hire ETCP-certified personnel in lead positions. In the beginning, ETCP launched with the radical notion that we should verify technical competency before trusting people with life-safety responsibilities. Two decades later, that "radical notion" has become industry standard.

The real question isn't why you should require ETCP certification. It's why you haven't required it already. It's a slam dunk. ■



Jason E. Blackwell leads the historic Paramount Theatre in downtown Oakland as General Manager—a role that feels less like a job and more like stewarding a national treasure and a piece of Bay Area magic. With certifications as both a Venue Executive (CVE) and Facilities Manager (CFM), he brings over thirty years of experience making sure the show goes on, the lights stay bright, and the building is the highest performing version of itself.

His career reads like an adventure through some of the West Coast's finest cultural institutions: from building out new buildings and facilities for San Francisco Ballet to overseeing event production and building operations at Portland's Centers for the Arts, and worked extensively as a union stagehand throughout the East Bay. After serving three years as Assistant General Manager at the Paramount, he took the top spot in 2022. He's spent decades mastering the art of keeping beautiful, complicated buildings running smoothly.

When he's not at the theater, you'll find Jason on the road catching one of his son's touring bands, exploring the outdoors by any means necessary (hiking boots, bike, raft, or rope), or posted up at a local music venue—because, he can't get enough of live performances even on his days off.

Check your certification eligibility



*Entertainment Technician
Certification Program*

Find out more:

Riggers: https://etcp.esta.org/certify/certify_rigger.html

Electricians: https://etcp.esta.org/certify/certify_electrical.html

Portable Power Distribution Technicians:

https://etcp.esta.org/certify/certify_ppdt.html

Learn more about each exam and the educational resources that will help you prepare: <https://etcp.esta.org/certify/certify.html>