RECOGNITION OF TRAINING

Historically, the profession of forensic document examination has recognized the need for extensive, hands-on training, for a period of at least 2 years. The training is conducted through a direct apprenticeship-style approach under the direct supervision of a primary training officer who is an experienced forensic document examiner.

Beginning in the 1930's, the Federal Bureau of Investigation established formal training protocols for forensic document examiners, laying the foundation for standardized training in the field. By the 1960's the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Laboratory had implemented a formal two-year training program for its examiners, a model that was soon adopted by other federal and state law enforcement agencies with forensic document laboratories. These agencies uniformly required a minimum of two years of comprehensive full-time, in-house training to achieve competency and consistency within their agencies. ASQDE Founder Albert S. Osborn and his professional associates in the private sector also recognized the importance of comprehensive full-time training. Since its incorporation in 1942, ASQDE has held stringent requirements for applicants, restricting membership to examiners from the public and private sector examiners who meet the current two year minimum training requirement. Additionally, the ASQDE recognizes the need for a recognized and qualified principal trainer to be physically present during the training program to fully assess the progress of the trainee.

FAQ about training

Why is there a 2-year minimum training requirement and why must the training officer be physically present?

There are several reasons for the 2-year requirement of training. First, forensic document examiners are not just handwriting examiners. Scope of work documents list many areas of study that comprise forensic document examination. The trainee must develop a thorough understanding of each topic, including reading relevant literature, studying applicable examination methodologies, receiving training in the use of instrumentation, and recognizing potential variances that may arise during the examination process(es). Then the trainee must develop their foundational experiences separately in each subject area by conducting numerous case examinations that will represent, as close as possible, the full extent of variances.

The training officer must be present to listen to the thought processes as the trainee produces and assesses the data, assesses limitations, and develops conclusions for each

examination. The training officer can then ask questions throughout the process. Only through this process can the training officer adequately assess the trainees thought process and progress until such time that the trainee has demonstrated proficiency.

Multiple studies support the necessity of a comprehensive two-year training program in forensic document examination. In 1997, Dr. Moshe Kam, et al published a paper [1] comparing the proficiency of fully trained examiners, those currently in a formal training program, and a control group with comparable education backgrounds but no formal training in forensic document examination. Dr. Kam's study noted that those in a formal training program but who had not yet completed two years of training had proficiency results that were lower than fully trained examiners but higher than the untrained control group. Notable, Dr. Kam also observed that the proficiency scores of fully trained examiners were not correlated to their years of professional experience, thereby evidencing that the training program itself was the source of proficiency.

In 2022, a study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was published [2] noting that examiners with less than two years of formal training had "higher error rates".

With the complete lack of any studies demonstrating that shorter training periods can produce comparable results, ASQDE will continue to require and promote a minimum of 2 years of training for membership and as an industry standard.

[1] Kam, Moshe et al, Writer Identification by Professional Document Examiners, Journal of Forensic Sciences, Vol 42, No 5, 1997
[2] Hicklin, R Austin et al, Accuracy and Reliability of Forensic Handwriting Comparisons, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), Vol 119, No 32, 2022.

Do forensic document examiners require/receive the same training whether they work for a government laboratory or in private practice?

Forensic document examiners conduct the same examinations regardless of their employer. In fact, private examiners and government examiners have, on occasion, examined the very same case materials on behalf of opposing parties. Accordingly, there is no justification for different training substance or methodologies based on employment setting.

In some instances, examiners employed by specific agencies may require additional or specialized training to address examinations unique to their agency. For example, certain U.S. Secret Service examiners receive specialized training in the detection of currency

counterfeiting. However, this specialized training is supplemental and does not replace the foundational two-year training requirement.

Why is a college degree required?
In keeping with the published industry standard, ASQDE membership requires the completion of an earned baccalaureate degree or equivalent from an accredited college or university.

Forensic document examination is a science. The discipline is grounded in the principles of the scientific method including data development, critical assessment, and recognition of limitations. The scope of work within this field involves the application of chemistry, physics (including the behavior of light and motion), advanced instrumentation, and statistical analyses. Beyond the technical aspects of examination, examiners must write technical reports that accurately reflect the data, assessment, and conclusions in a manner that is reflective of the processes yet sufficiently clear for the non-technical reader to understand. Finally, the examiner must be capable of effectively articulating their findings through oral testimony in depositions and courtroom proceedings. College-level coursework plays a critical role in developing the analytical thinking, problem solving abilities, and effective communication skills essential to this profession. These foundational competencies are necessary for conducting technical examinations, documenting and conveying the results in a clear, professional manner.

Is a two-year training program economically difficult for a potential trainee?
The economic impact on trainees and the curriculum of the training program necessary to provide properly trained forensic document examiners are two distinct and independent issues. Economic challenges are not unique to the field as similar difficulties exist for those pursuing degrees in medicine, law, or other demanding professions. Yet we do not reduce the rigor of these professional curricula. One would not feel comfortable using the services of a doctor or pilot who's training had been shortened in order to cut costs. The integrity and quality of forensic document examination training must remain uncompromised regardless of financial considerations.