

INDUSTRY WHITEPAPER

The Definitive Guide to Physical Security

Practical strategy for hiring, vetting, and retaining security systems installers and integrators — for commercial contractors competing for a small, fast-growing, dual-skilled workforce. Not guard staffing.

The hardest hires I've made in this trade weren't guards — they were the people who wired the system the guards stand in front of.

I'm Michael Carter, President of My Trade Talent. When contractors come to us about "physical security" hiring, the first conversation is almost always a clarifying one: are you staffing guards, or are you staffing the people who install and integrate the cameras, access-control hardware, and alarm systems those guards work alongside? Those are two different labor markets with two different paychecks, and most of what shows up when you search the term is about the first one.

This guide is about the second one — the installers, technicians, and integration engineers who wire, mount, and commission the systems that actually secure a building. It's a small, specialized trade that's growing faster than most, and it's genuinely hard to hire for, because the job asks for two skill sets at once: electrical trade competence and IT-networking literacy. Most candidates have one. Fewer have both.

This is the playbook I wish existed when I started working this vertical: what the labor market actually looks like, the ten roles that matter most, and a hiring process built around verification instead of guesswork. I hope it's useful whether or not you ever work with us.

The five things to take away if you read nothing else.

- **This is a small, specialized, fast-growing trade — not a big generalist one.** Security and Fire Alarm Systems Installers (BLS SOC 49-2098) number about 85,900 workers nationally, projected to grow much faster than average (7% or higher) through 2034, with roughly 9,400 openings a year.
- **Search demand is loud about guards and quiet about installers.** Most of what "physical security" hiring searches surface is guard-staffing volume — a real market, but not this one.
- **The job requires two skill sets most candidates only have one of** — electrical/low-voltage wiring competence and IT-networking literacy (IP addressing, VLANs, PoE, credential-management software).
- **Several of the 10 roles we recruit for share one BLS occupational code** because the classification system hasn't caught up with how specialized this work has become. We name that gap rather than force a number that doesn't exist.
- **A flat-rate, standing pipeline outperforms reactive hiring** in a labor pool this thin and this specialized.

INTRODUCTION

Physical security hiring has an identity problem before it has a labor problem.

Ask most job boards, keyword tools, or generalist staffing agencies about "physical security" hiring, and you'll get results about security guards — licensing requirements, hourly pay, staffing-agency terms. That's a real, sizable labor market. It is also not the trade this guide is about.

The people who make a building's cameras, access-control readers, door hardware, and alarm systems actually work — the ones who pull wire, mount hardware, configure the network side, and commission the system before a guard ever stands post — are tracked as a separate occupation entirely, with a separate wage profile, separate certifications, and a separate (much thinner) labor pool. This guide covers that installation and integration trade: the ten roles commercial physical security contractors recruit for most, what the real numbers say about the market, and a hiring process built around verifying skill instead of trusting a job title.

Type "physical security" into a keyword tool and you'll mostly learn about guards.

Search volume for "security guard salary" runs about 1,300 a month, with pay-rate and average-salary variants adding several hundred more — call it roughly 3,200 combined monthly searches across the guard-staffing salary cluster. Guard licensing and certification terms ("security guard license," "security guard card," "security guard certification") are even bigger, at roughly 8,830 combined monthly searches, and guard hiring/staffing-agency terms add another ~3,530 combined. That's a real, substantial market — and it's almost entirely about a different occupation than the one this guide covers.

Our keyword research did not surface dedicated search-volume data for "security systems installer" or "access control technician" terms specifically, and we're not going to invent a number to fill that gap. What we can verify is the labor-market reality behind it, which the next section covers.

The wage gap between the two occupations is stark: Security and Fire Alarm Systems Installers (SOC 49-2098) carry a national median of roughly **\$60,070/year (\$28.88/hour)**, while Security Guards (SOC 33-9032) run around **\$38,020/year (\$18.28/hour)** — figures BLS-sourced via O*NET OnLine. Budgeting for one role against the other's wage data is a costly mistake.

THE INSTALLATION TRADE, BY THE NUMBERS

Small, specialized, and growing faster than most trades.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks this installation trade as Security and Fire Alarm Systems Installers (SOC 49-2098) — not to be confused with Security Guards (SOC 33-9032). The numbers describe a trade that's comparatively small but expanding quickly, driven by how fast commercial buildings are adding networked systems relative to how fast the trade is producing qualified people.

85,900 workers employed nationally in Security and Fire Alarm Systems Installers, per BLS 2024 data via O*NET.

+7% or higher growth projected 2024–2034 — BLS characterizes this as "much faster than average" — with roughly **9,400 openings a year**.

WHY THIS COMBINATION IS HARD TO HIRE

The job asks for an electrician's hands and an IT tech's head — at the same time.

Modern security systems installs aren't just low-voltage wiring anymore. A tech mounting an IP camera or an access-control reader today also needs to be comfortable with IP addressing, VLANs, Power over Ethernet, and credential-management software — the networking side of a system that used to be purely electrical. That combination is harder to find than either skill alone.

Low-voltage electrical work on these jobs is a specialty within the broader Electricians occupation (BLS SOC 47-2111, national median **\$63,190/year**) rather than its own classification — the licensing and code knowledge is the same trade, applied to a security-specific scope. Candidates who can do that wiring work *and* speak the networking language are the ones commercial contractors compete hardest for.

A resume claim isn't a credential. Verify both halves of the job.

Look for NICET (National Institute for Certification in Engineering Technologies) certification for fire alarm and security systems work — the credential most authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs) and specs reference for code-compliant installs. The Electronic Security Association (ESA) also offers installer- and technician-level certifications specific to this trade.

- **NICET certification** — the credential most AHJs and project specs actually reference for code compliance on fire alarm and security systems work.
- **ESA installer/technician certifications** — trade-specific, distinct from NICET, worth confirming which level a candidate actually holds.
- **Manufacturer-specific training** on the camera, access-control, or alarm platforms your jobs actually use — a tech certified on one system is not automatically qualified on another.
- **State alarm/security contractor licensing**, which varies by state and often applies to the installing company as well as the individual — confirm both.

THE 10 ROLES

The positions commercial physical security contractors recruit for most.

These are installation and integration roles — not guard posts. Several specialties share one BLS occupational code because the trade doesn't have a separate code for every job title; we note that explicitly rather than force a number that doesn't exist. A full wage breakdown is in the companion Salary Guide.

ROLE	BLS CLASSIFICATION
Security Systems Installer / Technician	SOC 49-2098 — Security and Fire Alarm Systems Installers
Access Control Technician	SOC 49-2098 (specialty; no separate BLS code for access control specifically)
CCTV / Video Surveillance Technician	SOC 49-2098 (camera/NVR specialty; no separate BLS code)
Low-Voltage Electrician (Security Specialty)	SOC 47-2111 — Electricians (security wiring is a specialty within the broader trade)
Alarm Systems Technician	SOC 49-2098 (the occupation's own title covers this role directly)
Security Systems Project Manager	SOC 11-9021 — Construction Managers
Security Systems Estimator	SOC 13-1051 — Cost Estimators
Integration Engineer / Systems Integrator	SOC 17-3023 — nearest real classification; no dedicated "security integrator" code exists
Field Service Technician	SOC 49-2098 (service/warranty calls fall under the same code; no separate "field service" code)
Security Systems Foreman / Crew Lead	SOC 47-1011 — First-Line Supervisors of Construction Trades and Extraction Workers

Screen for the dual skill set before you screen for anything else.

- **Verify certifications directly.** Confirm NICET level and ESA certification status rather than taking a resume line at face value.
- **Test for both halves of the job.** A strong low-voltage electrician who's never touched a VLAN, or an IT-fluent tech who's never pulled wire to code, is only half the hire.
- **Ask about specific platforms, not general experience.** Certification and comfort on one camera/NVR/VMS or access-control platform doesn't transfer automatically to another.
- **Build a pipeline before you need it.** This is a comparatively small national workforce (85,900) growing faster than average — waiting for a seat to open puts you behind contractors who already have a warm bench.

A full interview framework — including specific questions by role — is in the companion Interview Guide.

WHY FLAT-RATE

Contingency fees are a tax on urgency. A retainer is a tax on nothing.

Most staffing agencies work on contingency — a percentage fee, often 20-25% of first-year salary, paid only when a hire lands. That model incentivizes speed over fit, and gives the agency no reason to build a durable pipeline for a trade this specialized.

My Trade Talent works on a flat monthly retainer instead:

- We're incentivized to build a standing, verified pipeline of installers and integrators — not just fill one seat and move on.
- Your cost doesn't spike with three open seats and doesn't disappear with zero — it's predictable.
- We stay accountable for fit over time, not just for a signed offer letter.

If open physical security installation seats are costing you install capacity every week they sit empty, a standing pipeline is worth evaluating against what you're doing today.

An open seat doesn't just sit empty — it moves work onto everyone else.

In an install crew, a vacant technician seat rarely shows up as a clean, isolated loss. It shows up as a project manager pulled off scheduling to run a punch list, as a job that slips past its commissioning date, or as a bid you don't submit because you can't staff the integration scope with confidence. None of that is captured by "one open req" on a whiteboard.

With this trade projected to grow much faster than average — roughly 9,400 openings a year against a base of only 85,900 workers — this isn't a one-time gap to fill and forget. It's a standing condition of a small, thin labor market. Contractors who treat every vacancy as an emergency, one at a time, are working against a labor pool that can't expand quickly.

Use our free **Cost of Vacancy Calculator** at mytradetalent.com/cost-of-vacancy to model what a specific open seat is costing your crew in coverage, missed commissioning dates, and lost margin — by role and days vacant.

EMPLOYER BRAND

Candidates with both skill sets have options. What are they actually screening for?

In a market this thin, the hiring conversation runs both directions. Contractors who win the best candidates on their shortlist tend to be specific and honest about a handful of things candidates consistently ask about:

- **Platform investment.** Techs want to know which camera, access-control, and alarm platforms they'll actually be running, and whether the company invests in training on them.
- **A real path from installer toward integration engineer or PM.** Contractors who can describe that path specifically — not vaguely — retain longer.
- **Training on the networking side.** Candidates who came up through the electrical trade specifically ask whether the company will invest in the IT-networking training that makes them more valuable.
- **Schedule and service-call structure.** Field service technicians in particular weigh how after-hours and warranty-call rotations actually get handled.

None of this replaces competitive pay. But at parity, the contractor who answers these questions specifically wins the candidate the vaguer competitor loses.

RETENTION

The skill path that gets someone hired is also what keeps them.

Because this trade rewards the installer who adds networking literacy on top of electrical competence, the career path from Installer/Technician toward Integration Engineer, Field Service Technician, or Foreman is a real retention lever most contractors underuse. A tech who sees a concrete, funded path toward integration-level work — better pay, more interesting scopes, less repetitive wiring — has a real reason to stay rather than shop their resume every time a competitor posts a higher hourly rate.

Investing in manufacturer-specific training and NICET or ESA certification progression signals that path concretely, rather than as a vague promise.

What a "standing, verified pipeline" actually means, operationally.

A standing pipeline isn't a bigger applicant pool — it's a smaller, pre-vetted one, maintained continuously instead of assembled under deadline. In practice, that means:

- NICET and ESA certification status is confirmed before a candidate ever reaches your desk — not after an offer is extended.
- Candidates are tagged by which platforms they've actually worked on and whether they carry both the electrical and networking half of the job — not by self-reported skill level.
- The pipeline stays warm between openings, so a seat filling today doesn't leave you starting from zero when the next one opens in a trade this small.

THE RECRUITING PARTNER QUESTION

Four questions worth asking any recruiter before you sign with them.

- **"How do you tell an installer from a guard-staffing candidate?"** If the recruiter can't articulate the difference between the two labor markets, the candidates you're seeing may not be screened for the right trade at all.
- **"How do you verify NICET or ESA certification?"** Get a specific answer, not a general assurance.
- **"What happens to the pipeline if I don't have an open seat this month?"** Contingency recruiters have no incentive to maintain one. Ask what stays warm between placements.
- **"Do you specialize in this trade, or is physical security one of a dozen categories you cover?"** Specificity in the answer usually tracks with specificity in the candidates.

The market isn't going to get easier. The process can.

A small, specialized trade growing faster than average — one that requires two skill sets most candidates only bring one of — isn't a temporary crunch to wait out. It's the standing condition for the foreseeable future. Contractors who adapt their hiring process now, around verification and a maintained pipeline rather than reactive posting, will simply spend less time and money on this problem than the ones who don't.

WHERE THIS TALENT COMES FROM

The pipeline runs through electrical trade training and IT-networking certification — not one or the other.

Because the job requires both an electrical trade foundation and IT-networking literacy, the strongest candidates in this trade tend to come from one of two directions: electricians and low-voltage technicians who've added networking and credential-software training on top of their trade skill, or IT/networking-trained technicians who've picked up the wiring and code side of the job. Neither path alone is common — which is exactly why sourcing for this trade can't rely on a single channel or a single job-board keyword.

Manufacturer training programs (run by camera, access-control, and alarm-panel makers) and ESA/NICET certification tracks are where a lot of this cross-training actually happens, making them a more productive sourcing channel than a generic posting under "security" or "physical security."

A flat-rate recruiting partner built for commercial trades.

My Trade Talent recruits for commercial trades contractors nationally on a flat monthly retainer — no per-hire contingency fee, no incentive to rush a placement that doesn't fit. We maintain live, verified candidate pipelines across physical security systems installation and integration and nine other commercial trades verticals — not guard staffing.

Get in touch: mytradetalent.com · (314) 886-7975 · staffing@abstraktmg.com



Every hire from zero is a *tax* on your team.

My Trade Talent maintains a live, credential-verified pipeline of trades talent on a flat monthly retainer — so open seats fill with qualified people, not guesses.

Schedule a Discovery Call

mytradetalent.com · (314) 886-7975 · staffing@abstraktmg.com