



Internal Auditor Competence – The Key to A Successful Management System

Let's face it; the majority of organisations only have an ISO 9001 certificate because their customers demand it. Consequently, most management systems fail to promote or even support business improvement, their modest aim being to engender a degree of control and consistency in its operational activities. In this situation internal auditing is usually the sole domain of the quality representative/manager supported by less senior members of staff. The result is that the outputs of internal audits are low level issues, providing top management with further proof that the QMS has a limited input to improving business performance.



It doesn't have to be this way. Raising the competence of internal auditors provides them with the confidence to challenge the way the business operates, and in so doing provide real benefits to business performance.

Understanding the Audit Objectives

To understand what is required of an internal auditor you have to consider that an internal audit has 4 main objectives:

1. to check for compliance with the organisation's own QMS processes and procedures
2. to ensure conformity with the requirements of ISO 9001
3. to assess the effectiveness of the organisation's processes
4. to identify opportunities for improvement

Compliance with your own procedures

We have to be realistic and agree that the first objective, that of checking compliance with your own procedures, does not require demanding skills for the internal auditor. In fact, if this is the predominant focus of the internal audit process then internal auditing is rightly seen in a fairly negative context. It is time consuming, it has to be done, but it adds little value to the improvement of business performance. It is also difficult to recruit anyone, let alone the right type of staff member, to conduct audits.

Conformity with ISO 9001

Interestingly, some people do not see the need for internal auditors to check the QMS against ISO 9001, after all, "our certification body auditor does that during surveillance visits". The standard does require you to audit against ISO 9001 and no QMS can meet all the requirements of the standard through documentation alone.



Although the internal auditor need not be an ISO 9001 expert it is important that they understand the intent of the standard and how to navigate around its less than helpful structure. The standard is just about good management practice and the competent auditor should be able to explain why requirements have to be met in these terms rather than by simply saying "the standard says we have to do it".

Assessing process effectiveness

The third objective, that of assessing process effectiveness, can present the internal auditor with a dilemma. Having some understanding of how to interpret information, particularly when presented in statistical format, can be advantage, but all too often the internal auditor is in unfamiliar territory and this can lead to poor analysis. The real skill is being able to agree with an auditee that corrective action needs to be taken to address an ineffective process. This is not so easy to do when the auditee happens to be a senior manager who resents being told that his/her process is ineffective, but this skill can be taught, and it is essential if the QMS is to be continually improved.

Identifying opportunities for improvement



The last objective, that of identifying opportunities for improvement, requires an internal auditor not only to identify opportunities but to persuade the auditee those improvements should be considered. Again, having to audit in unfamiliar areas can pose problems for the internal auditor, who may have to overcome fairly entrenched views of existing working practices. The skilful internal auditor will be able to suggest areas for improvement without providing the solution, thus ensuring that the ownership of the solution remains where it should be, with the auditee. This skill is probably one of the most difficult for an auditor to master but, again, an important aspect of the audit process if the QMS is to support and encourage business improvement.

Realising the benefits of auditor competence

A competent auditing team should have a positive impact on the QMS in a relatively short period of time, moving quickly from the generation of compliance only issues to an output of predominately improvement opportunities.

Improving internal auditor competence has an added bonus; the skills developed by the internal auditor will be reflected in other aspects of their work, notably better communication, analysis and improvement identification skills.