

# QSU Live Auditor Competence



Featuring: Michael Carmody, Paul Scicchitano, Simon Feary, James Kesselring and Alan Marash

**E**ditor's Note: The following is an edited and shortened transcript of a live panel discussion on auditor competence moderated by QSU Publishing's President and Publisher Paul Scicchitano at the American Society for Quality's recent ISO 9000 Summit in Atlanta.

#### Paul Scicchitano:

All of the thousands of management systems auditors that are among your ranks and have attained certification through either the old Registrar Accreditation Board, Quality Society of Australasia Ltd. or International Registrar of Certificated Auditors have shared a common experience up until now.

They spent a total of about 40 hours over five days poring over case studies, role playing with their instructors and reviewing each requirement of the applicable quality or environmental management system standard — most typically in a hotel setting, just like this one. The experience more than likely culminated with a two-hour exam prepared and graded by an accredited training firm like the one represented here right in the middle of these gentlemen, based on guidelines established by one or more accrediting bodies.

Upon successful completion of the course, they received a certificate that they then used to satisfy the training requirements for auditor certification. Well folks, we're not in Kansas any more, and enter the publication of ISO/IEC 17024. This is a document that promises, if nothing else, to shake things up in the auditor certification world. Customers are demanding greater confidence in the products and services they buy from certified organizations. A lot of people now think this can be accomplished

in part by competence driven certification programs based around ISO/IEC 17024.

Probably the biggest misconception in all of this, which perhaps you already know, is that accredited registrars, the people who actually send out the auditors who will provide the confidence are under absolutely no obligation to use certified auditors. In their defense a number of these registrars tell me that their internal mechanisms are often better and more robust than the established programs. Certainly, they can do it a lot more cost effectively.

ISO/IEC 17024 requires accredited personnel certification bodies to examine an auditor's knowledge and skills. Many experts see this approach as incompatible with the current training model used around the world and other programs. We will find out.

#### Complaints Process

Let's start with our auditor, or personnel, certification representatives. We heard a great deal of emphasis yesterday on the importance of filing complaints with respect to the third-party certification. Do you have a process for handling complaints that is separate from the processes set up by the registrar?

#### Simon Feary:

Yes.

#### Paul Scicchitano: (speaking to Michael Carmody)

I assume you have one as well, or you will have one by the end of the day?

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## QSU Live

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### Michael Carmody:

Yes, we do. Part of the RABQSA International is an accredited personal certification body. That is, our certification-systems-related processes are accredited by a member of the IAF (International Accreditation Forum). In our case it's JAS-ANZ (Joint Accreditation System of Australia and New Zealand) and part of that accreditation process to ISO/IEC 17024 demands that we have a complaints and appeals process, which is independently accredited.

### Simon Feary:

Yes, we're exactly the same although we're not accredited. We have a management system. We run along the lines of the certification standards and there's a requirement to have a complaints process and there's a requirement to have an appeals process. We have those. Just to repeat, we run our organization as any other certification body runs its organization, and part of the rules are that you have a complaints process and an appeals process, and we're no different. But also, why wouldn't we have a complaints process? You get very valuable information from complaints. Information, if you act on it, is beneficial to your organization.

### Michael Carmody:

I don't know if Simon shares the same experience, but from an RABQSA perspective, we don't actually receive a lot of formal complaints, nor appeals. One of the problems that we have is that we receive a lot of hearsay and a lot of indirect complaints with respect to performance. But the minute we start to formalize that process in terms of putting it in writing and send it through. And there's a process we need to follow, often, particularly from auditees, they fail to deliver the goods.

So then we do get a range of complaints coming in. As we start to formalize that process, we find that many people are not willing to commit themselves to paper.

### Paul Scicchitano:

What kinds of things should people complain about? What would be appropriate for them to contact the auditor certification body with directly?

### Michael Carmody:

I'll give you our experience. I'm struggling with this one because we just don't get very many complaints. Either we are doing things extremely well or everybody else in the field is doing things extremely well or people are very frightened to complain.

I just don't know which. Most of the complaints — almost all complaints are about third parties. The most difficult complaints to follow-up on are where we get contacted by an auditor who says, "X is auditing terribly. He's doing all these things wrong. Sort it out."

Those complaints are extremely difficult and very expensive and very time consuming to sort out. What if at the end of it we find out that there was an agenda behind the allegation — we have had instances of this — where there's a disgruntled employee who wants to snitch on a colleague. That's one good reason I think for volunteering your identity so you at least have something valid to go on. Almost all of our complaints are about one auditor complaining about the performance of another.

### Simon Feary:

I would support that. The only thing I would add to that is that a lot of the complaints that we receive, to be frank with you, have very little to do with the auditor's skill or knowledge. It is about the way he or she conducts themselves on site. In other words, the way in which they demonstrate certain attributes. That's a very difficult area, but what it has led us to do, we've taken some effort under the new accredited schemes to focus in on this ability of an auditor to demonstrate the appropriate attributes, specifically the scheme or scope of certification. So often it's not skill and knowledge that we are receiving complaints on, but more about the auditors conduct in that broad sense.

### Paul Scicchitano:

We have a user up here, so let's ask Jim. Jim, have you ever filed a complaint or wanted to file a complaint against an auditor?

### James Kesselring:

We have had two situations in seven years where a complaint came from us against an auditor's performance during

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## Michael Carmody

Carmody is president and CEO of the new RABQSA International, which offers a range of personnel and training certification schemes and related professional development services worldwide, via an innovative e-based medium that receives and administers applications from every corner of the globe. The RABQSA program represents the first large-scale implementation based on the recent publication of ISO/IEC 17024 for bodies operating personnel certification schemes.

## Simon Feary

Feary is director of the International Register of Certificated Auditors (IRCA), the IQA's (Institute of Quality Assurance) operationally independent certification body. Following its beginnings in 1984, IRCA has earned a world-wide reputation and has been recognized for some years as one of the leading international organizations for certifying management systems auditors and approving training organizations who present auditor training courses.

## Alan Marash

Marash is president of STAT-A-MATRIX, a training provider that has trained over 100,000 people. Marash was the first training provider to serve as a representative to IATCA, which recently also underwent a name change to become IPC (International Personnel Certification Association). STAT-A-MATRIX has previously held dual accreditations from both IRCA and the former Registrar Accreditation Board (RAB).

## James Kesselring

Kesselring is the ISO 9000 management representative for Garrett Container Systems Inc. of Accident, Maryland. The company has been able to grow from 20 employees just a few years ago to nearly 100 today, and Kesselring attributes much of this growth to his company's commitment to its ISO 9000 program. Kesselring was awarded QSU Publishing's 2004 Management Representative of the Year Award.

## QSU Live

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the audit. The complaint ... was in relationship to verbal communications with one of the female employees within the company... After I finished doing research, it turned out that the party that was involved wasn't really registering the complaint. It was another third-party that was registering the complaint because they overheard what they thought was an off-color type comment.

The other complaint that we had was an internal management conversation with the auditor. The auditor was leaning heavily on a change of command that took place (within his firm) ... I sat down with him one-on-one personally and we discussed it. I tried to make it a win-win situation that it wasn't the type of thing he should be discussing openly with our management.

He was disgruntled with [his firm]. He should have discussed it with [his firm], not us. We weren't the feedback to [his firm]. But our registrar has a complaint system and we fill out one after every audit and I diligently do that because I think it's part of a program that you need to maintain the same as we do it internally with our customers.

## Psychometric Examinations

### Paul Scicchitano:

One of the most talked about components of your program, in just speaking with the registrars and auditors that I've encountered is the addition of a psychometric examination. I believe it's 85 questions to try and see if the auditors possess the right traits or personal characteristics that would make them good auditors. How did you come up with that test?

### Michael Carmody:

In the design and development phase where we sat down with both industry and our CBs and training providers, etc. a couple of years ago one of the areas of auditor performance that continued to fall out of the discussion was this issue of about how the auditor is actually performing on site — the demonstration of appropriate traits or attributes and how we were tackling that.

Again, there was a fundamental view that this was an issue out there. Now as you are well aware, ISO 19011 (auditing guidance) has addressed the issue of personal attributes for a number of years now. Within that standard, it prescribes a number of attributes that effective and efficient auditors should be capable of demonstrating. Up until the point of the accredited certification, we used to approach that exercise to be frank in a fairly subjective manner.

We would talk to references, we would talk to auditees, we would inquire how a certain auditor conducted himself or herself. We had the appropriate processes and procedures in place and checklist, etc. But it was really a fairly shallow attempt to try and get our hands around

how this auditor is actually performing in terms of conduct. What we set about was to see if we could get some rigor into this process, because we believe strongly that the demonstration of appropriate attributes, according to the certification scheme or scope was in effect the fundamental component of the competency mix, along with knowledge and skill and additional qualification.

What we did is we had a look around internationally at who was being challenged by a similar exercise. We had a very close look at the human resource industry and the way the human resource industry was looking at people and being able to look at organizations and look at people and look at the way they either fit or don't fit.

We set out an expression of interest worldwide to seek comment from organizations that were involved in this game as to how they could assist us. There was a very small organization in New Zealand called CML Ltd. that was involved in a number of related projects and they had some very, very unique tools and processes in place to have a look at the individual and whether the individual could in fact demonstrate certain attributes, or at least possess the potential.

Very, very, long story short, we engaged this organization and we set out working with each of our scheme committees in quality, environment, OHS and food safety to talk about the individual, not the skills, not the knowledge, but the type of auditor that performed most effectively within those industries. And against that, the small company CML, developed a matrix, what they call a psychometric matrix whereby they identified the sorts of attributes that effective and efficient auditors appeared to demonstrate as compared to those who weren't terribly effective. Again, long story short, what was, I suppose, remarkable in one sense, the lot of the attributes that we determined were in fact mirrored in ISO 19011.

The next issue, of course was identifying the attributes. That's one part of the exercise. Being able to measure that performance is another part of the exercise, and then, finally, if you can define it and measure it, how then do you examine a person's ability to demonstrate certain attributes? And that's where we really step in to developing a software-based product that enables us through a fairly simple 25-minute engagement with our applicants to actually see if they have the potential to deliver and demonstrate the attributes that the scheme committee, not RABQSA, but the committee consisting of industry felt that were necessary

### Paul Scicchitano:

Now suppose you were to get a guy who's been auditing basically since 1987 when the standard was published or when the first audits were conducted, and he doesn't do so well on this test, what happens then?

### Michael Carmody:

Getting the information is the easy bit. What you do with the information as a personnel certification body becomes a little tougher. Again, it is the scheme committee  
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tee. It is industry. It is the CBs that look at what we are going to do with this information and how it will impact on an auditor's certification. Now without going into too much detail, there are gradings within the examination of attributes.

If we find, for instance, that an auditor is revealing that he may have difficulty in demonstrating a certain attribute under certain conditions, it triggers a series of accredited processes within RABQSA. Essentially the first step in the exercise is to make sure the applicant just simply hasn't screwed up the exam. It is a very simply based exam, but surprisingly people pick the wrong box and all the rest of it, so that's the first step in the process.

If that's not the case and it appears that the applicant may have a problem in meeting the requirements or criteria of that scheme, we interview that applicant. The applicant is interviewed via telecom or video conferencing and the point of the interview is to ascertain if it is in fact the character that we are seeing.

We have a psychometric Q&A that we walk through that confirms for us whether or not the auditor may be experiencing a problem. What we do then is we recommend a certain phase of professional development, so that during the period of certification that they undertake certain professional development to facilitate some of the difficulties we see that they might have.

If in the most extreme example we identify people who have fallen off the face of the earth outside the radar, then it may well kick in a formal interview face to face and it's against that interview that again we will go through this process and ascertain whether they are hitting the mark or not.

...It's amazing how quickly you can look at people, go through a series of checks and balances and clearly identify that this perhaps is not the industry for them. It's an excellent exercise.

**Paul Scicchitano:**

I'd like to hear from Simon about whether your organization is also looking into something similar.

**Simon Feary:**

I wonder if we are missing the point with this concentration on auditors and auditor certification. I sat through a very interesting panel discussion yesterday, and we talked about the accreditation bodies. We talked about the registrars and the issues of credibility and integrity and things that were wrong and things that could be made better. There is a structure there.

Accreditation bodies are regulating with a small "r," the registrars who deal directly with the customers. Auditor certification is very much on the periphery. As Paul pointed out, there's no requirement for registrars to use certified auditors. Some do because they're able to demonstrate to their accreditation bodies that by having certification that the auditors meet ISO 19011.

Some don't. Some prefer that they demonstrate competence to the accreditor through another means. Some accreditation bodies pay no attention whatsoever to auditor certification — very few. Most do. But it shows that we are very much on the periphery. There are issues and we discussed those yesterday, issues of incompetence.

But are they issues of incompetence for the individual auditor in the field or are they issues with competence of the structure? Are the accreditation bodies doing their job in making sure that the registrars do their job? And I think yesterday's panel made it quite clear that the structure isn't working as it should. My inclination is to address the issue from the top down, not from the bottom up — not to say all of the ills of the system lie with the incompetent auditor therefore auditor certification bodies you need to do something different.

My inclination is to say that there is a system. Make it work. The accreditors need to be better policemen because there are registrars out there who won't do exactly what they ought to do and I think that's where I see the solution. The solution is not bottom up producing a very highly engineered auditor certification product. But it's with the accreditation bodies and the registrars making the structure more advanced.

**The accreditors need to be better policemen because there are registrars out there who won't do exactly what they ought to do and I think that's where I see the solution.**

**Continued Recognition of Training in Question**

**Paul Scicchitano:**

Now in the past, correct me if I'm wrong, but in the past you could take say an RAB-approved course to meet an IRCA certification and vice-versa. Does this stop now?

**Michael Carmody:**

No it doesn't. Along with our accredited certification schemes and the nonaccredited schemes, the current MLA is still in place ... and the training that underpins IATCA and various process and protocols of the training provider has not shifted. We can't change the IATCA programs and I had determined by IATCA the process supporting those schemes. We just simply deliver that certification product, so we don't amend.

**Paul Scicchitano:**

Let's ask Simon from IRCA. Are you still going to be able to accept the new model?

**Simon Feary:**

I'm not sure we will. We will continue to accept IATCA as Mike said as we are bound by the MLA to do so, *(See QSU LIVE on page 10)*

## QSU Live

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but what we do when we look at other training approval bodies training is to see if it is equivalent to our own. And if it is equivalent to our own, then we have no problem in accepting it. If it is not equivalent in terms of the way that the training is controlled and regulated, or in the way that the course content is different, then we would have difficulty in accepting it.

### Paul Scicchitano:

Is there a formal process that needs to take place? If so, when might we expect that to happen?

### Simon Feary:

Well, what happens is we do have a formal process for determining equivalence. Applicants submit with their application a training certificate and if it's on our list of approved training providers or training approval bodies, then we accept it. If it's a different one, then we ask them to provide information upon which we can make a decision about whether this is equivalent or not. So yes, there is a formal process.

## Less Than Perfect Scores

### Paul Scicchitano:

And in the past, as I understand it, in a lead auditor's class, you could pass if you had maybe less than a perfect score — maybe 70 percent. Is that still going to hold true?

### Michael Carmody:

Well, it really gets to the fundamental issue of competence. We have struggled with this. We have worked, shopped out training providers. What competency-based certification is about is you either can do it or you can't do it. It always amuses me that when I talk to training providers and they say, "well, the way we do this, the way we test knowledge is we sit a written exam and the pass mark is 70 percent."

I say, "Oh, that's nice. What does 70 percent mean? Does that mean they are only 70 percent competent or are you asking 30 percent additional questions they actually don't need to know, or what?"

What's the rationale for 70 percent? Invariably the response I get is something like, well it's the

industry benchmark or something or other. What we said to our training providers is that the scheme committee, that's this committee up front, designs and develops the course and the competency specific to your industry, have

clearly articulated that in the case of knowledge we are talking about now, there are certain competencies that is, tasks that need to be performed under certain conditions to certain standards of performance that must meet their requirement of competence.

Not a 70 percent requirement, not a 50 percent requirement. They can either do it or they can't. Now if the training provider wishes to extend that, if the training provider wants to create examinations and teach additional material, we have no concern whatsoever. But I just want to ensure that the 70 percent that this guy gets right include my knowledge-based competencies. I don't want my competencies in the 30 percent that they get wrong.

Now, in practice, these are difficult challenges, and you know where the challenge lies? In the scheme committee, to be frank with you. When we sit with our stakeholders and we sit with training providers and industry, etc., the big challenge for RABQSA is to actually get industry to clearly articulate what they want. The most staggering thing to me over the last two to three years in this game in working with scheme committees and industry, industry's immediate response is, "We want better auditors. We want better performance. We want this. We want that. We want this."

"Well," we say, "that's nice. What do you mean by better auditor? What do you actually want them to do? More importantly, how well do you want these guys to do this to be an effective auditor in your industry?" You know at that point ... you come to the realization that after awhile that many players in the market in our industry, not our industry, in our market actually don't know what they want. And more importantly, can't express what they want, and we had significant issues in our workshop in the scheme committee to try to drag this out of them in some sort of measurable sense because if we can't measure what they want, we can't examine it, and it's still a tough issue.

## Witnessing Auditors

### Paul Scicchitano:

There's two issues I want to ask about in particular, and these are things I'm hearing the most from registrars and users of this system ... One of the aspects of your program in addition to the psychometric exam that has been generating a lot of discussion is the requirement to have an auditor witnessed by another auditor. I understand you are going to be hiring auditors around the country to conduct these witness audits and I've heard questions: What does this entail? Do we have to have this done every year? Who is going to be witnessing me? What is the criteria for that person?

Since there's probably not a big travel budget here for these auditors, it is possible we are going to have pockets of friends in regions that meet at the local ASQ chapter or TGI Friday's on a Friday night and they sit down and say 'it's just a formality, wink, wink.' Tell us about that?

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**In a lead auditor's class, you could pass if you had maybe less than a perfect score — maybe 70 percent. Is that still going to hold true?**

**Michael Carmody:**

Well I suppose the first question I would ask, who here believes that we should not witness the performance of this auditor on site? Does anyone believe we shouldn't do that?

At the end of the day, they go and sit on a course. They pass a written exam. They go out into the field, audit, do whatever they do ... They are carrying my card. I'm certifying the competence of this individual and yet to date, I've never set eyes on this individual. I've never been into the field and witnessed their performance ... we believe strongly we've got to witness the performance of this guy on site. In our mind, there's no give or take, although there's some fee-based stuff coming up later in the story.

The second thing is, well how do you do it? And this is when you get into the mechanics of the process. In our view, what we've prescribed is that we have approved skill examiners ... What the standard demands is that we also have to define through the scheme committee the competence of the examiner, so not only has the auditor got to demonstrate certain confidence, but the people who are examining them, be they knowledge or skill or back in the RABQSA office, the examiners who go through your application.

We have to embark to find the competency requirements for these people, and that process has to stand up for accreditation. Now, to be specific, approved skill examiners have to be lead auditors for certification, have to have completed a deemed competent workplace training assessment or national equivalent. They are the two basic requirements as they stand at the moment. The same thing applies to my own staff around the world. They also have to meet those basic requirements.

The issue with skill examination, of course, is that you've got to try and remove as much of the subjectivity out of the exercise. We don't want people on site turning up and saying "he did a good job." That's not what it's about at all. The skill examination provider is a competency-based profile that's being developed by the scheme committee. There are tasks and measurement standards and performance. Essentially the auditor either can do it or they cannot do it. And so the focus of the skill exam is very definitive.

The issue here in North America was very surprising to us. When we advertised and set up some competency basis. It's all on the Web site. You can go in there and read the stuff. When we advertised that, we thought we'd get a sprinkling of people sort of interested in this. We had 400 applications in the first two weeks.

And the majority of those applications are from good quality auditors who have demonstrated a performance long before I ever arrived on the scene and so we've been deluged ... for two reasons: One, okay, they see a dollar in it. They get paid to actually go out and do this, but a great majority of these people actually feel they are going to

offer a contribution back to the industry. "I feel passionate about the issue of auditor performance and want to get involved in this process." So we think it's been very positive.

**Credibility Must Be Addressed****Audience Member:**

The certificates are losing credibility. We've heard that during these two days. The audits are losing credibility. The number of people attending this (conference) is dropping, and it appears that this whole thing is on a decline. And I haven't heard anything yesterday or today that sounds like there's a rescue effort.

**Michael Carmody:**

Well, I don't disagree with you and in fact, I do agree with you. I mean at the end of the day, I think this industry has some real fundamental problems and I was sort of taken aback a little bit by people standing and telling me there's not an issue out there with auditing and this, that and all the rest of it.

Let me tell you, and I travel the world extensively, I'm involved with ISO (International Organization for Standardization) and IAF and all these other bloody crowds around the place. We have a real fundamental problem as an industry, and I would agree with you sir that I think our product is declining in relevance and value. It's being dumbed down to a simple commodity.

What I don't see around the table is anyone initiating change. I just don't see anyone around this table having the grunt and the firepower to take some of these macrochallenges head on. Now I have two options: I can either sit back and watch this and go to yet another meeting and talk about auditor performance. There are four working groups in IAF now devoted to auditor performance.

I can continue to do that for the next three to five years and I guarantee at the end of it, I'll still only have a set of minutes. Or, I can do something about it. I can do my part, that is RABQSA in trying to tackle our little niche that this exercise with regards to defining, measuring and examining the competence of people to industry's requirements.

That's where we're coming from sir. And I have very little influence on where ISO is moving or what IAF is doing and what the accreditation community is doing, etc. I'll be frank and I have ... IAF, I don't see them doing anything. I don't see the product improving. It's the same old cart with a different coat of paint and some shiny hubcaps.

**Alan Marash:**

I don't disagree with much of what you're saying. Without going through too much history, back in 1994 or 1993, the course providers that were accredited by RAB got together. I represented a group that went to go and talk to

*(See QSU LIVE on page 12)*

# Quality Systems Update

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IAF in Geneva and they didn't want to hear from us. They didn't allow me to speak over two days in Geneva.

This issue is not a new issue in terms of some concerns with the quality of audits and the integrity of registrations throughout the world. I do believe that it has to start with accountability for the registrars and the individuals that they employ to bring that integrity back to the system and that can rebuild some credibility that we are slowly losing. I'm not going to say that we're not.

We are certainly slowly losing credibility throughout the world, but the accountability has to start at the registrars. While I may not agree with the process that Michael is taking, and we share this privately as well, the fact that he is taking the initiative, I do commend. I'm not sure that we're going to go down the path and follow him or not, but at the end of the day, the accountability has to start with the accreditation bodies who oversee the registrars.

## Sky Not Falling

**Simon Feary:**

I think we're being a bit doom-laden here. Let's step back and get this in per-

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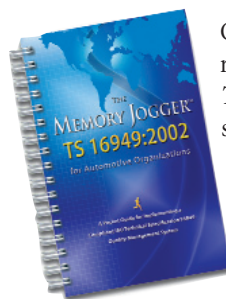
spective. While we are whipping accredited certification, actually it's been a very successful story. It's slightly more than 20 years old, and to look at the number of certificates, isn't that about a half a million now in the marketplace?

It's a huge number. But perhaps there's an issue that the infrastructure which controls the certification hasn't kept pace, and as a result, we have a slight loss of credibility, but that doesn't mean to say that the whole thing is going to come tumbling down.

So I think we ought to keep this in perspective. Large parts of the world think accredited certification is a very good thing, not to say it couldn't be better. I just want to add something to Alan's comment about accountability. I would take it a step further up the chain, that is not the registrars, it is the accreditation bodies.

This is where the control should be exercised. It's the accreditation bodies. They are the policemen for this. The whole credibility of the accredited certification rests with the performance of the accreditation bodies ... But I think in terms of perspective, there's a lot of good that's come out of accredited certification. ■

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