



What would make the perfect certification body audit?

Outputs from an IRCA Open Space gathering. London, 8 December 2006

Who to ask?

'What would make the perfect certification body audit?' is a question that is being pondered by the great, the good, and even some of the ugly within the conformity assessment industry. But whose opinion really counts? Surely that of the end user of certification. So, when we at IRCA wanted an answer to this question during the development of a new auditor certification product we went to the end users, and this paper contains a summary of the outputs¹.

What did they say to the question?

What would make the perfect certification body audit?

- **Price & value:**

The value-add that we end-users want cannot be delivered by certification bodies because certification bodies generally compete on price. This means auditors often do not have adequate time for things like audit planning and preparation. This seems to be a chicken-and-egg situation: we end-users need to pay more, but we won't because we do not foresee increased value.

- **Auditor conditions:**

With the commoditization of certification [described above] and the resulting price drop, auditors seem to be doing more for lower day rates. This means that more competent auditors are discouraged from remaining in the industry and those that are left burn out working up to 4.5 days on site each week! This is no career, let alone a profession.

- **Auditor competence:**

Understanding our business. We want third party auditors to understand our business in terms of its strategy, plans and stakeholder requirements, so that they can focus audit outcomes in terms of business objectives and encourage improvement that will help achieve them. We want auditors to consider our business in terms of the value we give to our customers. We want better audit planning to facilitate this and we want an auditor who:

- Understands business issues
- Commands respect
- Has maturity & credibility
- Has industry knowledge
- Feels comfortable, yet not over confident
- Can leave the standard behind when required
- Has excellent written skills
- Can analyze and make clear conclusions
- Is analytical, but engaging
- Is an experienced auditor
- Can actively listen
- Is prepared to challenge and not be intimidated by senior managers
- Can rank findings in terms of business benefits/risk reduction
- Is sensitive to the 'vibe' of the organization

¹ These outputs were generated at an Open Space event run by IRCA which was attended by 30 representatives from organizations both private and public, national and international, and that hold management systems certifications or recognize them from suppliers, or both.

Top management competence. We want auditors to be able to discuss these business issues with top management as a 'partner'. We want auditors to be able to speak the language of business with top management. Perhaps one question when selecting lead auditors is 'would you employ this auditor as a senior manager?'

A fresh pair of eyes. We value the auditor coming in as a fresh pair of eyes to confirm what we are doing and to be able to identify issues that may otherwise be left unsaid internally for political reasons.

Value. We recognize the need to avoid consultancy in terms of telling clients what to do. However, we want more value in terms of:

- Making a link between business objectives and the audit finding
- Making a link between risk (regulatory, market and technological) and the audit finding
- Prioritizing findings
- Making a link with previous audit findings
- Mentoring clients through improvement
- Focusing on meaningful continuous improvement, including following up on previous non-conformities in terms of root cause analysis

▪ **Multi-site audits:**

Currently end-users often receive a stack of audit reports completed by different auditors. What we want is a consolidated summary report with trends. Again, we recognize that we need to pay more if we want this.

▪ **A management systems auditor please:**

We would like to see a systems auditor, not a QMS or EMS auditor. Viewing quality, environment and so on as part of the whole business rather than discrete functions helps involve senior managers more. We want auditors to take that approach too. So IRCA, we want to dump the QMS Auditor and the EMS Auditor, and just have a MS Auditor. We realize that there is a small pool of such auditors and that there will be more audit planning required: i.e. it may cost us more.

▪ **What we don't want:**

- Auditors operating in their own comfort zones, focusing on their specific knowledge base whilst they ignore other areas
- Auditors making their own interpretations of standards
- Auditors talking too much and listening to little
- Inaccurate documentation of the issues
- Auditors who only know the standard and stick to the letter
- Auditors with poor time management

A forum for more debate

The summary paper is offered for public consumption and to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the integrity of conformity assessment and certification globally: something we at IRCA consider to be at serious risk, incidentally.

If you have something to say on this topic of audit or if this paper has generated a reaction in you, why not have your say now on the IRCA on-line Discussion Forum: www.irca.org/forums/.

Other voices...

Interestingly, the opinions of end users concur entirely with those of the certification bodies that we have asked – and you can read about the CB's opinions in our on-line magazine IRCA INform: <http://www.irca.org/inform/issue12/INform.html>

Do you want to know what we at IRCA think about the state of conformity assessment? Read this: <http://www.irca.org/inform/issue8/SFeary.htm>

IRCA thanks Jim Wade and the members of the Business Improvement Network for their contributions during this Open Space event. <http://www.bin.co.uk/>