

Quality Systems for Building Departments

The Five Key Steps to a Successful Internal Quality Audit

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INTRODUCTION

In Part One of this series, readers were provided with information about the origin and definition of quality management systems and how these systems can be used by building departments as a tool to improve the quality of the services they provide. In Part Two, readers learned more about the purpose, necessary pieces, and application of a successful internal quality audit.

In the previous article, readers were informed that an internal quality audit is an important tool for the assessment and management of a quality management system (QMS). This essential internal assessment tool focuses on the quality of the process used to provide Department services; it is only indirectly concerned with the quality of the service itself. Internal quality audits are designed to do two things: (1) Show the organization whether the QMS in place is being followed; and (2) tell executive management whether the QMS being followed is effective in ensuring quality. Therefore, internal quality audits tell executive management how to fine-tune and improve their quality management system.

This article (Part Three of the series) will discuss the “nuts and bolts” of a successful internal quality audit, broken down into five key steps.

CONDUCTING AN INTERNAL QUALITY AUDIT: *The Five Key Steps*

Before an internal quality audit can be conducted, executive management needs to have a firm grasp on the purposes, requirements, and methods. Generally these are as follows:

- ▶ The purpose of the audit is to look at the real-world operations of the organization and to match those up with what the quality system describes.
- ▶ Auditors find and note any disconnects so that either the operations or the quality documentation can be corrected to better fulfill the organization’s primary goals.
- ▶ The auditors findings are documented in an audit summary. A report of findings is presented to key staff so that they can agree upon corrective actions and come up with a deadline for their implementation.
- ▶ Internal auditors must be qualified (either in a classroom setting or by another qualified auditor on staff) and auditors may not examine their own job functions.
- ▶ Every portion of an organization’s quality system has to be audited at least once per year.
- ▶ Management needs to review the audit findings. This “Management Review” forms the basis of improvements to be made to the existing quality system.

Once these principles have been agreed upon, the organization is ready to prepare for a successful internal audit. By using the following five components—Scheduling, Planning, Managing, Reporting, and Verifying—an organization can ensure a high-quality audit each and every time



Scheduling

Generally speaking, the further in advance an audit is scheduled, the better it goes. An audit is scheduled in advance so that the parties involved know when to expect the audit, which process(es) will be the focus of the audit, and who will lead the audit team. This advance scheduling also allows the parties being audited to allocate the resources needed to support the event (e.g., employees, meeting rooms, interoffice travel, etc.).



Planning

Well before an audit is scheduled to begin, the lead auditor needs to construct an audit plan. The plan should detail the scope of the audit, the objective(s), and the audit agenda. The purpose of the plan is to organize the audit’s expected timetable for auditing specific processes and specific underlying processes (or “sub-processes”) and who will conduct the audit of each segment specified.



Managing

Internal audits need to be well managed; therefore, prior to each internal quality audit, a lead auditor (or team leader) needs to be assigned. The lead is responsible for making sure that the audit is well organized, carefully scheduled, conducted courteously and professionally. In addition, the lead serves as a coach to ensure that all the auditors’ findings are legitimate, reasonable and clearly presented. The lead is also charged with resolving any disagreements between audit team members’ findings.

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**Reporting**

At the conclusion of the internal quality audit, stakeholders (in most cases, the managers for the functions being audited and executive management) are provided with a written summary of observations and comments resulting from the audit, as well as a list of audit findings (nonconformities, concerns and comments). These form the basis for discussion of a plan to resolve any nonconformities and concerns.

**Verifying**

Verification usually occurs in two stages. This is the “homework” that results from an internal audit. When one or more nonconformities are found in a process, the manager in charge of the process is generally asked to respond to the lead auditor by an agreed-upon date. This is Stage One. The manager’s response needs to include an explanation of the root cause of the nonconformity, what they suggest as corrective action and the proposed date for implementation. The lead auditor will review the manager’s response to see if the root cause is plausible and if the corrective action and proposed completion date seem adequate. The lead auditor may accept a manager’s response as is; however, if the lead auditor is not satisfied, he or she may ask the manager to revise the response and resubmit it for review. If the manager’s response is accepted, he or she should immediately begin taking the proposed corrective action.

Stage Two begins when the lead auditor is notified by the manager that corrective action has been implemented. The lead auditor is then responsible for verifying that the corrective action has successfully eliminated the root cause of the nonconformity.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the five steps above help close the loop on internal quality audits. Problems are spotted during the process and their resolution is verified and documented. As always, the overall goal of internal quality audits is to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the existing quality system, bring about quality awareness, help to decrease the potential for service failures and create opportunities for improvement.

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