

## Meeting the Challenge – Transition to ISO/IEC Standard 17020:2012 – IAS



by Patrick McCullen (Vice-President/Chief Technical Officer) and Mohan Sabaratnam (Quality Manager)

From the perspective of an accreditation body, this action by ILAC was long awaited and expected but not without some trepidation. Accredited inspection bodies also anticipated this change and realized that several adjustments to their inspection operations would have to be made. While a three-year implementation period seemed to provide sufficient time to effect changes on an international scale, it became readily apparent to ILAC-recognized accreditation bodies, that immediate action was needed to prepare themselves as well as their accredited inspection bodies for this significant change. International Accreditation Service (IAS) has been hard at work to meet the challenges of educating our accredited entities, staff and assessors on the intricacies of the revised standard in ample time.

Recognized accreditation bodies throughout the world are required to operate under International Standard ISO/IEC 17011, *Conformity assessment - General requirements for accreditation bodies accrediting conformity assessment bodies*. As such, this standard clearly specifies the frequency at which onsite assessments of inspection bodies (also called Conformity Assessment Bodies or CABs) are to take place. While there are options that permit accreditation bodies to utilize a combination of periodic surveillance or reassessment visits to the accredited CABs, regardless of the option chosen, the intervals between surveillance visits or reassessments cannot exceed two years. If a combination of periodic surveillance and reassessment visits is utilized by the accreditation body, the intervals between full reassessments cannot exceed five years. Typically for inspection bodies, a surveillance assessment is conducted after the first full year of accreditation followed by surveillance or full reassessment visits every two years. Depending on the proven stability of the inspection body and its services, the assessment/surveillance regime may be adjusted provided it still achieves the minimum frequency specified in the standard. The surveillance and reassessment intervals must

be taken into consideration when implementing transition to a revised standard so that the accreditation body can arrange its implementation plan to ensure that its accredited inspection bodies have demonstrated compliance with the revised standard by the effective date set by the ILAC membership. In this regard, the membership has set the implementation date at three years from March 1, 2012 which was the date of publication of the standard.

To facilitate accredited inspection bodies to make a smooth transition to the revised standard, several interim steps are taken. Accreditation bodies prepare guidance information such as a cross-reference document highlighting changes between the previous and the new version of the standard, revamping accreditation documents (assessment surveillance and reassessment checklists, assessment reports, technical checklists, etc.). It is also necessary to develop assessor training programs and to conduct training sessions for the inspection body's assessors. Most importantly, the accreditation body must establish and publish a transparent and clear transition policy that sets forth the accreditation body's requirements and timelines. Such a pathway provides each accredited inspection body the ability to seamlessly upgrade its own policies, management systems and procedures to the new requirements of the standard.

While there are significant changes to the standard, not all clauses of the ISO/IEC 17020 standard have been revised. Accordingly, during on-site assessments, technical assessors will identify and document in their assessment reports any new requirements that would require revisions to policies, procedures or other actions needed by inspection bodies for establishing compliance with ISO/IEC 17020:2012. Inspection bodies will be required to respond to all findings based on the 2012 version and provide objective evidence of compliance in accordance with their accreditation body's transition policy.

IAS has developed an assessor checklist and cross reference document on the revised standard that identifies format changes where there may be a change in the clause numbering or sentence structure, as well as new or additional requirements that identify new or amended requirements to particular clauses and concepts. The problem posed by such a change between the two versions of the standard is that accreditation bodies

or experts may interpret and/or apply compliance expectations inconsistently. It is critical that all ILAC-recognized accreditation bodies take a practical approach to assessing inspection bodies and provide sufficient guidance to their clients and training to their assessors in progressive increments. Being a revised standard, all accreditation bodies and accredited inspection bodies are in the 'starting block', clearly implying that both accreditors and accredited agencies involved in this transition have a learning curve on the implementation of the new requirements. Providing suitable training and guidance will ensure that each inspection body understands the compliance requirements, and the accreditation body assessors are mindful of not creating requirements beyond the intended interpretation of the standard. It must be realized that some of the interpretations in the standard are generic, they may not be applicable to all situations in all sectors of inspection.

IAS has moved forward with the following initiatives to implement the transition by:

- Providing support to IAS Clients with webinars;
- Having readily downloadable information on the IAS website;
- Setting specific implementation dates in line with the IAS accreditation regime and giving our accredited inspection bodies sufficient time to prepare prior to their next scheduled IAS visit;
- Designing a Transition Policy that will cover all the accredited inspection bodies over an accreditation cycle to meet the ILAC deadlines;
- Developing a Gap-Analysis Cross Reference document establishing harmonization on interpretation;
- Providing tools (checklists, policies, guidance documents, etc.) to all accredited inspection bodies to facilitate compliance with the revised standard.

Policy details and supporting material for the IAS Transition to ISO/IEC Standard 17020:2012 are available under:

[http://www.iasonline.org/Inspection\\_Agencies/docs.html](http://www.iasonline.org/Inspection_Agencies/docs.html)