

An audit does not guarantee quality...

Hungary: The company at the centre of the toxic waste spill in Hungary in Oct 2010 had been audited only weeks before

NHS: The well-publicised problems with quality of care at Staffordshire hospital were missed despite a number of NHS audits

Rolls-Royce: Problems with its Trent 900 engines wiped more than £1bn off the value of the company despite intensive auditing

Banking System: Each of the banking corporations which contributed to the near total collapse of global banking system were the subject of routine auditing

BP: An internal audit conducted by BP PLC on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig detailed severe safety flaws months before the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. The audit detailed how the drilling rig, owned by contractor Transocean, failed to fully comply with BP's standards. Seven months before the April explosion, auditors found 390 maintenance tasks that were more than a month overdue on the rig

References...

Quality Systems Handbook: 2nd Edition (Hoyle, 2006)

People First: Quality World Jan 11. (Hutchins, 2011)



Let's get it right...

Previously great emphasis has been placed on the need to undertake audits in order to maintain MWH UK's ISO 9001:2008 certification. Whilst the standard does require an audit programme to be in place it does not prescribe any requirements with respect to the scale of the programme or the frequency with which we must undertake audits. This article explains the true nature of this requirement and provides guidance on the future role of audits.

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"Audits should be supplementary to quality and not its driving force..." (Hutchins, 2011)

ISO9001:2008 requires that the organisation "to conduct audits at planned intervals" and to ensure that "the audit programme takes into consideration the status and importance of the processes and areas to be audited and results of previous audits".

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? It is perhaps more relevant to focus on what this does not mean. It does not mean that the organisation is required to:

- Establish an annual audit programme
- Undertake a specific number of audits per period
- Audit every location or person in a given period
- Focus all audits on the production process
- Use a prescribed checklist for each audit
- Use audits exclusively i.e. do not use any other business improvement tools or techniques in the pursuit of quality

The ISO 9001:2008 is only intended to be a set of minimum requirements, were it at the vanguard of best practice, it would be updated every day rather than once every 7 years.

AUDIT IS A TOOL, NOT A SOLUTION: Whilst the importance of audits and inspection activities must not be overlooked especially in industries and sectors where lives are at risk, they are not intended to be, nor should they be taken as a passport to achieving quality, safety or environmental needs of the organisation in question.

Auditing can prevent the introduction of bad practices, but it remains a post-operational inspection activity and has little influence on the creation of good practices. The only way to add value is to make the right things, as determined by your customer, and make them right first time.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE AUDIT?

Audits should be supplementary to quality not be the driving force behind it. As a business we have invested heavily in the infrastructure required to ensure the quality of our work and in understanding and improving those aspects of our business which have the potential to hinder the achievement of desired outcomes (i.e. the achievement of quality). Aspects such as process design as well as "softer issues" such as teamwork, leadership, culture and communication. These are the factors which are the driving force behind quality. They have a much greater effect on the quality of our work than any audit could ever hope to have.

Audits should not be used to measure the performance of these aspects of our management system, instead they should be used to validate the results of any metrics we have in place and are currently monitoring. Consider this... if you're have a responsibility for ensuring a critical activity is happening, but you're not sure that it is taking place, should you wait for an audit to find out that it isn't? Or should you have a clear indicator in place that (as a minimum) shows the activity is happening? Is it not better to use an audit to validate results rather than to provide you with them?

BP Audit detailed rigs safety flaws before disaster. (Beasley, 2010)

Order from Chaos: Quality World Apr 2011 (Dalling 2011)