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What Auditors Look For

An 18-Point Guide to How Certification Auditors Evaluate Your Management System

Audits feel unpredictable only when you don't know what the auditor is trying to verify. This guide walks through the eighteen areas auditors examine in nearly every certification or surveillance audit. It is written generically so it applies across standards (ISO 9001, AS9100, ISO 14001, ISO 45001) and across industries.

1. The Big Picture

Auditors look for evidence that your business and its processes are planned, have objectives for how they should perform, and have controls in place to assure conformance to both internal and external requirements. The weakest area is usually the handoff between one process or department and another. A classic example: contract review identifies that materials for a job must be purchased from a specific vendor, but never communicates that requirement to purchasing, so the customer requirement is missed.

2. Document Control

Any document that can affect customer service, quality, delivery, health and safety, environmental concerns, or legal and special requirements must be controlled. That includes procedures, forms, and work instructions for the jobsite, purchasing, sales, estimating, and design. Just as importantly, the auditor will check that you are actually doing what your documents say you do.

3. Control of Records

Auditors spend most of their time interviewing personnel and reviewing records. They want to see that records are retrievable, stored in planned locations, and remain legible for your documented retention period.

4. Management Commitment & Responsibility

Auditors look for signs that management is genuinely committed to the management system: records of management reviews, evidence that adequate resources are provided, and communication to personnel about the importance of meeting customer and legal requirements. They will also confirm that management assesses risk and reviews the actions taken to mitigate any unacceptable risk.

5. Human Resources

Auditors want evidence that personnel have been evaluated for competency against their position, that training was given and recorded to close any gaps, and that management evaluated whether the training was effective (with retraining recorded when it was not). They will also review onboarding for training on system basics like policies, objectives, and document control, and check that emergency drills, safety meetings, and required periodic training are scheduled, performed, and recorded.

6. Maintenance & Housekeeping

The auditor will walk the facility looking at housekeeping, safe conditions, environmental impacts, and the maintenance of facilities and equipment. Where conditions like temperature and humidity can affect customer or legal requirements, the auditor will verify those conditions are controlled.

7. Planning

Work that affects the product or service delivered to the customer must be planned under controlled conditions that assure all customer and legal requirements are fulfilled.

8. Contract Review

The auditor will verify that customer contracts and purchase orders are reviewed to catch every customer and legal requirement, and that those requirements are communicated to the departments and processes that need them in order to be met.

9. Design & Development

Design and development work must be planned, recorded, and verified against requirements. The auditor will want records showing the design was validated to fulfill functional and performance requirements, with every stage of the design process recorded.

10. Purchasing

Auditors verify that you have methods for approving suppliers, that you only buy from approved suppliers, and that you flow down all information the supplier needs to meet requirements. They will also check that you verify the product or service you ordered was actually received as ordered, and that subcontractors meet the quality, environmental, and health and safety requirements that apply to them.

11. Production & Service Control

Production and service processes must be planned and controlled to meet customer, legal, environmental, and health and safety requirements. This includes calibration of monitoring and measuring equipment, validation of process results, identification of product and its status, traceability where required, protection of customer property, and proper storage and handling. Where applicable, operational controls must be in place to prevent injury, ill health, and environmental escapes.

12. Customer Satisfaction

The auditor will verify that you gather customer perception data and act on it to improve satisfaction. Customer complaints must be recorded and responded to (unless management documents a decision not to respond), and customer feedback should be considered for continual improvement.

13. Monitoring & Measuring of Processes

You need methods for measuring the performance of your core processes, with targets set and actions taken when objectives are not met. These metrics are commonly called Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

14. Inspection & Quality Control

The auditor will look for evidence that you inspect the product or service to assure it meets customer requirements before it is delivered.

15. Internal Audits

You must have complete system audits covering every standard to which you subscribe, performed by qualified personnel or a qualified party, and the audits must be effective.

16. Nonconforming Product

A process must be in place to identify and control nonconforming product so it cannot reach the customer without a prior concession obtained from the customer.

17. Continual Improvement

The auditor will review your corrective actions, preventive actions, and improvement projects to see that when something goes wrong, you determine the root cause and fix it so it won’t happen again, and that you verify your corrective actions were effective. They also want evidence that you act to prevent issues before they occur and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of your system.

18. The Bottom Line

Auditors are looking to see that you “say what you do,” “do what you say,” and “can prove it.” Records and interviews create the objective evidence auditors need to verify that your business conforms to internal, customer, and legal requirements.