



WHAT TO EXPECT AT AN ISO 9001 ASSESSMENT - Guidance for success

All assessment bodies follow a broadly similar routine for an assessment to BS EN ISO 9001. These notes assume that a document review (a comparison of your documented quality system to the requirements of the Standard) has already been performed, either on site or at the assessment organisation, and the result was satisfactory.

Before the team arrive

Much of the preparation is in itself just good Quality Management. All employees should be made aware of the assessment and understand its importance. Everyone should know the role they have to play, be aware of the policies and procedures that affect them. They should also know where the official copies are located.

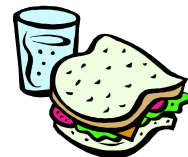


Ensure that all areas are as tidy as working conditions allow and that things are labelled as required. Remember first impressions do count. It is worthwhile walking round the whole company with an honest eye to spot anything embarrassing, before the assessor discovers it for you! Anticipate possible questions and ensure evidence to support your answers is to hand. Do not try to introduce major changes at this stage.

The assessing team's needs

The assessor(s) will want a room from where they can work during the course of the assessment and consideration should be given to where they can hold meetings with senior management. The assessors may also require access to a telephone and photocopier and power for a laptop.

Assessors will want to eat during the assessment and should be offered either a reasonable buffet on site, or a fairly rapid meal at a local pub, for example. They know all about time wasting and being softened up with big meals!



If they have to stay overnight, offer a list of local hotels (two or three star), if requested. In general, offers of evening entertainment will be politely turned down.

The big day

To start, the assessor(s) will want to hold an "opening" meeting with your management team. At this meeting you will be told how the assessment will be performed and the likely timetable. The leader will then state how any problems will be noted as they arise and how they may be recorded on the assessment report. How to respond will be addressed later.

Some assessment team leaders may also want a brief meeting with their colleagues prior to the "opening" meeting. Remember the assessment team may not have met previously.



Following the meeting, the assessing team will split up and start assessing. You must decide who will be your contact and guide with the assessor(s). Generally if there is more than one assessor, the team leader will look at the managerial aspects of your system, ie structure and responsibilities, audits, reviews and corrective and preventive action. The other member(s) will look at the working areas eg offices or production areas as appropriate. Each assessor will want a guide who is knowledgeable about the particular areas.

You should brief your staff to respond to their questions honestly, to the point, and to describe the normal pattern of events. Do not volunteer information that is not asked for, or try and expand into any unusual occurrences unless asked. The normal routine for an assessor is to ask a member of staff what they do and then ask to be shown how it is done and/or to ask to check their procedure. During the assessment the assessors will be making copious notes on what they are viewing. Lots of writing does not mean that problems are being found.

If the assessor does find a problem, the guide should be informed and asked to witness that the situation exists. The guide is not, at this stage, necessarily agreeing to a problem, only that it exists. If the problem is un-arguable, then it is best to just agree and move on. Further debate may reveal further problems!



If the assessor has got hold of the wrong end of the stick, and the apparent problem is dealt with in a different way by your Quality System then it is up to the guide to point it out. This is where the guide can earn his/her money! If a particular piece of evidence cannot be found at once to address an apparent problem, the guide normally has until the end of the assessment to produce it. It may pay to nominate a "gopher" to seek out this sort of thing.

It is important for the guides to remember that the assessors are expert at assessing, not expert in your methods or the quirks of your Quality System. The assessor may not see something that to you is obviously wrong or understand automatically how you are covering a particular requirement of the Standard.

Any problems found during the assessment may be categorized as nonconformities or observations, for example. A nonconformity is where a significant part of the Standard has not been covered or where there is a serious breakdown in the system. This can be a cause for registration to be denied.

An observation is ... where there may be an occasional loophole in the system, or where the service or product quality is not likely to be affected. It is not cause for failure unless there are sufficient numbers of similar problems to indicate a major problem.

At the end of the assessing period the assessor(s) will want to discuss and to write up their findings. You should similarly be reviewing what the guides have seen, and ensuring that the assessors have received a fair impression of your Quality System. If there is anything you are unhappy about, you will have one last chance to put the record straight, but you must get the evidence to show them.

The guides may be asked to review the assessors' findings so that any last minute interpretations can be discussed, or last minute evidence presented.

The Final Meeting



At the final meeting the Assessment Leader will report on, or ask colleagues to report on, their findings. They are obliged to relate any problems they have found to a clause of BS EN ISO 9001.

The team leader will then make known if a recommendation for registration will be made.

The assessor cannot issue an ISO 9001 certificate and registration number to a successful company immediately but will submit the findings to his/her superiors for review. It is unusual for the assessors' findings not to be accepted.

A system which totally fails to meet requirements is likely to have been identified by the assessor earlier in the assessment process. A choice would have been given either to stop the assessment or continue and identify all the problems and restart the assessment at a later date. Alternatively a conditional recommendation may be made (subject to a plan to clear the problems identified being submitted).

Corrective Action

This will depend on the assessment organisation. Normally small problems can be cleared by post or email ie by sending evidence that appropriate actions have been taken. For more major problems, a further visit may be needed. On such a visit only the recorded problems should be re-examined.

Advertising

Once certified you will wish to promote your success through the use of the relevant assessment body logo. Artwork etc will be provided for you to use by the assessment body. Do however read the regulations controlling the use of the logo. They are strict!

You may also consider the formal presentation of your certificate and/or press releases. Most assessment organisations will help you in this (remember you will be promoting them as well!)



Finally remember to advertise your success with your employees. Without them you would not have succeeded.

Follow up

Once you are registered, there will usually be two inspection visits each year from the assessors, the frequency being dependent upon your certification body. These visits will be used to ensure that you maintain your Quality System, including undertaking your own internal audits, and will tend to look at particular areas in more depth.

Reporting and clearing nonconformities etc is generally similar to the Initial Assessment.

Good luck!

Polyfield can help with preparing for your ISO 9001 assessment. Contact us for more information.