

# Establishing continuous improvement with internal audits

Sam Kinch, Quality Management Consultant and Founder of Quality Inspired, explores how internal audits can save a company time, money and stress

**T**he internal audit determines if an organisation's quality management system, based on the company's requirements and ISO 9001:2015, is effectively implemented and maintained. The internal audit will help an organisation achieve its objectives and identify any areas that need corrective actions. Uncovering the problems found during an internal audit and resolving them prior to the external auditor's visit will save time, money and extra stress.

The key aims of an internal audit include:

- Providing a comparison between the quality objectives that have been set and what is actually being done;
- Identifying potential danger spots;
- Eliminating wastage;
- Verifying that any previous corrective actions have been successfully achieved;
- Confirming that everything is working efficiently;
- Identifying non-compliance with previously issued instructions;
- Identifying deficiencies within the quality management system;

- Recommending any corrective actions that could improve the system.

To meet these aims, the internal auditor will prepare an audit plan, and the procedures required to carry out these audits should always be documented and available. A documented audit procedure is optional, as it is no longer a requirement of ISO 9001 for organisations to establish one.

## Risk-based thinking

The ISO 9001:2015 revision places emphasis on risk-based thinking. Basing your internal audit programme on this methodology will improve your organisation's ability to recognise both positive and negative risks, as well as opportunities to improve internal and external processes and embrace change where continual improvement is the fundamental principle.

Adopting the internal audit programme into an organisation doesn't have to be hard work. ISO 9001:2015 puts strong emphasis on leadership and their involvement in a quality management system and its success.

With the leadership team spearheading the way, the organisation can be assured that the necessary resources required will be arranged, corrective actions will be resolved, and the overall business

performance will improve. This regular review of the quality management system will embed the principle of continual improvement in the whole organisation and help manage risk in a timely manner.

## Reality check

Some organisations may feel they don't need internal audits as they are aware of all the issues. However, internal audits can help uncover unnoticed areas that need attention and their severity in accordance with the quality management system. This is a key opportunity to

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stand back from the daily details and take a fresh look to compare how things actually are and how they should be. The organisation will be able to evaluate its policies and processes across all departments, which will enable it to set itself specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-based (SMART)



objectives. This leaner way of working will enable the organisation to be effective when making plans, engaging teams, eliminating and reducing waste, protecting its reputation and brand.

The audit is also an opportunity for management to improve their effectiveness and control over the quality management system, including corrective action plans and mitigating risk for a product or service failure.

The audit highlights the policies or procedures causing risk to products or services. The benefit this brings is the opportunity for the organisation to adopt new risk-reducing methods or policies.

### Enhancing brand reputation

If an internal audit is made known to the organisation's customers, suppliers and interested parties, it demonstrates the organisation's commitment to its quality management system and continuous improvement.

It highlights the organisation's commitment to ensuring compliance to a product and/or service, applicable regulations and laws, and also to meeting any requirements set by the third party that may even have a contractual agreement with the organisation – which can also be evaluated.

### Mitigating risks

The internal audit can highlight potential risks in an organisation's processes that could prevent the organisation from meeting its objectives, suffer loss or cause catastrophic disaster.

The internal audit can define the criteria and set tolerance levels for the risks, identify action plans that can be implemented, and how and when to communicate appropriately.

When the audit is conducted frequently, the organisation can examine and evaluate the processes with enough time to control the issues that have been found. This will also allow the organisation to identify any opportunities to improve processes or eliminate them completely.

Ultimately, the internal audits will demonstrate the proactivity of the organisation and its ability to apply continual improvement.

The results of these efforts will be improved efficiency from the processes and the teams, cost and time savings from avoiding the pitfalls of unseen issues, mitigating negative risks and providing opportunities to improve an organisation's reputation.

**Sam Kinch is an ISO 9001 Auditor, Quality Management Consultant and Founder of Quality Inspired and ComplianceResource.co.uk**

## 5 top tips

1

Purchase and familiarise yourself with the ISO 9001:2015 standard.

2

Understand what risk-based thinking means and how to apply it.

3

Base any decisions on evidence provided and risk potential.

4

If you have a great audit, boast about it and your improvements to enhance your reputation.

5

Always seek advice from expert trained professionals if you are unsure.