

Auditing OHS systems-Lessons learnt

Organisations that are successful at Occupational Health and Safety have regular comprehensive internal and external audits. Standards must be developed for the safety management system e.g. Visitor safety, contractor safety, compliance with statute law, use of personal protective equipment, management commitment, hazard identification/risk assessment, safe working procedures, loss prevention & control, employee involvement, emergency procedures, accident investigation, education/communication, inspections, health & fitness, injury management, etc and compliance with these standards must be audited.

One company I was associated with introduced the above standards and it put a massive increase in the focus on safety. What excellence in implementation of the standards would look like was defined and people were trained in this. A detailed set of audit questions, based on the fore-going was developed as was a detailed set of auditing guidelines and roles of auditors defined. Sites to be audited were briefed on the auditing guidelines and auditors were trained on the audit questions and auditing guidelines. A series of annual Executive Safety Audits was introduced at the various sites with an audit team led by a senior manager to give the process significant management horsepower. The largest audit team I was involved in had 10 auditors and audited the site for 4 days. A quality assurance approach where NCR (Non-compliance reports) were issued was used and formal processes were introduced to follow-up on audit recommendations.

The technical basis, training and preparation for the audits was sound but the key to success was the fact the audits were driven by senior management.

A criticism of safety audits is that they are usually not based on an examination of serious personal damage occurrences (accidents) experience.

What ever paperwork you produce, be succinct. Auditing documentation tends to get unwieldy and difficult to use in practice. Only the very dedicated or very bored are going to wade through pages and pages of auditing documentation.

Need to audit against a standard, maybe A.S./ N.Z.S 4801, Tri-Safe, internal standards of OHS excellence, Zero Harm principles or a commercial Safety Management System or a combination of the foregoing.

A set of audit questions needs to be developed. eg. if you were interested in auditing management commitment to safety questions could include-Give examples of how management demonstrates its commitment to safety, Explain how managers build employees safety awareness, Give examples of how management participates in safety meetings, inspections, reviews and accident investigations, Explain how managers hold staff accountable for achievement of safety targets and performance, Explain how performance appraisals include a meaningful consideration of safety attitudes and performance, Explain how management strives for safety best-practice.

A method of rating findings must be used eg.

5 Excellence recognised externally and internally.

4 The commitment of all personnel is demonstrated by behaviour, the approach is seen as a way of life.

3 Progress audited and review systems implemented, improvements planned and commenced, all supervisors commitment demonstrated by behaviour.

2 Actions well established, deficiencies identified, managers commitment demonstrated by behaviour.

1 Defined actions commenced, communications with all employees commenced, roles and responsibilities defined.

0 Some actions commenced, policy objectives defined

Need an opening meeting with stakeholders, including senior management. The auditing process must be explained.

Need a closing meeting with stakeholders, including senior management to discuss findings and allow rebuttal. Some organisations like to have all supervisors and health & safety representatives at this meeting.

Need a written report with a concise management summary. There should be no surprises in the written report as major findings have been discussed at the closing meeting. The written report should provide suggestions for addressing non-conformances and a suggested timetable for implementation.

A physical inspection of the workplace will identify safety system deficiencies.

Need to examine the safety "paper trail". Safety committee meetings and follow-up actions, safety meeting minutes and follow-up actions, personal damage occurrence ("accident") investigation reports and follow-up actions, safety inspections and follow-up actions, safety audits and follow-up actions, safety induction records, general safety training records and so on.

Need to question managers, supervisors and workers about their perception of the Safety Management System. Tri-Safe has a good set of questions that can be tailored to an organisation. It may be deemed appropriate to develop a questionnaire to be put to a cross-section of managers, supervisors and workers at meetings.

If you give a low rating from the audit be prepared for criticism and "push-back" from the site that was audited. No one likes to be told they are doing a poor job. It is essential that the guidelines to implement whatever standard you are auditing against are well publicised and agreed to beforehand as well as the auditing process agreed to. You need to have solid evidence to back up your assertions. If an organisation has a history of superficial safety audits they could be less than impressed by a change to a more searching audit format and subsequent lower ratings.

Be prepared for people to lie to you. Be prepared for people to genuinely think an issue was addressed when it was not. Ask for solid evidence to back up people's assertions.