qualitycertifications

John Mason's Plain Text

Quality Certification

First published in 2012
John Mason
Oberon NSW Pty Limited
PO Box 6238 BHBC, Baulkham Hills NSW 2153
info@johnmason.com.au
www.johnmason.com.au

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Author: Mason, John
Title: Quality certification : John Mason's plain text / John Mason
ISBN: 9780987441300 (pbk)
Series: John Mason's plain text
Subjects: Total quality management—Australia
Dewey Number: 658.4013099

Printed in Australia

Disclaimer
The material in this publication is of the nature of general comment only, and neither purports nor intends to be advice. Readers should not act on the basis of any matter in this publication without considering (and if appropriate, taking) professional advice with due regard to their own particular circumstances. The author and publisher expressly disclaim all and any liability to any person, whether a purchaser of this publication or not, in respect of anything and of the consequences of anything done or omitted to be done by any such person in reliance, whether whole or partial, upon the whole or any part of the contents of this publication.

Contents

Before

During

After

Forward

Perhaps it should be headed Caveats, Conflicts, Explanations and Thanks. You pick. Do you get the gist already? This is the first book in a series called 'John Mason's Plain Text' and for good reason. When speaking all things quality and all things certification, I speak (well, I type) quite plainly. No rocket science, no dark art, just plain text. I propose to talk with you, not at you in these pages. And yes, the book talks about quality management system certifications, not environment management systems, safety management systems, not even integrated management systems. Why? Well, it doesn't really matter in the certification space but mostly because I really like quality.

The book has three parts. Before, during and after. There is some blurring between the three of them for it isn't essential that I keep them separate or that you read them in order. Rather, it is a collection of blog posts and thoughts gleaned over the last 20 plus years which at times drifts into qualspeak.

Whilst on the topic of qualspeak, I apologise now because it is at times, a necessary evil. Necessary because you need to acclimatise to the words the certification fraternity speak. However, some of my learned colleagues pop brain vessels if the uninitiated get the qualspeak wrong. I don't really mind if you (or I) use the correct terminology, it's the intent that counts.

Here are some of the words that upset them the most when interchanged;

certification ↔ accreditation
continual ↔ continuous
audit ↔ review
finding ↔ opportunity and so on.

I do have a conflict of interest and wish to declare the following. I refused to lawyer-up for the following words and as always, it is the intent that counts. I am a shareholder, subcontractor, nonexecutive chairman of an advisory board for a certification body called Global-Mark. My consulting company is called quality.com.au (which is one of the trading names of my holding company Oberon NSW Pty Limited) and it is certified to ISO 9001:2008 with Global-Mark.

Does this influence my outlook, recommendations and advice on the certification industry? Probably, but you can make up your own mind on this.

Many thanks must go to many without whom this book would had never seen the light of day but in particular the following are dear to my heart; Linda Mason, Alison Mason, Jessica Mason, Phillip Cranney and all those really good auditors who have shown by example just how it should be done.

Thanks too, to the myriad of subpar auditors and certification providers who have taught me what not to do.

And lastly, if you like what you have read, send me an email at; I.Like@qualitycertifications.com.au and let me know why. I will publish your kindness on the web. On the flip side, email me at; I.Dont.Like@qualitycertifications.com.au and should your feedback make it to print, I will send you a free copy of the next edition.

Enjoy the read

John Mason

Before

Certification service providers

You have a choice

Choose a certification provider as you would any other service provider and base your decision on price, service and quality. Just remember, you can only ever have 2 of the 3 of the above attributes. Be comfortable with the two you want.

Unfortunately, not all of the certification providers give quality service. There are many contributing factors to this, but three predominant reasons are;

- lack of client service,
- poor 'back office' support, and
- inadequate client facing personnel.

So, if you are not getting what you expected or not getting what you were promised, contact your provider and get them to fix the situation. After all, you are investing a great deal of time and resources to your certification, make sure you are getting what you deserve. If they can't (or won't) adapt their service levels, change providers.

If you must change your provider, you can. The exercise is relatively simple and it should be 'free'.

My choice

I am often asked this question. Depending on the situation or forum in which I am asked will determine my answer. With that said, the provider I currently choose and trust to provide quality.com.au with certification to ISO 9001:2008 is Global-Mark. We have been a client of Global-Mark since the day Herve Michoux (Managing Director) opened his doors for business. They made the transfer process from our previous provider seamless and painless with no extra fees. We like their personnel, processes, back office support and automation, ensuring we get what we deserve from a certification provider.

The ticks

Did you know that there is only one company in the whole wide world who can issue a quality management system certificate to ISO 9001:2008 with those 5 white ticks? Yes, only one.

Did you know that that certification service provider is only one of thirty plus service

providers in Australia. There are hundreds worldwide. Each and every one of them uses a different certification logo, different certification brand.

Now in Australia, the 5 ticks are the most recognised. Why? Well the company was a company formed under statute (a quasi-government utility) that provided printed standards to the Australian market. Then they got into product accreditation and system certification to satisfy a need in the market. Their only 'opposition' was a laboratory registration company who kept pretty much to themselves in their own market. But there was always a perception that if you wanted to get a quality management system certification there was only one provider. The legend grew and the brand recognition flourished.

However, due to demand, alternate service providers were formed and today there is a very good competitive supply of such providers offering various degrees of price, service and quality. During this period, the tick company listed on the stock exchange and it is now a fully-fledged, profit generating,

publicly listed company trading off the misconception of their past.

Well it was. They have dropped market share from 99% (in 1990) to somewhere below that today and it continues to drop. There are many reasons for this but they are not the subject for the remainder of this chapter.

The key point is, that any accredited certification provider can generate a bona vide certification certificate recognised worldwide. It means the company that has been certified has been assessed and adjudged the same as all service providers in this field. It just has a different logo. A bit like getting your Compulsory Third Party car insurance from different insurers. Different company, different logo, same insurance.

As the certification market continues to mature and certified companies realise the logo is not the be all and end all, it will be the true value adding service providers who will prevail. Those same certified companies will then realise the full benefits of an effective quality management system is the reward in itself.

Auditors

What Do Auditors Audit?

The four stages of certification and what auditors audit are;

1. Documentation Review

Normally a desk top review scenario of just the documentation you supply to them. The auditors are looking for a policy, a quality manual (or similar), the six mandatory procedures (documents, records, audits, non-conformance, corrective action, preventive action), your own procedures, associated forms, records and an interrelationship document explaining the processes of the company.

2. Pre-Certification Review

Pre-certification reviews are the assessment of the implementation of the quality management system. They will focus on management review meetings / minutes, records of internal audits, corrective actions, nonconformance, document management, records management, training / competency records, the level of understanding by employees and the overall assessment of

operational procedures and how they interrelate.

3. Certification Review

During certification reviews they will audit everything in the scope of the quality management system. However, their sample plan is quite shallow and if they can find conformance quickly, they will tick the box and move on.

4. Surveillance Reviews

Every time they visit during a surveillance review, they will audit the following; findings from previous audit, management reviews, internal audits and corrective actions. Once they are happy with that, they carve up the rest of the standard and audit.

Employee or Subcontractor Auditors?

There are many pros and cons about the fraternity of certification auditors, not the least being whether they are an employee or a subcontractor of the certification body.

Here are a few thoughts. In the first instance, make sure you know whether they are an employee or not. Why? It is just good to

know, especially with regard any conflict of interest that might occur or be perceived. If you don't know, ask. There is nothing quite so wrong that your auditor is also a consultant for your biggest competitor. A little checking via LinkedIn and Facebook could also help.

Employee auditors are less likely to have control of their forward planning. This means that you cannot plan an audit 1, 2, 3, 6, 12 months in advance. For project management focussed people like me, this is very important. If they cannot plan in advance, you best find out who in the back office is the keeper of the calendar and try to book through them. But of course, if you are one of the smaller players in the certification client pool, don't be surprised that your date gets bumped as the audit approaches. Just keep the communication up to the operations people and cross your fingers.

Subcontractor auditors can at times drift into consulting more than our employed ones. Why? They just do. Does this help or hinder. It is very situational. Just be aware and temper any given 'advice'.

The employee auditor tends to have a little less customer focus. This is because their billing machine back office does not like idle days. This means they do not have planned customer relationship time which results in no coffee chats, update phone calls, etc. They just turn up on the assigned day.

Subcontractor auditors are normally more flexible with their time and as a consequence have a little more flexibility when it comes to rescheduling and usually, at no extra cost. Employee auditors are normally blissfully unaware to schedule changes and any forward planning. But if you want the specific date, that normally means a new auditor. Consequently if you hold out for the desired auditor, that normally means a change in date to suit them, not you.

Subcontractor auditors also get a break from auditing. If they audit full time, they can become a little stale and a little cynical. If they are exposed to the rigors of designing, implementing and consulting in quality management systems, it will keep them keen and keep them flexible in the auditing phase.

I don't pick a certification body based on the employee status of the auditor, but you should take it into consideration as part of the overall process.

Scope of certification

What's That?

Not only is certification site specific (next chapter), it is also scope specific. So who determines what is in scope and what isn't? Well, the majority of the decision lies with you, the client. You are in charge of determining risk and risk management and in doing so, you document the scope of the quality management system in relation to the activities within that site.

Normally, this means ALL activities within a site. If the organisation is particularly complex, highly divisionalised (if there is such a word), or corporately sensitive, then there might be a case to narrow the scope to specific operations or tasks. This is not ideal but it is accepted by the certification bodies within Australia.

However, there is one caveat. Certification providers do have the right to 'veto' a scope or more accurately, the definition of a scope. If the complexity or the intrinsic nature of the business makes it difficult to compartmentalise processes, divisions or shared services, then the certification body will instruct the client to

reword a scope until all parties are happy. Once this occurs, and you have passed your certification audit, the scope is then quoted on the quality management certification certificate.

So be careful when you are reviewing a possible customer, partner, contractor, supplier, vendor, etc and of their claims to certification. Check the 'fine print'. What site or sites are they claiming and what is the scope. You might just be surprised who is trying to fudge what out there in the market place.

Site Certification

Did you know that when a company gets certified, it is only certified at the nominated site or sites, and only to the defined scope of certification?

The site specific thing is intriguing. I thought at the beginning of this great industry in the late eighties, site specific certification was just a fee gouge. It probably still is, but in these modern days of connectivity and centralisation of services such as accounts, sales, administration, etc, it might be more so than ever.

Some business to business activities require site specific controls. These include fabrication, extraction and manufacturing processes. Remember this. With a thoughtful scope and a dynamic, interconnected quality management system, just one site is all that is needed to be covered by your certification.

Is Design In Your Scope?

Don't let your certification body determine if design is within the scope of your quality management system. The decision still lies with you. By definition, or in particular by standard, there are 7 elements of design and development. These are;

7.3 Design and development

7.3.1 Design and development planning

7.3.2 Design and development inputs

7.3.3 Design and development outputs

7.3.4 Design and development review

7.3.5 Design and development verification

7.3.6 Design and development validation

7.3.7 Control of design and development changes

Normally if your customers have a design component in the contract, you will need to adhere to the above and include them in your certification. But if it is less than say 10% of your business, then perhaps you shouldn't include it. A simple risk analysis or return on investment will help you determine which is best for you. Just make sure you do your homework and if you decide to make it an exclusion, make sure you document the reasons why so that when your friendly auditor comes along, there is no debate, just fact.

Planning

Audit Plans

Does your certification body supply you with an audit plan? Do they supply it with sufficient time before the audit commences? If the answer is no to either or both of these questions, you deserve better.

Without this invaluable tool, how can you satisfactorily prepare for the audit? Never forget that the certification process is a relationship journey, not just one of inspection and compliance. When you are in a relationship, both parties need to contribute. It is very difficult to ensure the right people are available at the right time so that the auditor is reviewing the right process owners and associated records.

A good audit plan will let you know the dates, the times, the locations, the relevant clauses of the standard and or the relevant process under review. It will also let you know who will be conducting the audit. In particular, with those certification bodies who constantly change your auditor, this will give you time to verify that person's experience and track record. Can you do that? *Yes you can*.

Remember, it is a relationship, you need to be comfortable with the person you are about to share your organisation's inner most quality machinations.

Another important aspect of an audit plan is to validate the audit durations, the reporting, the sample plans (for multisite organisations), etc against the invoice you will receive. You then use both (plan and invoice) to compare the proposal / agreement you have with the certification body to ensure you are getting what was agreed to. If you cannot get the plan you expect / deserve in a timely fashion, perhaps it is time to review your service provider options.

Planning The Certification Audit

You have chosen your certification provider. They have conducted the document review. They have conducted the stage 1 review. Now, depending on the requirements of the certification provider, they have deemed you ready for the certification audit. This will be based on the progress of your corrective actions raised during the previous two steps and the required volume of records to enable the effectiveness of your quality management system to be judged. This can be a week, a

month, the magic three months, a year or any time frame deemed appropriate.

Once you achieve this milestone, your certification body will send through an audit plan detailing what he or she will be auditing, when, who and duration. Remember this is only a plan and all stakeholders should agree to the content of the plan. You as the auditee should realise that all clauses will need to be audited in the certification audit. You cannot skip anything other than exclusions. So make sure people are available, make sure they are the people who are responsible and endeavour to provide substitutes in case of absentees. A very important point is that you can and will fail an audit if a clause cannot be audited, and a clause cannot be audited if the person responsible for the clause is absent.

These plans should be in your possession within a week prior to an audit. Insist on it. Do not accept a situation that allows the auditor or audit team to do planning on the morning of the audit.

If they provide a plan that is purely based on the clauses and elements of the standard, it is

the management representative's role to 'convert' such requirements into a meaningful plan / schedule of meetings and appointments that best suit your personnel. The aspects that remain constant in any certification audit plan are; entry meeting, lunch, audit team meeting, exit meeting. The rest is very situational.

Now, as a final note, here are a few hints about lunch. Last century it was a given, an expectation, that you provided lunch to the auditors. Some auditees, used this opportunity to waste time or ply the auditor for information. Neither is very productive. Today, it is not expected, but it is a nice touch. However, before you order a banquet, ask the auditors whether they have brought their lunch or would they like lunch provided. Check on dietary needs and limit the numbers from your company to the key stakeholders and enable plenty of time for the audit team to be able to speak privately amongst themselves before they recommence auditing. If you have decided not to provide lunch, provide them with instructions on how / where to get lunch, the time, etc during the entry meeting.

When To Audit

Most quality management system design and implementations are done on a project basis. That means there is a plan and a deadline. Quite often such plans are based on financial or calendar year deadlines. This means that nearly all quality management system certifications are 'promised' for completion either in June or December of any given year. By sticking to such an arbitrary line in the sand, most businesses then have certification audits planned for these two months as well.

Firstly, the impact on your company during these busy periods may outweigh the benefits, leave employees stressed with the timing or you may experience availability issues. Next, your certification provider is also stretched at these times.

The big whammy in all of this, especially around the recertification phases, is that once you get to annual reviews, there are even more companies seeking certification and recertification in these two months making the whole process even more compressed. This creates situations where certificates may expire, your preferred auditor is not available

and perhaps key personnel within your company also difficult to pin down.

Do yourself, your company and your certification provider a favour. Plan to do your certification audits in April or October and you will at least mitigate one hurdle in the certification process.

Booking Audits

Each certification body has a different process for booking an audit. Some are more helpful than others. You need to find out very early what their process is so that way you can compare the service delivery to your expectations.

If you have more than one site, in more than one state, ask for a 'national coordinator'. Find out what the lead times are for making a request for an audit. Some certification bodies have very strict engagement rules, booking rules, change in date rules and quite specific requirements concerning what records are to be generated before a certification audit can take place.

When booking audits or changing audit dates, communicate early, communicate often. Many certification providers have penalty clauses in their terms and conditions. Make sure you know them and meet them.

Others just have unwieldy, large bureaucracies that cannot handle change quickly. Others will assign you a dedicated client manager who will work with you to ensure both parties can be accommodated. If the certification body requires written confirmation, find out what format will be acceptable and use it.

Some guidelines / prerequisites for planning your first certification audit include;

- all mandatory procedures are written and implemented,
- records of these procedures have been generated that demonstrate effective implementation (one record is not effective implementation),
- awareness training of all relevant staff has been conducted and recorded,
- at least 2 management reviews have taken place,
- at least 5 nonconformances have been identified with the resulting corrective

actions effectively implemented and closed,

- a majority of your internal quality audits have been conducted. Be careful, some certification bodies require all audits have been completed,
- ensure the relevant people will be available,
- ensure practical, comfortable and 'secure' work spaces can be made available for the auditor.
- provide lunch (it might not help but it can't hurt),
- ask for an audit plan and expect one.

Some certification bodies have quite exhaustive precertification visits, documentation reviews and expectations. Get them defined and meet them and at the end of the day if it all seems a bit difficult, look at changing your provider.

Audit Preparation

A Quick Checklist

How to prepare for an audit;

- Confirm the date
- Confirm the auditor(s)
- Confirm the audit is a certification audit not a stage one, document review or gap analysis
- Confirm the duration in total days, auditor days, the number of auditors
- Ask for an audit plan. No sorry, let me rephrase this. Demand an audit plan
- Book a room for the auditors to work from and conference in
- Catering
- Travel requirements
- Safety induction planning
- Is a remote / project site visit required and if so, get one that is convenient and representative
- Determine computer network access requirements and then provide it
- Have appropriate PPE ready
- Have a pre audit meeting to plan requirements with the appropriate people

- Make appointments with the relevant personnel and have alternate people available, just in case
- Meet with these people and give an overview of process, records, expectations
- Ensure awareness training, inductions or similar are at least planned and that previous records are available
- Prepare a tour of your facility / site with appropriate personnel
- Make sure your most senior titled person is available to participate in at least the entry meeting

Some nice touches include recognition on the 'welcome board' at reception, product samples, conduct pre audit discussions / meetings for planning, interpretation, etc.

Above all relax, enjoy. This should be the culmination of a desired project, a desired corporate goal and that all is in place to get the desired certification, first time.

Road Map

One of the best tools you can invest in for your up and coming quality management system certification audit is to generate an auditor

friendly 'road map'. More accurately a cross reference table that lists the elements of the ISO 9001 standard and then lists next to each element where in your quality management system is the corresponding procedure, policy, data, record. You can be as brief or as detailed as you wish so long as it is pure quality speak, very auditor friendly, standard friendly and accurate.

You can then just hand it over to your auditor, or walk them through the map and / or give them access to your system (hard copy or electronic) to let them explore. As a proactive move, why not send it to them a few weeks before the audit giving them a chance to prepare. At the end of the day, the more helpful you can be in this process, the less they will need to investigate in order to satisfy their JAS-ANZ or certification body back office requirements for reporting. Plus, the more accurate and readily retrievable this process is, the more relaxed your auditor will be.

Changing Dates

Personally, to change a certification date, a precertification date or a post certification date is not best practice.

To a certification body and / or the friendly auditor, it suggests the priority your company is placing on either the certification process or the quality management system itself might be lacking. Do it too often and the desired business relationship could be soured.

Your quality management system should be able to operate at all times, assuming the organisation can continue to operate without key personnel for an hour, a day, a week? Second-in-commands, explicit instructions, pre-prepared records, audit trails, etc can all be put in place in order to meet an agreed deadline or event. Sure there will be times when calendars don't sync, but once they do, commit and prepare. Don't make the audit date so low on your priorities that it is the first date you think of changing when reviewing your time.

Remember, some certification bodies have quite heavy and intricate penalties for changing dates. Most certification bodies use subcontracted auditors who book such events 2, 3, 6, 12 months in advance. To chop and change them within a week or two weeks will cause lack of income. Then they may not be so accommodating with forward

planning future audits or even charge you more for fully flexible airfares just in case, and so on.

The point being. Commit to your quality management system and commit to your certification audit date. Give both priority and if you are only doing either for certification sake, be prepared to pay for this strategy and the baggage that comes with it.

Audit Durations And Fees

FTEs And Other Mysteries

All certification bodies are governed (within Australia) by JAS-ANZ (Joint Accreditation System Australia New Zealand, I know you all wanted to know that!). These guys issue certification bodies with an accreditation to supply certification services. Because of this, each certification body is stringently audited by JAS-ANZ in about the same manner that certification bodies audit you and me. When they conduct these audits, they audit against the JAS-ANZ requirements and the requirements of the certification body's own management system. One of the most stringently audited aspect of a certification body is audit duration.

But this is quite easy. There is a published schedule of audit days that compares employees and management system. There are very few interpretations allowed of this schedule and so if it says an audit will 'last' 6 auditor days, the records must demonstrate 6 auditor days. Whether you do it by 6 auditors on one day or 3 auditors over two days, etc, they must match.

However the one big interpretation is the number of full time equivalent (FTE) employees and the number of people conducting the same activity. It is these interpretations that can cause the differences in quotations you will receive from a certification body.

To get the best results consider the following. Define who is full time, who is part time, who is casual. You can find this information from your employment contracts. Just keep a summary. For the part timers and casuals, simply convert / gather the time in hours, divide the number a full time is expected to work and get your FTE. So when you are asked, just produce the spreadsheet and there is no argument.

Hint: make sure there is some correlation with your organisation chart.

The next biggest definition is how many people are doing the same job. Remember, make your best estimate as to how many people are doing what and record it. Then discuss this data with your certification body. You will be rewarded.

Triennial Cycles

Did you know your certification is based on a triennial cycle (three years)? Triennial cycles are a requirement of JAS-ANZ. So don't try and ask your certification body to extend it or to ignore it. They can't. They won't.

So what does this mean? The complete certification cycle roughly follows this sequence. As always it is unique to your circumstance, complexity, risk and certification body. So take this as a guideline only.

Document review (1 off); precertification audit (1 off); certification audit (1 off); post certification audit; (1 every 6, 9 or 12 months) and recertification audit (triennial audit, once every 3 years).

The terminology changes between certification bodies and the frequency of post certification audits is dependent on the maturity, risk and complexity. You can negotiate a certification plan within the parameters of JAS-ANZ and your certification body requirements but the recertification / triennial audit is not negotiable.

Whilst the requirement of the first three years of certification is a sample of the system split over the three years, the triennial now requires the entire quality management system to be audited in full in one fell swoop. What value this adds to the process bewilders me, especially when you are doing it for the 6th, 7th, 8th time. However, it is part of the process. Just plan for it, experience it, deal with it.

How Long?

Third party certification audits are planned at a frequency and duration to meet the requirements of JAS-ANZ. Notice, that statement did not mention your needs.

Now the overarching guideline for planning frequency and duration is whether the entire quality management system of your organisation (or more importantly, those sites and activities within the scope of your certification) can be audited over the course of three years.

I have written before about this and the numbers game between FTEs, how many people are doing the same job, etc. They all impact on the final number.

Once the gross number of days or hours are determined, then it is a matter of choice, but mostly your certification body's choice.

The end result might be for a 12 auditor day certification scenario of; 3 days for certification audits (2 auditors for 1 day, 1 auditor for the 3rd), then 1 auditor for 1 day every 6 months (or 2 auditors for one day every 12 months) for the next three years.

A sample plan for a multi-site system, may need all branches to be audited at half a day per site, per year, totalling 5 auditor days that year and the balance made up of annual events, more branch events, etc, etc, etc.

My head hurts just typing this stuff, so imagine what it is like to convince the certification body to meet your needs as they balance their JAS-ANZ requirements.

The best thing to do is to keep the dialog open, keep the planning process fluid, and to keep your options open with other certification bodies.

How Much?

Fees vary greatly! Certification fees are dependent on the size and complexity of your organisation, the type and number of management systems and the number of sites.

As an example (as at 2012) a company of around 50 employees at one site, with relatively simple processes, say importing and wholesaling in machine parts seeking certification to ISO 9001 would expect to invest around AU$6,000 for the initial certification. They would then need to make a provision for a further AU$4,000 per annum thereafter for ongoing post certification type audits for three years. This is then followed by a re-certification audit of AU$6,000 to finish the triennial cycle.

The cost escalates appreciably if you have multiple sites and multiple risk systems such as ISO 14001 and / or AS 4801. There aren't many economies of scale and this is mostly attributed (or so say the certification bodies themselves) to the limitations placed on them by JAS-ANZ.

As an example (again, as at 2012) one of the largest certifiers for one of my clients (20 people) received a quotation for certifying a combined ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and AS4801 of AU$17,000. Just to get certified! So be careful and make sure you are comparing 'apples -v- apples' when asking for a price through competitive tender.

But is it really that expensive? Well it's not if you are trying to get and / or maintain government contracts or trying to enhance either your unique selling points or value proposition! It is positively cheap if you are putting the system in to gain reductions in waste or increases in productivity.

If you are putting in a system and or getting it certified just to maintain a sales advantage, put the costs in your marketing budget and calculate a return on investment. However, no matter why you want your quality management system certified, you need, in fact deserve, the best possible service and price.

Get the price right

I was taught when it comes to selecting a product or service, you must base your

decision on price, quality, service. Then remember that you can only ever have two of the three of these attributes. Bugger! So let's focus on price.

No two certification providers supply their schedule of fees in the same format. Much the same way as no two consultants will provide you with a proposal in the same format. However, a certification services provider only has a finite number of components to their proposal and therefore it should be easy enough to make direct comparison between them once you get a handle on the terminology.

Here are some of the 'words' used when quoting fees; application fee, administration fee, annual licence fee, additional certificate fee, gap analysis fee, stage 1 fee, stage 2 fee, document review fee, certification audit/review fee, accreditation levy, post certification / surveillance fee, triennial audit / recertification audit fee, follow up audit / nonconformance audit fee, travel time fee, travel expenses, cost recovery fees, etc.

Nearly all providers charge on a fee for service basis which normally means the

provider over services you. At least one of them, structures their fees around a fix fee, paid in advance. At least two charge for intra-metro travel. Some charge intrastate, most charge interstate and international travel. All will charge you extra for a nonconformance or follow up audits. Most will increase their fees by CPI each year. All will review their fees just before or after each 3-year certification cycle.

The best way to evaluate them is to set up a weighted matrix that allows multiple variations in fees and terminology. Then add weighting factors for customer service, reporting, penalty clauses, etc. Then it is all down to just how damn good they can be with their customer service and their quality management processes.

During

Auditors

How To Treat Them

In the bad old days last century, our learned auditing fraternity often took a supposedly very moral, very high ground, very technical, very inflexible attitude toward their task. Having achieved a modicum of extra knowledge in the field of quality management systems gave them, they thought, the right to run riot over the systems and the personnel they were auditing. Not all auditors, but many.

It was so bad in the early days, consultants would school clients in how to be adversarial without being overtly obstructive, how to prepare records and files to present to them and so on.

So now, good consultants are very proactive with clients and should coach them how they should interact with certification bodies. If I am retained as a consultant, I will meet up with proposed auditors, review CVs, have a coffee meeting in an attempt to get to know them and know their interpretation of the standard so that our clients get the best possible outcome.

I don't try and influence decisions or matters of judgment. I just need to get an idea of expectations and interpretation. Be aware, most auditors are very time poor (who isn't), and most are subcontractors who do not value 'free' customer relationship visits. This does not mean you can't do it by phone or e-mail. Just make sure you start the relationship before they arrive for their first auditor visit.

They Won't or Don't Consult

Have you ever been subjected to a 3rd party auditor who won't answer a direct question concerning a particular aspect of your business because they see their answer as consulting? It is a fine line but one worthy of adhering to.

Why? Well mostly because their JAS-ANZ charter as an auditor does not allow them to and especially so on matters they have raised.

You can ask auditors questions concerning the standard, the certification process and perhaps, to some extent, interpretations of these aspects. Though, don't be surprised if

they give the 'no can consult' answer if you haven't framed it correctly.

When is the best time to ask them any question concerning a finding? Well, not at the exit meeting. The best time to ask is when the matter / finding is identified / discovered and you are informed that it will be recorded in the report.

Get clarification. Get the exact example they will cite, be comfortable about the result. Then, after you have considered it (and not necessarily at the time it was discovered) pose a possible solution and seek a determination whether your solution would have avoided or at least mitigated the original finding. If yes, you can start down that track. If no, don't badger them, rethink, reformulate and ask again.

If your certification provider is reporting findings correctly, you should be able to handle system changes as a result of audit reports without having to consult with them.

Precertification

Stage 1 And / Or Document Reviews

When choosing your certification body be sure to read and understand the stage 1 and document review requirements. Each certification body does it differently but they all generally following these steps.

Application - obvious for some but if you don't apply and pay the fee, your certification is going nowhere. Some certification bodies will negotiate this fee and most will not charge it at all should you integrate other management systems or you are transferring a certification.

Document review - as it implies, you must submit your quality management system for scrutiny against the standard. Some certification bodies may ask you to send records as well. Some will conduct a phone interview and some will require a site visit. One requires you to complete a 20 page checklist and then requires their auditor to confirm each of the details on site, independent of the risk foot print which at times is a monumental waste of time.

Stage 1 - is verification of the company's readiness to undergo the certification review. This stage will focus on the results of the document review and the volume of records that will determine the effectiveness of the quality management system.

At this time you must make sure at least the majority of your internal audits have been conducted. A number of certification bodies require all of the audits to be done. Make sure at least two management reviews have been conducted and at least 5 or more full cycle corrective actions. Training records, sales and purchasing records are next followed by processing data and others.

Then it is the call of the auditor whether the certification audit will take place. Depending on the certification body, the lead time will be between a week and a month away (and possibly longer if you want a November / December or May / June time slot.

Document Reviews

This is normally the first stage of the certification process (or second if you count your application). It can be conducted on site or off site, you choose. Very often it will be conducted simultaneously with a stage 1 or precertification audit to determine the readiness of a quality management system for the certification audit.

Confused? Well of course you should. This is, after all, the dark art of certification. Sorry, no more cynical talk. The confusion comes with the lack of uniformity when describing the various stages of the certification process.

The document review is a very simple exercise since the publication of the 2008 standard.

- Do the six mandatory documented procedures exist?
- Do they meet the requirements of the standard?
- Is there a quality policy?
- Is there a quality manual or at least a description of the scope and content of the structural elements of the quality management system and

- last but not least, is there any supporting documentation, procedures, forms, instructions, etc that have been deemed appropriate by the organisation to demonstrate how the quality management system should function.

A document review is a very objective review of the requirements of the standard. Normally there is no resultant report other than to highlight if any documentation is missing or does not address the requirements of the standard. Just be aware that all certification bodies conduct these reviews and audits differently, report differently and may or may not allow the review to be separated from the precertification.

This is not a big issue. Some certifiers have proformas to complete. As mentioned before, one even has a 20 page mandatory document review questionnaire, without which they won't even plan a precertification review.

Once you can show / demonstrate the structure and content, the next step is the precertification review.

Precertification Audits

So what is a precertification review / audit? Didn't I just do a document review? Perhaps you did, but as usual, the document review and precertification review are two different phases in the certification process. It is just that some certification bodies conduct them separately, some conduct them concurrently, some even ask the client what they would like to do. It makes no difference just as long as your know the rules and expectations of your chosen certification body.

I have written about document reviews previously. Once you have successfully met your certification body's document review requirements they then turn their attention to precertification. Dependent on what they found or what they were shown during the document review, in particular records generated by the system, they will deem the timing of the precertification review.

The timing is based on two main factors; 1) enough evidence (records) to enable a judgement on effective implementation and 2) sufficient time between precertification and the proposed certification review / audit.

Some of the above factors include;

- at least 3 months of operational records in sales, purchasing, manufacturing, inventory management,
- at least two management reviews,
- a substantial if not all internal audits completed (very much certification body dependent),
- at least 2 full cycle corrective action plans,
- competency / resourcing records and
- sufficient document, data and record control.

Should any nonconformances be raised during the document or precertification reviews, don't expect to have your certification review / audit within 3 months. If any other classification of finding is raised, you will need to demonstrate the lead times needed to correct or modify them before a certification body will allow the planning of the certification review / audit.

Keep in mind, just because you have a time line within a project plan, it doesn't always mean you can keep it if it doesn't match the certification body requirements. Some certification bodies won't even allow any

forward planning of certification dates without the first two reviews having even taken place.

Meetings

Entry Meeting

Every audit should start with one. Why? So that the scene, the scope, the intents can be set.

Your auditor then explains the process, confirms the scope, describes reporting, categorisations of findings, confidentiality, seeks clarification of reporting styles, lunch breaks, report generation periods. They might even give an overview of their credentials or background.

They will expect the management representative to attend. However, there are some that also expect a 'show of strength' by having the managing director, the chief operating officer, the chief financial officer and so on. Perhaps for the very first certification audit this might happen, but don't be bullied, just have those who wish to attend, attend, the rest can hear about the meeting through phone calls or emails.

Hopefully your certification provider has provided you with a booking / audit schedule

/ plan for the areas that will be audited on the day. It will be during the entry meeting that you can discuss and negotiate times, personnel, resources, etc if you haven't already done so.

These meetings should only take 20 minutes. Any extension to this is governed by you, the client. If you have nothing further to add, don't and get on with the audit.

Exit Meetings

Every audit must finish with an exit meeting. Make sure you manage the process. This doesn't mean hijack it, just manage it. Find out what the expectations are from the auditor and certification provider. Ensure an agreed time, location and duration to a mutually acceptable situation and ensure it happens.

Once you have the logistics, communicate the requirements to the management review team and any interested stakeholders. Don't force anyone to be there. If it is the first certification audit exit meeting, it is suggested that at least the management representative and the managing director are present. All subsequent exit meetings should just be

sensitive to the requirements of the management team and or the certification provider.

Now as the quality management representative, you should already know the result. If not, why not? Always ensure open and frequent communication between yourself and the lead auditor. We have dealt with findings in previous chapters, so make sure you are aware.

The next step is to school the attendees as to their behaviour and what to expect during the meeting. The most important aspect is to 'not argue the toss'. Get them to accept that you, as the quality management representative, have accepted the findings and therefore so should they. If they think that the finding is incorrect, they should raise it with you after the meeting. Starting the dialog during the meeting, will just drag it out and open the door for more 'discussion' for the remainder of the findings. Take the verbal report on face value and in the knowledge it is just a courtesy communication rather than an opportunity to joust.

As most certification providers will announce the result within the first few minutes of the meeting, accept the overall result (which should be positive), bask in the good news and keep a few notes to demonstrate the importance you place on the process.

Even if the lead auditor should spring a surprise result / finding during the meeting, accept it, then ensure you seek clarification before they leave the site. All forms of feedback and dispute can then be handled through due process with the certification provider as opposed with an individual.

Records and Site Sampling

There is much to write about records sampling. It falls into two categories; site sampling and record sampling.

The first is mathematical and defined by the certification body as required by JAS-ANZ. It can be quite a complex formula but if all sites are similar in complexity and operations, then the rule of thumb is the total number of sites (TNS) to be audited is equal head office (HO) plus the square root of the number of remaining sites (RS). Thus giving us the Mason Theory of Sampling Relativity for simple systems;

$TNS=HO+\sqrt{RS}$

For the complex issues of different scopes, different complexities, different operations and so on, I will leave the formula setting with the certification providers.

Sampling of records, is less defined and primarily left to the auditor to determine risk and subsequent need for objective evidence to be demonstrated. All auditors are charged with the responsibility of finding conformance,

and doing so based on a level of confidence that is experienced when reviewing any particular aspect or clause. The more compliant, objective evidence found by or presented to an auditor that quickly gives a confidence of conformance, will mean less records will be needed for review.

On the flip side, any, and I mean any discrepancy to process, procedure or intent as demonstrated by an incorrect record or even worse, the lack of a record, will have your friendly auditor wanting more records to review in order to make a determination.

Remember, all auditing is based on sampling and all sampling can either give good or bad representation of the quality management system being audited. Once a lack of conformance is found it cannot and will not be ignored. The extra digging or increased sampling will help the auditor either mitigate the finding or escalate it. Simple.

Findings

Did you know that every certification body uses a different format for reporting your 3rd party audit results and findings. All certification bodies 'grade' their findings into 3 categories (well I think all, I have never seen an audit report that had more or less).

There are three schools of naming protocols with a large number of derivatives around words but the intent of the categories are; nonconformance, incident, observation.

Almost universally, a nonconformance is called a nonconformance or a nonconformity. In particular, a clause or sub clause of the standard is not being addressed or an accumulation of incidents has caused an escalation to a nonconformance. A very simple example of this would be that there is no documented procedure for internal audits (one of the 6 mandatory procedures required by the standard).

An incident, which I have seen called; minor nonconformance, improvement request, area of concern, and more, means a 'minor' breach in standard, a non-adherence to a procedure / process, lack of evidence or similar where the auditor has found isolated incidents. An example (keeping to the internal audit theme) would be that the audit report conducted in August has not been signed off by the auditor.

An observation, AKA opportunity for improvement, is when in the 'opinion' of the auditor, the organisation may gain some value in considering a scenario, situation and / or could use the finding to improve the quality management system. For example, why not split the internal audits schedule into monthly segments and or focus on the process rather than the procedure when planning. Some certification bodies use this category as a place to record very minor incidents but this is something I do not agree with.

Each grade of finding has its own repercussion and reporting criteria. Make sure you know them and / or get a published copy of 'what to do' when you receive a finding.

Then put it / them into your own corrective action system and address them in the required timing and format.

Objective Evidence

As we have discussed, the classifications of findings is very important but it is not as important as agreeing that a finding has been found.

The first thing you must do whenever a finding is brought to your attention, is to see or have quoted what is the objective evidence being cited in the circumstance.

If this cannot be explained or shown, then you must seek further clarification. This is the most important part of any of the audit processes. You as the auditee must agree that a finding is evident. Once agreed, then accept. The only wriggle room after this is the classification which we covered last chapter.

And why am I droning on about this? Well, it is to do with the professional relationship and trust you need to foster between yourself and your service provider. All parties need to be clear as to what is being found, what is being

classified and what to expect in the exit meeting. You as the management representative for your company have the right to ensure all things reported are factual. At the end of the day, the final output is the audit report and in it are the 'results', so let's make them right.

More effort and resources are wasted than in all of the certification processes combined when reacting to inaccurate or even worse, incorrect findings. So ensure you are kept in the loop. Ensure that they are agreed to and then there will be no surprises in the exit meeting.

Classifications

Each certification service provider is required by JAS-ANZ to classify their findings. How and by what name is largely up to the provider.

But before I get onto this, "What is a finding?" A finding (or issue, matter, discrepancy, etc) is any situation that requires consideration or remediation with regard the quality management system. For example, during an audit it was discovered that there is no documented procedure for internal quality audits.

Make sure you know how a certification provider classifies a finding and what are the required remedial actions for each before you finalise your decision on a provider. Whilst most operate within similar constraints, some have some very quirky 'rules' and reporting requirements. And how do you do that? Ask for their published guidelines / criteria.

The three broad categories of findings are;

1)nonconformance (or nonconformity, major corrective action, noncompliance, etc);

2) corrective action (or improvement request, area of concern , minor conformity, minor corrective action, etc);

3) observation (consideration, opportunity for improvement, comment, etc).

What they represent;

1) nonconformance – lack of mandatory requirement or an aggregation of findings within the one clause.

2) corrective action, something is in breach of the standard or your own procedures / processes. Fix them.

3) observation, you may get some benefit from considering an alternate means of managing a situation.

And here is the consequence of each;

1) nonconformance – you will not receive initial certification, you will need to show cause (planned corrective actions) and remedial actions within 3 months to retain certification.

2) corrective action, certification will be granted / continued but you will need to close any remedial action before the next visit (6~12 months).

3) observation, you will need to demonstrate that you have considered the finding and declared an outcome.

Easy. The best way to combat findings and their classifications is not to get any. Good luck with that one! If your certification is part of a continuous improvement strategy, then rejoice in the findings found, so that you can make your quality management system better.

Communication

For the quality management representative, there should be no surprises in an exit meeting concerning what findings were found during the course of an audit. Why? Because your lead auditor should have kept you informed throughout the audit process. Why? Because, once a finding is raised no matter what the classification, the auditor should at that point receive agreement from the auditee and / or the management representative, that they have accurately discovered the finding with the supporting objective evidence.

The only time there might ever be a surprise finding is when the audit team collaborate their findings. They may find an adverse trend requiring the finding to be escalated. If this happens, the lead auditor should advise the management representative immediately so that the situation can be agreed to or mitigated by providing additional evidence.

And why would they want to do any of the above? Well it is their charter as third party auditors to find conformance and in my mind, to mitigate the severity of findings if they can.

This does not mean you get to argue the point, every point or every interpretation. It means that once brought to your attention, you can find mutual agreement on the finding, the evidence and the classification.

And how would you know that? Your certification body should have a published criteria around this so that you can react accordingly.

Reporting

As with audit findings, each certification body has its own format and style for reporting an audit. Some merge their findings and their report in the one document. Some are short. Some are a matter of fact. Some are voluminous, condescending, interpretive, regurgitated trite and so on.

In Australia, the peak accreditation body, JAS-ANZ, has quite specific reporting requirements for a certification body to report the outcome of an audit to a client. These are;

- an overall statement of meeting the requirements of the standard,
- the number of and the status of each finding,
- the status of each element audited,
- statements concerning key processes and controls,
- description of the organization and its on-site processes,
- an overview of the applicable regulations (including licences/permits), and
- the management system is effective in achieving the organization's objectives.

This could be done in one page, so long as there is supporting evidence such auditor notes, recordings, video, etc.

You should be happy with the reporting. If you are not, tell your provider what parts of the report you like and what you don't like. Tell them what parts are important to your internal reporting or corrective action processes. Ask them to simplify or provide more detail. The choice is yours.

Determine how much time is being billed against you for reporting. Ask them if they can do the reporting off site and ask for a preliminary report before they leave the site in case their back office machinations causes you delays. Remember, they can only make findings and report on objective evidence which they should then quote in any finding or report documentation. Don't allow them to generalise. Make sure you are getting specific examples.

Audit reporting is meant to be a value adding process. If it isn't, tell your provider and ask for the value and expertise you deserve.

After

Celebrate

During the exit meeting of your certification audit, the following words should be uttered….'and it gives me great pleasure to recommend your company for certification to ISO 9001. Congratulations.'

I can almost hear your thought processes. Your shoulders relax, your head stops throbbing and you begin to envisage seeing the back of your friendly auditing team leaving the premises. It was all worth it. Sure there are findings and recommendations but the end result is a recommendation for certification.

No certification body grants certification on the day. JAS-ANZ just doesn't allow it. It must go through a compliance audit in the certification body back office before a certificate is granted.

Having said that; "let the celebrations begin!" Get a hold of your internal distribution list and blast them with the news. Make sure you highlight who contributed, who was audited and that you will speak with the responsible

people in due course. Keep it light and positive. Issue a warning to those who like to embellish. Clearly state, that you have been recommended not granted certification.

The next step is to contact all of your customers and suppliers. Tell them of the recommendation or wait the 5 days (Global-Mark) or up 10 weeks (some others) to clearly state you have achieved certification.

Why not organise the certification body or a local dignitary to come and award the certificate. Throw a BBQ, harbour cruise or just have pizza at your next Management Review meeting. Just do something, you deserve it!

Branding

OK, so now you are certified. Woohoo. The band has left, the nibbles have been nibbled and the whole boardroom is festooned with your chosen certification body's logo.

Some of these logos / brands are very popular and well recognised, some are not. So unless you are selling your product / service based solely on the recognition factor of your certification service provider (and I hope you

are not), then why bother promoting them without the commensurate royalty or advertising fees.

In retail, cataloguing and shelf space, is a very expensive exercise. So why aren't you charging your certification body for their right to use your space to promote their business? A little bit cynical I know, but worth pondering.

Of course it is good to use the certification body logo with your own brand strategies so as to be seen as a committed quality provider.

However, even the most popular of the certification body brands can also be a bit misleading. Is it quality management system endorsement or is it product certification? Who knows, unless you look at the small print. Never trade on misconception and make sure everyone knows what your certification body logo stands for.

Promote your certification and your certification body heavily to those who need to know it most. Where possible, keep it electronic.

There is nothing more expensive than having to repaint your warehouse or your truck fleet with a new logo because your relationship with your current provider has soured. Even worse, when you are forced to remain with a certification provider that adds no value to your company because of such rebranding expenses.

Fixing findings

And so, the audit is finished, the exit meeting conducted and the audit report has hit your desk. As discussed, there should be no surprises, there should be correctly categorised findings, and specific examples. Now you have 3, 6, 9 or 12 months with which to fix them.

If you have findings that have to be addressed within 3 months, then you have got a nonconformity or a major corrective action (of course the names are different for every certification service provider). When you have one of these, you normally have to provide details on what corrective actions you will take, what resources you will use and a timeline to at least reduce the matter to an improvement request / minor corrective action if not closed all together. The rest of the categories of findings you will just need to address before the next audit or at least consider if they are an observation.

It really doesn't matter what the category is, my recommendation is that you treat each finding as an individual event and include them in your system's own corrective action

process. Make sure you cross reference them so that you can trace them when the auditor returns.

Once in the system, correct the situation as reported. For example, if the finding is the audit report for the internal audit of purchasing in October was not signed….get it signed. The matter can then be closed. However, if you are using certification as an improvement process, you should also look into why the report was not signed. If it is for continual improvement, close the initial finding, then open a new corrective action and review the signing process. Make sure you still reference the originating circumstance. Now, this is not the only methodology. You could keep the original open and make the review of the signing process part of the effectiveness review of the entire finding / corrective action / matter.

Remember, don't go re-inventing the wheel based on the findings and examples of one audit. Be reflective and only take those actions that you need to take to address the tabled findings. Once you have that out of the way with your certification provider, you can then get on with your own continual

improvement cycle through your management reviews, internal audits and corrective actions.

Avoid The Cram

It's been three months since you were certified. Do you still have that inner glow from a 'job well done'? You should. But now you need to avoid any hangover and you definitely need to avoid the 'cram'.

Some companies think that certification is a race. You cross the finish line and dine on the success forever. It isn't. Certification is only the beginning and if you are not careful, that wonderful success can quickly be replaced with the threat of your certification being suspended.

"What?" Can they do that? Yes, they can. Your certification body will be back within 6 months of your certification and they will be looking for a number of things. Did you record the findings from the audit in your own corrective action system or management review? Have you fixed them? Have you met your frequencies for internal audits, management reviews, corrective actions, calibrations, etc, etc.? Have new employees

been made aware of their impact on the system and so on and so on. Yikes, if that seems a tonne of work, it is. So to ensure you aren't faced with suspension threats, keep the project rolling.

BUT (yes, capitals) do not leave it to the last minute. Don't create that last minute cram of work / activity as you ready for the next audit. Spread it out, take your time and review your frequencies. Companies who create cram days or in fact cram weeks just to 'pass' audits are not doing themselves any favour. Once your astute certification provider gets wind of the cramming, the more clever of them (some say, the more caring of them), will find ways to show management that cram quality is not good quality.

Plan Ahead

Don't Defer

I have written before why you should not postpone audits, but the most important reason is that your certificate may lapse if you defer the recertification audit.

JAS-ANZ mandates that an audit must be completed within 12 months of the last review. Within, not 'around' or 'near enough'. Should they review your certification service provider's files and find that you are out of date, they will instruct your provider to suspend the certificate. If you miss the expiry date of your certificate because you defer an audit, it will be suspended or cancelled effective on the expiry date.

Missing an expiry date has many complications, not the least that your certificate won't be accepted in tenders but it also means additional costs because stage one reviews may need to be conducted again.

The main reason to keep audit dates, and in particular the recertification ones, is that there

are lead times from the audit to the final report. Now this can be as short as a day, but due to the time of year (remember June and December are bottlenecks), the complexity of the audit, the number of locations, etc it can be a number of weeks. If you are in this situation, make sure your provider is aware and that the process needs to be expedited.

However, as always, the easiest way to stop the above from happening is to be proactive with your provider, set timely dates and stick to them.

Scheduling Audits

I am constantly amazed at the lack of customer service certification providers demonstrate when planning and scheduling audits. Any audits. Stage one, document reviews, initial, follow up and or post certification audits. There is only one constant in this process, it's difficult.

As a normal business courtesy, negotiate a suitable time and date with all parties and then give the event the importance it deserves and stick to it.

Allow enough time to plan, enough time to gather resources and or data. Don't postpone because a key person will be absent. Just ensure an alternative person is available and if not, try and set up a video or teleconference in lieu, which doesn't necessarily have to be on the same day.

As always each certification body has a different process to book an audit. Some are more difficult than others. Some threaten rescheduling fees as part of the initial negotiations for a suitable date.

All Australian certification bodies must follow the requirements of JAS-ANZ. Some of the most important are; the audit schedule, frequency, audit hours and expiration dates.

As a rule, the least amount of time a post audit can take place is annual. Don't ask for longer, it won't happen.

The next important aspect is expiry date. If your certificate expires, you are required to go through the complete certification process again, so don't let that happen.

Make sure you conduct any recertification's / triennial audits at least 4 weeks before the expiry dates. For some certification bodies make sure it is 6 weeks and if you are unsure, ask them.

Review Your Auditor

Keep Your Auditor?

Can you? Do you want to? What are the pros and cons? Let me say from the outset that keeping the same auditor will always be my preference. But it isn't all 'beer and skittles' if you do. 'Familiarity breeding contempt' can cause issues, so will the 'can't see the forest for the trees'.

Enough of the desk calendar quotes. Utilising the same auditor is a very personal decision and one which you must make yourself and / or manage yourself. If your certification body won't allow you to keep with the auditor of your choice, then it becomes a bigger picture decision on whether to keep the certification body.

Most will accommodate this request, but there might be logistical issues especially if they have a centralised booking function. As will the fact if you are not one of their top 20 to 50 clients.

Having an auditor learn and grow with your quality management system, learn and grow

with your company brings about economies of scale and a true empathy with your goals and objectives. You won't have to waste your time teaching a new person the nuances or history of the company or system.

Once you have a professional relationship with your auditor you can utilise their experience and knowledge in some truly value added auditing (an oxymoron for some I know). Just remember to work on the relationship and manage the relationship should it not meet your expectations. This is still a client / supplier scenario and it should be treated as such. So stick with the one that meets your needs most and change if they don't.

Changing Auditors

Do you have to accept the proposed auditor? In one word, no. However, it depends on the certification body on whether this is easy or hard. You should have a valid reason not to accept the proposed auditor or to change the one you have.

Here are just a few reasons;

- they don't seem to have the industry experience,

- they don't relate to company personnel very well,
- their reporting is not to the agreed requirement,
- contactability,
- lack of service focus,
- lack of customer service,
- their interpretation of the standard or certification process, etc.

If the reason is not a technical issue, such as lack of service focus, don't wait for the next audit before you bring your concerns to the attention of the certification provider. Do it as soon as you receive your report (and or certificate).

Ensure you confirm the conversation via email or letter but ensure there is written communication explaining the situation. As part of this exercise, then ask for a different auditor. Should they 'forget' and put the same person forward again, remind them of the communications.

If the certification body proposes a new / different auditor, you are allowed to ask for their resume, their industry codes, even a referee or two from other clients. If refused,

time to reconsider your certification body or to escalate the request to the certification body back office or management.

When subjecting yourself to a third party audit for certification, it is a very intimate business situation so make sure you are comfortable with who you are going to work with. Do not accept substandard work and escalate as needed.

Most certification bodies use subcontractors as their auditors. These people usually have better customer focus (but not always) with the downside being they are difficult to replace, especially if they are your sole contact point with that certification body.

Others have employees (and normally very overworked, no tongue in cheek here, they are) but they really aren't bothered to negotiate or take an alternate view to a situation because they know they will still be 'hard' at work tomorrow, no matter what the feedback from today is. So be careful, be choosy and get the best you deserve.

Review Your Provider

Certification And Service

Is this heading an oxymoron? Perhaps. A certification service provider is only as good as your primary contact. If you happen to be a small or medium sized business, you may not even register (no pun intended) on the certification provider's radar. There are many fundamental reasons why you get varying degrees of service and attention from the certification fraternity. Here are a few.

If you wish to have the biggest market recognition from your certification trade mark, then realise, they also attract the 'big end of town' as their client base. What this means is that 80% of their revenues come from 20% of their clientele. If you just happen to be in the bottom half of that client pool, then you aren't even afforded a primary contact. You must deal with the operations department for such things as auditor availability, audit dates, reschedules, etc. Got a problem with a certificate? Different department. Got a problem with an invoice? Different department. And so on.

Remember, the largest provider is also one of the very few that has employee auditors which comes with its own pros and cons. However, these guys do have resources and do have people in just about every location in Australia.

Most other providers have a client manager mentality, and that means your auditor is your primary contact. This streamlines your communications and allows you to form a relationship with that person. It also means you don't have to induct that person into your workplace or quality management system every time they show up and it means they can truly add value once they learn the culture of the organisation.

However, not all providers allow these 'client managers' to actually book audits, so you will still have to go through some sort of back office bottleneck to get a date set up or changed. Some don't allow these people to quote on additional sites or additional risk systems either.

Keep in mind, there are certification providers who do all this from your primary contact which ensures you get the best level of care

and the service you deserve. And if you are not, you get to resolve with them first to ensure the best outcome. If not, it is just a phone call or email away to request a replacement auditor (or provider) and let the journey begin again.

Change Your Provider

Can you do that? Yes you can. Some of the certification providers make it more difficult than others but the ones who focus on their clients and or prospective clients make it as easy as possible.

So let's explore why you would want to change. Have you experienced any (or all) of the following?

- inflexibility with audit dates,
- over servicing during an audit,
- takes more than a week to get a proposal,
- takes more than a week to get an audit report,
- takes more than 2 weeks to get a certificate,
- cannot negotiate forward audit dates with the auditor,
- the auditor only turns up for audits,

- they don't have a physical office location in your capital city,
- you only ever hear from them when an audit is due,
- the audit is based on a fee for service,
- more than one auditor turns up,
- a different auditor turns up most times,
- opinionated auditors,
- you can't complain because it will jeopardise the result,
- cumbersome audit reports,
- lack of client management

and the list goes on.

Let me temper these reasons by saying that all certification providers can from time to time, exhibit some and / or all of the above. But, it's how they deal with these concerns or dissatisfaction that makes the difference. If you are dissatisfied with your current service provider - CHANGE.

Changing is all about the timing. If your certification provider only give you 4 weeks notice for an audit, then reciprocate with your notice to dispense with their services. Be careful though, you may have pre-paid for that year, so it may well be more beneficial to wait for your anniversary.

You don't have to wait till the next full triennial certification review to change. If you are changing from one JAS-ANZ provider to another, they can take into consideration all previous reports and historical data. The more data you have, with the least number of improvements or concerns (not nonconformances as they must be zero), the easier it will be.

At the end of the day, if you are unhappy, change. If you have a reasonable track record and you time it right, you can have a transfer of certification within 2 weeks at NO COST.

Closing Thoughts

Certification is a journey, not a prescription. I am sure you will learn from my journey and make it applicable to your company, your situation.

About John Mason

John Mason is founder, managing director, managing consultant and managing auditor of Oberon NSW Pty Limited, trading as quality.com.au and Quality Certifications. A specialist management consultancy designing, developing, implementing, supporting and auditing quality management systems based on ISO 9001.

As a businessperson, John has achieved a significant track record in business development and client satisfaction with his focus being strategic planning, project management and sales. John is a metallurgist and lead auditor in quality management systems.

He is the nonexecutive chairperson of the Global-Mark Advisory Board and has held chairmanships, office bearer and board member roles with many Not-for-Profit, Non-Government organisations and Government boards with the more recent being Sydney Hills Business Chamber, Hills Schools Industry Partnership and NSW Community Housing.

On a personal note, John is married with 3 daughters, enjoys physical fitness, personal development, golf, ballroom dancing and travel.

For more information, visit his profile page on LinkedIn;
http://www.linkedin.com/in/johnjamesmason

John Mason's 'Plain Text' is the title and for good reason. When speaking all things certification, he speaks (well, types) quite plainly. No rocket science, no dark art, just plain text.

The book has three parts and is a collection of blogs and thoughts gleaned over the last 20 years.

John proposes to talk with you, not at you in these pages. And yes, the book talks nothing but quality certification. Why? Mostly because he really likes quality.

So come along, read about his certification experiences. It will change your quality certification outcomes.

ISBN 978-0-9874413-0-0