

ISO 9001

How to Fail the ISO 9001 Driver's Test

by **Paul Palmes**

Would you like to guarantee a really difficult ISO 9001 audit? Perhaps create an event that will forever taint your certification efforts as a colossal exercise in stress, fear and dread? Allow me to offer 20 years of head-scratching observations that are seldom included in discussions of what not to do when trying to prove you're capable of driving on the ISO 9001 highway.

Let's explore that metaphor further,



In 50 Words Or Less

- **An ISO 9001 audit can closely resemble a test to get your driver's license.**
- **Adequate resources and preparation are key to passing an audit, but are too often overlooked by management.**
- **The key to success is a trained and experienced management representative.**

because the process of getting a driver's license is similar to the preparation and initial road test of an ISO 9001 compliant system. Think of the auditor as a department of motor vehicles (DMV) tester who must examine your vehicle and several of its key operators before it can proceed down the entrance ramp and merge onto an exclusive road.

The other cars and drivers on that road were all similarly inspected before being allowed to travel there and understand they will occasionally be tested in the future.

The Management Representative

The day before your registration audit is the moment your organization is about to metaphorically enter that vehicle inspection area. Who's driving? Is that person,

usually known as the management representative (MR), truly ready for the job? (See “Excerpts From ISO 9001,” p. 35) Has she driven the vehicle through different types of weather and terrain prior to this day, or is this a defining moment that could become a career breaker?

MRs who cannot foresee what will be asked of them and what is required to successfully register might as well hand over their driving responsibilities before the audit. After all, when an inexperienced MR breaks down during the audit, most organizations suddenly find a replacement, typically a senior manager, who steps in to save the day—assuming the crash isn’t too severe.

I’ve seen it. It happens far too often, and the indicators are typically there long before the audit. They can include:

- Hesitancy or noticeable confusion about how ISO 9001 actually works.
- A pattern of missed assignments during program development.
- Highly infrequent communication between the MR and key top managers.
- A panicked rush to complete everything 30 days before the audit.

Inexperienced MRs often are poorly prepared and scared of potential failure. Of course, they then carry those fears into the audit, along with any available documents they think might help, regardless of whether they’re relevant to the task at hand. Just as a 16-year-old might take along a good luck charm on test day, an inexperienced MR often will misrepresent the organization’s efforts by dredging up an irrelevant report or some other favorite—but unrelated—icon.

Resource Allocation and Support

Section 5.5.2 of ISO 9001 says the MR should be provided adequate authority to meet his various responsibilities. Section 6.1 requires resources be provided to “implement and maintain the quality management system and continually improve its effectiveness.”

The MR’s levels of confidence and competence are often directly proportional to the degree of investment in his training, necessary tools or other support from the organization. Lacking appropriate resources or the authority to act as a true representative of top management, the undersupported

MR further diminishes his effectiveness.

Observant auditors recognize this just as quickly as DMV testers who accompany inexperienced drivers through their first road tests. Prospective drivers who arrive on time and are ready to listen and demonstrate they understand the commands asked of them are rewarded for their study, training and skill development. Being in such a position most likely required a willingness to learn, resources and time to effectively train and support from friends and family.


It’s no different for an MR. Too often, however, he is not given adequate resources, such as specialized software, staff hours, meeting time or other developmental considerations. Adding potential problems is the old adage, “You don’t know what you don’t know,” and on audit day the truly inexperienced MR often realizes quickly the task at hand requires more than a few prior laps around the track.

Interestingly, this realization is often the point when a senior manager tries to rescue the audit through whatever approach has worked in the past. While the MR calms himself in the background, the real instigator takes center stage to talk the auditor out of the standoff. Had senior management exerted the same energy to train, assess and upgrade the MR’s abilities, such rescue efforts would have been unnecessary.

Several preaudit training and networking opportunities exist, including:

- **Online ISO 9000 user groups:** Several are available, and each offers direct contact with others who know or can help find answers to ISO 9000 related questions.
- **Books and magazines:** Many are available that address audit preparations, expectations and general insight.
- **Local practitioners:** There’s no better way to learn than from another person who’s gone through the process. Arrange appointments with MRs from local ISO 9000 certified organizations.
- **Consultants:** They often have a broad range of helpful tips, best practices and streamlining techniques to help the MR best represent the organization.

Most often, there’s a huge gap in perhaps the most obvious place: the relationship between the



MR and the registrar. Of all the resources you can look to for help and direction, your registrar has the most to offer.

Many organizations don't work closely with their registrars before the audit because they're afraid of showing ignorance and inadequate preparation, the two deficiencies most apparent to the auditor within an hour or two of the visit.

Here is where a road test differs considerably from an ISO 9001 audit. You wouldn't dream of calling the DMV and requesting a test officer's time to ask about the driving test. Many people already have gone through it, and the sequence of activities is rigid and well defined. An ISO 9001 registration audit has plenty of controls and areas requiring rigid adherence to core practices, but it's also tailored to the organization—its product type, complexity and number of employees.

An Ounce of Preparation

A poorly prepared MR hasn't asked for help, hasn't talked with the lead auditor or the assigned account manager in the registrar's operation and has only the audit schedule—usually provided a

few weeks before the audit—to direct her planning and preparation. However, in 20 years, I have never seen an audit schedule proceed as initially scripted.

Openly discussing the upcoming process, asking all questions and admitting the unknown develop a positive foundation that fosters flexibility and dialogue, prime requirements for an MR on audit day. If your chosen registrar is aloof, unresponsive or unavailable, admit to having made a poor choice, ask for the deposit back and find a different one.

The best registrars are available and responsive to the client long before the audit. The best prepared MRs make themselves known to their registrar as students of the standard, their own operation and the important relationship between the auditee and auditor.

Audit day, regardless of the best preparations, remains a tense affair. A well-prepared and supported MR, an involved management group, informed employees, published schedules and coffee and lunch menus at the ready are the basics of what will be days of give and take. But just as a

Excerpts From ISO 9001

5.5.2: Management Representative

Top management shall appoint a representative who, irrespective of other responsibilities, shall have responsibility and authority that includes:

- Ensuring that processes needed for the quality management system are established, implemented and maintained.
- Reporting to top management on the performance of the quality management system and need for improvement.
- Ensuring the promotion of awareness of customer requirements throughout the organization.

6.1: Provision of Resources

The organization shall determine and provide the resources needed:

- To implement and maintain the quality management system and continually improve its effectiveness.

well-prepared teenager might drive into traffic without looking, it's possible to trip and stumble during the audit simply due to stress.

Preregistration audits often are worth twice their investment if only to dispel the dread and stress. A good preregistration audit also affirms sound practices and points out areas that need attention. Assuming those are attended to, the actual registration audit takes on a positive tone from the outset and is often a confidence booster for everyone involved. Think of the preregistration audit simply as another bullet point in the list of MR training and networking opportunities.

The MR is supposed to be a member of management. In reality, however, this assignment is often delegated to a person working at the periphery of true top level management. This decision often results from misconception, arrogance, indifference or the sadly appropriate conclusion that somehow executive management has neither the time nor the contact with operations to effectively oversee the audit.

Choosing a novice—in disregard of the remaining requirements of ISO 9001's section 5.5.2 calling for real authority to "establish, implement, maintain and report on progress"—is a recipe for remorse. Yet, the choice and subsequent abandonment of the MR often entirely are the fault of senior managers, who show lack of appreciation for the true spirit of the standard with such behavior.

ISO 9001's title is *Quality Management Systems—Requirements*. If this simply was a quality system, there would be no mention of management in the title. The committees that wrote and maintain this standard aim to improve the quality of management, not the management of quality. If the latter position were true, most of section five, "Management Responsibility" (immediately followed by the subheading "Management Commitment"), would be unnecessary.

In fact, section five makes it clear that management is to plan, communicate, review and apply resources based on the results of investments of allocated resources. Such a program should not be reduced to an occasional report from a distant manager whose ability to influence change is handicapped by a lack of real or perceived authority.

Joining the Traffic Flow

The ISO 9001 driver's test requires a flexible,

knowledgeable, authoritative and skilled MR performing at a level that verifies the organization's right to drive among equals on a new international highway. A lack of investment in and support of the driver often leads to the first and most noticeable weaknesses in the examiner's eyes as the vehicle swerves and lurches through the process.

Such a lack is avoidable and preventable, and those who understand the standard never would allow it, because such a performance more often demonstrates weakness in the organization's leadership rather than incompetence of the MR. His or her lack of preparation and control is merely a window to executive indifference or delusion, both of which can be assessed and corrected long before the door is closed and seat belts buckled.

NOTES

More information on ISO 9000 audits can be found at the following websites:

Elsmar Cove, www.elsmar.com/Imp (case sensitive).

Practical information on several quality related subjects.

Columbia Audit Resources, <http://auditguy.blogspot.com>. Auditor Dennis Arter's blog is made for both the veteran and new auditor in search of best practices and discussion.

PDCAuditing, www.pdcauditing.com. This site features new 15- to 20-minute quality related podcasts approximately every two weeks.

PAUL PALMES is the quality assurance director at Northern Pipe Products Inc. in Fargo, ND. He has a master's degree in administration from Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA. His most recent book, *The Magic of Self-Directed Work Teams—A Case Study in Courage and Culture Change*, was published by ASQ Quality Press in 2006. An ASQ member and certified quality manager, Palmes is vice chair of U.S. technical committee 176, which is responsible for writing and updating the ISO 9000 series of standards.

Please comment

If you would like to comment on this article, please post your remarks on the *Quality Progress* Discussion Board at www.asq.org, or e-mail them to editor@asq.org.