Understanding Certification Bodies

Selecting the Most Appropriate Certification Body

In this white paper, we will provide you with steps and information to make your path to certification easier and less expensive.

Applicability

This whitepaper reviews the most crucial steps to take in selecting the correct certification body for your organization.

All organization looking to get certified should properly gather the necessary information to make an informed and strategic decision when selecting a certification body.

How to choose your registrar?

A Certification Body or Registrar is your key to successfully certifying your organization to a management system standard. Even though certification bodies look the same and must follow the same rules, they are very different from one another. These rules are laid out in a number of different documents. One of the primary documents that certification bodies must follow is ISO 17021. This document provides the requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of management systems. However, a certification body's interpretation of these requirements can vary. Here, we offer 5 questions to ask your certification body prior to selecting a partner in seeking a certification partner.

Certification Auditor or Internal Auditor?

A **certification auditor** performs the final audit for the certification body to confirm you are in compliance with the standard.

An **internal auditor** is used to help the company prepare for the final audit. The internal auditor will review documentation, walk the facility, identify areas that need to be fixed. If engaged first, some internal auditors will even assist with negotiating certification audit costs.

Rule of Thumb ~ First: Internal Audit. Second: Certification Audit.

Five critical questions to ask

1. Who are you accredited by?
2. How much do you charge per man-day?
3. Do you have certified local auditors with availability to audit my organization?
4. What risk level am I and what, if any, discounts have you applied to my audit time?
5. Do you include off-site time for audits or do you add time for review of nonconformities?

Who are you accredited by?

There are thousands of certification bodies out there, but not all of them are legitimate. In order to be a true certification body, you must be held accountable by an accreditation body. In the United States, the most common accreditation body is the ANSI-ASQ National Accreditation Board (ANAB). Another popular accreditation body in the United States (and internationally) is the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).

Whichever certification body you choose, be sure to verify that they are accredited by a recognized accreditation entity. Do your research so that you don't end up with an unaccredited certificate.

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How much do you charge per man-day?

Every certification body is slightly unique in how much they charge per day. Typically, an audit day (also known as a man-day) ranges from $1,000 to $1,600 per day. Part of this depends on the standard being audited. The core standards, such as ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and ISO 45001 are typically on the lower end of the man-day rates. Other standards, such as aerospace, automotive, and medical require more specialized auditing and therefore cost more.

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Do you have certified local auditors with availability?

There are many factors that go into calculating the cost of an audit. These factors will typically include on-site audit time, off-site time, certification fees, account maintenance fees, etc. Additional expenses are usually associated with auditor travel and can often end up being as much as the audit itself.

If you are very budget conscious, be sure to plan well in advance so that you are able to work on scheduling a local auditor to save on travel costs. However, if your timeline is very tight, this may not be an option for you.

Local Auditors Save Budget

Most organizations do not realize they have a say in their assigned auditor.

Auditors come with a wide range of experience and personalities. Obviously, not all personalities appeal to all audiences. If you end up with an auditor that doesn't mesh well with your organization, be sure to let your certification body know and request a new auditor.

Remember, you are their customer and they will often do whatever they can to keep your business. Auditors are there to ensure conformance to the requirements of your applicable standard(s).

Most auditors will provide value and benefit your organization tremendously.

However, there are always going to be auditors out there who will not be a good fit based on personality.

And still others tend to seek out as many nonconformities as possible, regardless of whether or not this adds value to the organization.

Nonconformities As Burdens

Nonconformities identified should not burden your organization with useless corrective actions. but don't be afraid to utilize the certification body's appeals / dispute process, if needed.

Every certification body is required to have an appeals / dispute procedure. If you truly feel that a finding is not valid, be sure to dispute the finding with the certification body.

Although auditors are supposed to be independent, some certification bodies will require time to be added for the auditor to review your corrective actions. If you are working with a certification body that does not include off-site time for your audits, it's typically because they will add time once any nonconformities are identified.

Some auditors will identify as many findings as possible so they can get paid more for reviewing the corrective actions. This is why you need to fully understand the initial quote you receive and what is included.

What risk level am I and what, if any, discounts have you applied to my audit time?

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When determining audit time for your audits, there are several factors that the certification body will consider.

These factors include:
- effective employee count
- risk level
- integration level with other standards
- other allowable discount factors.

When determining the base time for establishing your audit duration, certification bodies follow the requirements in the IAF MD-5 *Determination of Audit Time of Quality and Environmental Management System*. IAF stands for the International Accreditation Forum. MD stands for Mandatory Document. Certification bodies who are accredited by organizations such as ANAB or UKAS, must follow the IAF documents. The MD-5 grid provides the base audit time required for Quality Management Systems, which is based on effective employee count and for Environmental Management Systems, which is based on effective employee count and risk level.

As part of the certification body application process, organizations need to communicate their overall employee count. The employee count includes full-time employees, part-time employees, subcontractors, seasonal employees and temporary employees. From your employee count, the certification body will need to determine your organization's *effective employee count*.

For environmental and energy standards, risk level can also significantly impact your overall audit time. Certification bodies generally follow their own guidelines for determining risk levels.

Risk levels are generally identified as low, medium or high risk. The difference between a low risk and a high risk organization with the same employee count is approximately double in overall audit man-days.

Check out the MD-5 Audit Time Grid
IAF MD-5 Audit Time

When reviewing your quote, be sure you understand the risk level applied to your organization and that you agree with it. If for some reason you do not agree with the risk level, discuss this with the certification body to see if there is a way to provide justification to get it reduced.

If your organization is looking to get certified to multiple standards, certification bodies are able to offer discounts. Typically, the greater the integration between the standards sought, the greater the discount.

Integration discounts and requirements are outlined in the IAF MD-11 IAF Mandatory Document for Application of ISO 17021 for Audits of Integrated Management Systems (IMS).

The percentage discount applied is often subjective and varies. Most organizations are able to qualify for a discount in some way. An experienced auditor will be able to walk you through how to uncover any opportunities to obtain them.

Examples for discounts may include low complexity of activities, maturity of management system, exclusions to standard requirements (no design for ISO 9001), very small site for the number of personnel, integration of standards, etc. The potential reasons to increase or decrease audit time can be found in the IAF MD-5 mandatory document. Again, rely on your internal auditor to guide you through the process of getting the most competitive pricing on certification.

Your internal auditor can assist in getting all the discounts to which you are entitled with your ultimate certification body!

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Do you include off-site time for audits, or do you add time for review of nonconformities?

Certification bodies are allowed to allocate up to 20% of the on-site audit to off-site audit activities. The maximum allocation of 20% is not typically given though, as this would eliminate any on-site report writing time that the auditor may have. What is typically seen is 10% for on-site report writing and 10% of the overall audit time allocated for off-site audit activities, such as developing the audit plan, finalizing the audit report / nonconformity reports and follow-up actions for approving corrective actions. By allocating approximately 10% of the on-site time to off-site activities, organizations can typically avoid having any additional time added for review of corrective actions.

The key to it all is to understand the certification body requirements so that you can receive the most cost effective and value-added audit for your money.

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