

## Checklist 2: How does a certification-based standard work? A catalogue of questions

### Please note

This checklist offers specific guidance on what questions you should clarify with the standard organisations as part of your (re-)certification process, whether you are a client or a supplier company looking for certification. The information in the checklist is intended to help your company better understand how certification-based standards work and to draw conclusions about the resilience of certifications.

Armed with this information and the "Credibility" filter in the Standards Tool, you can make an informed decision on whether the standards satisfy your quality expectations and whether the type and scope of the audits suits your company.

### Key questions:

- Does the (initial) certification require self-reporting or an audit?
- How often is the certified company audited?
- Are audits conducted on-site or remotely?
- How far reaching are the audits?
- How are breaches of rules dealt with?
- Who has access to the results of the audits?

### Concerns to note when selecting your auditors/audit company:

- **Who is conducting the audit?**
  - In an "internal audit", checks are carried out by specially trained employees of the supplier. You need to make sure that the supplier maintains an appropriate error culture so that internal audits (can) uncover potential issues.
  - In a "purchaser audit", a qualified employee from your company carries out the audit. Trust in the process is important here as well. You need to make sure that both sides treat one another fairly and communicate on even footing.
  - In an "independent audit", an independent and often specially accredited certification organisation checks compliance with the standard.
- **Who decides on the audit company?**
  - The company seeking certification commissions the audit company
  - The business customer makes it a condition of contract
  - The standard organisation specifies a recognised or accredited audit company

**Good to know:** Check whether the audit company has been accredited by a third party. Websites such as that of the [Deutsche Akkreditierungsstelle GmbH \(DAkkS\)](#) or [Assurance Service International](#) are good places to start.

- Is the professional qualification of the auditors ensured? How are the requirements for licensing the auditors regulated and documented? Does the standard organisation regulate this itself or does an accredited audit company do this? Does your company have access to these regulations?
- What qualifications and training must auditors provide? Where are these stored? With the standard organisation, the audit company or the company seeking certification?

- Are the auditors proficient in the local language and familiar with the cultural context?
- Are the auditors trained in all elements of the standard being audited and do they know which elements of an audit should be investigated using a checklist, which in a personal interview or which in off-site audits?
- Are the auditors trained in being aware of human rights, protecting their sources of information and not endangering workers by asking them questions either on-site or off-site, e.g. through the use of (threats of) violence by superiors or dismissal?

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#### Things to think about when conducting audits:

- **How frequently are audits conducted?**

- When do you need to conduct your next audit in order to maintain your certification?
- Does the result of risk analyses have any bearing on the frequency of audits?

**Good to know:** The frequency of audits differs from standard to standard, but it is quite often every 1-2 years. Full recertification is regularly conducted after 3 years.

- **How are audits structured?**

- Is the audit announced or unannounced?
- What does the process look like for a regular audit?
- How long does an average audit last?
- Are the auditors on site, and, if so, is it one auditor or several?
- Are interviews conducted? If so, are workers interviewed on site or also off site (this is safer, but results in longer audits as this has to be done outside of working hours)?
- How long does it take to tour the factory/production site/farm?

- **Are the following documents checked?**

- Employment contracts, personnel files and where applicable, timesheets
- Transfers of wages and salaries
- Worker warnings and dismissals
- Policies such as codes of conduct etc.
- Documentation on implementing the standards
- Organigram or other documents that describe management procedures and responsibilities

- **Are interviews conducted with ...?**

- Head of staff
- Foremen
- Workers
- Vulnerable groups

- **(Where applicable) How are workers interviewed?**

- Are the auditors free to pick who they want to speak to or are workers assigned to them?
- Are auditors out of sight and reach of the management and foremen during the worker interviews?
- Are there on site or off site interviews?
- What precautions are taken to protect worker statements so that they do not have to fear reprisals?
- How does the audit company deal with parallel contracts? Are the audit and the conformity decision made by two different people?

**Things to think about when working with audit results:**

- **How are the results of the audit documented?**
  - Checklist
  - Open fields on forms for additional information
  - Summary of major findings
  - Stipulated minimum content of audit report, deadlines for submitting full reports after audit
  - Uniform reporting format
  - Justification for conformity decisions and choice of methods
  
- **To whom are the audit results communicated to?**
  - To the management of the company seeking certification and, if so, how and in what form?
  - To the business customers and, if so, in what form?
  - To the standard organisation and, if so, in what form?
  
- **What happens in the event of violations?**
  - How is compensation and remediation regulated?
  - Who pays the cost of compensation and remediation?
  - Who is responsible for reviewing and following up on the compensation?
  - How is the management of the company seeking certification involved in this?
  - What do adaptive measures look like?
  - Is information provided on concrete measures, including deadlines and consequences in the event that deadlines are missed or no action is taken?
  - How urgently must the adaptive measures be implemented? Do measures have to be implemented immediately or are companies given a limited transition period (generally 1-3 years)?
  - Who establishes what adaptive measures are to be taken? The standard organisation together with the company seeking certification? The standard organisation on the recommendation of the audit company? Or the business customer?
  - Are methods adapted to the specific risks identified?
  - Who implements the adaptive measures? Does the standard organisation offer assistance by providing expertise or external consultants?
  - Is external and internal expertise integrated into the process of establishing and implementing the adaptive measures (from civil society, worker representatives etc.)?
  - What is the procedure in case of "No go's" and serious violations? Is the focus on long-term collaboration to continuously improve the situation locally or do violations lead immediately to de-certification?

### Further information: Dealing with violations as a business customer

If a certified supplier violates the requirements of a standard, should the supplier's business customers opt for a cooperative approach (see "[Identifying the limits of audits](#)"). This can help to limit disincentives to conceal breaches and suppliers can embark on a path towards continuous improvement – even if they are (temporarily) de-certified.

Terminating the business relationship with a supplier should always be the absolute last resort (*ultima ratio*). It may be the appropriate thing to do in the event of particularly serious violations, if the remedial measures taken do not seem to be having any impact, if there are no alternative, less serious remedies available and if it does not seem as if increasing influence would have much effect. In such case, you should also act responsibly when withdrawing from the relationship, making sure you observe stakeholder interests as you do so.

### Still got questions?

Get in touch with one of our experts for free, confidential advice:

- Download your search results from the "[Standards-Tool](#)".
- E-mail us at [kontakt@helpdeskwmr.de](mailto:kontakt@helpdeskwmr.de) or give us a call on +49 (0)30 590099-430.