# Conducting Interviews:

## *Collecting and verifying information*

*by J .P. Russell*

*This article is devoted to a quick review of ISO 19011 topics. Following the discussion, a quiz is provided so readers may evaluate their understanding of the information. Readers are encouraged to share this article during short informal meetings with other auditors or interested parties which should result in more effective audits.*

Clause 6—Performing an audit, is a major part of ISO 19011. Also called "process steps" or "actions," auditing activities are the step-by-step methods for preparing, performing, reporting, and following up an audit. This article is about conducting interviews during the product, process or system audit.

## Conducting interviews

The ISO 19011 clause 6.5.4 reference Annex B7 for guidance states interviews should be carried out in a manner adapted to the situation and person interviewed, either face-to-face, or by other means of communication. This is very good advice because situations vary as well as the people. As you approach the interview location, assess the situation. Your objective is to ensure the venue for the interview will be favorable for collecting and verifying information. This may come naturally because instinctively you know the environment you need for conducting a two-way conversation. However, sometimes auditors can find themselves in totally unacceptable environments for conducting interviews.

## Interview environment

First, an auditor must assess the environment for each interview. The environment includes the physical location and all of the surrounding activities taking place possibly having an impact on the interview process. The physical site should include seating or standing room; it should include enough space for each individual to feel comfortable and not feel their personal space is being invaded. In general, the physical location of the interview should be clean, but exceptions are allowed based on the prevailing work environment. You may find yourself in situations where the space is not acceptable. In one case I recall, the interview was planned to be conducted in an empty office. The office size was adequate, but it was crammed with unused furniture with no seating and barely enough space for the interviewee and auditor to stand. The solution was to ask for another venue. An auditor should dress to accommodate the interview location. Don't wear a new suit when interviewing welders at their work stations. If your next interview is with the general manager, you could wear coveralls for the shop floor interviews. eAudit interviews may be structured around collaborative software access, but many of the face-to-face issues still apply.

Next, consider the surrounding activities. Use your senses to listen, smell, see and touch to assess the potential impact on the interview. Some questions may be: Are there loud, recurring sounds? Are there odors? Is it too hot or too cold? Could anything endanger someone? Does the interview area have moving objects or distracting scenery to potentially draw away the interviewee's attention? On occasion, you will be required to ask to interview people while they work. That is okay - and even desirable - if your data collection plan includes observing the task. You may ask the operator or provider to explain the process steps as they are being performed. However, if you are interested in verification of management system requirements (such as knowledge of the importance of environment/safety/quality requirements), interviewing people while they work can be ineffective. Most people performing a task are thinking about the job instead of auditor interview questions. Perhaps for quality and safety reasons, that is how it should be. You may have experienced an interviewee who tries to multi-task during the interview. Part of the time is spent answering interview questions. The rest of the time the interview ceases while the interviewee responds to a work-related task. You should always try to be flexible and accommodate the work environment, but being able to collect information to verify conformity to requirements takes priority. One technique when interviewing people linked to on-going work processes (e.g., production, on-demand services such as responding to calls or needs) is to request substitute individuals be available to fill-in while you conduct the interview. In other cases, operators like the idea of coming in early or staying late, possibly making overtime pay, to be available for interviews.

Once you accept the situation, consider the person to be interviewed.  For system and process audits, people should feel comfortable with the surroundings. Don't interview an engineer in the janitor's break area or interview the dump truck driver behind a desk in the plant manager's office.

Conducting an audit interview in a situation resulting in an effective interview process seems very simple, but you must apprise yourself of the acceptable criteria. When the situation is not conducive to an effective interview, take action to improve the situation for a more effective audit.  Don't waste their time or yours.

## Interview guidance

An auditor should consider the following:

1.  Ensure your interview sample is sufficient to meet the audit objectives and you stay within the audit scope.   You need to consider both the number of people to interview as well as a representation of organization work classes.  For example, there may be operators, staff, clerical, associates, technical, supervisory, managerial, directors and executives. Interviews should be held with persons from appropriate levels and functions performing activities within the scope of the audit.

2.  Conduct interviews during normal working hours. I would rephrase this suggestion by saying auditors should schedule interviews during normal operations and/or normal working hours.  When practical, interview people near their workplace where relevant documents and records will be readily accessible. This will also make the interviewee feel more comfortable.

3.  Use interview techniques to help put the person at ease prior to and during the audit. The person being interviewed may be anxious and concerned about being interviewed. If you believe the interviewee is very nervous about the pending interview, you can practice techniques to reduce stress levels. You could smile, use open body language, explain what you are going to do and why, ask if any concerns or questions need to be addressed, note or compliment the interviewee regarding something on the desk or in the work area, and so on.

4.  Explain the reason for the interview and that you will be taking notes.  If you collect the data you need, everyone is happy. If the data cannot be provided, then everyone knows there is a problem that needs to be addressed. There are two reasons for explaining note taking.  Most interviewees associate the recording of notes as a problem or error they made, or they may think you have stopped listening to them to record notes. In some cases, I have had to interrupt the flow of the interview to record all of the information being shared. I may say, "Hold that thought." Then when I am ready to listen again, I try to get back into the same rhythm.

5.  Initiate interviews by asking people to describe their work. This is a useful technique to help put people at ease. Most people like to talk about something they know about or are proud of.

6.  Avoid leading questions possibly biasing the answer. This may be something you can practice at your next auditing group training session. *The ASQ Auditing Handbook* is a good resource regarding interviews and there was an article in "Quality Progress"[1] magazine (*Improve Your Audit Interviews*) many continue to find very beneficial.

7.  The results of the interview should be shared with the interviewee. Results such as, "I now have all the information I needed," or "I am still missing the piece of information about XYZ."  You don't need to be overly congratulatory or condemning, just professional.

8. Thank the interviewee for participating and cooperating. To you this may be just another interview, but to the interviewee, it may be something they talk about for the next several years.

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[1]      ASQ Audit Division and JP Russell, *Improve Your Audit Interviews*, Quality Progress magazine, available online at , http://www.asq.org/qualityprogress/index.html

## Pay attention to interfaces

Auditors should pay particular attention to the interfaces between processes in the management system. This means you should investigate and verify inputs and outputs. Most system breakdowns are between processes. Individuals, supervisors and managers focus on what they can control instead of the overall system. Individual processes within an organization can be efficient and the people operating the process may be competent, yet the overall organization may be inefficient and ineffective. You can ask about the process starting with materials and other inputs. "Are your agreed-upon requirements always met?" "Do delivered outputs always meet your customer requirements?" Though the words *always* and *never* should be avoided when creating test questions, for interview questions they can be very effective in surfacing problems areas. Sometimes going downstream of the process being audited is advisable to verify inputs. In other cases, outputs may need to be verified.

Next, the standard states auditee expertise is vital to the audit. It also suggests information obtained from interviews could result in discovering opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the management system. Stating the auditee should be competent is a qualification neither the auditor nor the audit program management has control over. Stating that information obtained from interviews could result in discovering opportunities to improve is appropriate as long as that is an audit objective.

## Opportunities for improvement

The following are questions auditors can ask possibly leading to areas where opportunities for improvement can be identified and addressed:

__ Are you getting all of the information you need to do your job right?
__ Are there any nagging problems happening over and over again?
__ Do you believe you have received adequate training? Could additional training help do your job right? What kind?
__ Do you get the support you need or the support you were promised?
__ Are you able to meet customer requirements all of the time? Why not?

These are good questions, but by no means are they all inclusive of the questions an auditor can ask to identify opportunities for improvement. Perhaps you can you think of other questions; if so, write them down.

## Interview guidance beyond the standard

Auditors should know the audit evidence needed and samples for the interview. Auditors do not want to appear to be on a fishing expedition. If an interview is scheduled, auditors should be on time. When delays occur or the schedule changes, keep the auditee representative informed. If for example you are running 20 minutes behind schedule, you should request the escort (or by other means) to inform the next person on the interview schedule you will be late. Even if an escort or management representative states "everyone has been told to be available for the auditor all the time," you should insist interviewees be notified of schedule changes. Auditors should be courteous and considerate. Sometimes this can be difficult if auditee management tries to lead you around and questions everything you ask to see or do. Needless to say, an auditor must be able to deal with domineering personalities from time-to-time.

## Conclusion

Interviews are one of the most important means of collecting information. Being done effectively is certainly one of the most difficult tasks to achieve. Interviewing provides a medium for surfacing issues needing to be addressed, and is a means to verify people do what they say they do. Plan what you do and do what you plan.

## Quiz

Considering the guidance in the article, please choose the best answer:

1. Interviews should be carried out in a manner adapted to the… (complete the sentence)

   a. situation.
   b. auditee needs.
   c. audit team.
   d. all of the above.

2. When selecting persons to be interviewed, the auditor should consider which of the following?

   a. levels or classes
   b. functions
   c. audit scope
   d. all of the above

3. Which of the following would not be good practice?

   a. conduct interviews during normal work hours
   b. ask questions that will bias the answer
   c. explain the reason for the interview
   d. thank interviewed persons for their participation

4. Where may you likely find communications breakdowns in the management system?

   a. quality-environment-safety department
   b. top management
   c. interfaces between processes
   d. none of the above

Answers
   1. a. Interview situations must be effective. Most of the time, an auditor modifies the approach to fit the situation, but other times it may be necessary for the auditor to change the venue.

   2. d. Other considerations may exist, too, such as availability. Selection of interviewees is the purview of the auditor. The selection should be representative of the group and consistent with the scope. What if the auditee tries to handpick the folks to be interviewed?

   3. b. Ensuring you do not bias the answers you get from the interviewee may take practice. One error is telegraphing the answer in the question. For example, "When there is nonconformity, do you record it on form 1234?" Instead ask, "When there is a nonconformity, what do you do?" Or "In the case of a nonconformity, how is it communicated to others?" If you have time, check out the "Quality Progress" article, *Improve Your Audit Interviews*.

   4. c. One of the very good approaches of ISO 9001 is the introduction of the idea of processes and systems created by multiple processes. This has facilitated breaking down barriers created over the years. The audit process has increased the ability to identify problems and has helped in linking processes.

## About the author

J.P. Russell is the founder and managing director of QualityWBT Center for Education, LLC. He is also is an ASQ fellow, ASQ-certified quality auditor, voting member of the American National Standards Institute/ASQ Z1 committee, member of the ASQ Z1 Auditing Committee, secretary of the ASQ Standards Committee and member of the U.S. technical advisory group for International Organization for Standardization technical committee 176. Russell is a recipient of the Paul Gauthier Award from the ASQ Audit Division and author of several ASQ Quality Press books about auditing, standards and quality improvement.