

Basics of Sustainability

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Environmental Auditing

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Aims

By reading this section, you should be able to:

- Understand the environmental audit process.
- Know what qualities are required from an auditor and understand what is required by way of preparation before an environmental audit is carried out.
- Know how an environmental audit is conducted.
- Identify the different types of evidence sought during an environmental audit.
- Understand the post-audit procedure and reporting.

Introduction

Environmental auditing originated in the 1970s as a response to organisations, particularly heavy industry and chemical companies, being reactive rather than proactive to industrial accidents and liabilities. Environmental damage, remediation costs, fines for non-compliance, and negative public perceptions saw these organisations implement audit procedures to identify weaknesses in their system and mitigate the risk of such accidents occurring. To improve this further, they then began to filter the auditing systems through their supply chains.

In addition to reduced risk, companies with robust environmental auditing procedures in place began to profit in a number of other ways, including having greater market and stakeholder benefits, efficiency gains, financial savings and an improved reputation that came with public relation benefits. Environmental auditing expanded relatively quickly to all sectors of the economy, and can be defined now as covering any business operation and its interaction with the environment. This has become more ever-more prominent with the issue of man-made climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Pre-Audit

Prior to the audit, the auditee/department will prepare for the auditor with relevant documentation being made readily available. Key personnel will be advised to be available on the day as required. Permission and access to relevant locations or offices should be in place with an adequate briefing given to the auditor with PPE made available should it be required.

On all occasions, an environmental audit should begin and conclude with a meeting. Before an audit is carried out, the auditor will advise the auditee of the process that will follow. Usually, this will be along the lines of an initial introduction and assurances that any questioning done by the auditor is purely a fact finding exercise to ensure that processes and procedures are being adhered to, and not a fault finding 'witch hunt'. If a process or procedure is not being adhered to, this will be addressed to bring it back into compliance.

Planning the audit itself is important and this may be by drafting up an audit specification, obtaining relevant information before the audit is conducted and having checklists to ensure all relevant areas have been covered.

The Auditing Process

The Auditor

As well as having the necessary qualifications and experience, the requirements for an auditor should be that they are completely independent of the party being audited. This demonstrates that there is no conflict of interest, and that they are objective in their investigation so as not to be allowed to digress into other areas that are not part of the audit protocol.

The auditor should be a good listener with an effective interaction that prompts and gains relevant information in as much detail as possible, it is important that the findings related to the questioning are accurately recorded.

An auditor should be diplomatic in their approach, sensitive and understanding of the outside pressures that may be imposed on an auditee. They should also have the ability to follow a line of questioning that leads to a trail of evidence that confirms the effectiveness of a process, or procedure, and subsequent conformity.

Aims and Objectives of the Audit

The primary aim of any environmental audit is to understand the Environmental Management System (EMS) employed by a company in its daily operation. Further to this, the audit will also be used to understand company systems along with operation and plant processes, including any maintenance regime. The objective of an environmental audit is to identify areas of best practice and any system or procedural failings thereby targeting improvement of weaknesses and the sharing of best practice to drive continuous improvement.

Conducting the Audit

Auditors have their own way of conducting an audit, but usually after the opening meeting has been carried out, they will evaluate the EMS then move to explore the office or site location to understand the environment within which the system is operating.

Fig. 1: Typical example of the evidence that an auditor will be looking for

Evidence Type	Examples
Physical	Badly stored fuel un-banded, poor segregation of gas and oxygen cylinders, drip trays for static plant
Documentary	Records of inspection, environmental plans, discharge licences
Circumstantial	Staining from uncontained spillage or a drain blockage, though the area has nothing to indicate an offending object or substance
Testimonial	Evidence gained from the employee during the interview

Obtaining **physical** or **documentary** evidence is extremely important to verify **testimonial** or **circumstantial** information that has been observed.

Collection of evidence will normally be drawn from the following methods:

- Interviews
- Examination of relevant documentation
- Observing operational activity
- Observing the conditions with which the operation is being carried out
- Test data, inspection records
- Monitoring records

Evaluation of the Audit Results

With all the evidence gathered and observations made, the auditor will draw up his report based upon his findings. The report should include or refer to the following:

- Audit scope
- The audit objective
- Persons/department audited
- Date and location
- Audit findings and the related evidence
- Audit conclusion
- Major and minor non-conformances
- Follow-up actions within a defined time frame
- Any identified good practice
- Distribution to relevant personnel

The report is not limited to the above so may include other aspects. The report will be written using simple short sentences and a neutral context. It should be factual with no ambiguity with the findings and should not be judgmental.

Post-Audit

On completion of the audit, the auditor will invite the auditee and relevant key personnel into a room and debrief them on the audit findings. The auditor will give an overview of the audit and advise of the positive findings as well as the negative ones. Thereafter, they will issue a report indicating the department or departments audited, along with a summary of the audit findings. These findings will pinpoint any non-conformity and what actions are required, as well as identify who is responsible for the actions and when they are to be completed by.

Continual improvement is the theme with regards to the audit and the findings will normally identify where there are shortcomings and areas for opportunities to improve the system.

Bibliography and Further Reading

British Standards Institution (BSI) (2011), **Guidelines for Auditing Management Systems.** (ISO 19011:2011), London: BSI

Humphrey N & Hadley M, (2000), **Environmental Auditing.** Palladian Law Publishing Ltd, Isle of Wight.

Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) auditing information
www.iema.net/auditors