

Improve Your Audit Interviews

by ASQ's Quality Audit Division and J. P. Russell

The interview is often the most challenging aspect of an audit for new auditors. Yet the interview process may be the most important element of an audit.

For that reason, auditors must be able to apply various techniques to gather information without challenging the auditee. One auditee may be familiar and comfortable with the audit process, while another may be nervous and apprehensive.

Eliciting information from the former may be simple, but from the latter it may be difficult and time consuming. The manner in which an auditor initiates the interview process may well determine the success of the interview.

Conversational Process

Interviews should be relaxed and conversational. Auditors should not simply dive into the checklist. Instead, they should take time for introductions by the guide, then ask about the interviewee's position and duties. After a short time, the interviewee should have mentioned a topic that is of interest to the auditor, who may ask for more information about that topic. From that point, the audit is underway, with the auditor linking questions to other topics of interest and documenting evidence, as appropriate.

When the auditor uses a conversational process to conduct the audit, the interviewee, rather than the checklist, is the central figure. The auditor's focus should be to understand the process and the person's role in that process. Once the focus shifts from the process to the checklist, the conversation and the information the auditor needs to verify effectiveness will lag.

The use of open-ended questions is necessary to gather information.



Auditors need to ask who, what, when, where, how and why questions, which elicit information from the interviewee. Because these questions require the interviewee to provide an explanation of the process and related activities, the auditor will receive more information and be able to ask follow-up questions to ensure understanding.

In 50 words or less ...

- The audit interview process should be done in a conversational style with open-ended, nonleading questions
- Auditors should know how to recognize and solve problems such as auditees intentionally wasting time or steering the auditor away from certain employees

When the auditor relies only on questions beginning with phrases such as "Does the organization ... " or "Is there a ...," the auditor will be talking more than the auditee and, as a result, will learn very little.

Checklists are usually written with yes or no questions to facilitate note taking and link questions to requirements. Questions are constructed by converting statements in procedures, standards or work instructions.

For example, a document may state, "Process settings must be recorded on the work order." An auditor will construct checklist questions from this document, such as "Are process settings recorded on the work order?" yet the questions during the interview may be very different. An interview with an operator may go something like this:

Auditor: How do you know what the process settings should be?

Operator: I look on the work order before I start the job.

Auditor: Could I see the work order for the job you are working on?

Operator: Yes, here it is.

Auditor: Thank you.

The auditor is able to verify the operator has access to the work order and the settings are recorded on the work order.

Message from GMP Labeling

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Auditor: Could you show me where you make the setting adjustments?

Then the auditor verifies the settings on the work order match the settings on the machine.

Good follow-up questions for the auditor to ask may be:

- What do you do if the settings are not on the work order?
- What do you do if you think the settings are wrong?
- Do you ever change the settings?

The opposite of an open-ended question is a leading question. Leading questions are asked with the expectation of a specific answer. An auditor should not lead an interviewee through the questions during the interview. Leading questions can be avoided if the auditor asks open-ended questions such as those listed in Table 1. Additionally, if an auditor goes into an interview expecting to hear certain answers, the audit results will be biased.

Interviewing a Group

Interviewing a group is not the preferred method of conducting an interview, and its use should be limited. Auditors should avoid this method of interviewing unless there is a very good reason for doing so. For example, an auditor may want to interview a project

team to better understand the team dynamics or a group of sales representatives before they leave on an assignment.

One of the difficulties of interviewing a group is being unable to read the body language of several people at the same time. When conducting an interview with one person, the auditor may easily recognize a sensitive question has been asked. However, the auditor may have to watch each person's reaction with each question asked in a group interview to ask the appropriate follow-up questions. When this method must be used, two auditors should be present and the group should be as small as possible, ideally no more than five people.

Using a Translator

Audits should always be conducted in the language of the auditee. Unfortunately, this is not always possible and sometimes a translator must be used. If possible, the translator should be independent of the operation being audited as well as the firm conducting the audit to ensure credibility of the audit.

The use of a translator requires much more time for conducting interviews, evaluating evidence and summarizing audit results. Therefore, the audit

team leader must adjust the time allotment for interviews accordingly. The auditor's questions must be short and to the point for the translator to convey the proper meaning. Otherwise, questions will have to be interrupted for the translator to communicate a portion of the question to the auditee, allow the auditor to complete the question and then complete the translation of the question to the auditee.

While simultaneous translation may be a little faster, the auditor will not be able to read body language as easily since the auditee will be attending to the translator's voice rather than the auditor's voice. Only appropriate planning with a skilled translator will result in an effective audit.

Corroborating Information

Each person involved with an organization has a unique perspective, as does each member of the audit team. One person can filter information differently from another, miss an angle or stop short of getting the full story. For these reasons, facts stated and other data collected during an audit interview must be corroborated to ensure accuracy. Auditors can corroborate information by:

Table 1 — Open-Ended Questions vs. Leading Questions

The auditor should say:	The auditor should NOT say:
How (where, when, what, why) do you record the test results?	Do you record the test results in the lab logbook?
How do you know this value is right?	Is this instrument calibrated?
What is the first thing you do?	Do you set up the equipment first?
How do you know this is the current (correct) version of the drawing?	Is this drawing correct (current)?
How were you trained to perform this procedure?	Did you read the standard operating procedure during training?
What are the reporting requirements for nonconformances?	Do you have to notify your supervisor when a nonconformance occurs?
What is the standard procedure for responding to customer complaints?	When a customer calls, do you have to record the details on form xx?
How do you know this equipment is calibrated?	Does this sticker indicate the equipment is calibrated?
How do you know how to do this operation?	Do you follow the procedure for this operation?
What do you do with the finished product?	Do you place the finished product on the rack?

Table 2 — Common Time-Wasting Ploys and Possible Solutions

The problem	One solution
Requested personnel are unavailable to the audit team.	Depending on the situation, the auditor may interview the backup or tactfully state that absence of key personnel may prolong the audit or that the audit's scope may have to be modified.
The escort is repeatedly late in the morning.	The auditor could ask the escort for suggestions for being able to start the meeting on time and make the necessary changes to the schedule.
The auditee makes the auditor wait repeatedly for needed supplies or requested documents and records.	The auditor should request needed supplies during the audit planning stage and anticipate document and record needs in advance. An auditor could also travel with the auditee to select the documentation samples or supplies.
Constant distractions occur during interviews (area is noisy, phone rings constantly or other interruptions happen).	The auditor could suggest they move away from the area or close doors if possible; phones should be set to call forwarding or answered by someone else.
Interviewees state they were not informed of the audit and are not prepared.	The auditor should confirm employees are aware an audit is taking place and ask auditee management about the state of readiness of the management system to be audited.

- Asking for information in a different way.
- Asking for evidence demonstrating an activity is performed as described.
- Asking several people the same question.
- Observing the activity in question being performed.
- Reviewing the evidence of other audit team members.
- Reviewing other evidence such as procedures, instructions and records.

Potential Problems

Communication problems are probably the principal difficulty that must be overcome during an audit. An auditor can minimize the effects of miscommunication by relying on the escort to correct misunderstandings and by corroborating all information through one of the methods already mentioned.

Occasionally, an auditor who does not have a good grasp of the process being audited may not ask the right questions and may realize only after completing the interview that important issues were not addressed. To recover from such an oversight, the auditor may revisit the area or raise the issue for necessary action at the daily meeting.

To ensure the right questions are asked during the interview, an auditor could end the interview by asking whether the person is responsible for any other activities or ask for his or her opinion on how well the process is performing.

Another problem auditors should be able to recognize and overcome is delay tactics. Common techniques employed by auditees to waste time and possible

solutions by auditors are listed in Table 2. Several types of problems may occur during interviews, and auditors should be trained in techniques that minimize such interference.

When an auditee’s repeated time wasting—or another tactic, such as one of the examples that follow—hinders the progress of an audit and threatens to severely compromise the audit schedule, the lead auditor is responsible for notifying auditee management and the client.

Steering the Auditor

An auditee may attempt to steer the auditor toward specific interviewees. Auditees often prefer auditors interview certain personnel and avoid certain others. However, one person’s knowledge

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may not be typical of others in the organization. Therefore, the auditor should take charge of the selection process.

An auditor should approach a work area and determine the people performing different tasks. Candidates for interviews can be randomly chosen as long as it is safe to interrupt them in their jobs. The auditor should follow the interview protocol previously described.

If an auditee insists a specific person is unavailable for interviewing, the auditor should be considerate but persistent if the interview is vital to the success of the audit. Without being threatening, the audi-

tor can suggest the person’s unavailability may prolong the audit. A statement such as “I may have to stay over for another shift” may gain the desired cooperation.

Additionally, the auditor should guard against reacting improperly to employees who have hidden agendas or axes to grind.

Answering for the Auditee

Another common problem occurs when an escort or area supervisor answers for or intimidates the interviewee. An escort generally stays within listening distance and takes notes but should step back slightly. An ideal arrangement is for an auditor to sit or stand between the interviewee and the escort, facing the interviewee.

An escort is to be an observer only and should not be involved in the interview unless there are communication problems. An auditor can minimize an escort’s participation in the interview by directing questions to and maintaining eye contact with the interviewee.

For example, questions about machine setups and measuring parameters are normally beyond the knowledge of an escort. If an escort starts to answer for an auditee, the auditor needs to redirect the question to the interviewee, avoiding eye contact with the escort. If an escort continues to interfere, the auditor should say, “I prefer to get the information from the staff member.”

The “Too Busy” Response

Although some people are intimidated by the audit, sometimes interviewees are

unable to concentrate because they are distracted by the fact that their jobs are not getting done. People are afraid to say, "I am very busy. I need to complete this test. Can you come back in 10 minutes?"

A good auditor will sense when an interviewee is preoccupied and will move on and find other ways to keep the audit moving. Other times, it is appropriate to go ahead and ask to see the interviewee perform the work if the auditor needs to observe it anyway. Completing the task may relax the auditee, making him or her able to concentrate on the auditor's additional questions.

Such problems may be avoided by stating in the opening meeting that the purpose of the audit is to evaluate the effectiveness of the system by focusing on the processes, not the people. The audit team leader may also state the audit team will complete the audit within the allotted time but will remain onsite as long as necessary to complete the audit objective. However, the audit team leader and members should communicate any potential problems so they can be resolved quickly and the audit team leader can avoid having to extend the audit.



Rambling or Introducing Irrelevant Information

Some auditees are not intimidated by the audit but introduce irrelevant information during the interview. The information may be related but not pertinent to the topic. The result is the time allotted for the interview is wasted without providing the auditor any relevant information.

The auditor must bring the auditee back to the topic of interest without alienating the person being interviewed. This may be accomplished by politely interrupting the flow of conversation when there is a slight pause to remind the auditee there is a limited amount of time for the interview and the audit plan may be adjusted if necessary.

Another method is to ask for specific evidence for the manner in which the process or operation is performed or to show the person the checklist question you are seeking to verify.

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