



Quality System Oversight to Improve Safety and Operational Integrity: The Most Important Tool for Executive Leadership



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The practice of quality system oversight is emerging as one of the most effective diagnostic tools for all aspects of aviation operations. From air carriers, airports and ground handlers to airframe and component manufacturers, Executive leaders have a vital tool available to them.

Within the aviation community, the words "audit" and more recently, "quality system oversight" (formal auditing enhanced by on-going surveillance), have taken on an entirely new meaning among enlightened managers and forward-thinking operational professionals. If you are ISO accredited, an IS-BAO registered operator or IOSA registered, the terms quality system and quality audit are well known. Within the United States, say the word "audit" and two images emerge: a box of receipts and sitting in front of an IRS agent!

For this article, we are focusing on the use of the phrase as a means to evaluate if your company is performing to its stated operational goals and standards. The word "standards" will, for this article, encompass company policy and procedures as well as regulatory standards you are required to comply with.

So what is a Quality System and Quality System Oversight? For the best description, we turn to the European Commission's civil aviation regulations, commonly known as EU-OPS 1 (formally JAR-OPS). EU-OPS 1.035, states that a Quality System shall be established by an operator **"to monitor compliance with, and adequacy of, procedures required to ensure safe operational practices and airworthy aeroplanes."** Further, it states that "The quality system must include a quality assurance programme that contains procedures designed to verify that all operations are being conducted in accordance with all applicable requirements, standards and procedures."

For operators that have a quality system in place, you could assume that the operator is



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conducting oversight of the technical functions that support flight or maintenance operations. Applying the concept of Quality Systems beyond flight or maintenance operations to all operational and support functions exposes new segments of the aviation community that have until recently adopted the concept of voluntary continuous compliance monitoring.

This tool becomes the most effective means to determine an operator's level of compliance to both the regulations with which it must comply and the technical programs (or company-mandated policies and procedures) it has developed to perform specific functions.

Most of us familiar with auditing can recall a rigid, prescriptive compliance checklist that resulted in either a pass or fail. And the style of that audit--the methodology--set the tone. This prescriptive style allows very little latitude concerning corporate culture, operational constraints, management styles and other unique factors. For the most part, it is based on a set of regulations or compliance indices. Usually, little tangible feedback was offered from the auditors as they were auditing--checking to see if a program or element was evident in writing or that the correct string of words came out of the respondent's mouth. Validating the program's actual effectiveness has an entirely different outcome, and is usually not determined by basic auditing.

In most cases, the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program being audited was never determined because that was not the focus. There was no requirement for an evaluation of the way in which different programs or departments (e.g. flight operations and maintenance) worked together--the systems and all of its parts.

Process auditing emerged as the methodology from which a thorough understanding of the administrative and technical elements of an organization's operation were examined and evaluated. This approach revealed the appropriateness and effectiveness of those technical and administrative elements which support that operation. Professionals trained in process auditing look at the entire organization: the way it is organized, the training, the culture, the way in which different departments communicate internally and the meaningfulness of the corporate safety statement or mission statement, to name just a few of the many elements addressed.

Why look at the entire company, rather than focusing on just the flight department or the contracted services provider? It is because people outside of the traditional department have direct and indirect decision-making authority that impacts how that department performs its function. Many times, well-meaning executives make decisions that can affect the operational integrity of a technical department without a full understanding of the ramifications that their decisions may have.

Another example of the benefits of a system-focused program audit can be found in the ground



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handling business. Many of the services provided by ground handlers are not regulated by the FAA. Companies offering these services may believe that they have a comprehensive program in place, only to find out by participating in a program quality audit that they lack certain performance and integrity elements. For instance, they may perform the physical ramp handling but lack a defined program outlining the standard to which they will train their employees.

Brand-aware, safety-conscious operators are looking for partners that have embraced quality systems and integrity processes into their day-to-day activities, to assure mission success and as an integral part of the services they are offering.

Today's operating environment demands solid programs with carefully considered policies and procedures. If you think your programs are comprehensive, you may wish to test them via a quality system oversight audit. The results may surprise you.

Whatever niche of the aviation industry you support or work within, the benefits derived from an effective internal evaluation or quality oversight program will be extremely valuable to your customers, your employees and your shareholders.



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