



Audrey Milesi (audrey.milesi@amc-advisory.com) is CEO of AMC Advisory in Switzerland.

Leveraging compliance monitoring programs for successful ISO audits

By Audrey Milesi

Compliance monitoring programs play a pivotal role in ensuring organizations comply with regulatory requirements. Organizations are expected to have a robust compliance monitoring program in place to ensure appropriate governance. Depending on their field of activities, organizations may also be subject to International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certification(s) to guarantee a certain reputation. ISO was founded in 1947, and its standards are vital to companies wanting to be certified.

ISO audits are a critical aspect of the certification process, serving as the litmus test for an organization's adherence to these global standards. Hence, if a company already has a compliance program in place, it would be recommended to leverage it to efficiently avoid duplicating work. This article delves into the intricacies of compliance monitoring programs, their significance, and how they can be effectively used for a successful ISO audit.

Understanding the purpose of ISO audits

ISO standards are globally recognized benchmarks for quality, environmental responsibility, information security, and other facets of business operations. Achieving ISO certification can provide an organization with a competitive edge, foster trust among customers, and enhance the overall efficiency of operations. Note that ISO certifications are not always required; some organizations decide to get certified only to improve their reputation and credibility.

ISO-certified auditors carry out ISO audits over a three-year period. Auditors will assess a company's overall alignment of policies, processes, and procedures against ISO standards and expectations.

These audits indicate an organization's commitment to quality, continual improvement, and adherence to global best practices.

The role of compliance monitoring programs

Compliance monitoring programs serve as the backbone of an organization's ISO audit readiness. These programs encompass the systematic and ongoing evaluation of an organization's processes, policies, and procedures to ensure they meet the specific ISO requirements.

Here are some essential aspects of compliance monitoring programs and their significance in ISO audit preparation.

1. Setting the foundation

Before even considering ISO certification, an organization must establish a robust compliance monitoring program led by the compliance team (and may also include the risk management team). This program is the foundation upon which the organization's ISO journey can be built. It defines how compliance with ISO standards will be assessed and maintained.

2. Ongoing monitoring

Compliance monitoring is not a one-time activity; it's an ongoing process. Regular monitoring of processes, policies, and procedures is crucial to ensure compliance is maintained over time. This continuous evaluation demonstrates that an organization doesn't just temporarily meet ISO standards but remains compliant in the long run. The frequency may vary depending on various factors. For example, policies are usually reviewed annually (or ad hoc any time there is a significant change in process); however, some operational activities (such as a client's transactions) may be reviewed daily or weekly.

It is good practice to define all activities in the program and their frequencies and report on the results quarterly, biannually, or—at the very least—annually.

3. Identifying gaps

One of the primary purposes of compliance monitoring programs is to identify gaps in an organization's compliance with regulatory requirements, which can also be used toward ISO standards. Any ISO audit starts with the preparation of a so-called statement of applicability. The organization must fill in this document so auditors can customize their audits. In doing so, the organization can already identify potential gaps early in the process and be able to take corrective actions to rectify them.

4. Corrective action

Compliance monitoring programs are not just about identifying issues but also about proposing corrective actions—subject to management and sometimes board of directors approval. When gaps in compliance are identified, organizations can implement corrective measures to address these shortcomings, thus improving their adherence to ISO standards.

5. Data gathering and documentation

Proper documentation is a crucial aspect of any compliance program. It requires organizations to maintain thorough records of their activities and corrective actions taken. This documentation can also be used during ISO audits, as it provides evidence of an organization's commitment to compliance.

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