VIRTUAL AUDITING
AN ANALYSIS OF VIRTUAL AUDITS IN THE FACILITIES MANAGEMENT INDUSTRY

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Virtual auditing, often referred to as "remote auditing," is the process in which audits are completed remotely using new technologies.

Audits are a compliance validation cornerstone as clients and regulatory agencies look to businesses to confirm policies and procedures are met and corrective action is taken when necessary.[1]

As business agreements evolve, audit processes must evolve alongside the growing needs. Digital versions of audits can be completed with a high degree of thoroughness using video conferencing, email and document sharing platforms. Virtual audits allow Quality Assurance teams to deliver ongoing compliance validation activities without disrupting operations when traditional in-person audits are not viable.

Our findings showed a cost benefit with decreased travel, as the technology needed to execute the audits was already in place. Reduction in air and car travel also reduces carbon emissions – a key sustainability initiative for all organizations.

This article presents key findings from recent audits completed in the facilities management industry along with a look at benefits and drawbacks of virtual auditing.

VIRTUAL AUDIT PROCESSES

The keys to successful virtual auditing are organization and efficiency. A common theme found in our research on virtual audits is that the investment of advance planning pays off by providing a consistent audit process.[2] An outline of the audit process provides the road map needed to maintain consistency and produce reliable results.

The following steps were put into place for recent virtual audits our Quality Assurance team completed.

INITIAL CONTACT WITH AUDIT LOCATION LEADERSHIP
• Explain why sites are selected for audits
• Identify key stakeholders for each site location
• Gain vested leadership involvement

PREPARE AND CONDUCT A KICK-OFF CALL WITH ALL SITE TEAMS
• Introduce Remote Auditing Team
• Introduce auditee and service streams for each site
• Explain virtual audit process (i.e., purpose, timeline, expectations)
• Schedule each site's meeting dates and audit preparation steps

CREATE AND TEST TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS
• Determine which platform will be used for data sharing and build the shared space
• Prepare back-up technology to avoid failures
• Share brief how-to instructions for accessing each shared folder used in documentation verification

CONDUCT COLLABORATIVE AUDIT SESSIONS FOR EACH SITE
• Perform virtual audit assessment
• Assist site leaders with accessing data sharing folders
• Review initial auditing scores
• Provide feedback and action plan process

REQUEST AND REVIEW ADDITIONAL SITE - SPECIFIC DOCUMENTATION
• Site leaders will submit documents to support virtual audit sessions
• Review of documents submitted by Remote Auditing Team
• Determine areas of opportunity

CONDUCT CLOSING MEETING
• Present and review preliminary results
• Help with reaching compliance

• Collaborate on process improvement with key stakeholders
• Email official detailed audit report to all key stakeholders

KEY FINDINGS

Virtual audits of new onboarded properties provided detailed case studies to guide process improvement. A summary of the observed benefits and drawbacks to virtual audits are listed below.

VIRTUAL AUDITING ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES

ADVANTAGES
(+) Shorter set-up time
(+) Flexibility for Assessor and Auditee
(+) Ability to gauge compliance without lengthy in-person process reviews
(+) Ability to include numerous team members in audit conversations
(+) Reduction in carbon footprint lending to sustainability efforts
(+) Virtual interactions versus in person interactions can lead to less audit stress

DISADVANTAGES
(−) Technology connectivity
(−) Client privacy challenges
(−) Less interpersonal connection
(−) Environment and document observation limitations
(−) Limited to the Auditee's understanding of utilized technology
(−) Requires additional training for participants

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES
• Technology connectivity: advise auditee to perform a pre-check of internet connection prior to audit date
• Client privacy challenges: adjust audit content to avoid imposing on client proprietary materials
• Less interpersonal connection: utilize video conferencing to increase visibility of participants facial reactions
• Environment observation limitations: request images of supporting materials
• Limited understanding of utilized technology: create simple how-to-guides and/or training that can be provided prior to the audit
• Training for participants: walk through sessions prior to audit dates

VIRTUAL AUDITING BEST PRACTICES
• Audit kick-off call to provide an interpersonal connection
• Development of an audit tool to assist with preparation
• Pre-work by Auditee in preparation of the remote audit session

- Digital document sharing for compliance validation
- Use of video conferencing
- Hybrid process of document sharing, virtual conversations and onsite observations proved to be the best overall practice

HYBRID AUDITING

Our experiences have led to the determination that a hybrid version, encompassing both virtual and in-person audit elements, may be an optimum solution. Maximum results can be achieved when quality professionals are able to use technology in tandem with onsite observations.

This methodology provides both tangible and intangible information such as visualization of the entire facility, ability to gauge emotional intelligence of site leaders, interaction with the client, as well as utilizing technology to retain compliance validation documents.

ESFM has been able to capitalize on this hybrid method to achieve a successful CIMS certification, which extended to 15 accounts during a one-week timespan. Additionally, this model was utilized to achieve the WELL Health-Safety rating for a Life Sciences client in Gaithersburg, MD.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOLUTIONS

A deep dive into available technology solutions was completed. It is noted that there is a need to compare the cost associated with in-person audits and the technology necessary to conduct virtual audits. A summary of the most popular options identified is provided below.

TECHNOLOGY & SOLUTIONS

CLOUD TECHNOLGY

Purpose: to provide a solution for remote auditing that allows you to access files and records without having to be at a specific place at a specific time

Benefits: offers collaboration support, flexible workflow, app integrations, data protection, threat detection

Financial Commitment: customizable monthly subscription

MOBILE SOLUTIONS

Purpose: to provide a real-time auditing experience from a remote location

Benefits: increased team participation with visual capability, efficient use of business funds, allows for interpersonal connection

Financial Commitment: A' la carte depending on audit frequency

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There has been significant progress in the development of virtual audit processes. New systems and out-of-the-box thinking have been employed to ensure quality audit outcomes are reached. Once the learning curve has been achieved, remote audits have also proven to be highly successful.[3]

With appropriate planning, leadership support, and essential technology in place, virtual auditing is a convenient tool that can produce similar end results as an in-person audit.[3]

To achieve success like that of an in-person audit, leadership involvement is crucial. Support from each level of management is necessary to ensure the thoroughness of the virtual audit.

Gaining buy-in from senior leaders can facilitate a cascading effect on other levels of management, therefore, providing the collaborative evolution needed to meet the growing needs of the process. We anticipate virtual audits to become more efficient and commonplace in our industry. Specifically, the hybrid model encompassing both technology and in-person audit methodology.

As remote technology grows within our digital culture, it is expected that electronic audit solutions will become readily available. Elevating the virtual audit option is a useful and effective tool for quality assurance professionals.

REFERENCES

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