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ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group

Guidance on

Customer Complaints

Content

1. Introduction 1
2. Outline of iso 10002 3
3. Auditing of the complaints-handling process 4

1. INTRODUCTION

The effective management of customer complaints is an essential part of a quality management system, in order to provide feedback when the outputs of a QMS have not achieved the objective of providing" consistently conforming products".

While there is no single clause in ISO 9001 that is dedicated to customer complaints handling, it is important for auditors to be aware of the various clauses of the standard which relate to this topic and which enable them to evaluate an organization's complaints handling process.

The ISO 9001 clauses which directly or indirectly require the effective management of customer complaints (often as part of the requirements on "customer feedback"), include:

- **Clause 5.1.2** requires top management to ensure that "customer (…) requirements are determined, understood and consistently met"
- **Clause 8.2.1** c) requires the organization to obtain "customer feedback relating to products and services, including customer complaints"
- **Clause 9.1.2** requires the organization to "monitor customers' perceptions of the degree to which their needs and expectations have been fulfilled." This is actually more demanding than just responding to customer complaints, as when properly implemented, it requires the organization to proactively seek customer feedback rather than just sitting back and reacting to "formal complaints" which are often few and far between, because the "customer" can't be bothered or feels they are wasting their time.
- **Clause 9.1.3** requires the organization to analyse and evaluate appropriate data relating to the degree of customer satisfaction - again, this should actually be more demanding than just responding to complaints.
- **Clause 9.3** requires management review inputs to include "customer feedback", which necessarily includes customer complaints.

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- **Clause 10.2.1** defines requirements for reviewing nonconformities, including any arising from customer complaints, and subsequently acting on those NC's to determine cause, implement corrections and corrective actions, and verify effectiveness, etc.

Throughout an audit the auditor should be alert for indications that may suggest customer dissatisfaction and which should have been addressed by the organization as part of the customer complaints handling process. Good sources of such information may include, for example:

- Goods returned by the customer,
- Warranty claims,
- Revised invoices,
- Credit notes,
- Articles in the media,
- Consumer websites,
- Direct observation of, or communication with the customer (for example in a service organization).

Auditors also need to be aware of the existence of **ISO 10002 Quality management - Customer satisfaction - Guidelines for complaints handling in organizations** and to encourage their clients to make use of this guidance in developing their complaints handling process.

The Introduction to ISO 10002 states:

> "This International Standard provides guidance for the design and implementation of an effective and efficient complaints-handling process for all types of commercial or non-commercial activities, including those related to electronic commerce."

The process for complaints handling described in ISO10002 can be used as an element of a quality management system.

The information obtained through the complaints-handling process can lead to improvements in products and processes and, where the complaints are properly handled, can protect and improve the reputation of the organization (regardless of its size, location and sector).

An effective and efficient complaints-handling process reflects the needs of both the organizations supplying products and those which are the recipients of those products.

The Introduction to ISO 10002 further states:

"Implementation of the process described in this International Standard can

- provide a complainant with access to an open and responsive complaints-handling process,
- enhance the ability of the organization to resolve complaints in a consistent, systematic and responsive manner, to the satisfaction of the complainant and the organization,
- enhance the ability of an organization to identify trends and eliminate causes of complaints, and improve the organization's operations,
- help an organization create a customer-focused approach to resolving complaints, and encourage personnel to improve their skills in working with customers, and

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- provide a basis for continual review and analysis of the complaints-handling process, the resolution of complaints, and process improvements made"

It is very important that auditors have knowledge of ISO 10002 and its guidelines, and that they use that knowledge during audits. However, ISO 10002 does not specify any requirements, but just gives guidelines; consequently, it is not possible for an auditor to raise any nonconformities against its recommendations.

2. OUTLINE OF ISO 10002

ISO 10002 addresses the following topics:

- Guiding principles
  - Visibility
  - Accessibility
  - Responsiveness
  - Objectivity
  - Charges
  - Confidentiality
  - Customer-focused approach
  - Accountability
  - Continual improvement

- Complaints-handling framework
  - Commitment
  - Policy
  - Responsibility and authority

- Planning and design
  - Objectives
  - Activities
  - Resources

- Operation of complaints-handling process
  - Communication
  - Receipt of complaint

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  - Tracking of complaint
  - Acknowledgement of complaint
  - Initial assessment of complaint
  - Investigation of complaints
  - Response to complaints
  - Communicating the decision
  - Closing the complaint

- Maintenance and improvement
  - Collection of information
  - Analysis and evaluation of complaints
  - Satisfaction with the complaints-handling process
  - Monitoring of the complaints-handling process
  - Auditing of the complaints-handling process
  - Management review of the complaints-handling process
  - Continual improvement

It also includes the following informative annexes

  - Guidance for small businesses
  - Form for complainant
  - Objectivity
  - Complaint follow-up form
  - Responses
  - Escalation flowchart
  - Continual monitoring
  - Audit

3. AUDITING OF THE COMPLAINTS-HANDLING PROCESS

Auditors should be able to verify that an organization has established an effective documented complaint management **process**.

ISO 10002 recommends that when examining the performance of the complaints-handling process, the auditor should assess:

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- the conformity of complaints-handling processes with the organization's policy and objectives
- the extent to which the complaints-handling process is being followed
- the ability of the existing complaints-handling process to achieve objectives,
- strengths and weaknesses of the complaints-handling process
- outcomes of internal audits of the complaints-handling process
- opportunities for improvement in the complaints-handling process and its outcomes
- outputs from management review should include
    - decisions and actions related to improvement of the effectiveness and efficiency of the complaints-handling process
    - proposals on product and service improvement decisions
    - actions related to identified resource needs (e.g., training programmes) used to identify opportunities for improvement.

Note: The ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group has published a paper on auditing “Customer Feedback" which also includes some guidance on customer complaints.

Please access our websites at ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group, or at Accreditation and Assessment Practices - IAF, where you can find information about ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Groups, download Introduction, the other ISO 9001 APG and AAPG papers.

Feedback from users is welcomed by APG/AAPG and will be used to determine the need for additional guidance documents, as well as for the revision of the current ones.

In case you wish to provide your feedback, the Group Secretary contact details are also available on these sites.

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