



The Last Word

Broaden the audit experience

Most laboratory safety personnel spend time either conducting or reviewing safety audits. Regularly scheduled audits often assume a predictable format, especially if the auditor is the same person each time. Equipped with a clipboard or a notebook, the auditor prowls through the lab, looking to find violations. People do not talk to an auditor, unless the auditor speaks to them first or unless they know the auditor well. The auditor usually does not say much during the audit, just adds notes to the clipboard.

Within this traditional audit format, an organization can make a significant improvement just by varying the individual who carries out the audit. At least once per year, ask the responsible faculty member or lab manager to do the lab inspection. These individuals understand that they are responsible if an accident happens in their lab. Several times during the year, ask staff members, possibly in groups of two or three (no managers or faculty), to conduct the audits. In addition to the different perspectives of each auditor, peer auditors have empathy with the lab staff. If they find something relatively simple, they might correct it themselves or ask a colleague in the area to remove the violation before the audit is finished. Remember, the most important goal of lab safety audits is to find unsafe conditions and correct them as soon as possible. Audit results should be documented and sent to the individual in charge of the lab. The audit findings should be discussed with the lab staff at the next regularly scheduled lab safety meeting. You do *have* safety meetings, don't you? I recommend that every laboratory have at least four audits per year. Each audit should be followed by a safety meeting where one agenda item is the audit results and assigning one staff member to address each violation in the audit. Document the assignments and the corrections that have been made. From a legal perspective, if you do not document an action, it did not happen.

In the aftermath of the accidental release at Bhopal, India, in the mid 80s, my company instituted a corporate audit program for every manufacturing facility, warehouse, and major laboratory in the company. These corporate audits were scheduled every 3–4 years. The main purpose of the audit was to determine if there is a possibility for a catastrophic incident at any corporate facility. An audit team

was put together consisting of company employees who were not stationed at the facility being audited. Usually there was a corporate safety/health/environment representative, a manager from another facility of the same type as the one to be inspected, possibly an employee who used to work at the facility but had transferred to another corporate facility, and one employee who had expertise that would be helpful to the team. For many years, I participated in every corporate audit of our four global research facilities. I represented Research Management and explained what our expected policies and procedures were. For some plants that had “non-research” laboratories, I was selected for the audit team based on my experience in lab safety.

These audits were taken very seriously by the managers at facilities being audited. Each audit finding was assigned to an on-site employee to correct and a date of completion was agreed upon. In the first few years of this program, a corporate officer was always present for the closing meeting to emphasize the importance of these audits to the company. Six months after the audit, a follow-up memo was sent to the top manager of the facility indicating which items had not yet been corrected. Most items were completed within a year.

These corporate audits were the most significant corporate safety events for every facility. A corporate policy developed that said any recommendation made by the corporate audit team must be implemented, regardless of the current budgetary situation. Eventually, facility managers realized that they could correct unsafe conditions if the corporate audit team would cite the item on their report. This led to a sense of shared responsibility for these audits. The facility would bring up concerns they had, and these concerns would be reviewed by the audit team along with their independent findings. Although these audits are a lot of work for the facility being audited and the members of the audit team, everyone understands the advantages of having these audits and resolving any problems.

Let's create an atmosphere of cooperation in conducting our lab audits. Be receptive to suggestions and safety concerns of coworkers in your work environments. Be careful out there while auditing facilities that you are not as familiar with. Ensure that your colleagues and audit team members are careful too.



Ken Fivizzani is a chemistry graduate of Loyola University Chicago and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He retired in 2009 from Nalco Company, Naperville, IL, where he was the chemical hygiene officer for nineteen of his twenty-six years there.