Remote Audits by DQS
Principles, Requirements, Risks and Opportunities

We are in the middle of digital transformation, a process of continuous change based on digital technologies that are being developed at an ever faster pace. Digital technology is having a profound impact on Quality Management and offers new opportunities to certification bodies and their clients.

A logical use of digital technologies are Remote Audits, which are an already established audit method and not a separate type of audit. However, the authors of ISO 19011 do not rank remote audits the same as on-site audits. Rather, they offer to integrate "remote" as one of several methods "appropriately balanced" into audit planning.
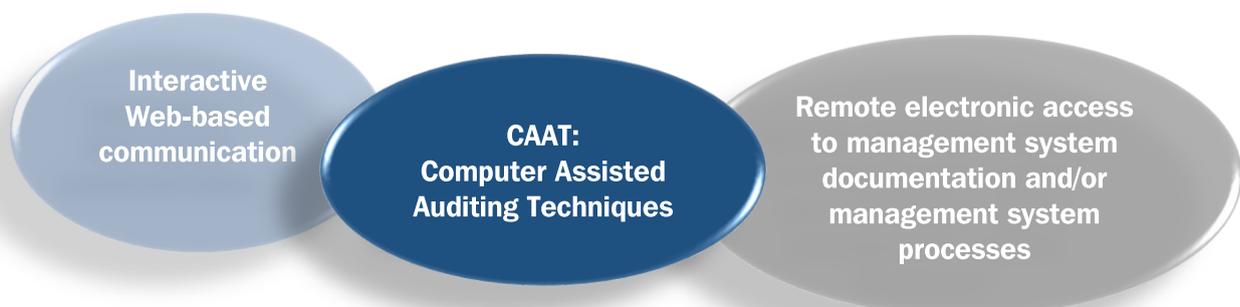
In the past, remote audits were often used for off-site document review, and that is still their strength, even if new technology seems to offer more options. While remote audits may be used for parts of the total audit time and to avoid travel time, they may require increased audit time for planning, setting up the necessary **I**nformation and **C**ommunication **T**echnologies (ICT), etc.

According to ISO/IEC 17021-1, which governs our work as an accredited CB, remote auditing activities have to be documented. The client is responsible for the infrastructure of remote audit, which ideally, should be performed at the client premises.

Chapter 5.5.3 of ISO 19011:2018 is concerned with the selection and determination of audit methods: "In order to carry out the audit effectively and efficiently, the person(s) who controls the audit program should select and determine the methods for the audit depending on the defined audit objectives, the defined audit scope and the defined audit criteria".

Auditors wanting to conduct remote audits need to have the necessary technical skills and be familiar with virtual meetings. For the sake of concentration, we recommend no more than two to three hour sessions.

DQS audits must follow the "binding document on the use of **ICT** for audit/evaluation purposes". It states, for example: "Such computer-assisted auditing techniques ("CAAT = Computer Assisted Auditing Techniques") may include, for example, the following:"

Interactive Web-based communication

CAAT: Computer Assisted Auditing Techniques

Remote electronic access to management system documentation and/or management system processes

"Audits can be conducted on site, remotely or a combination of both. The use of these methods should be appropriately balanced, based, inter alia, on consideration of the risks and opportunities involved." (Dr. Grieb: DQS Auditor)

Risk assessment

Prior to any remote audit, DQS lead auditors shall always carry out a risk assessment regarding the effectiveness of remote audits and the use of ICT. Some of the criteria are:

- Integrity of the audit process
- Effectiveness of the audit achieving the audit goals
- Feasibility in relation to ICT:
  - ✓ Risks to the objectivity and validity of the information collected
  - ✓ Information security for all involved in the audit
  - ✓ Feasibility in relation to the selected technology (auditors and customers)
  - ✓ Contemporary and stable ICT, with competent people
  - ✓ Good bandwidth for data transmission and reliable power supply
  - ✓ Uninterruptible and high quality of sound / picture

Remote assessments may be considered for use when…

- travel to the client or specific location is not reasonable (i.e., for safety reasons, travel restrictions, etc.).
- there are unavoidable changes in scheduling the audit (i.e., personal issues, change in business priorities, etc.).

DQS **decides** if any part of the on-site audit **can be conducted remotely**, based on the following criteria:

- Availability of the necessary infrastructure to support the use of the ICT proposed (e.g. Data security, data integrity, media equipment, bandwidth, etc.)
- Systematic implementation of its management system where records, data, etc. can be reviewed at any site, despite where the work is being performed.
- The client's proven track record of conformance at the location of the remote assessment (e.g. no non-conformities).
- Low risk level of the assessment (e.g. small site in another country without production, international sales offices).
- The auditor's familiarity with the management system of the client and its practices (at least participated in the initial or recertification audit) and has visited its headquarters.

Data protection and data privacy

IAF document MD 4 highlights some prerequisites for remote audits, which are carried out using "Information and Communication Technology (ICT)". Here are some principles:

- Client and auditor determine the level of security requirements and ensure the security and confidentiality of electronic or electronically transmitted information.
- ICT may only be used if auditee and auditor agree. This requires a well-established relationship and remote access protocols.
- Both client and auditor need to ensure they have the necessary electronic infrastructure to use ICT: "ensuring" includes trying out the infrastructure and planning alternatives if necessary!
- For hosting, the customer shall choose between an external provider or their own server. Auditors need to familiarize themselves with the customer's hard- and software.

Remote audits/ assessments shall NOT be conducted in case of:

- Initial audits (the auditor shall know the management team and the premises of the client)
- Clients with a history of critical non-conformance at the location being assessed
- Significant changes in the management or process responsibilities for relevant processes
- A high level of risk
- Any violation of accreditation rules or statutory and regulatory requirements
- Where security issues exist, e.g. restricted areas or classified documents

On-site audits with experienced DQS Auditors *lead to added value for clients. Their contribution on-site with their know-how of the premises and the direct interaction with people will remain decisive for the results of audits on the way from management reviews to certification, today and in the future.*

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