



by Craig Cochran

Selecting a registrar is a decision that can't be taken lightly. Many people have compared the relationship between an organization and its registrar to that of a marriage. That isn't too far from the truth because the interpretations and decisions provided by the registrar can have a significant effect on the organization. There are a number of considerations that guide the decision of which registrar to use, but they essentially revolve around two variables: the registrar itself and the lead auditor, who will be your primary contact.

The starting point for evaluation is the registrar's capabilities. Three questions should be answered in the affirmative to prequalify the registrar:

1. *Are you accredited by a signatory to the International Accreditation Forum?*

Accreditation is the registrar's quality assurance. It ensures that the registrar is following the necessary protocols and adhering to sound business habits. An accredited registrar is audited regularly by the accreditation body, just as your company might be audited. In the United States, the national accreditation body is the ANSI-ASQ National Accreditation Board (ANAB). Robert King, ANAB's president, states that most credible accreditation bodies are signatories to the IAF, which provides oversight and quality assurance to the accreditation body. This chain of oversight is detailed in the figure below.



Most U.S. organizations simply need to know if the registrar they're considering is accredited by ANAB. ANAB's Web site (www.anab.org) shows the accreditation status of registrars, including whether the registrar's accreditation has been suspended or withdrawn.

2. Are you qualified to audit in our industrial classification?

If the registrar isn't qualified for your organization's type of business, there's no sense in doing further evaluations. Registrars are accredited by the 39 scopes defined by the IAF. If a registrar doesn't have specific competency related to a scope, they aren't allowed to grant certification against it. This ensures that registrars evaluate organizations for which they understand the technologies, processes and industries.

The 39 IAF scopes can be found on ANAB's Web site under the "advisories" header. Accredited registrars will be able to quickly state whether accreditation allows them to audit a particular organization.

3. Do you have technical support capabilities that are readily accessible?

Ideally, you want a registrar that has competent technical services at its home office, accessible via telephone and e-mail. When a question about an interpretation or requirement comes up, you want expert answers as soon as possible. The competencies of the technical support personnel can significantly affect an audit's result.

Service fees

If the registrar clears these first three hurdles, there are a host of other issues to explore. One of the most obvious is pricing. You'll want to take into consideration all costs during the three-year registration cycle. The best way to do this is on a spreadsheet that subjects all registrars to the same criteria. Registrars should be asked to provide cost estimates for the off-site documentation review, pre-assessment audit, registration audit, accreditation mark fee, all surveillance audits during the three-year cycle and any travel expenses. The key is to evaluate all registrars against the same pricing criteria and eliminate any surprises. Most registrars are likely to be similarly priced when only local travel is involved.

You'll also want to speak to some of your key customers to get their opinions on registrars. If your customers aren't certified and have no knowledge of the certification process, any question will be meaningless. Customers who are certified, however, often have opinions about the most effective and appropriate registrars for their industries. Contacting your customers on this point has a couple of benefits: It indicates that you want to align yourself with their approach to certification, and it allows you to publicize the fact that your organization is pursuing management-system certification. Obviously, any chance you get to publicize your efforts can be an opportunity to sell more products and trump your competition.

Questions to ask

Once you have a handle on pricing and customer preferences, there are many other factors that bear on the decision of whom to use as a registrar. These include:

- *How flexible are you in terms of scheduling? Can you accommodate our expected registration date?*

These are obviously very important factors. For those organizations that have stiff timetables, these questions should be moved up into the prequalification category. Registrars with local auditors can often accommodate audits on short notice.

- *Do you have an auditor in our area?*

A significant portion of a registrar's costs are travel expenses such as airfare and hotels. These can be cut dramatically if the registrar has an auditor in the local area. A local auditor may also allow more flexibility in scheduling.

- *Does your contract for registration services include additional management-system requirements above and beyond the requirements in the standard we've implemented (such as ISO 9001)? If so, what are the additional requirements?*

People are often shocked to hear that registrars will insert their own requirements into the contract. It's quite common, though. When you sign the contract, you agree with whatever else the registrar might have decided you should implement. A common example is when a registrar insists that organizations perform process audits. There's no such requirement in ISO 9001, although it's a good idea. Learning about these additional requirements during an audit is far too late in the process.

- *Will we have an opportunity to interview the lead auditor who will be assigned to our company?*

The answer should be, "Of course!" The lead auditor is the most important factor in the relationship, and it's very important for your organization to be comfortable with the person. See the section below for sample questions to use when interviewing the prospective lead auditor.

- *May I speak to some of your current customers to get a feel for your customer service?*

Make sure to get the phone numbers and actually make the calls. Real customers will be able to provide some of the best information about a registrar. When you interview the customers, ask them what they like about the registrar as well as what they don't like. Also ask if they ever had a problem of any sort and, if so, what was done about it.

- *Do you publish an official interpretation of ISO 9001 requirements? Can I get a copy?*

Not all registrars publish interpretations of the standards they audit against, but all can discuss their overall philosophies related to the way they read them.

•Have you ever had your accreditation suspended or revoked? If so, what were the circumstances?

•Will we be billed for travel time?

You'll of course be billed for travel expenses, but a few registrars might try to bill for the time spent traveling.

•What happens if we have a difference of opinion with one of your auditors?Whom do we contact?

Differences of opinion are a fact of life. The trick is to resolve differences constructively. All registrars have a formal appeals process, but it's much easier if there's a technical expert at the registrar's headquarters who can help resolve issues in real time.

•What accreditations do you hold?Can we choose to have only one or two accreditation marks on our certificate?

Many registrars have multiple accreditations, and they bill customers for each accreditation mark that's affixed to their certificate. Most organizations don't want or need marks beyond the accreditation bodies of the countries in which they do business.

•How are major nonconformities handled?

It's hoped you'll never have to worry about major nonconformities, but it's a good idea to know the process up front. Most registrars require a special visit to verify corrective action on major nonconformities.

•What sort of "off-site" time (e.g., report preparation and manual reviews) could we be charged for?

Most off-site time should be considered part of the overall service and should not be billed separately. The one exception might be a quality-manual review, during which someone performs a desk audit to ensure that the manual makes all the necessary commitments.

•What are the restrictions and/or terms of using your registration symbol on our company-published material? What are the associated costs?

Many organizations find value in using the logo of their registrar in marketing literature. This can add credibility to the certification, especially when the registrar is a well-known and respected firm. Other organizations design their own certification symbols to tout their management system. Be sure not to use ISO's logo on any of your company-published material, however. ISO doesn't allow it.

The lead auditor

All of these are important questions that reflect on the registrar as an organization. But most of the time you won't be dealing with an organization; you'll be dealing with a person: your lead auditor. It's critical that you're comfortable with this person. You'll certainly want to interview the lead auditor, preferably in person but at least via telephone. Trust your gut reaction after the interview. You're looking for someone who's not overly concerned with rigid interpretations of requirements but rather with helping you become more successful. You want flexibility and common sense. Preferably, you would like a seasoned manager who's familiar with the realities of running a business.

Here are some questions to ask during your interview with the lead auditor that will help pinpoint someone who will work in partnership with you:

•*Can you tell me about your experiences working in industry?*

Someone with rich experience is going to understand the real world. Believe it or not, there are quite a few auditors who don't have much real-world experience as managers. Please note that long careers in government, the military or academia don't necessarily count as industry experience. Some of the worst auditors I've ever encountered have had long and illustrious careers in these fields.

•*How do you feel about disagreements when they arise between you and the customer?*

This question might make some auditors uncomfortable, but good ones will respond that they have no problem with disagreements and are open to working with customers to reach a common agreement on interpretations.

•*Can you tell me about an audit situation when you and a customer had a disagreement on interpretations and how the disagreement was resolved?*

This will tell you a great deal about the candidate's conflict-resolution skills. You don't want someone who seems uncompromising and unwilling to view situations from alternate perspectives.

The following three questions are more on the "touchy-feely" side but, if answered honestly, can give you some insight into the auditor's personality. Be prepared to answer why you're asking these questions.

•*How would you characterize yourself: as a technical person or a people person?*

In general, "people persons" seem to be more flexible in their interpretations than highly technical types. They're also easier to work with. It goes without saying that an audit can be a stressful process, but an auditor with strong people skills can help relieve some of the anxiety. An auditor who's a people person is also more likely to take the time to clearly explain his or her rationales and thought processes.

•*Do you consider yourself a creative person?*

Creative people will have a more flexible approach to auditing and will be more open to a wide range of interpretations. You don't want someone who'll roll over, but you do want an auditor who's willing to consider creative and novel approaches to meeting requirements. Rigid paradigms in auditors can be dangerous.

•*What are the three most important things I should know about you?*

This is a purely exploratory question. There are no right answers, of course, but the answers will help clarify the auditor's personality.

Selecting a registrar is just like selecting anything else that can have an important bearing on your success. It requires research and sound judgment. If you evaluate both the registrar and the lead auditor according to the criteria discussed here, you should be able to make a wise decision.

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