

Checklists Aren't the Enemy

by Don Brecken

When used properly, checklists can be a valuable audit tool.

This article may annoy well-meaning audit experts who feel that checklists have somehow been outlawed with the advent of the year 2000 version of ISO 9001; it may also aggravate some of my fellow Baldrige criteria experts who harbor similar biases against checklists, and the ISO 9000 series of standards, for that matter. My Six Sigma friends, however, will just be happy someone is using one of their tools.

I favor the use of checklists when auditing. But I've run into more people who swear that audit checklists are no longer allowed when auditing. I know where this comes from and will reserve discussion on this topic for another article. The bottom line with checklists is they can and should be used (with the exception of an

ISO/TS 16949 stage two audit) as long as they don't restrict the audit. In other words, they are appropriate audit aids.

My favorite checklists

My main reason for writing this article was not to annoy those who don't like to use checklists but rather to share how I use them in my internal audit program. I am very pragmatic when it comes to designing and developing management systems. Much like the master chef who creates fine cuisine, I add a pinch of this, a smidgen of that, and a spoonful of the other to create the desired management system. "Whatever is effective in achieving the objective," is my motto.

This is how I developed two audit checklists for internal audits and performance excellence audits. My internal audit checklist is flavored with a pinch of Six Sigma and my performance excellence audit checklist has a heaping dose

of Baldrige criteria. Again, my point is not to rile those who lobby against checklists but rather to share what I believe to be an innovative application of quality concepts that aid, rather than restrict, the audit process.

A pinch of Six Sigma

The internal audit checklist I specify for general go-out-and-audit purposes for my organization is shown in figure 1. I added to this checklist a suppliers-inputs-process steps-outputs-customers (SIPOC) diagram in a swim lane configuration so processes can be easily documented during the audit. SIPOC diagrams are one of many tools used by Six Sigma practitioners for high-level mapping of processes.

I've found that the integration of a SIPOC diagram into my audit checklists helps to put auditees at ease with the audit process. Most people don't mind talking about their jobs or sharing their work. I

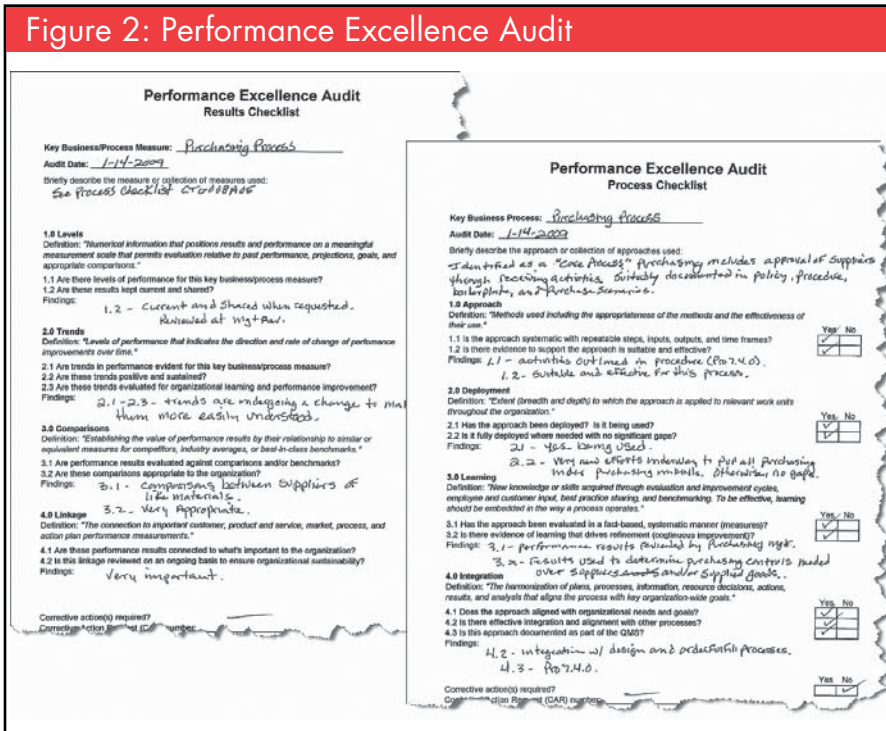
Check Points

- ✓ Checklists have been demonized as tools of lazy auditors who want only to verify minimal compliance with standards rather than provide independent assessments of the efficiency of a process.
- ✓ Well-considered checklists can help auditors examine forgotten parts of a management system.
- ✓ A checklist that integrates the comprehensive, forward-thinking requirements of the Baldrige criteria and Six Sigma's focus on statistics is a great way to work the benefits of both methodologies into an audit.

Figure 1: Internal Audit Checklist

Internal Audit Checklist – ISO 9001:2008 / AS9100							
All Employees							
Reference	Requirement	S	OFI	NC	NA	NE	Comments
QP 4.1 & Pro 4.1.0	Describe your process? What is it you are doing?	✓					CNC Machining
Suppliers	Supervisor Design Dept.						Electrode Design Edm Burn Sheets
Inputs	Data & Line: up						
Process Steps	Rough cut → Side work → Semi-Finish						
Outputs							Part to C/PD Ready to Burn
Customers							Edm Dept.
Reference	Requirement	S	OFI	NC	NA	NE	Comments
QP 6.2 & Pro 6.2.2	What is the relevance and importance of what you do?	✓					Good awareness.
QP 7.2 & Pro 7.2.2	Who are your most important customers? What do they require of you?	✓					The next generation - Edm

Figure 2: Performance Excellence Audit



start my audits with an open-ended question, which asks the auditee to describe what he or she is doing. While the auditee is describing the process steps he or she is following, the auditor can begin filling in the SIPOC diagram on his or her checklist. This has also worked exceedingly well for capturing undocumented processes.

A heaping dose of Baldrige criteria

Whenever one of our core processes is audited I specify a pair of checklists that, when used together, execute what I call a performance excellence audit. This pair of checklists is shown in figure 2. Our core processes are the proc-

esses I deem necessary for our quality management system (QMS) and their interaction is described in our company's quality manual. Some examples of core processes audited in this manner include our sales order process, design process, purchasing process, quality planning process, and order fulfillment process.

These performance excellence audit checklists are my creation and are heavily patterned after criteria used by my fellow Baldrige examiners to evaluate Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria items. One checklist is used to evaluate the process and the other is used to evaluate results. Processes are evaluated based on approach,

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deployment, learning, and integration. Results are evaluated for their levels, trends, comparisons, and linkage.

Conclusion

“Whatever is effective in achieving the objective,” is my motto. If it works, use it; if it doesn’t, discard it. My hope is that by sharing these checklists, others will open their eyes to innovative ways to modify their own checklists. And remember a checklist is only an aid. Using checklists and collecting objective evidence helps verify the effectiveness of a QMS and will drive improvement.

About the author

Don Brecken is the director of quality for Commercial Tool & Die Inc. His background includes quality leadership, management consulting, registration and surveillance audits, and quality system implementation.

Brecken is a fellow of the American Society for Quality (ASQ), a certified manager of quality and organizational excellence, an RABQSA business improvement auditor, and has served on the board of examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. He is also a deputy regional director for ASQ's region 10.

Brecken earned his MBA in strategic management from Davenport University's Sneden Graduate School. He also has three undergraduate degrees in business with a technical specialty in quality leadership. He instructs a variety of quality and management-related courses for Ferris State University and Davenport University's undergraduate and graduate programs.

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