



Getting the most benefit
from your remote audit

1 Context

Oversight of suppliers and internal operations from a regulatory, food safety and quality standpoint has always been a vital part of the production of food. Current programmes for the assessment and certification of management systems largely rely on a third-party certification body sending auditors to their clients' premises to conduct audits.

The need for confidence and supply chain assurance has not diminished. If anything, it is even more vital at a time when the world is struggling with a pandemic. However, Covid-19 has significantly impacted on this process, and so the use of remote assessment techniques is being adopted into everyday operations at an accelerated rate. Whether for corporate oversight, internal audits, supply chain verification or certification audits, the successful use of remote techniques in auditing will support successful operations.

It is clear that remote auditing will not be a temporary substitute solution when things return to normalised operations, and so it provides an opportunity to preview and test future methodologies. Those businesses that embrace remote verification as a new process, and embed it as a tool to support their compliance regime, will be well positioned to improve their future development, and will benefit the most.

Whilst face to face auditing remains the most effective and trusted mechanism, remote auditing has a clear role to play in supporting assurance when access to the site is not possible or appropriate.

2 BRCGS Remote audits

Where it is not possible for an audit to take place onsite due to Covid-19 restrictions a site may opt for a remote audit. A remote audit includes an audit of all the requirements of the Standard, for example a review of internal audits and a document review. The audit of production and storage facilities uses live video. Successful sites receive a six or twelve month certificate based on grade. There is no grade for Consumer Products Foundation level and the Gluten-Free Certification Program. For these programs the normal pass/fail criteria apply.

While this option is not a GFSI benchmarked programme, remote audits are delivered by IAF ISO/IEC 17021-1 accredited certification bodies that are operating under IAF MD4 and IAF ID3. They are also subject to the rigour of BRCGS' five pillars of compliance to ensure the integrity and consistency of BRCGS certification, in order to deliver results that brand owners can trust.

3 Preparing for the audit

This document has been produced to help you prepare for a remote audit to ensure it adds value and supports your business goals.



3.1 Process

The remote audit process will follow the same principles as physical on-site audits. Sites should adopt a company-wide approach, and engage staff in the planning, training, and practice.

Your designated personnel will need to be available throughout the entire audit. Leadership should be prepared to be available during the opening and closing meetings, as well as various times throughout the audit should questions arise. Delivering awareness sessions for employees in advance of the audit can help prepare and engage staff in the process.



3.2 Access support information

Be aware of publicly available support material that has been put together on remote auditing good practices.

Suggested resources:

- IAF Mandatory Document for the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Auditing/Assessment www.iaf.nu/upFiles/IAF%20MD4%20Issue%202%2003072018.pdf
- IAF has also published a series of FAQs to communicate a common understanding for managing remote assessments: <https://iaffa.com/category/remote-assessments-audits/>
- ISO has also put together a set of useful resources to share best practices on remote auditing: www.iso.org/ca-covid19.html
- The IIOC (Independent International Organisation for Certification) links to further information on remote auditing from its certification body members: <https://iioc.org/corporate-news/iioc-members-providing-remote-auditing/>



3.3 Planning

Work with your certification body to ensure that the schedule takes the needs of your staff into account, and that there are appropriate screen and physical breaks.

Identify the need and role for “audit assistants” to support the smooth running of the audit by carrying out tasks such as sourcing material and information, managing interview timings and general liaison. The assistant can help gather evidence and support the auditor as the audit is happening. This will improve engagement as well as provide training opportunities for staff in the audit process. Many sites have found it useful to delegate a member of staff to be responsible for the live video - i.e. to carry the camera or other video equipment, whilst in production and storage areas.

Understand, prepare for, and utilize the vertical audit technique. Plan in the design, initial explanation, document sourcing, and evidence review as separate activities.

Ensure any employee privacy concerns are identified and mitigated well before the audit.



3.4 IT Considerations

Test and map out the wi-fi signal strength in various locations and improve or find alternatives for service areas where there is poor coverage. Create a map of any wi-fi dead spots and provide to the audit team in advance of the audit.

Ensure all security protocols for accessing wi-fi are known and available in advance. Identify digital firewalls and ensure access for the entire team will be seamless. This includes auditors as well as auditees.

Consider the need for an IT facilitator to support the entire audit, or at a minimum the start of each session. Their main role would be to troubleshoot any problems should they arise.

Set up a dedicated room for the audit, in the same way as you would for an on-site audit. Set up a dedicated room for the audit, in the same way as you would for an on-site audit. It should have appropriate audio/visual systems and support. A dedicated interview device will allow more efficient use of resources.

Plan in advance for document sharing:

- Scan relevant documents in advance to ensure that you have electronic versions (wherever practical). Set up scanning capability in the “audit room” should this be required.

- Set up a place where the auditor can easily find any documents requested.
- If possible, provide direct access for the auditor into the site's digital documentation system. Ensure passwords are available.
- If available, provide the auditor direct streaming capability for any site process monitoring video equipment.

Consider a backup communication platform in case of failure. Mobile phones, secondary computers, and alternate communication platforms should be planned for. Wired LAN access points in the "audit room" are advisable for speed and back up. Ensure portable devices are fully charged before the audit.



3.5 Preparation

Carry out a mock session in advance with internal and external individuals to test IT, security, communications and platforms.

In the facility:

- Practice a video assessment, using the intended equipment throughout the facility, mapping out areas of weak signal, areas of excessive noise or interference, and other potential issues. Discuss any concerns with your certification body.
- Practice video interviews with staff
- Risk assess remote audit protocols and practices that will arise from the remote audit activity and equipment, paying specific attention to high risk areas and the potential for contamination. Assess employee safety concerns (e.g. trip hazards while walking around filming).
- Use existing incident management assessment protocols to undergo a "what could go wrong" scenario analysis well ahead of the audit.
- Test that lighting is sufficient in the areas to be audited
- Map out the facility beforehand, identifying wi-fi dead spots, (for video), areas of restricted access (i.e. material flammability risk areas).



3.6 Planning with the auditor

Auditors should identify and request a list of documents and supporting information required in advance to allow you to plan effectively for the audit.

Aim to provide the auditor with a guided tour of the documentation system in advance of the audit, in order to ensure that the audit team understands how to navigate around the system. This orientation should be provided by a member of staff that is very familiar with the system. Support this understanding and orientation by providing the auditor with visual cues (maps, and photographs of the physical site, physical markers to identify location etc). Label lines or equipment if needed.

The day before, or shortly before the audit starts, liaise with the audit team and lead auditee to ensure that they can log on successfully and ensure all communications are working.



3.7 Policies and procedures

Review site security policies, ranging from documentation systems, data sharing, to allowing visual assessment of the facility, and ensure they are updated to accommodate remote audit practices.

Ensure all access granted during the audit is reset following the audit. Change passwords if necessary, or discontinue access when no longer required.



3.8 Outcomes

Core outcomes are the same as for an onsite audit. Complete corrective actions, root cause analysis, and the development of a preventive action plan must be completed and reported to your certification body. Evidence must be provided within 28 days of the audit.

Observe, identify, and highlight positive findings with staff, and ensure positive feedback, where deserved, is shared to those responsible.



3.9 Long-term considerations for improvement

Throughout the process, record any learnings that you can apply in future that will make the process more effective and improve your operations.

Consider the viability of a digital management system platform for improved access, management and accessibility of operational information.

Revisit the feasibility study, and preparation plans, post audit, and adjust as necessary. Implement corrective actions that will ensure a more effective and efficient outcome.

Carry out a post audit review in order to capture activities that worked well and activities that could be improved.

Consider staff training in areas such as internal audit techniques, remote audit techniques and managing remote audit courses.



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