Dakota
SOFTWARE

Going Virtual with EHS Audits

Winning strategies for conducting remote audits and self-assessments

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Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic so many aspects of our lives have changed, including the ways we work. For many, remote and virtual work have become a new normal, but it poses great challenges—some of which have never before been considered—for environment, health, and safety (EHS) professionals. EHS leaders are nothing if not adaptable though and, as could be expected, new strategies and solutions are being introduced to meet these challenges.

In a COVID-19 world, many EHS professionals are looking for the right tools to fit the unique needs of their organizations. How can you monitor for compliance if you can't travel to (or, sometimes, even physically enter) your offices and/or job sites? How do you ensure your preventive actions and safety initiatives are not falling by the wayside? How are you preparing to train your workers to stay healthy during reopening?

Here, we'll look at some of the tools that can help you stay on top of the situation.
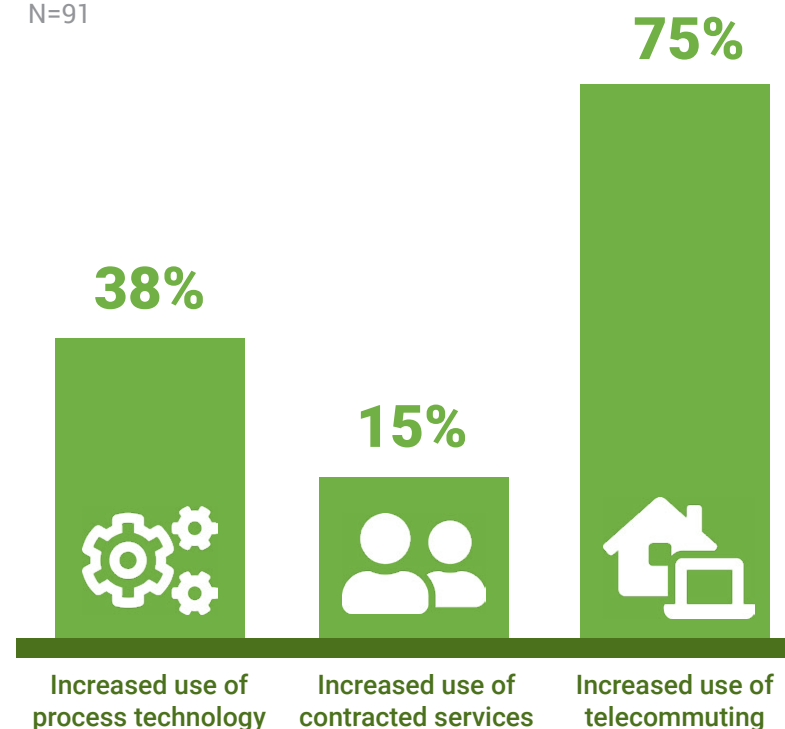
Conducting EHS Audits remotely

A virtual EHS audit isn't as intimidating as it may sound, but there are several prerequisites that apply across all EHS auditing, virtual or not—and hopefully, you already have these in place. First and foremost, you need skilled auditors who will be diligent throughout the process. Second, you need the basic tools of a modern 21st century workforce. In the (highly unlikely) event you're still performing all of your EHS functions on paper alone, it may be a bit more difficult to launch a virtual audit!

Here are some key considerations to keep in mind for conducting a virtual EHS audit.

☑ Video interviews. Remote video conferencing tools have become indispensable in recent months. It's time for EHS to start using these corporate collaborative tools effectively as well, and video interviews are just as valuable to an audit as in-person conversations.

☑ Streaming video walkarounds with site staff. For organizations with multiple facilities spread out geographically, local site staff are able to physically enter a facility—but you or your auditor(s) cannot travel there. Through the use of streaming video, you can virtually join site walkarounds, conduct inspections, and discuss issues with employees.

With regard to human resources, which of the following do you anticipate as work returns to normal?

N=91

38%	15%	75%
Increased use of process technology	Increased use of contracted services	Increased use of telecommuting

A bright future for telecommuting

One of the lasting impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic may be the testing and validation of online collaboration tools. Live polling during the Webinar Roundtable "*Managing EHS Priorities During the COVID-19 Crisis* " on April 8, 2020, showed an overwhelming response by EHS Professionals to increased use of telecommuting after the pandemic.

Virtual Audit Checklist

- ☑ Consider using virtual audits only for sites previously identified as having low risk

- ☑ Define the scope of the audit (likely more focused than normal)

- ☑ Develop a virtual audit plan/schedule (shared in advance)

- ☑ Have on-site personnel complete a self-assessment questionnaire for review by remote auditors and subject matter experts (SMEs)

- ☑ Identify data resources for documents and records in digital repositories

- ☑ Establish the timeline for requesting and receiving documentation

- ☑ Customize an audit protocol specific to the virtual audit scope

- ☑ Online opening and closing meetings, periodic debrief meetings (screen share as needed)

- ☑ Use mobile devices with streaming video and/or drones for touring site operations when possible

- ☑ Record a site video tour in advance and share with remote auditors

- ☑ Consider following up with on-site audit after the virtual audit (less time on site)

Conducting EHS Audits remotely (cont.)

- ☑ Reviews of EHS records. Even if your operations were temporarily shut down, you or your auditor(s) should have access to company EHS records. Take this time to review your leading and lagging indicators, ensure that you are effectively managing corrective and preventive actions, and be confident that when you resume full operations, your workforce will fall back into safe habits on the job.

- ☑ Preparing and reviewing your training. When your operations fully reopen post-COVID-19, your employees will need to receive training on any necessary new health and safety protocols on top of all of their other regular safety training. Review all of your training materials to ensure accuracy and relevancy, and, as necessary, work with your learning management system (LMS) provider to verify that your training content is up to date, engaging, and able to be effectively communicated and distributed to your entire workforce.

Assessing compliance doesn't have to take the form of a "formal" audit, but it's important to know that you are doing all that is necessary to maintain the safety and health obligations of your company. The primary tool to aid in this mission is software.

Software Provides a 360-Degree View of Compliance

Compliance is an ongoing process that requires a past, present, and future mindset—lessons learned from past performance, the current state of your EHS programs and initiatives, and planning for tomorrow. This 360-degree view is most efficiently managed using software, which empowers EHS managers to perform audits even in the challenging environment we're experiencing right now.

A proper EHS software solution can provide:

☑ A higher level of visibility into EHS efforts throughout the organization;

☑ A way to capture and view data related to incidents, observations, and inspections;

☑ Normalization of data for apples-to-apples comparisons across the enterprise; and

☑ The ability to schedule tasks and be alerted when deadlines are approaching or have passed.

An important aspect of cloud-based software is that it is accessible from virtually anywhere, allowing your EHS team to review compliance efforts and results remotely on multiple devices.

However, software is not without challenges. The lack of expertise among site staff, inconsistent processes across sites, and insufficient visibility into results are common issues. **This presents a need for employees and auditors to perform accurate and timely self-assessments—and a custom-made tool for the task.**

A Unique Platform for conducting self-assessment

Among commercially-available software solutions, **Dakota Auditor is uniquely designed to handle the challenges currently facing EHS professionals and their organizations**. By combining all of the elements of traditional EHS software mentioned above with an expertly curated regulatory library and audit protocols, the solution creates a system that is adaptable to multiple different compliance needs—including the ability to facilitate virtual EHS audits of site-lead self-assessments.

An audit can be customized to your organization's unique compliance obligations in several simple steps:

☑ Build a compliance profile. Determining what regulations affect you can be a complex matter. Dakota simplifies the process with a series of applicability questions that allow users to create an organizational or site profile—once your profile is built, you can audit against the profile and know that it will be in accordance with any applicable regulations.

☑ Complete checklists, document findings, and take action. By answering applicable checklist questions, EHS professionals and managers can determine where their programs are meeting compliance obligations—and also where they may be falling short. When red flags are identified, the findings can be tracked to closure using Dakota's Action Item management tools.

Benefits of Self-assessments

Reduced or more effective on-site auditing time

☑ Collect and review available information in advance of the audit (e.g., applicability/pre-audit questionnaire, documents/records)

☑ Potential to complete records review protocol remotely

Improved site compliance capabilities

☑ Improved information sharing between corporate and site staff

☑ Increased understanding of requirements by site staff

Improved cost effectiveness

☑ Activities are more scheduled

☑ SMEs participate for specific issues as needed

☑ Create your audits. Based on your facility's compliance profile and current regulatory requirements, you can build comprehensive or narrowly focused audits that will examine the most important aspects of your EHS programs.

☑ Generate reports and analyze results. Monitor and review the status of audits as well as generate reports for executive management using a variety of dashboards, filters, and data analysis tools.

By leveraging the appropriate technology tools, EHS managers can use virtual audit and self-assessment techniques to ensure they are doing all they can to strengthen and maintain their compliance programs—even without the benefit of corporate auditors or SMEs on site.

Key Takeaways

☑ Collect and review information in advance of the audit

☑ SMEs can be called in to participate/view evidence, especially with a less compressed schedule

☑ Technology can help promote a deeper, more detailed, pre-audit applicability assessment

☑ Mobile devices with audio-video applications can be used to conduct physical assessments and interviews

☑ Technology can bolster on-site team's understanding of requirements

Interested in learning more about remote auditing techniques and technology?

Dakota Software's Compliance-based EHS Management solutions empower companies to more effectively plan and execute EHS procedures and make measurable improvements to their overall operational performance.

Webinar

For more information on the various ways EHS Managers are conducting remote audits and self-assessments, watch the recording from our June 9th webinar, **Grounded! Anticipating the Future of EHS Auditing.**

Dakota Auditor

Auditor enables auditors to easily and effectively test and verify a site's compliance status. Auditor captures all relevant EHS regulations and allows auditors to leverage site-profiles, regulatory domains, and question tags to determine the scope of their audits.