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Challenges faced by quality managers working in organic certification agencies

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Intricacies of the subject

Organic certification agencies play an important role in maintaining the credibility, integrity, and reliability of organic production and certification systems. Within a certification agency, the quality manager has a critical responsibility for ensuring that the quality system is effectively implemented and that certification activities are conducted in accordance with applicable standards, procedures, accreditation requirements, and regulatory requirements. The responsibilities of a quality manager extend beyond maintaining documents and records. The position involves monitoring the effectiveness of the certification system, ensuring personnel competence, supporting accreditation assessments, monitoring certification activities, conducting or coordinating internal audits, handling complaints and appeals, following regulatory developments, and identifying risks that may affect the impartiality and integrity of certification. A quality manager may also face challenges when business, operational, or commercial priorities conflict with quality and compliance requirements. Certification agencies operate in a competitive environment and may have pressure to complete certification activities within specified timelines. However, certification decisions must remain based on objective evidence, applicable standards, established procedures, and impartiality. This article highlights the major responsibilities and challenges faced by quality managers working in organic certification agencies and proposes practical measures to strengthen the quality function, independence, and effectiveness of certification organisations.

Introduction

Organic certification depends on a systematic process involving application review, inspection, technical evaluation, certification decision-making, surveillance, documentation, and continual monitoring. The credibility of this system depends not only on the competence of inspectors and reviewers but also on the effectiveness of the organisation's quality management system. The quality manager plays an important role in ensuring that the certification agency operates according to its approved procedures and applicable requirements. The quality manager may review quality procedures, monitor internal audits, follow up on corrective actions, evaluate personnel competence, prepare for accreditation assessments, monitor complaints and appeals, and ensure the organisation communicates changes in standards and

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regulations. Quality management in an organic certification agency is particularly important because certification decisions can have significant consequences for operators, farmers, processors, traders, exporters, consumers, and the certification agency's reputation. A weakness in the quality system may therefore affect not only an individual certification file but also confidence in the certification system immediate access to records, discussions, meetings, and organisational information may be necessary for effective quality oversight. The quality manager should therefore be regarded as a key function within the certification system rather than simply as a person responsible for maintaining quality documents.

Regular office availability

Quality management involves more than documentation and electronic records. Regular office availability supports direct communication with personnel and management, timely resolution of quality issues, coordination of internal audits, monitoring of corrective actions, personnel training, and accreditation preparation. However, selected activities, such as document review, report preparation, and corrective-action monitoring, may be performed remotely where confidentiality, information security, and organizational requirements permit. Working arrangements should ensure that the Quality Manager can effectively fulfil the responsibilities of the position.

Overall responsibility

The quality manager is responsible for monitoring the effective implementation and continual improvement of the quality system. This includes certification procedures, personnel competence, internal audits, corrective actions, complaints and appeals, document control, management reviews, impartiality, accreditation requirements, and applicable organic standards. Procedures must be implemented in practice rather than maintained only as documents. Corrective actions should also be evaluated for effectiveness to prevent recurrence of identified problems.

Responsibilities that cannot be delegated

Routine activities may be delegated to competent quality executives or other personnel with clearly defined responsibilities. However, the quality manager must continue to monitor the overall effectiveness of the quality system. Tasks such as document compilation and evidence collection may be delegated, while evaluating significant quality weaknesses, reviewing corrective-action effectiveness, and ensuring accreditation readiness may require direct involvement. Delegation should improve efficiency without disconnecting the quality manager from quality-management activities.

Personnel competence and training

Personnel competence is essential for reliable certification. The quality manager should monitor training and competency requirements for inspectors, reviewers, technical personnel, and quality staff. Training should cover applicable organic standards, inspection and certification procedures, documentation, traceability, non-conformities, impartiality, complaints, appeals, and quality management. Attendance alone does not establish competence; appropriate evaluation through examinations, witnessed activities, work reviews, or other suitable methods may be necessary.

Accreditation and assessment readiness

Accreditation readiness should be maintained continuously rather than addressed only before an assessment. The quality manager should monitor previous assessment findings

corrective actions, internal audit results, management review records, personnel competency, certification files, complaints, appeals, and impartiality records. Both documented procedures and evidence of their effective implementation must be available. Continuous monitoring reduces the pressure associated with external assessments and supports consistent compliance.

Certification process monitoring

The quality manager should monitor whether certification activities follow approved procedures, including application processing, inspection, technical review, non-conformity handling, certification decisions, certificate issuance, and surveillance. Monitoring mechanisms should identify delays, incomplete records, inadequate evidence, inconsistent handling of non-conformities, and procedural deviations. Repeated problems should be investigated to determine whether they indicate systemic weaknesses requiring corrective action.

Internal audit and quality monitoring

Internal audits help evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the quality system. The quality manager should coordinate the audit programme, ensure auditor competence, monitor audit coverage, and follow up findings. Audits should examine actual practices rather than merely verify the availability of documents. Recurring findings should be analysed to identify root causes and determine whether training, procedural revisions, improved supervision, or other corrective measures are required.

Appeals, complaints and disputes

Complaints and appeals provide valuable information about certification performance and potential weaknesses. The quality manager should monitor their recording, investigation, evaluation, resolution, and follow-up according to documented procedures. Matters should be handled objectively, within applicable timelines, and without inappropriate commercial or personal influence. Where necessary, corrective actions should be implemented and their effectiveness evaluated. Proper analysis of complaints and appeals can support continual improvement.

Regulatory standard updates

Organic certification requirements may change as standards, accreditation criteria, and regulations are revised. The quality manager should monitor relevant updates and ensure that their implications are communicated and implemented. This may require revising procedures, forms, checklists, training materials, inspection requirements, and competency criteria. Circulating information alone is insufficient; applicable changes must be incorporated into actual certification activities.

Management decisions

A certification agency is also a business organization and management may need to make decisions concerning clients, timelines, staffing, workload, finances, and operational priorities. However, business decisions should not compromise the integrity of certification activities. For example, management may wish to complete a certification process quickly because of an important commercial deadline. The quality manager must ensure that the required technical and procedural steps are nevertheless completed. Similarly, an important client should not receive preferential treatment if doing so would conflict with applicable certification requirements. The quality manager should be able to communicate quality concerns to management in a professional manner and provide objective evidence supporting the concern. The purpose is not oppose management decisions but to

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ensure that business decisions are implemented within the boundaries of applicable quality and certification requirements.

Independence and impartiality

Independence and impartiality are essential for credible certification. The quality manager should be able to raise concerns regarding conflicts of interest, commercial pressure, preferential treatment, inappropriate influence, or attempts to overlook procedural deviations. Adequate authority and organizational support are necessary to ensure that concerns can be reported without fear of retaliation. Certification activities should be based on applicable requirements, documented procedures, objective evidence, and professional judgment.

Administrative responsibilities

Quality managers often handle internal audits, accreditation preparation, training, complaints, appeals, document control, regulatory updates, and certification monitoring. Excessive administrative work may reduce the time available for effective oversight. Workload planning should consider the number of certification schemes, certified operators, personnel, audit requirements, and the complexity of certification activities. Delegating routine administrative tasks to competent staff can improve efficiency while allowing the quality manager to focus on monitoring and continual improvement.

Flexible working

Digital systems enable certain quality activities, including document review, report preparation, record analysis, training preparation, and corrective-action monitoring, to be performed remotely. However, direct interaction may be necessary for confidential discussions, personnel coordination, meetings, and urgent quality issues. Flexible working arrangements should therefore be based on the nature of the activity and clearly defined requirements for availability, communication, confidentiality, information security, and office presence.

Recommendations

Organic certification agencies should strengthen their quality functions by:

- Clearly defining the quality manager's authority, responsibilities, and accountability.
- Providing adequate independence, resources, and management support.
- Maintaining regular office interaction where direct coordination is necessary.
- Delegating routine tasks only to competent personnel with defined responsibilities.
- Maintaining effective personnel training and competency evaluation.
- Conducting internal audits that assess both documentation and actual implementation.
- Monitoring certification processes, complaints, appeals, and corrective actions.
- Reviewing regulatory changes and maintaining continuous accreditation readiness.
- Ensuring that commercial considerations do not compromise impartiality or certification integrity.
- Establishing transparent criteria for office-based and remote working.
- Reviewing workload and providing adequate administrative support.
- Promoting continual improvement through audit findings, complaints, assessment observations, and other quality information

An effective quality manager strengthens the certification system through continuous monitoring, professional judgment, independent oversight, and coordination. The ultimate objective is to establish a quality

culture in which compliance, impartiality, accountability, and continual improvement are shared responsibilities across the organization.

Conclusion

The quality manager plays a critical role in implementing, monitoring, and continually improving an organic certification agency's quality system. Beyond maintaining documents and preparing for accreditation assessments, the role involves personnel competence, internal audits, certification process monitoring, complaints and appeals, regulatory updates, and corrective actions. While routine tasks may be delegated and selected activities performed remotely, the quality manager retains overall responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of the quality system. The position requires adequate authority, resources, independence, and management support to address risks to quality, compliance, impartiality, and certification integrity. Ultimately, an effective quality manager promotes accountability, transparency, consistency, and continual improvement, strengthening the credibility of the certification agency and the confidence of its stakeholders.

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