Quality and Accreditation Institute
Centre for Laboratory Accreditation

Change   Adapt   Improve

GUIDANCE ON REMOTE ASSESSMENTS

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CHANGE HISTORY

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This document provides guidance on planning, preparing, managing and performing remote assessments of Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs).

1.2 As Information and Communication Technology (ICT) becomes more advanced and sophisticated, there is an opportunity to use ICT to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of accreditation assessment activities, including remote assessment situations. When ICT is used to undertake accreditation assessment activities the integrity of, and confidence in, assessment results must be maintained.

1.3 Remote assessments can provide Accreditation Body (AB) additional assessment techniques to facilitate the assessment of CABs with the same or enhanced degree of effectiveness as compared with traditional on-site assessments. Furthermore, remote assessment techniques may permit the AB to witness and assess more locations and capabilities with approximately the same number of resources that it utilises for on-site assessments.

1.4 Examples of the use of ICT to facilitate remote assessments may include but are not limited to:

   a) meetings - utilising teleconference facilities, including audio, video, and data sharing;

   b) assessments of documents and records utilising remote access, either synchronously (in real-time) or asynchronously (when applicable);

   c) recording of information and evidence utilising pictures, video, or audio recordings; and

   d) Providing visual/audio access to remote or potentially hazardous locations.

1.5 The objectives for the application of ICT for remote assessment purposes are:

   a) to provide a methodology that is sufficiently flexible and non-prescriptive, which can be used to confirm conformance, assure competence, and promote confidence;

   b) to ensure that adequate controls are in place to avoid mishandling that could compromise the integrity of the accreditation assessment process, especially at times the on-site assessments are not practically feasible; and

   c) to support the principles of safety and sustainability.

1.6 Regulatory requirements, stakeholder schemes, normative documents, and conformity assessment standards may impose limitations on the use of ICT for assessments and may take precedence over this document.

2. Scope

This document provides guidance on the remote assessment using ICT for of all types of CABs.

3. **REFERENCES**

APAC TEC0-001: Guidance on Remote Assessments by Accreditation Bodies, Issue No. 1, 20 October 2020

4. **Objectives**

The objective of a remote assessment is to establish confidence in the CAB activities by direct observations carried out through an electronic medium. Remote assessments provide the opportunity for increased safety, better timing, the inclusion of CAB personnel that may not be easily accessible, and avoidance of travel delays and restrictions.

5. **Definitions**

5.1 Remote Assessment [Source: ISO/IEC 17011:2017 3.26, modified — the note of the original definition deleted and a new note is inserted to entry.]
Assessment of the physical location or virtual site of a conformity assessment body, using electronic means.

NOTE: Remote Assessment can be a combination of any of the following assessment techniques:

- File/records review
- Document review
- Review of performance in proficiency testing and other inter-laboratory comparisons
- Review of existing quality control
- Interviewing
- Remote witnessing

5.2 Information and Communication Technology (ICT): Technology for gathering, storing, retrieving, processing, analysing, and transmitting the information. It includes software and hardware such as Smartphone's, handheld devices, laptop computers, desktop computers, drones, video cameras, wearable technology, artificial intelligence, and others.

6. **Risks to Accreditation**

6.1 We should identify and document the risks and opportunities that may impact assessment effectiveness for each use of ICT, including the selection of the technologies, and how they are managed.

6.2 When ICT is proposed for the assessment activities, the application review should include a check that the CAB and the AB have the necessary secure and reliable infrastructure to support the use of the ICT proposed.

6.3 Considering the risks and opportunities identified in 6.1, the assessment plan should identify how ICT will be utilised and the extent to which ICT will be used for assessment purposes while maintaining the integrity of the assessment process.

6.4 When using ICT, assessors and other involved persons (e.g., technical experts) should have the competency and ability to understand and utilise the ICT employed to achieve the desired results of the assessment. The assessor should also be aware of the risks and opportunities of the ICT used and the impacts that they may have on the validity and objectivity of the information gathered.

6.5 Because of the potential risks associated with the ineffective use of ICT tools, the assessor(s) and CAB should test the effectiveness of the ICT tools before commencing the remote assessment.

7. Security and Confidentiality

7.1 The security and confidentiality of electronic or electronically transmitted information are particularly important when using ICT for assessment purposes. This includes data in storage, data in transit, and data in use.

7.2 The use of ICT for assessment purposes should be mutually agreed upon by the AB and CAB (including information security and data protection measures and the respective local regulations) before ICT is used for assessment and recording purposes. The respective jurisdictions'/regions' data protection and privacy laws must be strictly adhered to.

7.3 Any conflicting issue should be resolved before the commencement of the remote assessment process.

7.4 In the case of non-fulfilment of these measures or non-agreement of information security and data protection measures, the AB performing the assessment activities should consider other methods to conduct the assessment. Other methods may include reversion to a face-to-face on-site assessment.

8. Remote Assessment Considerations

8.1 We have procedures for conducting and managing remote assessments in whatever circumstances they are used. We have documented remote assessment as part of the accreditation scheme where appropriate, and in assessment programmes. Procedures include determining the feasibility of conducting a remote assessment and an assessment of risk.

8.2 Where remote assessments are used to replace an activity that is usually performed on-site, we will ensure that the applicable circumstances and limitations are clearly defined.

8.3 The use of remote assessments may be voluntary, by mutual agreement, or maybe initiated at the discretion of the AB to fulfil its accreditation needs (assessments, surveillance, investigations, verifications, etc.).

8.4 In general, the scope, planning, assessment process, and documentation of the assessment should follow the relevant clauses of ISO/IEC 17011, IAF/ILAC A2 and ISO 19011.

> NOTE   When the language of CAB is not the same as of the assessment team, the assessors may need more time for preparation, translation and review of records, including personnel files and assessment files.

8.5   Circumstances which could be considered in determining the use of a remote assessment include, but are not limited to:

a)   travel to a CAB or specific location is not reasonable/feasible;

b)   when a visit to a CAB or assessment location is not possible during crisis or in response to directions from government and regulators based on security, health, and safety measures;

c)   When there are unavoidable changes in scheduling for the assessor or the CAB (i.e., personal issues, change in business priorities, etc.);

d)   the number of sites is difficult for the AB to assess within its time frame;

e)   the CAB has a systematic implementation of its management system where records, data, etc. can be reviewed at any site irrespective of where the work is being performed;

f)   the assessment is for a minor extension to the scope of accreditation;

g)   the CAB has a proven track record of conformance at the location of the remote assessment;

h)   the risk level of the assessment is deemed low by the AB;

i)   an activity or activities planned for the on-site assessment could not be completed and extending the on-site assessment is not the best resolution;

j)   a follow-up assessment is required that cannot be conducted within suitable time frame;

k)   we have an assessor (or team of assessors) already familiar with the CABs management system and practices.

9.   Determining CAB Eligibility

9.1   QAI determines whether the CAB is a viable candidate for remote assessment. We have defined and document qualification criteria for determining when it is appropriate to perform an assessment remotely, such as:

a)   the extent of remote assessment whether it is partial or full;

b)   the criteria for the appropriate use of remote assessment;

c)   the eligibility of the CAB for remote assessment (i.e., the facility may be contractually obligated, or the scheme required to be assessed on-site);

d)   whether there is a conflict of interest with the parties being assessed remotely;

e)   whether the CAB permits and accommodates remote assessment activity (i.e., availability of records in electronic format or document reader);

f)   whether the CAB can provide a representative or interpreter that is capable of communicating in the same language as the assessor;

g)   whether the QAI has the capability to conduct the remote assessment in the chosen medium/platform of the remote assessment;

h) whether the CAB can share all necessary information to conduct the assessment via the electronic media;

i) Whether a list of activities to be covered by the remote assessment and the personnel involved is available.

10. Planning and Scheduling

10.1 If ICT is used for assessment purposes, it often contributes to the total assessment time, as additional planning may be necessary which may impact assessment duration. This can be balanced against removal of time spent on arranging the logistics associated with on-site assessments and travelling.

10.2 Before initiating a remote assessment, it is important to define and ensure:

a) the agenda for the planned remote assessment;

b) clear expectations for the pre-defined documented information (including records) that is to be made available prior to and during the remote assessment;

c) the desired scope of review;

d) the list of activities, areas, locations, items and personnel to be assessed and witnessed;

e) availability of the necessary CAB personnel;

f) consensus on the time zone among all parties involved in the assessment activity;

g) the duration and time frame for conducting the remote assessment (e.g., 4hr/day for 3 days);

h) The virtual assessment schedule shall be shared with the organisation by the assessment team in 15 days in advance of the assessment.

i) The organisation shall schedule a test assessment with QAI team via Zoom 10 days prior to the assessment.

NOTE **Timing should adhere to the rules/guidance defined for the duration. Permit time for breaks and individual review by the assessor. Assessment days should be calculated using prescribed methods, Scheme rules, etc. Additional time may be needed to facilitate remote assessments.**

j) appropriate remote access to the documents used by the client, including availability of scanning equipment to facilitate the presentation of paper copies;

k) there is sufficient time for training on how to access and navigate any document management software and controls/permissions;

l) A plan on how to review the information that cannot be shared remotely (e.g., due to confidentiality or access issues). QAI will define or express how this will be dealt with (e.g., follow-up, issuance of a non-conformance, etc.).

> **NOTE** **Personnel facilitating remote assessment may not be permitted to share certain confidential information or there may be an existing corporate policy on how certain mediums can be used to provide such information.**

10.3 The CAB should provide to QAI prior the conduct of remote assessment as needed:

a) Designated individual(s) that will facilitate, manage, and coordinate the arrangements of the assessment on behalf of the CAB. This should include translators, when necessary;

b) applicable files, projects, reports, self-assessment tool etc. that have been preselected by the assessor or AB staff;

c) CAB procedure(s) and documents for process (es) being assessed. Some information, such as project reports and client files, may need to be sent to the assessor for review before the remote assessment;

d) summary of key changes (e.g., personnel, organisation, equipment, accredited methods) in the CAB since last on-site assessment;

e) Other evidence deemed essential and necessary.

10.4 Platform and technology planning should include:

a) determining the ICT platform (e.g., Go-To-Meeting, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.) and hardware for hosting the assessment, to be agreed upon between the AB and the CAB;

b) enable security and/or profile access to the assessor(s) and others involved in the assessment;

c) testing ICT compatibility between the assessor(s) and the CAB before the assessment by performing a trial run;

d) encouraging and considering the use of webcams, cameras, etc. when physical evaluation of an event is desired or necessary;

e) Any recording of remote activities, including discussions that take place, should be agreed upon by both parties before the assessment. This includes arrangements for storage and disposal of recordings.

10.5 Scheduling requires the following to be carefully considered:

a) time zone acknowledgment and management to coordinate reasonable and mutually agreeable convening times, and taking into account working periods at the CAB (e.g., work shifts);

b) a trial meeting using the same ICT platforms agreed upon should be conducted to ensure the scheduled assessment will be performed as planned;

c) Remote assessment duration. Continued effectiveness of participants should be considered throughout the assessment. Smaller daily assessment sessions may be considered;

d) Proper security measures should be taken, when applicable, to protect confidential information. This includes ensuring secure physical locations to operate for both parties.

11. Performing an Effective Remote Assessment

11.1 Should an item not be able to be reviewed or complete determination not is able to be made, a record should be made.

11.2 The assessment should be facilitated in quiet and secure environments whenever possible to avoid interference and background noise (i.e., speakerphones) and ensure information security.

11.3 Choose the most effective types of ICT for the specific activity. Multiple types of ICT may be considered during the same assessment.

11.4 Consider the use of headphones or advanced microphones to assure clear communication.

11.5 Facilitation of the assessment should follow normal assessment plans and processes, including a CAB walk through to allow the assessor(s) to get a 'lay of the land'. Also, assessors should request the CAB to 'scan the room' at the beginning of each remote session to determine who is in the room.

11.6 QAI will halt the assessment if the ICT tools are found not to be suitable during the assessment. In such instances QAI at least attempt to use telephone or other means to continue the assessment if internet connection is not stable.

11.7 QAI can terminate the assessment due to an inability to maintain satisfactory connections or conditions during the scheduled time. This should be recorded in the assessment report.

11.8 Have participants always introduce who is speaking if multiple people are involved. Both parties should make their best effort to confirm what was heard, stated, and read throughout the assessment.

11.9 All remote assessments should be concluded with a summary, review of the day(s)'s events, issues of concern, clarification of issues, non-conformances, and expectations.

11.10 Both parties need to take appropriate measures to safeguard the confidentiality of data in any format.

11.11 QAI implements measures to monitor the performance of the assessor(s) and the effectiveness of the assessment. This may include feedback from the CAB and witnessing of the remote assessment by other AB personnel.

12. Technical Witnessing

12.1 Effective technical witnessing can be one of the most difficult parts of the remote assessment process. Preplanning and preparation for each area to be witnessed is done.

12.2 Access to stable high-speed internet and/or cell signals is critical to assure clear and effective audio and video.

12.3 Preplanning and testing of the chosen ICT should be performed for each witnessing activity at the location of witnessing. Dead spots or weak connectivity should be identified.

12.4 Video presentation skills of the CAB during technical witnessing are critical. This should be discussed in the planning phase. The CAB may need to set up a fixed camera location or consider a dedicated cameraperson to take the video and photos. CAB video/camera skills often improve over time and may result in increased assessment effectiveness and efficiency. Video and other imaging technologies can be facilitated through many device types' e.g. smart phones, electronic glasses etc.

12.5 Portability, connectivity, and battery life of the video device should be considered.

12.6 Live video streaming should be preferred. This provides real-time and interactive assessment and reduces risks to integrity that may be associated with pre-recorded video.

12.7 Pre-recorded CAB video demonstration may be considered. QAI or its Assessor clearly defines what is intended to be covered and what is expected to be recorded. QAI also consider any risks associated with the integrity of a pre-recorded video and implement measures to mitigate this risk.

12.8 Assessors should be able to direct the video imaging by the CAB of the witnessed activity to assure the effectiveness of the demonstration. Assessor proficiency to perform this activity should be considered.

13. Post Assessment Activities

13.1 Assessment reports and related records should indicate whether the assessment was conducted on-site or by remotely, the extent to which ICT has been used in carrying out assessment and the effectiveness of ICT in achieving the assessment objectives.

13.2 If virtual sites are included within the scope, the accreditation documentation (e.g., assessment report) should note that virtual sites are included, and the activities performed at the virtual sites should be identified.

13.3 The assessment report should include the details of the records reviewed and any findings. Both parties should make their best efforts to confirm what was heard, stated, and read throughout the assessment.

13.4 Assessment findings (Nonconformities, corrective actions, opportunities for improvement, etc.) should be drafted by assessment team members and provided to the CAB in writing promptly for review and acknowledgment. This is similar to those follows in normal course.

13.5 The CAB should respond to all assessment findings per the normal procedures.

13.6 QAI also considers its process for obtaining official signature or acknowledgment requirements for remote assessment documentation. Measures should be taken to assure the integrity of the final documentation.

13.7 Communication between the assessor(s) and the CAB for sending documents or clarification on issues and corrective action management should be pre-defined and communicated.

13.8 The assessor should confirm the deletion of any confidential documents, images, recordings, etc. per prior arrangements.

13.9 The closure of remote assessment nonconformities, review of assessment deliverables, and accreditation decision-making process (granting, renewal, extension, suspension, reducing, and withdrawal) should follow the same processes that are utilised for on-site assessments.

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