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International standards in environmental training - some difficulties with 'competency'

The IEMA offers a range of approved training courses through its training course providers, and is currently considering their expansion into other areas. The IEMA is one of the international bodies approving training courses, and thus one question for the IEMA is how does its practices compare with other similar bodies? At their best, UK training practices in general and IEMA's in particular have been described to me by influential figures in IAFⁱ and IATCAⁱⁱ as the best in the world. I fully support the IEMA scheme but believe there is a need to air some issues that undoubtedly exist. To be seen as an international 'benchmark' for excellence in training, the IEMA's system has to be above reproach. It is emphasised that the issues described are neither unique to the UK nor to UK training organisations; indeed there are examples of worse practices elsewhere.

Education: training or competency?

Several years ago I represented the UK on IATCA. It was a salutary experience. The committee began (optimistically) with a directive to develop a training and auditor registration scheme that was to be competency-based. Several years and many drafts later we have a result more or less identical to their quality management system which focuses on education, experience and witnessed audits. Something about re-inventing the wheel comes to mind...

During this process I was surprised by the lack of consultation with educational professionals. Is this arrogance or a blind spot? This is one area where the IEMA is trying to change matters, by involving the appropriate professionals.

In this article I examine the competency of training course providers, but first it is salutary to ask: why did the IATCA development process fail to deliver a true competency-based scheme? This is an important question – it was partly this failure that caused EARA(3) to withdraw from the IATCA process, so the reasons are worth reflecting on, within an international context.

First, competency-based education and training schemes are new and rely on a wide range of assessment methods - for confirmation, look at the specification documents for the UK NVQ schemes. Many countries are simply not ready in educational terms to understand and implement the concepts behind these types of schemes. Indeed, there can be problems with the phrase 'vocational training', for which there is no acceptable conceptual equivalent in some languages.

Secondly, competency specifications are very detailed. To obtain agreement within an international committee on these details is extremely difficult.

Thirdly, competency schemes demand many more resources from the supervisory body. If the IEMA were to introduce a full competency registration scheme it would stretch resources beyond the current limit.

As a result, we have an international scheme that is still training and experience-based. The IEMA scheme has improved on this to some degree with an interview for some grades. In chairing an IEMA interview panel, I can confirm that interviews can often determine whether the candidate's background has depth, and it gives conviction about their professional competence. However, it would be a further improvement to

interview all candidates down to Member/EMS Auditor level, even if this involved extra expense on the candidate's part.

Competence of training course providers

Although a competency-based training and assessment scheme eludes us, there is still the possibility of assessing training course providers on a competency basis. Essentially this consists of observing the course provider 'at work', and is a feature of many training course registration schemes worldwide.

However, there is no common methods for these assessments. Excel Partnership has been assessed by (amongst others) IRCA (UK) and RAB (USA) for QMS courses; and IEMA and JAB (Japan) for EMS courses. The assessment techniques of these organisations differ widely, as do the type of comments and advice given.

For example, IEMA focuses on course content and standard of delivery, whilst JAB focuses on administrative procedures and the qualifications of course leaders. During four annual assessments by one approval body (not IEMA!) we have only had one technical comment offered on the course (viz: Nick Lister is very poor at timekeeping - to which I plead guilty!).

By contrast there were many questions on our administrative procedures – for example how do we ensure our course marking is the same for in-house courses as for public ones? This question seemed strange, but not to the assessment body who believed we might mark in-house courses more leniently to “please the client”. Clearly this is happening with some course providers, or the approval body would not have asked the question.

Experience of training course providers

Then there is the question of courses being delivered by course leaders and organisations who have no direct experience in the sector the course participants come from. Can educational establishments relate to the problems of course participants from industry when discussing (commercial) management systems? Clearly it will depend on the educational establishment, the course leader and his or her past experiences – should the IEMA assess these issues, and not just the technical ability to deliver a clear training course? In many countries there is a pre-disposition for educational establishments (and lecturers with no industrial experience) to deliver environmental auditor training theory. This helps to explain why such training is stereotyped and produces 'standard checklist' type auditors. In such approaches the concept of competency is an alien one.

Course surveillance and number of courses?

It seems reasonable to suppose that if a course provider only delivers one or two courses per year, there is a higher probability of fewer resources being available to support the course delivery; for example, the ability to keep up-to-date with latest developments and to update technical information.

Note the caveat 'higher probability' – such a lack of resources is not axiomatic if the number of courses delivered is small, just more probable. The quality of course content and delivery is only partly dependent on resources, not wholly.

However, which UK (or other) course providers can give the latest picture on developments in ISO 19011, or give a comparison of the auditing techniques required for ISO 14011, 9001/2000, OHSAS 18001 and the ILO Guidelines? These are important issues to course participants who intend to implement combined systems, even if they come on an ISO 14001 auditing course. Is this a topic for the IEMA to evaluate in their training scheme?

Competency means different things to different people

Clearly differences in the meaning of 'competency' are rooted in different cultural and educational backgrounds. A teach-by-instruction educational system seems to lead to a course provider assessment that focuses on administrative practices (checklists formats, forms correctly completed etc). The individuals

doing these assessments are not necessarily proficient in evaluating the actual professional delivery competence of the individual organization, which (to the author's way of thinking) is at the heart of training and auditor assessment. A teach-by-investigation system leads to a variety of possible assessments, from a detailed examination of administrative practices to a review of teaching excellence. Fortunately, the IEMA system has the latter firmly in its sights.

Note

This article was published in 'the environmentalist' in January 2001. At the time the author was a member of the IEMA's training committee and a UK representative on TC 207/SC1 (for ISO 14001/14004 standards). He has also provided audit training in about 25 countries during the last ten years.

ⁱ IAF is the International Accreditation Forum.

ⁱⁱ IATCA is the International Auditor Training and Certification Association.