**Podcast Transcript: Safety Audits**

**Slide 1**: **Importance of a Safety Audit Program**

Hello, I’m Pat Hlavka, Safety Coordinator for the Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology at Mayo Clinic. In this segment I will introduce you to the importance of a safety audit program.

**Slide 2**: **Oh no…**

How would your staff respond if your Laboratory Director said that they needed to perform a safety audit? These are just a few of the examples of what I’ve heard over the years. I’ve found that staff resistance is often due to these factors: they don’t understand “WHY” safety audits are important, “WHAT” is being assessed, or they don’t know “HOW” to complete them. I am going to share some tips on how you can address these issues.

**Slide 3**: **Importance of safety audits**

An effective safety audit program can yield positive results. Not only can you measure and improve compliance with legal, accrediting and organizational safety requirements, safety audits are one method to identify and correct safety hazards. Employee awareness, morale and ownership of the safety program are a result of involving them in the safety audit process. Financial rewards can occur when employee injuries are reduced, equipment is better maintained, and resources are not lost because of unsafe conditions.

**Slide 4: Getting started**

Now that you understand why safety audits are valuable, let’s focus on how to design, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of your safety audit program. It all starts with regulatory and accreditation agencies. You need to know which agencies are overseeing your operations and what you safety requirements are. You can review inspection checklists from specific agencies, visit their websites, consult with regulatory colleagues within your organization and contact your local and state agencies to find which safety requirements apply to your laboratory.

Don’t forget about your own safety program and you facility’s requirements when determining the items that will be assessed in your safety audit program. Be sure to discuss your plans with the safety committee and the laboratory director to ensure your safety audit program is meeting the needs of your organization. An effective safety audit program will help prepare your organization for inspections by external agencies, but it’s not a replacement for these external inspections.

**Slide 5**: **Establish goals/outcomes**

The safety audit process begins with defining several key components. Establish the objectives and goals you plan to accomplish. Define the scope on which areas will be audited, and the frequency of how often will the audits be performed – such as annually or biennially, etc.

Be sure to determine who will be performing the audits. It may be many auditors who represent a wide range of job activities and have volunteered to help with the safety audits or it could be a specific set of individuals whose job it is to perform only safety audits.

By defining the requirements, the resulting measurements and metrics will provide indication of compliance. Ensure that the measurements and metrics are clear and that they are communicated to all stakeholders, the sponsor and oversight group.

**Slide 6**: **Consider audit methods**

There are many different methods for structuring the safety audit. A comprehensive audit includes an assessment of all components of the safety program such as a physical inspection of the lab area, review of safety-related documents, staff training records, and staff interviews regarding their knowledge of the safety program. This can be a time-consuming process but gives a great assessment of the overall safety program.

Focused safety audits and document/record reviews involve the assessment of a specific component of the safety program. These audits can be done more quickly than a comprehensive audit and provide specific information on these targeted safety items. Fewer resources are usually needed and there is less time actually spent auditing but this only provides a limited assessment of the safety program. An example of this type of audit is assessing compliance with chemical labeling requirements.

Self-assessments can allow the lab to review their own processes and operations to determine how they comply with the established requirements. This is a great way to promote awareness of the safety program components and ownership by the labs, management and the staff.

**Slide 7: Develop resources**

Develop a tool, checklist, or process that can be used to document the items that will be assessed and whether or not compliance is observed. It should also include a way to record the comments and observations. The audit tool and associated materials need to be available to all – including the auditors and those being inspected – then no one is surprised and everyone knows what is expected. Determine if the tool needs to be paper or electronic, or maybe a combination of both. It needs to be readily available and portable. The most important thing to keep in mind is that the tool you are using needs to work for you and your organization. If you have tried a tool or process and it isn’t working well then it’s time to find something that fits your needs.

Also be sure to document your safety audit process. This allows everyone to understand where, when, and how the audits will be done, who is managing the process and how the measurements and metrics will be managed. Listing the references and resources for the items that are being assessed allows others to read the requirements and obtain additional information. This also supports the rationale for why certain requirements are included in the audit. Remember – if it isn’t documented, it wasn’t done.

Training the safety audit teams is critical to ensuring that the auditors understand what is expected, what to look for, and how to document the findings. Consider providing photos or examples of previous safety audit findings to help show them what to look for. Training ensures a consistent approach to all of the audits.

**Slide 8**: **Perform audit/assessment**

Conduct the audit in a manner that is not punitive or harassing. The goal is that those being inspected know how to meet the requirements. So, be fair, understand the requirements, and be consistent for each area that is being inspected.

Include deficiencies that were identified in previous audits to make sure that things were fixed. When new safety processes or requirements are implemented by the lab, make sure that they are included in the safety audit assessments.

Document all findings including deficiencies, recommendations, and best practices. Your safety audit process should also include a method for ensuring that deficiencies identified during the audit are tracked to closure.

**Slide 9**: **Document audit findings/closure**

Be sure to keep a record of the findings and observations from the safety audit. These findings will be used to assess the safety program at the time of the inspection and will also be a benchmark to assess future audits and track program improvements. Clear and specific documentation of findings and recommendations will be helpful to management so that they know what needs to be fixed. Also consider the method that will be used to make sure that the deficiencies and findings were indeed corrected. Documented deficiencies should not go uncorrected, so make sure that they have been fixed. The correction of deficiencies can be verified during the next round of safety audits or you can do some spot checks to follow-up on things shortly after the audit.

**Slide 10**: **Metrics**

Now let’s take a look at metrics. The next few slides will show some examples of how the information collected from the safety audits can be compiled and presented to your organization. This graph is an example of the top five deficiencies found from Dr. Smith’s laboratory. Now Dr. Smith knows where she needs to focus resources to fix the issues.

**Slide 11**: **Metrics**

Be sure to find the positive things – such as best practices that can be shared with others. Great housekeeping, thorough emergency preparedness plans, and knowledgeable staff show that there are many positive activities. Finding the good things puts everyone in a much more accepting mind set.

**Slide 12: Metrics: Compare data over time**

This chart is an example of some of the safety audit information collected for three years. Comparing the data in this manner provides a quick snapshot of the audit information. In this example, the number of audits has increased during the three years, however, the total findings have decreased which indicates a steady, overall improvement in compliance with the organization’s safety requirements.

**Slide 13**: **Communicate - before, during and after**

By establishing a communication plan for the safety audits, you are ensuring that the stakeholders such as leadership, supervisors, lab staff and audit teams are informed of all aspects of the safety audit program. Be sure to let the stakeholders know the results of the safety audits. Provide the scope and the compliance with the defined requirements. Your safety committee can help with making sure everyone is aware of frequent deficiencies and act as a resource for making changes and providing support.

Finally, don’t forget to include other groups and organizations in communications. These may include quality management, facilities, infection prevention and control, human resources, information management, and many others.

Provide an outline for the next steps in the safety audit program. Identify aspects of the program that went well and where there are opportunities for improvement; share what has been learned.

**Slide 14: How to get staff involved**

Finally, let’s take a look at how to get others involved – you don’t have to do it alone! Participating in the safety audit program is a great learning opportunity because it gives others the chance to see the “Why”, “What”, and “How” of the process. They will have a greater understanding of the regulations and the requirements and also how their lab complies. Delegate and share the tasks along the way so that others get to be part of the process.

Be sure to ask for feedback from the areas that have been audited and also from the inspectors because they may have great ideas on how the process can be improved for the next time. Always be open to input on how things can be improved. Capture the lessons learned and adjust the process if necessary.

And finally, be sure to thank those involved for their time and commitment to improving the safety process! Everyone wants to help if they know that they are making a difference.

**Slide 15**: **Resources to consider**

By involving others both internal and external to your organization you will get a variety of expertise.

Include your laboratory safety committee members, laboratory staff, supervisors, lab directors and even other experts from Facilities, Security, Quality, and Information Management.

There may be some external resources such as colleagues in other laboratories and local businesses you could consider working with to get ideas and benchmark with their safety audit programs. Local universities and technical schools may have educational programs where students could be involved in your safety audit process and gain academic credit and learn about laboratory safety.

**Slide 16**: **Thank you for listening**

Safety audits can help measure your organization’s compliance with regulations and requirements and can be a great learning opportunity for all involved. Thank you for your time today. Good luck with your safety audits and I wish you well on your safety journey.

**End podcast**