CLIENT GUIDE

# WHAT TO EXPECT

## AT YOUR ISO CERTIFICATION AUDIT

A practical guide to the audit process, your auditor's role, findings and certification decisions.

| INDEPENDENT | COMPETENT | TRANSPARENT |
|---|---|---|
| Evidence-based assessment | Sector-aware audit teams | Clear process and findings |

**Certification should create confidence - not confusion.**
This guide explains what happens before, during and after a certification audit, what evidence an auditor may request, what an auditor may not do, and how nonconformities are handled.

**STRATLANE** CERTIFICATION

Professional certification. Modern audit technology. Independent decisions.

# What certification actually means

Certification is an independent assessment of whether your management system conforms to the requirements of the applicable standard and your own defined arrangements. It is not a certification of individual employees, products or services unless the certification scheme explicitly says so.

**The key principle**
Your organization owns and operates the management system. Stratlane evaluates it independently. The audit is based on objective evidence, sampling and applicable certification requirements.

## Why organizations choose certification

- Customer and supply-chain requirements, including tender or contractual expectations.
- Independent assurance that a management system is implemented and maintained.
- Market access and a credible way to demonstrate structured management practices.
- A defined external audit cycle that supports discipline, accountability and continual improvement.

## What a certificate does - and does not - say

| A certificate supports confidence that… | A certificate does not mean that… |
|---|---|
| a defined management system has been independently audited against specified requirements. | every transaction, record, location or activity was examined. |
| the organization has demonstrated conformity within the certified scope. | the certification body guarantees the organization’s products or services. |
| the organization remains subject to surveillance and recertification activities. | the organization can stop maintaining or improving its management system. |

# A clear process from application to certificate

The exact sequence can vary by standard, organization and certification status. A typical initial certification follows the steps below.

**1** **Application & review**
You provide key information about your organization, scope, sites, headcount, activities and management system.

**2** **Audit time & proposal**
The certification body determines the required audit time and prepares the certification proposal.

**3** **Stage 1 audit**
Readiness, scope, key documentation, internal audit and management review are evaluated before Stage 2.

**4** **Stage 2 audit**
The audit team evaluates implementation and effectiveness through interviews, records, observation and sampling.

**5** **Corrective action**
Where nonconformities are raised, you analyse causes and provide corrections and corrective actions as required.

**6** **Independent review**
The audit report and recommendation are reviewed separately from the audit team before a certification decision is made.

**7** **Certificate & surveillance**
After a positive decision, certification is issued and maintained through planned surveillance and recertification audits.

# What your auditor will look for

An audit is not a document inspection alone. The auditor is looking for a consistent story: what your system says should happen, what people understand, what actually happens, and what the records show.

**Think in four evidence streams**
DOCUMENTS • INTERVIEWS • RECORDS • OBSERVATION
A strong management system normally tells the same story across all four.

## Typical audit questions

- What are the objectives of this process and how do you know whether they are achieved?
- Which risks, opportunities and applicable requirements affect this activity?
- Who is responsible, and how is competence established?
- Can you show a recent example or record that demonstrates the process in operation?
- What happens when something goes wrong?
- How are changes, incidents, complaints, nonconformities or corrective actions followed up?
- How does top management evaluate performance and drive improvement?

## Sampling is normal

Certification audits use sampling. The auditor selects representative people, records, processes, locations or controls. A sample is not intended to inspect every item; it is used to obtain sufficient audit evidence for a justified conclusion.

**Best way to respond**
Answer the question that was asked. Be factual. Show the normal way you work. If you do not know an answer, say so and help the auditor find the right person or record. There is no benefit in guessing.

# What the auditor can - and cannot - do

| THE AUDITOR CAN | THE AUDITOR CANNOT |
|---|---|
| Ask questions and interview relevant personnel. | Design, implement or operate your management system for you. |
| Review documents and records relevant to the audit scope. | Tell you exactly which solution to implement in order to pass. |
| Observe activities and sample evidence. | Act as your consultant during the certification audit. |
| Raise a nonconformity where objective evidence shows a requirement has not been fulfilled. | Raise a nonconformity simply because the auditor personally prefers a different approach. |
| Explain the requirement, the evidence observed and the basis of a finding. | Guarantee certification before the independent certification decision is completed. |
| Identify opportunities or observations where permitted by the certification body's procedures, without prescribing a solution. | Ignore conflicts of interest, confidentiality duties or impartiality requirements. |

### Why this boundary matters

A credible certificate depends on independence. The same certification body must not certify a management system by first designing it and then judging its own work. Auditor impartiality protects the value of your certificate.

# If the auditor identifies a nonconformity

A nonconformity is not a personal criticism. It is a documented conclusion that a specified requirement has not been fulfilled, supported by objective evidence.

**Requirement**
What requirement applies? This may come from the ISO standard, scheme rules, legislation where relevant, or your own management system requirements.

**Objective evidence**
What did the auditor observe, review or verify?

**Gap**
How does the evidence demonstrate that the requirement was not fulfilled?

## Major and minor nonconformities

Certification schemes commonly distinguish between major and minor nonconformities. Classification depends on the nature, extent and systemic significance of the failure and on the applicable certification rules. Both require action; the effect on certification and the verification method can differ.

## Your response should normally address

- Correction: what was done about the specific issue found?
- Cause analysis: why did the issue occur?
- Corrective action: what will prevent recurrence?
- Evidence: what demonstrates that the actions were implemented and, where required, effective?

# How to make the audit efficient

Good preparation is not about creating a performance for the auditor. It is about making normal evidence easy to access and ensuring the right people are available.

| BEFORE | DURING | AFTER |
|---|---|---|
| Confirm scope, sites, agenda and key contacts. | Provide timely access to people, records and systems. | Review findings and deadlines promptly. |
| Ensure internal audit and management review are completed where required. | Use real records rather than specially created audit evidence. | Assign owners for corrective actions. |
| Check that current controlled documents and key records are accessible. | Ask for clarification if a question or finding is unclear. | Submit evidence in the agreed format. |
| Brief process owners on the purpose of certification - not scripted answers. | Keep the audit team informed of operational constraints. | Use findings to strengthen the management system. |

### A practical rule

Do not hide problems. Mature management systems identify issues, assess them and act on them. Evidence that your organization detects and corrects problems can be more credible than pretending that nothing ever goes wrong.

07 WHY STRATLANE

# Confidence in the certification process

The credibility of a certificate depends not only on the standard named on it, but also on the competence, impartiality, consistency and governance of the certification process.

### Accredited certification body
Stratlane states that it provides accredited certification services and issues certificates across multiple jurisdictions. Accreditation and certification availability remain subject to the applicable accredited scope and location.

### Professional audit network
Stratlane states that its auditors operate across 29+ countries, supporting international organizations with local and sector-relevant audit capability.

### Independent certification decision
The audit team gathers evidence and makes a recommendation. The certification decision is reviewed separately, adding an important layer of control between the audit and certificate issuance.

### Technology-supported auditing
Stratlane uses modern audit technology, including AI-assisted tools, to support audit consistency and evidence handling while professional auditors remain responsible for audit judgments.

### Verifiable certification
Stratlane provides a certificate database so customers and interested parties can check certificate validity and scope.

**Independent evidence. Competent auditors. Controlled decisions.**

# Your audit-day checklist

- ✓ **Audit plan understood —** Key process owners know when they are expected and what area is being audited.
- ✓ **Evidence accessible —** Current policies, procedures, records, dashboards and systems can be demonstrated without unnecessary delay.
- ✓ **Top management available —** Leadership can explain objectives, context, performance, risks and management review outcomes.
- ✓ **People answer naturally —** Employees explain how work is actually performed and know where to find the information they need.
- ✓ **Issues are transparent —** Known problems, incidents and corrective actions can be shown with evidence of follow-up.
- ✓ **No consulting expected —** The audit team can clarify requirements and findings, but it cannot design your solution.
- ✓ **Findings understood —** Before the closing meeting ends, you understand the requirement, evidence and next steps for each nonconformity.

# A certification audit should be rigorous, fair and understandable

The purpose of certification is not to catch people out. It is to establish, through an independent and evidence-based process, whether the management system meets the specified requirements within the certification scope.

A well-run audit gives your organization a clear view of conformity, identifies substantiated gaps where requirements are not met, and supports confidence among customers and other interested parties in the certification outcome.

> **Stratlane's commitment**
> We aim to make the certification process transparent and professionally controlled: clear planning, competent auditors, evidence-based findings, impartiality safeguards and an independent certification decision.

## Important

This client guide is explanatory and does not replace the applicable ISO standard, accreditation requirements, certification scheme rules, Stratlane contractual documents or audit-specific communications. Requirements and certification arrangements may vary by standard, accredited scope, organization and jurisdiction.

**STRATLANE CERTIFICATION**

Professional certification services for modern organizations

stratlane.com