



**Maren Gamble:**

Assessment, inspection, audit. What's the difference? And does it really matter? If you've ever been confused about which one to use or caught yourself using them interchangeably, you're definitely not alone. These terms get thrown around a lot in the workplace, often blending into one big safety blur. But here's the thing, each one plays a distinct role. Mix them up and you could miss serious hazards, waste time repeating tasks, or worse.

In this episode, we're breaking it all down. We'll explain the differences, walk through real-world scenarios and help you figure out exactly when to use what, so you can make your safety activities more effective, not more complicated.

**Announcer**

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

**Maren Gamble:**

Welcome to the IHSA Safety Podcast. I'm your host, Maren Gamble. Joining me this time is Michael Falls, Health and Safety Management Systems Consultant with IHSA in the COR® department.

Mike, let's get right into it. What's the key difference between an assessment and inspection and an audit, and why does that difference matter in workplace safety?

**Michael Falls:**

You know, Maren, that's a great question. Understanding the difference between assessments, inspections, audits, these are essential to workplace safety. These play unique roles in maintaining a safe compliant environment. I think the best thing to do is, let's highlight some definitions, and I think that'll help us with understanding the key differences between them.

**Maren Gamble:**

Sounds great.

**Michael Falls:**

So first of all, let's talk about assessment. So assessments, we're typically looking at a systematic evaluation. We use these to identify hazards and risks associated with specific tasks, either processes, environments. In most cases, that's what they're used for. In COR®, we use them specifically for hazard and risk assessments, and we do have a specific separate and distinct definition for each of these that I would think, if you're looking at COR®, it's something you should really look into. And this may be something that we could talk about further as well. Then we talk about inspections.

So we think about inspections, we're talking about a routine check of the workplace. So we're looking at things like the equipment, the processes, looking to identify those hazards, unsafe conditions, any non-compliance that may be happening in the workplace. And then finally, for audits, again, there's another sort of systematic but independent review of documentation, then looking at how well does that documentation work against what we're actually seeing in the field. And we're just trying to determine, is the organization or is the process meeting the intent of what we call established criteria?

So now that we define them, let's talk about the differences between them. So we typically will use assessments to help us identify and evaluate different hazards in the workplace, the risk associated with those hazards, and then we use that information and hopefully select the appropriate control measures. While inspections, they're a little bit different. We're looking at taking a view of what's happening. We're watching the processes, we're watching the work being done. We're looking to catch and correct any of those uncontrolled hazards and non-compliance, things like that. We're trying to catch them before they can lead to incidents.

Then finally, audits. Audits has given us a broader view. They help us with ensuring accountability, legal compliance, and they really support continuous improvement of our systems.

**Maren Gamble:**

Awesome, Mike. Thank you for introducing those concepts and those differences for us. I wonder if at this point you could help us bring those concepts to life a little bit more by walking us through a real world example of each of them: assessment, inspection, and audit.

**Michael Falls:**

Something that we should really look at, and you probably use the example of working at heights just because it is still one of the leading causes of workplace fatalities in Ontario. Even though we have legislation and we have all these things surrounding it, we need these other things to help us sort of hold ourselves accountable and make sure that we can figure this out. So let's use that as the example.

Assessments, so there's a couple ways we can look at this. Assessments are going to help us when we're planning to work. We're looking at, "Okay, let's identify what hazards are related to working at heights. Let's talk about the types of risks that we would see." So for example, we're identifying hazards, looking at things like, you can fall from heights, you can drop or have objects fall while work is being performed. If there's fall protection equipment, the personal protective equipment being used, is it being used properly or is it being used improperly?

So we're trying to identify those things and then attach, or not even attach, I guess evaluate the risk associated with those through this assessment. Again, we're trying to use this information to help us best identify what type of controls we should be implementing based on that assessment. To really instill that information, we're going to hopefully have that information communicated to the workplace parties, make sure they understand what the hazards are, what are the risks, and what are the best ways to protect themselves while they're performing the task?

**Maren Gamble:**

Awesome. So in theory, if I was out on a construction site and I knew that we were going to be performing some work at heights next Wednesday, I might sit down and start to perform an assessment to determine what I need to be prepared for and communicate by next Wednesday.

**Michael Falls:**

You know what? Yeah, there's a couple of ways we can do that. So you can do that, there's nothing wrong with that: preparation, taking away what you know currently now and adding that information in. Really we should involve a second layer is so right before the work starts, we want to confirm that that original assessment is still good, and now we're taking in specific site information that we maybe didn't have the first time we did it.

So typically when we look at assessments, for COR®, we look at it in three levels. We look at it as an overall sort of corporate document, a site planning document, and then a daily document as well. So just kind of based on what you're saying there, if we built a site plan or even our corporate document was looking at, "Hey, what do we know about the work we do and potential falls," great, we covered that. But then we can take it to that next level. Now we're adding in that site information because not every site has the same hazards and risks associated with it. Sometimes things will change. In not a lot of cases, they do remain the same, but again, we want to make sure that we're getting the most up-to-date information and we're applying that to the assessment.

**Maren Gamble:**

All right, sounds fair.

**Michael Falls:**

Okay, so let's talk inspections.

So now that we've done our assessment and the work is plugging away, there's a couple of things we need to think about with inspections. So first thing we look at is pre-use inspections. These are things that we would do before starting the work. So we're checking out things like, "Hey, is the PPE we're going to use, is it a good condition? Is it safe to use? How about the equipment?" If it's a piece of equipment, let's say we're using a ladder to climb to the roof that we're going to now work on, "Has that been inspected? Is it in good condition? Is it safe to use that?"

So we want to start with those types of inspections. Make sure that, again, we're putting ourselves in the best possible position. Then as the work's progressing, we look at other things too, like the site inspection. So here now, instead of looking at the condition of it, we're monitoring for things like compliance or adherence. Are we wearing the PPE that we just discussed in our assessment? Are we following the process as we discussed in our assessment, making sure that we're making the workplace safe as possible, but then we're doing those follow-up checks to make sure that, "Hey, are we doing things that we said we're going to do."

**Maren Gamble:**

Perfect. And so again, if I was planning my working at heights activities for next Wednesday, I guess both of these inspections are things that I would expect to be carrying out on Wednesday when the work's happening.

**Michael Falls:**

Yeah, I mean, this pre-inspection, definitely you want to do that before you start. There's so many variables in here too that we could go on forever with just talking inspections, like inspecting the site before we even look at doing things and then inspecting the work. But yeah, definitely we want to look at starting these before we start work and then continue to use both as the work progresses. If I take my harness off for the day, re-inspect it, before I go up the ladder again, just have a quick look to make sure nothing's changed, et cetera.

**Maren Gamble:**

Fair enough. So where does an audit come in then?

**Michael Falls:**

So the audit itself is now taking a look at that system as a whole, as that process as a whole from start to finish. So it takes a little bit of a, I'll say it's a further back view, and it's trying to just take in, "Okay, what do we do from today until next Wednesday? Did we do the right thing?"

So we're really looking at verifying that things like our procedures were followed. So we had a specific procedure. So for working at heights, have we done our assessments, and did our assessments account for the things that we knew about before we started the work? Did we find anything new while we're doing the work? Were these things documented and processed the way that we expect them to be? As far as things like checking out inspections as well as, "Hey, are we using the forms that we said we're going to use? Are they being completely filled in? They're not being sort of checkboxed and kind of thrown to the side that they're actually being filled out and being followed as we go through."

We might even look at things like, for us, we look at things like training. Do the people using the equipment, were they trained in working at heights? Were they trained how to do inspections? Are they following those processes again that we're looking for them to follow?

**Maren Gamble:**

Thanks, Mike. That's awesome. I think that was really helpful to help me understand better some of the specifics with what you went through there. But I guess my next question for you would be, are these nice-to-haves or need-to-haves? So are these processes tied to legal compliance?

**Michael Falls:**

Yeah, sure. Yeah, let's talk about it. So let's start with assessments again. In legislation, there's no real, I'll call it, direct tie to a specific section, in the sense that it says that you have to do assessments. But there's those duties for supervisors and employers where they have a requirement to acquaint a work with known hazards, and then that carries through to the worker themselves. They actually have the

right to know these hazards. It's one of our three rights, our basic rights: right to know, right to participate, and right to refuse. What our right to know is about those hazards.

So assessments are a way of fulfilling that sort of legal requirement, but it's not known as, "Hey, this is specifically to assessments, it's about that general duty of making sure that we identify the hazards and that those hazards are communicated.

**Maren Gamble:**

That makes a lot of sense.

**Michael Falls:**

Now, inspections are a different story. There is a number of sections within both the act and the supplementary regulations that actually lay out what type of inspection must be done, when that inspection must be completed, how often the frequency, and then also it lays out by who. So it gives us very specific information on what inspection, timing of that inspection, and who within the workplace should be completing those inspections. So there's a lot of legislation tied to inspections.

**Maren Gamble:**

Awesome. So Mike, I guess I'm wondering at this point, if I'm going to implement assessments, inspections, and audits in my workplace, I'm interested in knowing what are the most common mistakes that organizations make in each of these processes and how can they be avoided?

**Michael Falls:**

Yeah, for sure. The most common mistake that we see is the use of the terms. So assessment, inspection, and audit, and in everyday conversation, just having regular conversations like we're having right now, those terms, they have meaning, but they can sometimes be used interchangeably and it's not a big deal. When it comes to health and safety, they have very specific definitions as we already discussed in the beginning, and they serve very different purposes. So that interchanging is not ideal.

**Maren Gamble:**

Fair enough.

Actually, Mike, I have a confession to make on this front if I can. When I delivered my first sort of internal audit that I ever did when I was working as a health and safety manager, I definitely made this mistake. When I was reading the words about hazard assessments and assessments, thinking that my site inspection is assessing what's out there in terms of how I would use that word more commonly. And for that section, I submitted all of my general site inspections and I got some very kind but direct feedback back from the process letting me know that there was a specific difference between those two. So this is definitely something that I myself have fallen into the pitfalls of in the past.

**Michael Falls:**

Yeah, no, definitely. I think everybody has. Just based on, like I said, until you get into health and safety and start to learn about specific terms, and I'm going to say this goes back to legislation. So we got to always make sure that when we're looking at definitions, we're looking at, where's the definition coming from? Because your definition, my definition don't mean anything compared to, let's say, the legal definition, or in our case, let's say talk about COR®, we have specific definitions for a reason. We want to make sure that the person that's working through that process understands that this term means this, so that when you're working through your processes, it's clear as to what is it that we're looking for, what are the responses, or in this case, in your example, how are you going to prove or validate your process?

Well, if you're misreading or confusing those terms, that can lead to that inappropriate documents being submitted, not meeting the content, or heaven forbid, the ministry's on your job site and you're misreading something and they're now telling you, "Nope, you're wrong. Here's your fine or ticket."

**Maren Gamble:**

Well, exactly, and hopefully after listening to this podcast, there'll be fewer mistakes being made in that front.

When it comes to these items: the assessments, the inspections, the audits, how can frontline workers contribute meaningfully to the assessments, inspections, and audits? Why is their input critical?

**Michael Falls:**

Yeah, that's another good question. For me, I think all parties have to engage with purpose, and they got to take the processes seriously. If we look at this, I'm going to reverse engineer this a little bit, and I'll finish with the frontline workers, but this really starts from the top and has to work its way down. So employers are holding the most responsibility because they're the ones that have to develop, implement, and monitor these processes.

So they got to come up with, what types of assessments are we doing? Are we doing the right inspections? Do we have documents for these things? Do we want to include audits into our processes? The key here is they want to put these things together and then sort of communicate that information out. But then when that information comes back to them, it's super important for them to make sure that they listen to that feedback, that they're engaging these people and taking that information into consideration and using that for continuous improvement. That's going to help them build a culture.

And then so the supervisor is going to then be the next step. So they've taken all that information that the employers take in, and they're not going to lead and coordinate these processes. They're the ones that are going to be responsible for making sure that the workers are properly informed, they're properly trained, assessments have been completed, they're doing inspections. If it's a workplace inspection that should be done by a worker, making sure they're performing those as well. That falls back to the employer. They're overseeing daily operations. So they're really trying to take that information that the employer created, and they're that go between them to make sure things are functioning the way that they should.

And then last, we have probably the most important frontline group, which is the workers, because these are the people that are going to actively participate in, these are the people that have to make sure that they're following all these processes, things like that. But again, we also talked about this before. There's a lot of legal requirements to this, and we keep going back to their rights: the right to know, right to participate, and the right to refuse. So this is an opportunity where we can talk more about their participation and how that participation can help, not only grow the culture, but improve health and safety within their organization.

**Maren Gamble:**

Thanks, Mike. That sounds like a fabulous place for us to finish out our episode for today.

Thank you for listening to our episode on assessments, inspections, and audits. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us at [ihsa.ca](http://ihsa.ca) for all your health and safety needs.

**Announcer**

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