

The Last Guy Didn't Write Me Up On That!

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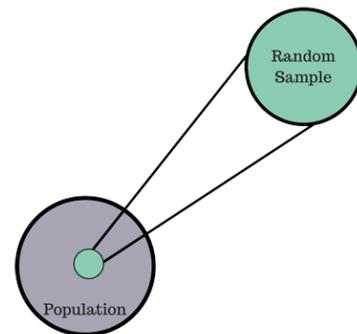
Gigs and dings and bones to pick...oh my! We at AASHTO re:source refer to these things by their proper name... “nonconformities.” So what’s the story behind why the last assessor didn’t “write you up” on something? That depends on lots of things – the test methods, the laboratory’s personnel, random sampling, our learning curve, miscommunication, and just plain human behavior. Let’s dig a little deeper into why two assessments of the same laboratory most likely will never be identical.

Contrary to popular belief, AASHTO re:source Laboratory Assessors aren’t in the business of meeting quotas for those “gigs.” In fact, quite the opposite is true. We begin with conformance in mind rather than, well, making your life miserable. Honest.

Let’s start with the test methods. As you know, standards development organizations (SDOs), like AASHTO and ASTM, are always improving and revising their testing standards. In general, this process leads to changes in those documents. This constant change can be a real challenge to keep up with for both laboratory personnel and AASHTO re:source. SDOs may revise some testing standards several times within the same year! Something that was acceptable two years ago may not be acceptable now. Also, SDOs may have added new requirements for equipment, testing, and quality management systems to the standards. In those cases, we wouldn’t have been looking for those new requirements two years ago when we last visited your laboratory.

The laboratory’s personnel may also be a factor. Maybe the laboratory’s personnel have changed since the previous assessment and a new person is demonstrating the test. If the same technician was demonstrating the test, perhaps they overlooked something this time. With so much ground to cover during on-site assessments, technicians are only given one shot at demonstrating the tests and things happen. It can be nerve-racking for technicians to demonstrate tests while an Assessor watches their every move. Nervousness can lead to mistakes that aren’t made on a day-to-day, or assessment-to-assessment, basis.

What’s this “random sampling” excuse all about? Auditing is an exercise in sampling. We don’t have enough time to watch every technician perform every test, or to review every single document and record in your quality management system. Each test included in the scope of the on-site assessment is only demonstrated once (by one technician). Assessors select policies, procedures, and records at random for review. Because of this, nonconformities may exist that were not uncovered during the limited time available for the on-site assessment.



Ah, the dreaded learning curve. This is a factor on our end too. With time and experience, we all learn more and more about the ins and outs of the testing standards. At AASHTO re:source, we comb through the standards regularly to make sure we haven’t missed anything we should be looking for. We also spend quality time throughout the year with leaders who play key roles in the AASHTO and ASTM standards development process. These interactions help keep us on our toes and we learn why certain requirements are incorporated into the standards. Sometimes things that weren’t a priority to review in the past get moved to the forefront because of these interactions.

Miscommunication is the failure to exchange information adequately. Whether you want to admit it or not, we are all guilty of this. There are two main forms of communication – oral and written. Both are involved in on-site assessments. We ask lots of questions, receive lots of responses, and review lots of documents. Unfortunately, with the exchange of all this information in a short period of time, there are bound to be breakdowns in communication...on both ends. This may lead to findings on your report that weren’t noted last time. That’s why it is important to ensure the lines of communication are clear between your personnel and our Assessor. Please don’t be afraid to speak up if you think we may have misunderstood what you said or did, or if you didn’t understand our questions.

What does human behavior have to do with all of this? We have an obligation to our customers to provide the best possible services, and we make every attempt to do that. To that end, we use various methods in our Assessor [training program](#) to ensure the highest level of competency and consistency. Every new Laboratory Assessor goes through a rigorous 6-month training program. This helps to ensure they are providing consistent and professional services. The training program is a mix of in-house and field training, and includes both technical and quality management system training. Experienced staff evaluate trainees every step of the way, and we leave no stone unturned. Still, consistency isn't foolproof because we are human beings. Minor inconsistencies between Assessors could be the reason why something wasn't noted previously. For example, the previous Assessor may have verbally indicated a minor issue while the next Assessor may have formally noted the same issue on your report.



It's hard to believe, but there is no perfect testing laboratory (what?!) or Laboratory Assessor. Rather than becoming consumed by what happened last time versus this time, we encourage you to shift your focus to why we are there in the first place. We are there to evaluate testing competency and to promote continual improvement. We hope the thorough and unbiased evaluations we provide will fulfill your needs and exceed your expectations this time...and every time!