

Chapter 9

Auditism: Symptoms, Safety Consequences, Causes, and Cure



Kristine Vedal Størkersen

Abstract This text is a reflection on today's organisational management, through an imagined disease, *auditism*. The empirical material for this reflection is collected mainly in the shipping and aquaculture industries, but other type of data suggest auditism may be prevalent in other industries too. Auditism is diagnosed when and where the idea of audits shapes how work is structured, performed, or talked about in a working environment. Symptoms of auditism are related to organisations' management of quality and safety—safety clutter, illegitimate core tasks, and an experience of two realities in an organisation (one for 'real work' and the other for 'bullshit' tasks or administration). Causes are function-based regulations and shallow audit regimes, as well as societal trends of how to prove legitimacy, accountability, liability, and efficiency. A cure could come through improved methods for auditing and documentation, or through trust in professional judgement instead of audits. Still, the prognosis is that many organisations will suffer from auditism before prescribing to reliable remedies.

Keywords Safety management · Organisation · Safe work · Audits · Accountability

Have you ever felt naked because you did not document some work activities, although no regulation or procedure required such documentation? Have you been tempted to still record those activities, just in case? Have you found yourself writing a report or filling out a form that most certainly will never be read by anyone—for example, a project half-year report? In some situations, you may even have continued writing that report because you yourself, during project initiation, created a procedure stating that this is mandatory. Or, when performing operations, have you been irritated with a coworker who did not submit the before-work *safety talk* in writing, even though she did the talk in practice and the documentation was her responsibility?

K. V. Størkersen (✉)
SINTEF Ocean, Trondheim, Norway
e-mail: kristine.storkersen@sintef.no

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In moments of clarity or frustration, have you wondered: Are your activities and the operations performed good enough, without being documented? If they need to be documented just so they can be counted and checked in an audit—is it worth the time? But since you are surrounded by *auditism*, you have been convinced that: What we do at work must be documented. To prove that we did what we should have done. Because someone will audit the records. For the sake of quality or safety, right?

9.1 Introduction (What Is Auditism and Why Try to Understand It?)

Auditism emerges when and where *the idea of audits shapes how work is structured, performed, or talked about in a working environment*. This differs from the intention of auditing, that is to ensure the governing qualities of a system, through control using other eyes and perspectives than operating personnel (Jensen and Winthereik 2017; Power 1994). Since *auditism* only is a word that I invented after years of observing such a condition in organisational life, this text is an exploration of auditism, its symptoms, consequences, causes, and potential cure.

Audits have become central in the last thirty years because of several trends in society. Due to deregulation, regulations have become goal-based, with responsibilities transferred to the organisations. Governments and organisations must demonstrate that this is legitimate, which means they have to show that companies are accountable (Baram and Lindøe 2013). Accountability is demonstrated in audits, so tasks must be documented and standardised to become auditable (Power 1994; Hood 2007, 2011). This enormous focus on audits has thus laid the grounds for auditism.

The basis for the concept of auditism is a combination of literature and empirical data. Organisational theory, especially regarding *the audit society* and *audit exploration* (see Power 1994 and his further work) points in the same directions as safety science. In safety management, many have for years wondered why regulation and management fail in creating safety and instead result in wearisome safety management systems (Hale and Borys 2013; Dekker 2012, 2017; Bieder and Bourrier 2013). In empirical studies, key explanations for the problems are suggested to be *audits* and how the organisations adapt to audits (Størkersen 2018; Størkersen et al. 2020).

This text includes examples from international and Norwegian shipping and aquaculture, since studies in these industries have provided much relevant data. See Størkersen et al. (2020) for descriptions of the studies from which we have extracted the interview quotes in this text.

Please note that audits and management systems have many benefits not discussed in this text. For the benefits of safety management, see e.g., Størkersen et al. (2017) and Lappalainen (2016).

9.2 Symptoms (What Auditism Looks Like and Possible Consequences)

Auditism is indicated by how organisations adapt to audits, and numerous examples exist. Here, I describe a few symptoms found in several industries. All are related to the growing of two parallel lines of work, one concerned with real work and another with ‘bullshit’ tasks, to adopt a provocative term famously used by Graeber, in the name of safety management (showed by safety clutter, apathy, or attention to decoys).¹

9.3 General Symptoms of Auditism: Two Streams of Tasks

A root symptom is that tacit knowledge and work practices are transformed into standardised auditable tasks. The reasoning behind is that work must be made legible to be documented and controlled. Effective audits require quantifiable tasks that are standardised and objectified (Jensen and Winthereik 2017). Standard tasks that resemble the core work can nicely be documented in cells on the accountants’ sheets and thus be counted and measured (Almklov 2008; Almklov et al. 2014)—even though these tasks may not contribute to the operations, and only constitute another layer of mandatory tasks to be performed.

A palpable side of this is that management implements such standardised tasks, and another is that many actors in the organisation perceive the tasks to be legitimate. Tasks implemented to be auditable are often related to reporting, documentation, or verification. Auditism is apparent when actors have internalised audit-centred thinking and throw away safety thinking to be auditable. As with other institutionalised organisational ideas (more in e.g., Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; DiMaggio and Powell 1983), audits for many have become natural solutions to problems, without questioning whether other measures might be better (Power 1994). The idea that auditing is an important part of work has spread so much that it has changed knowledge making (Jensen and Winthereik 2017). When auditing gets a central place in an organisation, it forms the creation of knowledge, which causes audit loops. Audit loops are “mutually shaping interactions between auditors and auditees that cross-organisational barriers in multiple directions, both ‘downstream’ and ‘upstream’” (Jensen and Winthereik 2017). This means that audits construct the environments they operate in to make them more auditable, with failures leading to more auditing. Audits were supposed to be detached from core activities, following another set of rules than those activities, but auditism spreads as audits influence how many organisations operate and create knowledge.

A serious symptom is when it becomes difficult to see the meaning of auditable tasks, which may be viewed as nonsense and even ‘bullshit’, but still performed

¹ For more about safety management and bullshit tasks, please see Størkersen and Fyhn (2024).

(Graeber 2018; Størkersen and Fyhn 2020, 2024). Auditism is demonstrated clearly when organisations implement systems that are auditable, even if the system is not meeting its goals or supporting the core work.

9.4 Symptoms Related to Safety Management: Safety Clutter and Illegitimate Core Tasks

A well-studied symptom is ineffective safety management systems. In many industries, safety management systems are seen as too extensive, bureaucratic, and focused on documentation, thus creating a risk rather than ensuring safety (Bieder and Bourrier 2013; Antonsen et al. 2012). A one-sided focus and overreliance on safety management systems can suppress other organisational functions and thus increase risk in areas those systems do not examine (Power 2004). A symptom of auditism is to not recognise that ill-fitting management systems might work against the objective of the system.

In addition, *safe work*—how core tasks are done safely—is often difficult to put into a system and to audit (Størkersen et al. 2020; Almklov et al. 2014). Unpredicted risks require an approach opposite to following rules, as they demand practical experience and the ability to improvise (Hale and Borys 2013; Hohnen and Hasle 2011). The extra tasks associated with auditism have been called safety work, or safety clutter and may be perceived as the opposite of working safely (Rae et al. 2018). Many experience that these tasks increase over time, as the organisation often adds tasks after accidents and audits (Amalberti 2001). Some experience the systems to be made to “cover the backs” of the bosses. The auditable tasks (*safety work*) thus create a parallel trail of tasks, alongside the un-auditable core tasks. Or, as the organisations suffering from auditism would understand it: The core tasks go on outside the managed part of the organisation, undocumented and often despite the safety management system. This creates a gap between formal rules and informal practices, which may be overlooked in audits. As a Norwegian ship captain said when we interviewed him about what he emphasises in reports and audits:

We answer what we know our parents want to hear. That's very smart to answer, it keeps us out of trouble. Captain, general cargo vessel.

9.5 Marine Examples: Apathy or Attention to Decoys

In shipping and aquaculture, safety management systems are in general described as exaggerated, complicated, and featuring procedures that are excessively detailed. Several studies have found that many shipping companies implement safety management systems ‘only on paper’, as their actual safety measures are not improved (Størkersen 2018; Antonsen et al. 2012; Anderson 2003). Many companies buy generic, standardised safety management systems that are guaranteed to satisfy auditors. As

a result, they often end up with an unwieldy system that is designed to cover all eventualities, and situations, but with several procedures that do not fit the situations on their vessels (Almklov et al. 2014). It is a common statement that safety management regulation does not necessarily lead to safer conditions; it only requires an auditable system (Anderson 2003). The increased administration in the name of safety can in the next step increase risk. Oversized systems require attention, and attention is a scarce resource. In an interview, this captain described how safety management formalities take the place of core work:

The paperwork you have to sign out all the time, right. It consumes time that I should've spent to, eh, perhaps be a good sailor. And it brings more tasks for you to do, right. Instead, you sit writing reports and check lists Captain, bulk vessel.

In general, there is widespread agreement that safety management systems should be simplified, updated, and useful (Hale and Borys 2013; Bieder and Bourrier 2013; Anderson 2003), and it is a symptom of auditism when they are added on as a reaction to audits.

9.6 Causes for Auditism (Why Auditism Develops in Organisations)

Auditism is a consequence of the characteristics of regulation and the expectations of organisations. The causes of auditism are thus directly related to the regulatory regime, but also to other values in society.

9.7 Drivers for Auditism: Function-Based Regulations and Shallow Audit Regimes

Most quality and safety management regulation and certification schemes are function-based. They call for management systems that fit a company's specific activities but must also be auditable and documented. These two requirements are often in conflict (Størkersen 2018). Since the main task of regulators is to ensure (most often through inspections or third-party audits) that industry companies comply with regulation, companies become deeply concerned with audits.

To audit effectively, there is a need for measurable tasks—standardised, objectified, and quantifiable (Jensen and Winthereik 2017). This is an easy basis for checking compliance (Hale and Borys 2013). However, audits are not equipped to verify that organisations have done enough, when the function-based regulations do not describe what is enough. Management fears being blamed for insufficient procedures, so they show they do 'all they can' through all-embracing safety management systems (Hood 2007). Auditing can therefore require reels of red tape at the expense of trust, dialogue, and autonomy (Power 2007).

The quality management and auditing industry favour written procedures for these reasons of transparency, and hence create major incentives for companies to write weighty procedure manuals but tend then to be blind to the gap with reality which a paperwork-based system audit does not pick up. (Hale and Borys 2013)

We can see that the ‘shallow’ auditing methods may cause auditism.² Paper trails are supposed to give auditors the ability to ensure that rules are being followed without examining the actual work (Hood 2007). Audits are passed when tasks are systematically documented in a system that is known and transparent to auditors who are unfamiliar with the local setting (Almklov et al. 2014). This is one of the reasons why many companies prefer to buy off-the-shelf systems even though they do not match their operations:

It’s easy for the ship-owner company to get zero nonconformities and comply with what’s to be complied with. And so it won’t be adjusted [to our activity]. They just buy the product and are through with it. [...] You bring apples to school to please your teacher, but you’re not getting full yourself. You don’t help yourself. Chief officer, fodder vessel.

9.8 Drivers for Auditism: Legitimacy, Accountability, and Liability

The massive focus on audits is caused by not only the quality or safety management regulation directly, but also other expectations from organisations’ surroundings. Companies need the verification to demonstrate accountability as a matter of legitimacy (as explained by Hohnen and Hasle 2011). In addition to audits from regulators, companies demonstrate accountability through the paper trails for financial supporters, insurance companies, and other stakeholders (Baram and Lindøe 2013). Within this logic, liability must also be covered by the management system. Liability law can result in extensive safety management systems because management wants to protect itself through detailed descriptions of task operations (Hood 2011). In many organisations, both managers and operational personnel have a similar understanding that procedures mainly are there for liability reasons and in practice can be ignored (Størkersen 2018).

We need to have a procedure for every work task. If something went wrong during work and we didn’t have a procedure for that task, one gets hung. Operational manager, fish farm.

9.9 Drivers for Auditism: Efficiency Virtues

Auditism is also caused by the fast pace in organisations and society. This pace may exist because of capitalism and similar virtues, that aspire to ever-increasing production and continuous development. Deregulation, function-based rules, and

² see for example Dekker (2021) and Hutchinson et al. (2024).

system audits are caused by the same efficiency idea, since regulation and detailed inspections of real work require thorough and expensive processes.

So, when managers just want to pass an audit but lack knowledge of the regulations or resources for system design, they outsource the making of an auditable management system (Størkersen et al. 2017; Almklov et al. 2014). It appears worthwhile to seek support on how to implement compliant systems. Consultancies are hired to help companies become safe and legitimate and simultaneously allow managers to cover their backs (Hood 2011).

In practice, extensive systems are never fully implemented because many of their prescriptions are too general, abstract, and decontextualised. Therefore, these systems are not legitimate and should not protect companies from liability issues. This is rarely acknowledged formally by industry organisations or their auditors.

9.10 Prevalence (Where Do We Find Auditism?)

There are indications that auditism is prevalent in most organisations operating according to international quality and safety management regulation or certification (Jensen and Winthereik 2017; Hood 2007; Størkersen et al. 2020; Power 2007; Dekker 2021; Almklov and Antonsen 2014). Auditism is found on all levels of society, within policymakers, regulators, business management, staff, and operating personnel. In many organisations, auditism is institutionalised. Empirical anecdotes tell stories of an epidemic of auditism (Størkersen and Fyhn 2024).

However, some organisations or industries may have been able to protect some employees or levels against auditism. For example, in the maritime industry, we have seen that some vessel captains (managers) do all translations of procedures and reporting for their crew, so the crewmembers can concentrate on their work (Størkersen et al. 2017).

9.11 Treatment or Cure (How to Get Rid of Auditism)

Auditism might be cured by changed regulations or improved methods for auditing or documentation. There is room within current regulations to enforce quality and safety goals and reduce focus on auditing. The extra work associated with audits ('safety clutter', documentation, reporting, routines not considered vital to the 'core tasks') can even be avoided with technological innovation. In transport, instead of manual reporting, one could make use of pre-existing data from electronic voyage plans, engine logs, and satellite navigation systems. Perhaps, documentation could come in non-written forms, such as the CCTV recordings already introduced in many areas. Of course, this involves an essential discussion of data protection under automatic versus manual documentation.

An alternative to audits overall is trust. Trust between regulators and organisations is already important in a function-based regime. Regulators presently must rely on the industry giving correct, truthful information about its operations and internal control (Dekker 2012; Lindøe et al. 2013). Still, their systems must be audited. The audit requirements create a misunderstanding that trust is not there. Organisations implement impermeable rules and red tape, that potentially lead to auditism and cancel out existing trust. Still, at the same time, many organisations rely on parallel streams of informal undocumented work to get core tasks done. In these unaudited backstage streams, trust lives. Professional judgement is the control mechanism. This could potentially inspire new systems not infested by auditism (Størkersen and Fyhn 2020). Both trust and blame will be found in organisations either way, and it is proven that the present system is not improving the situation (Hood 2007). To build a new system on trust will demand effort and innovation, but it has been shown to be possible (e.g., Dekker 2017).

9.12 Prognosis (What Happens Next?)

This exercise of describing auditism has shown that it is in the present context challenging to prove accountability at the same time as providing an organisational environment for safe work. Also, it certainly seems difficult for organisations to counteract the extensive management systems when so many trends are drivers for auditism and thus the systems' development and persistence. Auditism is not leading to anything good. Organisations and researchers can unite to cancel auditism by improving audits or replacing them with trust in professional judgement.

Ethical Statement Informed consent was obtained from all informants interviewed for this work, and their identity has been anonymised. The study protocol was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt reference 51197/3/LB).

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