



Safety audits are de rigueur for aerial adventure operators in the UK, much like third-party inspections in North America. Here's how they can add value to an operation.

SAFE AND SOUND

By Emma Bell and Steve Woods, Vertex Training

When customers come to our parks and facilities, we all want to ensure they have the best possible experience in as safe an environment as we can create. So, how do you ensure that you are meeting this goal (and discharging your legal duties) while also following health and safety guidance and industry standards? For us in the UK, safety audits are the answer.

In the UK, the duty toward employee and non-employee health and safety is codified through a series of legislative acts and regulatory standards, primarily the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974, (HSWA), but also a number of other codes and practices set forth by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The HSE recommends an approach called Plan, Do, Check, and Act. "Check" is a key component of ensuring an efficient and safe operation, and that's where audits come in. Safety audits support an operation by looking at the quality and effectiveness of its health and safety systems, as well as identifying opportunities for safety improvements.

WHAT GETS COVERED?

At Vertex, we've carried out nearly 100 audits for a wide range of clients, from small, independent single-site operators to large, multi-site nationwide operators.

Operators undertake audits for a variety of reasons. Some have identified specific problems and want the audit to go into detail about those problems and how they might be overcome. For others, the audit helps to identify strengths and weaknesses. For still others, an audit might measure the performance of staff, particular activities, or locations. Or, it may just be something the operator believes is an important part of their health and safety culture and plan.

In practical terms, an audit covers areas including, but not limited to:

- operation and management of zip lines, ropes course, or adventure park;
- PPE and at-height safety, including paperwork, equipment and storage, and its suitability and sufficiency;
- structures and inspections;

- session observations;
- staff training and monitoring; and
- accidents, incidents, near misses and rescues, as well as rescue procedures.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Even at the strongest of operations, audits will turn up unrecognized issues and provide solutions. "No matter what experience you have, getting a second pair of expert eyes has always proved to enhance and improve what we do," says Rod Baber, owner of Head4Heights in Cirencester, who has been working in the climbing, mountaineering, and high ropes world for more than 20 years.

Protect your staff and prevent accidents. Audits help identify small process flaws that can create safety issues. For example, a Vertex audit at a climbing wall found that two instructors running the activity received high praise from guests and demonstrated excellent people skills, but in their focus on customer engagement, they had allowed key safety

THE REGULATORY FOREST

Aerial adventure operations in the UK are subject to a variety of regulations beyond the Health and Safety at Work Act. Among them: The Management of the Health & Safety at Work Regulations, 1999, the Working at Height Regulations, 2005, the PPE Regulations, 1992, the Approved Codes of Practice, and the Health and Safety Guidance, both issued by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), and standards like EN15567, the European Ropes Course Association (ERCA) Standards, and guidance published by industry bodies such as the UK Ropes Course Guide.

practices to slip. It was only a matter of time before their unsafe belay handling led to an accident.

Through the audit, it became apparent that the slackening safety standards the instructors demonstrated were a result of several factors. The two instructors were the only staff qualified to run the climbing wall, and, as it was popular, the manager was programming back-to-back sessions, six days a week. Moreover, nobody else at the venue was appropriately competent to monitor, train, supervise, or nurture the two staff members.

As a result of the audit, a number of changes occurred: the two staff members were given time off to receive training; a course was arranged to qualify more staff to operate the activity; the company, with the assistance of Vertex, designed a manager training course to better prepare the managerial staff to supervise off ground adventure activities; and the operator implemented regular session monitoring and staff training to ensure each instructor's skills were maintained.

Create a culture of safety. At Rock Reef in Bournemouth, GM Peter Collett says regular safety audits improve staff awareness and understanding. "The knowledge given to our team about creating and offering a safe, controlled environment brings everyone such confidence, which creates a relaxed

atmosphere throughout the business," says Collett.

David Long, general manager of Hobble-down in Epsom, echoes those sentiments. "Our audit was extremely useful, not just from some of the suggestions raised but also for the instructors, who were able to see the company invest in the safety and operations, giving them further confidence in their role."

Identify process gaps. An audit at another adventure park revealed that it had great risk assessments (RAs), standard operating procedures (SOPs), training, and other processes for the delivery of its activities. The staff were performing these tasks in a safe way, with good equipment and systems. However, no material existed for the staff to document the inspections and maintenance work. Nor was there anything to show that staff had been properly instructed and trained to perform those jobs.

As a result of the outside audit, the internal auditing system was revised, a training and selection process was created for the inspection and maintenance jobs, and RAs and SOPs were created to support the inspection and maintenance work.

Stay on top of technology. That same operator used auto-belays on its indoor climbing walls, and a continuous belay

system (CBS) in its outdoor adventure park. The audit revealed gaps in staff knowledge about how those systems operated. As a result, some staff failed to complete critical inspections and tests required for both systems.

Following the audit, 40 percent of the CBS trolleys were removed from use and sent off to be repaired. The company also added an extra audit each year to ensure the business was keeping up with industry advances in technology, understanding, and methodology.

Big picture view. "The audit process has touched nearly all elements of our operation," says Mark Cumberpatch, safety adviser for Center Parcs UK, noting that the company revised everything from its PPE paperwork and harnesses to its Zippey trolley process following an audit.

As a tool, audits can:

- raise staff awareness;
- help you comply with the law;
- provide evidence that you are monitoring, reviewing, and improving your health and safety systems;
- identify problems and areas of weakness that could lead to accidents;
- help identify areas where there may be available technological advances;
- discover good practices within a team that can be shared across the rest of your workforce;

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Opposite page: PPE is on the audit checklist. Below: An audit can check specific areas of concern, or focus more broadly on safety and efficiency. Photos: Vertex Training



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- measure the culture of safety across several areas of your operation;
- provide solutions to pinch points and rescue/support hot spots;
- provide a review of your safety briefing and supervision effectiveness;
- independently assess the customer experience and engagement; and
- review the work carried out by external services such as inspection, maintenance, or training providers.

HOW TO PICK AN AUDITOR

Hiring the right auditor for your operation is a key consideration. "Initially, our staff were daunted at the thought of being monitored externally," says Long, "but the inspector soon put them at ease and involved them in a manner that gave them ownership of their role."

Internal or external. You can use an internal auditor (someone from your own operation), or an external auditor. Each approach has pros and cons, but

what matters most is that the person carrying out the audit is competent, has extensive practical, theoretical, and technical knowledge, and can carry out the audit without "fear or favor." It is critical, too, to match their experience to the way you work, your customer groups, and the activities you operate.

Determine competency. In the UK, we use two common acronyms to determine competency.

KATEL Knowledge. Attributes. Training. Experience. Limitations.

SKATE Skills. Knowledge. Attitude. Training. Experience.

These help set expectations and help a proposed auditor provide evidence for their competence or background as it relates to each one.

Support not sabotage. It's important to decide if an audit will be open (i.e., staff will know when the auditors are coming and have time to prepare), or if the auditor will show up without advanced warning. Either way, remember that an



Measure safety across all areas of your operation. Photo: Vertex Training

audit shouldn't be a tool to catch people out, but a way to support an operation, its managers, and its staff.

"A safety audit is imperative for our business," says Collett. "It allows our staff and directors to feel confident that everything within the business is sound, and instills confidence in our customers." ■



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100 Research Road, Hingham, MA 02043

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