



For Whom the Audit Bell Tolls

(Originally published in *College Matters*, September 2013 Issue)

So you have been selected for an audit. For many members this invokes a strong sense of angst and stress. Most concerns revolve over how much time it will take, what exactly do those people at the College want, is my CPD up to date, or rather, why didn't I keep my CPD up to date! Let's face it, Biology Professionals these days tend to be busy people and as such the priority is not often allocating time to having superbly organized records spanning one's entire career. Before you panic however, it is important to take a step back and understand the process, the expectations of the College and why an audit is imposed on us in the first place.

For most individuals the word "audit" brings to mind intrusive investigations by a regulatory body or oversight authority. Audits by the Canada Revenue Agency or forensic audits by accounting firms are probably the most familiar forms of this process. These types of audits can indeed be stressful intensive proceedings designed to seek out and identify anomalies or disparities in reporting, sometimes with significant consequences. Most often these are of a financial or fiduciary nature.

Audits in professional communities of practice, like that for Registered Biology Professionals in BC are undertaken to ensure that individuals are adhering to a set of standards as set out by the body to which they are accountable to. Often such professions are governed by legislation or regulations which include codes of conduct and in the case of the College of Applied Biology (College), a Code of Ethics. It demonstrates that the oversight body for a given set of professionals is practicing due diligence in monitoring its members on behalf of the public interest. The audit is an extension of the legally binding responsibilities that flow from the College of Applied Biology Act and its rules.

Undergoing an audit of ones' understanding and adherence to standards of professional practice, especially how they administer those activities, including record keeping and professional development can be a proactive educational tool; designed to create a high level of consistency in excellence of practice to which a professional community can uphold. This is a core premise for the College's audit process.



COLLEGE OF APPLIED BIOLOGY

All of the required forms including the member's CPD log and the actual audit form are online via the College's website. Every year upon dues renewal, members are required to declare that they understand their responsibilities to track and report on their CPD activities. So what then can be expected once your notification of audit from the College Executive has been received? One of the most typical (and unfounded) concerns is that the audit will be a disruptive process to home and work life, requiring weeks' worth of time to compile information. The audit form is more of an introspective check list to let a member recognize the sorts of record keeping, administrative and professional management responsibilities that come with accreditation.

Members should only be concerned if they have not made efforts to remain current in their area of practice, neglected keeping track of their professional development activities, have no system to organize and track work and data and have résumés which are inconsistent with their professional responsibilities. However that would mean that you have signed a legally binding declaration every year while ignoring your responsibilities to do so. In that case the audit may be the least of your worries. Fortunately few members ever find themselves in this situation.

Some of the simplest and readily available administrative tools can help ensure you are ready to meet the requirements of the audit. Utilizing your e-mail calendar as a means to track and store relevant activities over many years allows you to transfer information to the CPD log form (an Excel sheet) fairly easily. If your e-mail calendars or personal folders are not being backed up by your employer or yourself regularly (regardless of operating systems) that too is an issue in respect to record keeping responsibilities. So that is a hint - back up your e-mail and all other digital files or make sure your employer has a mechanism to do so. Mobile hard drives, flash drives and personal or company cloud systems are relatively inexpensive investment for ensuring your data and report archives are secure and constantly accessible.

The process is made less onerous by only requiring the last three years of CPD activities leading up to and including the audit. Members may and do choose to provide information going farther back, to the time CPD tracking was mandatory (and even before).

Some of the questions are focused explicitly on where information is stored, how frequently it is backed up and how secure it is. Others require members to analyze the work they do, especially the resources and legislation they rely upon, the degree to which their expertise and skills are utilized by their employer and by peers and the length of time all of these factors have been in play. In a way the audit flows from conceptual questions that motivate



reflection around professional practice and responsibilities to more prescriptive or precise questions about data and record keeping. It is the former questions that often pose some difficulty for auditees.

Why auditees 'fail' certain areas of the audit can be due to a number of reasons but there are some common ones:

- Leaving sections blank because the auditee feels they are redundant or repetitive or answered in their resume.
- Cryptic or vague answers being provided just to fill in a section.
- Second guessing what the auditor needs to see instead of contacting the auditor to ask if they questions.
- Misrepresenting skill sets or area of practice (information on the form does not match your resume or what you have listed on your profile with the College). This information must be consistent across all member information on file.

So how much information is enough? Auditors are not telepathic, nor should they be expected to hunt for information because members avoid answering a question by directing the auditor to "see résumé". Provide as much detailed information as you would reasonably expect if you were the one reviewing a submission.

In most cases deficiencies do not reflect purposeful intent to mislead. Members are not trying to hide something by avoiding answering questions or providing misinformation. However where the auditor has to continually request information or where the member continues to demonstrate avoidance or obfuscatory behaviour the process then becomes more reactive, potentially leading to the member's case being turned over to the disciplinary committee.

Professional accreditation and reliance is a growing facet of the applied biology community in BC. Those seeking to become registered professionals in this arena must also recognize the responsibilities that come with it. Is it really worth compromising that hard won recognition by refusing to provide some information about how you meet your professional obligations?

The standards and practices that govern our profession change over time, influenced by societal expectations and legislative requirements as much as the best science upon which our work is predicated. The audit process is not



COLLEGE OF APPLIED BIOLOGY

static. As more and more audits are conducted the process will evolve to meet the learning outcomes from each cycle.

The audit is designed to be a proactive, educational and guidance driven process. The objective is to ensure that Registered Biology Professionals in BC are meeting CPD and standard practice requirements and responsibilities to their governing body -the College of Applied Biology. Ultimately this helps to maintain public confidence in the profession.

Pamela Zevit, RPBio
Auditor, College of Applied Biology