

Infection Prevention & Control: Observational Audit vs. Competency Assessment



For an infection prevention and control program to be successful, it is important to **identify the differences** between an **observational audit** and a **competency assessment**. An observational audit is completed as part of the ongoing quality assurance and performance improvement (QAPI) process. **Observational audits** obtain data about task performance and process gaps; it is the direct observation or monitoring of healthcare personnel's adherence to job-specific measures.¹ A **competency assessment** is completed to meet education and regulatory compliance for your facility and is used to demonstrate staff knowledge of proper task performance.² **Healthcare personnel infection prevention competency** is defined as the proven ability to apply essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to prevent the transmission of pathogens during the provision of care.¹ A **competency assessment** verifies infection prevention competency through knowledge-based testing and direct observation. If direct observation is not included as part of a competency assessment, an alternative method to ensure that healthcare personnel possess essential knowledge, skills, and abilities should be used (e.g., skills lab).¹

Facilities should develop processes to ensure that all healthcare personnel understand and are competent to adhere to infection prevention requirements as they perform their roles and responsibilities. Training should include all healthcare personnel responsible for a particular task. For example, all healthcare personnel should receive training on hand hygiene. However, training on point-of-care blood testing would only be provided to those responsible for performing such testing or for cleaning and disinfecting point-of-care blood testing equipment. Facilities should require training before individuals are allowed to perform their duties and at least annually as a refresher. Also, facilities should provide additional training in response to recognized lapses in adherence (e.g., audits) and to address newly recognized infection transmission threats (e.g., the introduction of new equipment, new procedures). Training should be job-specific and include information about why, how, and when specific practices should be performed. In addition, facilities can identify and develop infection prevention champions within the organization. Infection prevention champions are respected individuals with strong communication skills who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the topic. These individuals support infection prevention initiatives by engaging and educating colleagues, solving problems, and communicating across all levels of leadership.³



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Infection Prevention Champions.

One **key** difference between observational audits and competency assessments is that observational audits are completed while staff are in the actual work environment, and competency assessments occur in a controlled environment, such as a scheduled training. This difference is significant in that observational audits allow facilities to obtain accurate compliance rates and identify process failures (e.g., missed steps in the hand hygiene process).²

The table on the following page identifies additional differences between observational audits and competency assessments.

Observational Audit	Competency Assessment
Used to obtain data about actual task performance and process gaps that can be used to inform QAPI activities.	Used to demonstrate staff knowledge of proper task performance.
A qualified team member trains staff/leaders (observers) to conduct audits (e.g., a licensed nurse educator, subject matter expert, champions ³). Audit findings are submitted to the qualified team member for review.	Qualified team members utilize standardized facility tools to educate and evaluate staff.
Observational audits are unannounced. Review of procedure is not completed before observation. The observer evaluates current knowledge and skills in the normal work environment.	The employee is aware of the observation. Education/training is provided first. Training should follow organizational policies and procedures. Training is conducted during a scheduled education, such as an orientation.
If education, correction, or coaching is required during an observational audit to avoid a potential infection prevention error, even if the employee verbalizes understanding, the observer should record " Not met or not successful " on the audit tool.	If education, correction, or coaching is required and the employee demonstrates/verbalizes understanding, this equal " Met or successful " on the competency checklist.
Performed regularly, as defined by your facility. Captures all shifts (including weekends).	Performed annually and as needed with updated policies and procedures.
Feedback is provided routinely (e.g., staff break rooms, meeting minutes, huddles). Immediate on the spot feedback should be provided to prevent patient/resident harm and a future error. Feedback should be documented in writing.	Feedback is provided one to one during competency assessment (e.g., demonstration).
Observational audit results are collected for tracking/trending and retained as part of the facility QAPI program.	Results are placed in the employee file for staff education requirements and used for evidence of competency.

What is an observational audit?

Observational audits obtain data about task performance and process gaps; it is the direct observation or monitoring of healthcare personnel's adherence to job-specific measures in the work environment.¹ Observational audits are the best way to understand if all healthcare personnel understand and are competent to adhere to infection prevention requirements as they perform their roles and responsibilities. It allows you to obtain accurate compliance rates and identify process failures, such as missed handwashing steps. Auditing creates an opportunity to provide feedback to staff on their performance and informs further education to reinforce and clarify key infection prevention concepts.³ Audits should target key steps outlined in infection prevention-related policies and procedures (e.g., hand hygiene, personal protective equipment, environmental cleaning, indwelling devices, injection safety) and focus on one aspect at a time. When selecting or developing an audit tool, remember to:

- Collaborate with key partners and departments involved in the audit process (e.g., Infection Prevention, Staff Development/Education, and Quality Improvement).

- Identify feedback mechanisms and data display locations (e.g., staff or committee meetings, posters, intranet, newsletters).
- Ensure audit tools align with all facility communication, programs, and regulatory requirements (e.g., quality initiatives, staff education, policies, and procedures).
- Establish Infection Prevention Champions² to engage staff.
- Review the availability of similar audit tools; it may be easiest to adapt existing resources.

Design considerations

A well-designed audit tool allows for a streamlined collection of data. Collecting data for action allows for targeted performance improvement efforts to enhance patient/resident safety and positive outcomes. An audit tool will enable you to obtain accurate compliance rates and identify process failures and essential data points for an effective quality assurance and performance improvement (QAPI) process.² When designing or reviewing an audit tool, consider the following:

- Instructions and key data elements (e.g., minimum observations).
- Brief rationale and definition of the process being audited.
- Clear and concise language. Keep content to one page, front and back.

The following table identifies existing observational audit resources which may provide templates for developing and implementing infection prevention related audit tools.

Hand Hygiene	
Hand Hygiene Observational Audits Data Tracking Tool	https://www.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/nursing-home/materials/hand-hygiene-observational-audit-tool-tt.xlsx
Infection Prevention & Control Audit Tool: Hand Hygiene	https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/documents/topics/hai/hand_hygiene_audit_tool.pdf
Speedy Audit Lite	https://www.speedyaudit.com/
Environmental Services	
Environmental Rounds Worksheet for Infection Prevention	https://apic.org/Resource_/TinyMceFileManager/Academy/ASC_101_resources/Assessment_Checklist/Environment_Checklist.doc
CDC Environmental Checklist for Monitoring Terminal Cleaning	https://www.cdc.gov/hai/pdfs/toolkits/Environmental-Cleaning-Checklist10-28-2010.doc
Infection Prevention and Control Manual Interim Cleaning and Disinfection Audit COVID-19 Pandemic	https://www.unmc.edu/publichealth/centers/cbheid/Project_ECHO/SessionMaterials/Session-5_Audit-Tool-Cleaning-and-Disinfection.pdf
Personal Protective Equipment	
Personal Protective Equipment Audit Tool	https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Programs/Community-Health/Project-Firstline/PPE-Audit-Tool.pdf
Hand Hygiene/Personal Protective Equipment Monitoring Tool for Nursing Homes	https://www.hsag.com/contentassets/57e42bf7e2a748088aa4ab3f3b31cddf/handhygieneppeaudittoolnhs_508.pdf
General Observational Audit Resources	
Data Gathering and Summary Reports	https://ipobservationtools.org/data-gathering-and-summary-reports/

Grid-Example Quick Observation Tools Summary	https://ipobservationtools.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Data-Tabulation-Blank.xlsx
CDC & APIC Quick Observation Tools for Infection Prevention	https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/tools/quots.html#anchor_1549306152
AHRQ Observational Audits: A Pathway to Improving Infection Prevention and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19	https://www.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/nursing-home/materials/observational-audits.pdf

What is a competency assessment?

A **competency assessment** verifies infection prevention competency through knowledge-based testing and direct observation. If direct observation is not included as part of a competency assessment, an alternative method to ensure that healthcare personnel possess essential knowledge, skills, and abilities should be used (e.g., skills lab).¹ **Healthcare personnel infection prevention competency** is defined as the proven ability to apply essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to prevent the transmission of pathogens during the provision of care.¹ This is done through job-specific education, training, and assessment to ensure that healthcare personnel possess infection prevention competency. Training should be adapted to reflect the diversity of the workforce, facility type, and tailored to meet the needs of each category of healthcare personnel being trained.⁴

Competency assessments are used to recognize potential performance problems and correct those issues. Patients/residents rely on healthcare personnel to be competent within their roles, including specific infection prevention and control practices. It is key that healthcare personnel perform the competencies required to deliver appropriate evidence-based care to patients/residents.⁴ In healthcare, **competency-based training** goes hand in hand with audits and feedback to promote adherence to standards of care and to help sustain safe, evidence-based practices.

What elements to address?

Whether you are reviewing your current competency-based training program or designing a new one, there are six general elements that should be addressed:

1. Are all relevant healthcare personnel included in the training?
2. Is training conducted upon hire before providing care or specific procedures?
3. Is training offered at least annually, and when new equipment or protocols are introduced?
4. Does your organization include specific elements of infection prevention competency?
 - a. Examples include, but are not limited to, hand hygiene, personal protective equipment, environmental cleaning, and disinfection.
5. Do you require healthcare personnel to demonstrate competency following each training?
6. Do you have a system for documenting the competency of healthcare personnel?⁵

The following table identifies existing resources that may provide templates for developing and implementing infection prevention-related competency-based training programs.

Hand Hygiene	
Hand Hygiene Competency Validation	https://spice.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Hand-Hygiene-Competency-SPICE.pdf
Caught Red-Handed	https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/documents/topics/hai/caught_red_handed_hai.pdf

Environmental Services	
Association for the Health Care Environment, Certified Health Care Environmental Services Technician	https://www.ahe.org/designations/chest
Personal Protective Equipment	
Personal Protective Equipment Competency Validation	https://spice.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PPE-Competency-SPICE.pdf
Personal Protective Equipment Donning and Doffing Competency Tool	https://www.aapacn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AAPACN_Personal-Protective-Equipment-PPE-Donning-and-Doffing-Competency-Tool_V.1.3.pdf
General Infection Prevention & Control Competency Resources	
Certification Board of Infection Control and Epidemiology, Inc.	https://www.cbic.org/
Competency for Novice Infection Preventionists	https://spice.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Competency-for-Proficient-IPs-updated-final_2022.pdf
Competency for Proficient Infection Preventionists	https://spice.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Competency-for-Noivce-IPs-final_2022.pdf
Infection Prevention and Control Toolkit for Training, Competency, Monitoring and Feedback	https://spice.unc.edu/trainingtoolkit/
World Health Organization: Core Competencies for Infection Prevention and Control Professionals	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240011656

References

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). Infection Control Assessment and Response (ICAR) Tool for General Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) Across Settings. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/hai/prevent/infection-control-assessment-tools.html>.

²Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2021 March). Competency Check vs. Observational Audit. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/nursing-home/materials/competency-check-vs-observational-audit.pdf>.

³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). Infection Prevention Champions. Retrieved November 29, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/hai/prevent/tap/preventionchampions.html>.

⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Core Infection Prevention and Control Practices for Safe Healthcare Delivery in All Settings. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/core-practices/index.html>.

⁵Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Competency-Based Training for Infection Prevention. Retrieved November 23, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/pdf/strive/CBT101-508.pdf>.