



Mastering EHS Inspections

Strategies for Engagement, Efficiency, and Compliance

Mastering EHS Inspections

Strategies for Engagement, Efficiency, and Compliance

Environment, Health, and Safety (EHS) leaders know that great safety and compliance performance is rooted in vigilance—not just from EHS staff, but from all employees. Maintaining this vigilance isn't always easy amid the day-to-day pressures of operations. But with regularly scheduled and properly managed EHS inspections, EHS managers can mitigate hazards and capture important data, all while keeping their workforce engaged in their safety and compliance programs.

Whether you're just beginning to formulate an EHS inspection program or looking to improve your current program, this seemingly small practice has the potential to make a massively positive impact on your EHS performance. This eBook covers everything you need to know to maximize these benefits for your organization.

What Is (and Isn't) an EHS Inspection?

An EHS inspection is a routine visual check of a facility, workplace, or process designed and conducted to identify potential hazards or other concerns related to environment, health, safety and regulatory compliance. While the length and type of inspection will vary depending on the needs of your operations, inspections should be more formalized than general workplace walkthroughs and safety observations.

For example, some form of inspection record, preferably in a digital format, should be kept for each inspection for the purposes of reporting and hazard analysis. If these records are kept consistently, they can highlight issues that need special attention before they result in larger problems, and help track progress toward continuous improvement initiatives.

Key Benefits of EHS Inspections

- ✓ **Protect workers from hazards.** OSHA's General Duty Clause requires employers to provide working conditions "free from recognizable hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious harm to employees," and specific inspection requirements are integrated into many OSHA regulations.
- ✓ **Engage your workforce.** EHS inspections can (and should) be performed by employees with firsthand knowledge of the work and its potential associated hazards. It's a prime opportunity to develop EHS champions among the workforce and ensure more EHS accountability companywide.
- ✓ **Reveal unrecognized hazards.** Inspections don't happen in a vacuum. They occur in the course of work, and encourage a heightened awareness of safety. This heightened awareness may cause workers to recognize new unforeseen hazards, helping them (and you) further refine the inspection process and elevate overall EHS performance.
- ✓ **Analysis and CAPA.** Often, Inspections allow employees to identify potential hazards and correct them on the spot. By collecting data from inspections, EHS managers can also analyze trends and proactively recognize issues for system-level Corrective and Preventive Actions (CAPAs).

Types of EHS inspections include, but are not limited to:

- ✓ **Housekeeping.** Standardized inspections aimed at keeping work areas clean and free of clutter can proactively prevent numerous safety hazards. For example, if oils or other liquids are used or stored on the job site, leak and spill inspections (accompanied by an effective cleanup process) will prevent slip hazards. If cords and/or hoses are a presence on your shop floor, inspections that verify proper cord management practices will prevent trips.
- ✓ **Equipment inspections.** Equipment inspections vary depending on the situation. Some equipment should be inspected prior to work use every time—things like fall protection, ladders, and various forms of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Machinery should be inspected and maintained on a regular schedule in accordance with manufacturer safety specifications. And don't forget about the equipment comprising your facility infrastructure—regular inspections of your ventilation and water systems are necessary to prevent numerous environmental and health hazards.
- ✓ **Process inspections.** Certain operational processes require strict adherence to inspection protocols. Examples include lockout/tagout (LOTO) as required under Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards, as well as pre-startup safety reviews under OSHA's Process Safety Management (PSM) rules.
- ✓ **Inspections guided by industry standards.** Depending on your industry, you may have certain inspections that are considered best practices or may be required by federal, state, or local law. For example, aboveground storage tanks (ASTs) are governed by a patchwork of laws and best practices, and standards for their inspection are guided by various industry groups.



The screenshot shows the Dakota Software interface. On the left is a sidebar with navigation links: Dashboard, Inspections, Manage Content, and My Organization. The main area features a search bar and filters for Facilities, Area (All), and Status (Active). Below this is a table of inspection templates.

NAME	AREA	STATUS	
Fire Safety Inspection Last used: 10/12/2023	Global	Active	Schedule
Hazardous Waste Storage Last used: 8/19/2024	Global	Active	Schedule
Housekeeping Inspection Last used: 10/12/2023	Global	Active	Schedule
Ladder Inspection Not used	Global	Active	Schedule
Oil Storage Last used: 10/16/2023	Global	Active	Schedule

A sample of EHS-focused templates within Dakota Inspections.



Bottom Up

Visual check of equipment, physical conditions, behaviors, etc.

- ✓ Narrower, limited scope and length of time
- ✓ Conducted routinely, often by site staff
- ✓ Observations of behaviors and physical conditions
- ✓ Inspection procedures may be subject to audits
- ✓ Usually conducted using checklists
- ✓ Issues may be corrected on the spot

Top Down

Verify compliance against regulations and standards



- ✓ Comprehensive, regulatory and systems focused
- ✓ Less frequent, but extended length of time
- ✓ Involve significant preparation and documentation
- ✓ Examines processes, procedures, and policies
- ✓ Conducted using protocols by team of experts
- ✓ Concludes with thorough report for management



Inspections vs. Audits

You may ask, “So...what’s the difference between an inspection and an audit?” While they share some similarities and both play important roles in EHS performance, inspections and audits are different in several important aspects:

- ✓ **Scope.** Inspections are more limited in scope, focusing on small, specific processes/tasks rather than taking an audit’s high-level view of overall EHS systems and how they interact with other organizational functions.
- ✓ **Frequency.** Inspections are performed routinely and frequently, sometimes every day. Audits are performed less frequently—perhaps quarterly or even annually.
- ✓ **Preparation.** While inspections do have a certain level of formalization (often as checklists), they’re tailored to meet a specific purpose and require little preparation to complete once a system is established. Audits usually follow a larger, standardized, framework such as ISO 14001, which can require a great deal of preparation, as well as input from experts.

In contrast to audits, inspection programs tend to be less comprehensive and more frequent. Inspections are typically managed from the bottom-up, allowing teams to have responsibility and flexibility as they find and fix smaller issues before they turn into larger ones. A well run inspection program can be a key to a successful compliance program.

Inspections are the ‘eyes and the ears’ of the organization, providing insights into issues and trends from the ‘shop floor’ and ‘out in the field.’ Analysis of inspection results can be used to inform how EHS audit programs should be focused and prioritized. Together, **inspections and audits can be a “one two punch” that provides a holistic view of compliance** and drives the type of continuous improvement that EHS leaders are looking for.

💡 Tips for Making Great EHS Inspection Checklists

In essence, an inspection is simply a checklist, and like any checklist there are good ones and bad ones. In *'The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right'*, author Atul Gawande, explains that, while vital, not all checklists are created equal.

"There are good checklists and bad... Bad checklists are vague and imprecise. They are too long; they are hard to use; they are impractical. They are made by desk jockeys with no awareness of the situations in which they are to be deployed. Good checklists, on the other hand, are precise. They are efficient, to the point, and easy to use even in the most difficult situations."

Working with EHS leaders over the years, we've identified best practices for creating effective checklists. Here are 3 tips to help take your EHS checklists from good to great.

🎯 Tip 1: Know your goal

As mentioned, good checklists are precise. This means you need to **know the exact goal of the inspection before you begin**. Often, we're so eager to get to the task at hand that we don't fully understand WHY we are doing it in the first place. Determining your goal can take some research on the front end. For example, if your goal is compliance with a particular regulation, you may need to determine what parts of the regulation applies to your facility.

Adopting a methodology of using precise checklists with clear goals would mean you'd create a separate checklist for each goal, one to check compliance with the regulation you need to meet, and another for your more general observations. **Keeping each checklist distinct will help you quickly identify and fix issues** in a more targeted way. It will also help those reviewing reports prioritize any corrective actions.



Manage Content			
Item Groups	Item Types	Inspection Questions	Inspection Templates
Templates			
Q Search by template name		Facilities	Area All
			Status Active
NAME	DESCRIPTION		
Confined Space Entry (CSE) Not used	Use this template BEFORE, DURING, and AFTER confined space entry in compliance with 29 CFR		
Stormwater Inspection Not used	Use this template to inspect the grounds within 24 hours of each storm event.		

Templates created in Dakota Inspections with clear goals documented.

Tip 2: Use a Simple Scoring System

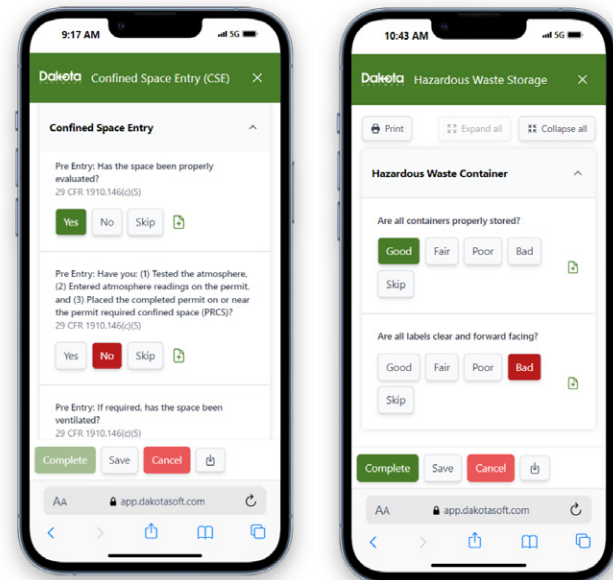
Just as we want our checklist questions to be focused and precise, the **checklist responses options should be quick and to-the-point**. An inspection checklist is not the place for open-ended questions or long essay-like responses. Some good methods for scoring inspections include: “Yes/ No,” “Pass/ Fail/ Warning,” “In Compliance/ Not In Compliance,” and “Rating.”

If you’re checking compliance with a strict regulation, a more binary system like yes/no or pass/ fail might be a good choice. If you have some room for interpretation or are looking to catch things proactively, a rating system may better suit your needs. A rating system makes it easy for the inspector to answer the question and **allows reviewers to quickly see where issues are** without having to dive into additional documentation.

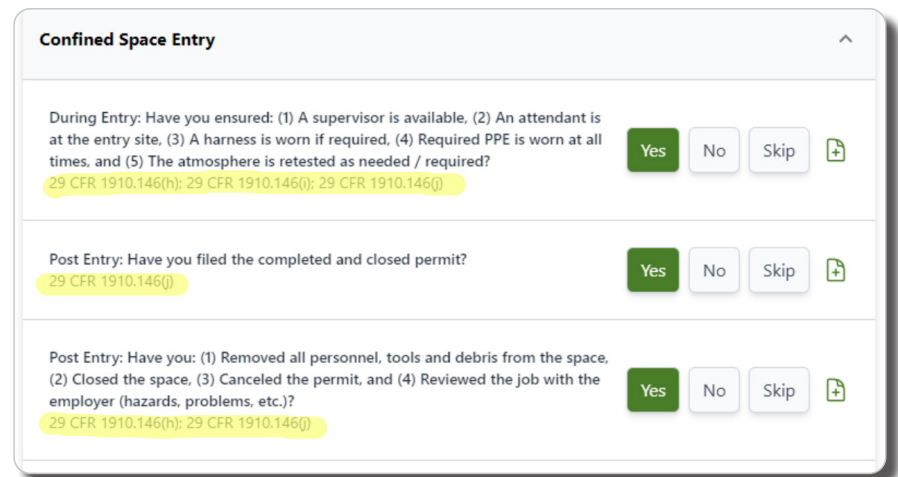
Tip 3: Provide Thoughtful Context

While checklists should be precise, they shouldn’t be so stripped down that our inspectors are left wondering why they are asking a particular question, or what the impact of a failed response is. A simple way to do this is to **provide a citation if the question is related to a particular regulation**, or some points to remind the inspector of the regulatory or corporate guidelines.

This small bit of **context is helpful for the inspector** because it lets them know the weight of their answer. A failing response on a question related to a strict environmental regulation may carry a different weight than a more general question. Having that context right there with the question helps those answering and those reviewing the inspection determine the urgency of any corrective actions that need to take place.



Checklists created using Dakota Inspections that utilize different scoring systems.



Confined Space Entry

During Entry: Have you ensured: (1) A supervisor is available, (2) An attendant is at the entry site, (3) A harness is worn if required, (4) Required PPE is worn at all times, and (5) The atmosphere is retested as needed / required?
29 CFR 1910.146(h); 29 CFR 1910.146(i); 29 CFR 1910.146(j)

Post Entry: Have you filed the completed and closed permit?
29 CFR 1910.146(j)

Post Entry: Have you: (1) Removed all personnel, tools and debris from the space, (2) Closed the space, (3) Canceled the permit, and (4) Reviewed the job with the employer (hazards, problems, etc.)?
29 CFR 1910.146(h); 29 CFR 1910.146(j)

Checklist completed in Dakota Inspections with citations noted for each question.

4 Key Benefits of Digitization

While a single inspection may be relatively simple, managing inspections across an entire enterprise (especially a large one) can quickly grow complex. This is why software solutions are a must for creating, tracking, maintaining, and archiving inspection processes and results.

Here are a few of the specific ways digitized inspections can help you better understand and improve EHS activities across your organization:

1) Standardize Programs

Without a centralized management system, comparing inspection performance across an organization can be an extremely challenging, or even impossible task. Many EHS teams we've talked with detailed the struggle of gaining institutional knowledge or determining where to focus improvement efforts when the only tools they have at their disposal are physical binders or clunky shared spreadsheets. Software can eliminate this hassle by allowing for the creation of sharable, reusable inspection forms. These forms can be utilized across an entire organization to ensure apples-to-apples comparisons of EHS standards.

This level of standardization enables management teams to have the confidence that the right questions are being asked at the right places. Comparable inspection results also allow for institutional pain points to be pinpointed and addressed accordingly. Of course, not every inspection needs to be controlled at the organizational level; therefore, Dakota's Inspections product also allows for the flexibility of facility-level management where appropriate.



"We do inspections but..."

At Dakota Software, we have focused for decades on providing comprehensive EHS compliance solutions. We've learned from talking with professionals in the EHS field that, while most organizations do have inspection programs, inspections are often still conducted on paper with results entered into spreadsheets, or never digitized at all. Some common pain points we heard were:

I don't know what people at other facilities are doing.

I need a way to catch what's overdue and make sure it gets done.

We file them away as "done" and don't do much with the information gathered.

We spend a lot of time trying to organize and find everything in Excel.

We don't have a good way to compare results.

The process is clunky, with lots of printing and copying.

If any of these pain points feel familiar, you should consider the many benefits of digitization. By now, we've probably all at least heard that moving EHS activities to a digital platform offers us "more visibility" and allows us to "centralize data". But what does that really mean in practice?

Simply put, the data gathered from inspections can offer visibility into your organization that can be used not only to improve EHS performance metrics, but ultimately help you protect workers and the surrounding environment.



[Checklists] remind us of the minimum necessary steps and make them explicit. They not only offer the possibility of verification but also instill a kind of discipline of higher performance.

- Atul Gawande
The Checklist Manifesto



The Dakota Inspections form builder allows you to:

- ✓ Create standardized inspection forms to target your organization's EHS priorities
- ✓ Share inspection forms across your entire organization
- ✓ Review apples-to-apples comparisons to pinpoint organizational needs

2) Ensure Timeliness

When interviewing EHS professionals about common challenges with inspection programs, a top concern was making sure inspections were done on time and documented. Even with our best efforts, tracking down when inspections need to be completed, what's overdue, and who is supposed to be performing a given inspection can be daunting when inspections are being done on paper and/or managed using a spreadsheet system.

Dakota Inspections helps manage this with built-in status tracking for all inspections. As soon as an inspection is scheduled, tracking begins. Tracking is automatically updated as inspectors perform (or don't perform) inspections. Tracking inspections can help you to:

- ✓ Identify overdue inspections across your organization
- ✓ Ensure that scheduled inspections are easily identified so they can be started on time
- ✓ Review completed inspections for record keeping

3) Quickly Identify Failing Items

As EHS inspectors complete inspections, they are collecting a lot of valuable data about your organization. While tracking that inspections were completed on time is necessary for record keeping, the individual responses to the questions on each inspection can shed even more light on conditions within your organization. That is to say, tracking does not stop once an inspection is submitted! We want to be able to leverage the data collected within each inspection so your organization can benefit from it. After all, the reason we perform inspections in the first place is to identify risk factors so we can address them before they become larger issues. Dakota Inspections keeps track of the responses to questions and makes that data easily available so you can:

- ✓ Track overall pass rate for inspection questions across your organization
- ✓ Compare inspection results on a facility-by-facility basis
- ✓ Identify specific items that are continually failing inspections

4) Demonstrate Continuous Improvement

Once an issue has been identified, the next step is to fix it! Naturally, once issues have been identified and addressed, we want to be able to show that adjustments we have made had the intended results to improve environmental and/or workplace safety conditions. Dakota Inspections allows you to view and compare inspection results over time. Viewing your inspection data in this way allows you to:

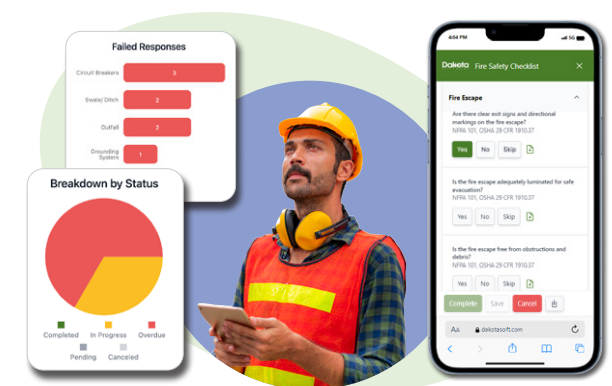
- ✓ Demonstrate that flagged “failing” items have been improved
- ✓ Show improvement in pass rate of inspections over time
- ✓ Indicate improvements within a particular facility that had been lagging

☑️☰ Inspections

Stay Vigilant, Stay Safe

Designed with EHS management in mind, Dakota Inspections allows organizations to track inspections, measure pass rates, and quickly identify issues. It features a curated question library specific to EHS processes and OSHA and EPA regulatory requirements.

Click below to see first-hand how Dakota Inspections can help keep your teams engaged, vigilant, and safe.



TRY IT FOR FREE

Conclusion

In fast-paced workplaces with complex regulatory obligations, lack of consistency and access to information can result in the breakdown of processes and failures of human judgment. Effective EHS inspection management, supported by customizable software, can systematically improve performance by identifying and correcting hazards, engaging frontline workers, and collecting structured data for tracking, trending, and analysis.

Sources & References

EHS Inspections: Gain Insight While Boosting Engagement

<https://www.dakotasoft.com/blog/2023/11/16/ehs-inspections-gain-insight-while-boosting-engagement>

3 Tips to Make a GREAT Inspection Checklist!

<https://www.dakotasoft.com/blog/2024/07/09/3-tips-to-make-a-great-inspection-checklist>

5 Things to Consider When Looking for EHS Inspection Checklists

www.dakotasoft.com/blog/2022/01/07/5-things-to-consider-when-looking-for-ehs-inspection-checklists

Audits vs. Inspections: What's the Difference?

<https://www.dakotasoft.com/blog/2023/01/17/audits-vs-inspections-whats-the-difference>

Four Ways Dakota Software Can Help You Up Your EHS Inspections Game

<https://www.dakotasoft.com/blog/2024/05/21/four-ways-dakota-software-can-help-you-up-your-ehs-inspections-game>

About Dakota Software

Dakota Software introduced the first-ever EHS compliance software. Originally designed to automate the environmental auditing process, we envisioned the need for preventative solutions and pioneered the proactive EHS compliance movement. Dakota remains dedicated to delivering solutions that helps our clients create a strong foundation of compliance for their EHS and ESG programs.

REQUEST A DEMO

www.dakotasoft.com

