

Selecting a Testing Lab for Your Product Safety Program: Important Considerations

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There are numerous questions you must ask before purchasing testing services in order to ensure that the data you receive are adequate and can be trusted. These include:

- Does the Laboratory perform the test(s) I need performed?
- Is the laboratory technically competent to perform the test(s) that I require?
- Does the laboratory have a documented quality management system, and is it implemented?

The standard for setting minimum requirements for the operation of testing laboratories -- the benchmark implemented and accepted globally -- is ISO/IEC 17025 *Conformity Assessment - General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories*.

ISO/IEC 17025 sets out the requirements for both the quality management system (Chapter 4) and technical competency (Chapter 5). Following is a listing of these two chapters' major sections:

4.0 Management Requirements	5.0 Technical Requirements
4.1 Organization	5.1 General
4.2 Management System	5.2 Personnel
4.3 Document Control	5.3 Accommodation and Environmental Conditions
4.4 Review of Requests, Tenders and Contracts	5.4 Test and Calibration Methods and Method Validation
4.5 Subcontracting of Tests and Calibrations	5.5 Equipment
4.6 Purchasing Services and Supplies	5.6 Measurement Traceability
4.7 Service to the Customer	5.7 Sampling
4.8 Complaints	5.8 Handling of Test and Calibration Items
4.9 Control of Nonconforming Testing and/or Calibration Work	5.9 Assuring the Quality of Test and Calibration Results
4.10 Improvement	5.10 Reporting of Results
4.11 Corrective Action	
4.12 Preventative Action	
4.13 Control of Records	
4.14 Internal Audits	
4.15 Management Reviews	

Before deciding on an approved testing service provider, you must carefully consider a number of important elements, as set forth in ISO/IEC 17025. In addition, if you have any specific requirements, these must also be addressed.

One additional question, however: Is your staff qualified to assess and verify the technical competence of the testing laboratory? If so, you may proceed with confidence to perform the necessary assessment and verification.

Consider this alternative

As an alternative to performing the assessment yourself, you may choose to rely on an independent third party accreditation body (AB) to perform the assessment. Furthermore, if you choose a testing laboratory that has been accredited by an AB that subscribes to the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation Mutual Recognition Agreement (ILAC-MRA), you can feel confident in your choice, for any AB that is an ILAC MRA signatory has been peer evaluated -- just as the accredited laboratories themselves are assessed periodically. [ILAC MRA signatory ABs must operate in accordance with ISO/IEC 17011 *Conformity Assessment - General Requirements for bodies providing assessment and accreditation of conformity assessment bodies*, and therefore have proven credentials.]

Bottom line: A laboratory that has a valid, current accreditation issued by one of the ILAC MRA signatory ABs has been thoroughly assessed by experts in their respective fields for all the elements of ISO/IEC 17025, and is therefore technically competent to perform the testing you require. In other words, the work of correct assessment has been done for you, thus saving you time and money and further strengthening your decision.

In summary, there are many items to consider when making a selection of testing service providers. As part of this process, it is essential that you determine the competence of the testing laboratories being considered. In this regard, you can either attempt to assess their competency yourself or select a laboratory holding a current and valid accreditation by an ILAC MRA signatory accreditation body. We recommend the latter choice.

For more information on ILAC and the MRA visit www.ILAC.org.