

How to Measure Investigator Competency

By Kevin McManus, Great Systems LLC

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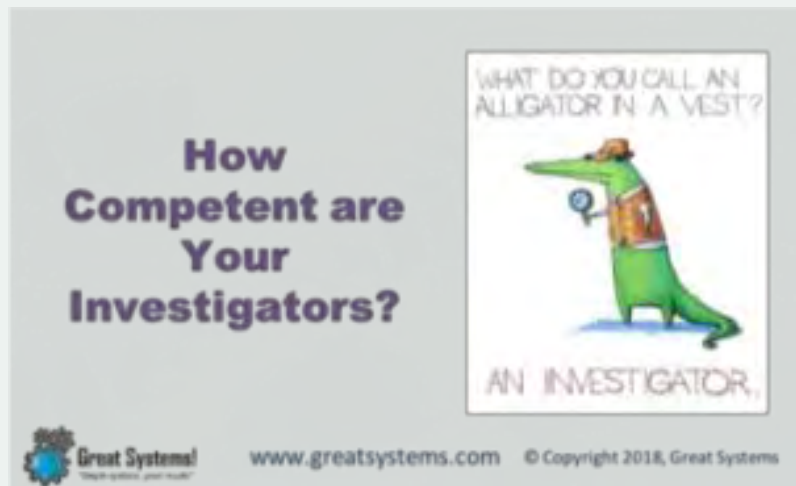
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How Do You Measure Incident Investigator Competency?

Most organizations these days have thought about the need to create competency models for all formal job positions.

Typically, these models focus more on skill definition than they do on consistent daily skill application of the necessary competencies.

In some cases, limited methods to assess skill competency on the job exists. Often, this is the case with measuring incident investigator competency.



In this post, I share an example Position Observation Checklist (POC) tool for an incident investigator work role. This tool helps high performance organizations achieve their skill definition and assessment goals.

When you create a POC for each job role, you define key tasks and behaviors across the organization. Plus, use of the POC tool on the job helps elevate the skills of all people who fill key job roles.

[**DOWNLOAD my example Incident Investigator Position Observation Checklist PDF**](#)

What is a Position Observation Checklist (POC)?

I discovered the Position Observation Checklist (POC) tool many years ago. I was researching the best practices of annual [Baldrige Performance Excellence Award recipients](#). The Pal's Sudden Service restaurant chain, a 2001 award recipient, uses this tool to help ensure its staff consistently know and practice the right skills on the job.

Both the trainee and a coach use the POC. Ideally, this use is 3-6 months after the completion of formal training. ([Kirkpatrick's fourth level of learning evaluation](#)).

At the [Pal's Sudden Service restaurant chain](#), people must score at least 75% on the POC three months after initial training completion to satisfy that certification requirement. A trainee or coach can use the tool at any time to assess current task competency levels.

Plus, you can trend scores over time for a given skill, skill area, or the job in total. This helps demonstrate improvement towards a given set of performance goals.

In a recent [TapRoot® 2-day root cause analysis course](#) I taught, I was asked about such a competency model for the incident investigator job role. I did not know of one off the top of my head.

So, I sat down and created this **example Position Observation Checklist for measuring investigator competency**. It is based on TapRoot® incident investigation process use. However, you can shape it to use with other investigative processes as well.

How to Create a POC for Measuring Incident Investigator Competency

The Position Observation Checklist (POC) is a great tool to use for self, peer, and supervisor evaluation. To create a POC, you first need to identify the 4-5 key skill areas that are core to a given job role. Second, identify 4-5 skills to demonstrate competency for each of the key skill areas.

Third, field test the draft checklist with 2-3 'competent' operators of various tenure. Finally, make the enhancements that these field reviews identify.

What are Your Goals for Measuring Incident Investigator Competency?

There are three goals for a well-designed Position Observation Checklist (POC). First, you want to define job expectations clearly.

Second, you want to provide a competency assessment tool to help evaluate formal training. Third, the POC creates a way to compare performance perspectives between trainee, peers, and coaches.

What would happen if you introduced this concept at your facility for ALL key positions? Do you think it is possible to come up with a POC for your key supervisory and management jobs?

In the best organizations, tools of this nature help achieve three things. First, they evaluate the effectiveness of current training content and delivery. Second, they target personal and training developmental gaps.

Finally, they integrate the use of the Position Observation Checklist (POC) with other processes. Example integration options include your strategic plan, annual training plan, personal development plan, and curriculum (training matrix).

How can the Position Observation Checklist help improve incident investigator skills?

All incident investigators have strengths in some areas and opportunities for improvement in others. For example, they might conduct great interviews.

However, they may need to improve their collection of other key evidence, such as photographs at the scene.

The incident investigator Position Observation Checklist (POC) helps assess competency levels across multiple skill areas and performance dimensions. Its use helps identify best practice sources as much as target areas for improvement.

Many investigators improve if you simply give them a means to assess their investigator skills. However, others may need to compare their self-assessments with one that a coach completes.

Use of the resultant gap analysis helps create a personal development plan that is investigation skills focused. However, without any feedback as to how well one performs as an investigator, one can place little focus or effort on improvement.

Trends of incident investigator assessment scores across a work site or business unit help identify systemic learning gaps across investigation teams. If you address such gaps, it helps you better optimize your investigation resource investments. Plus, score improvement leads to more effective investigations and better fixes.

The Skills of a Great Investigator

- Observant and aware
- Great listener
- Open minded, unbiased
- Organized and prepared
- Asks well-rounded, open-ended questions
- Understands why people make mistakes
- Appreciates the potential effects of culture
- Knows what types of evidence to collect
- Includes safety system analysis as part of evidence search
- Ethical in practice and complies with workplace rules



How skilled are your investigators?

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Position Observation Checklist -- Incident Investigator

Reviewed by: _____

Date: _____

Please rate the current skill level of the above individual based on your observations of his or her performance when leading an incident investigation. Use the scale provided to note the level of skill proficiency that you feel exists. After completing the review, add up the circled numbers to obtain the subtotals and a total position skills score. Compare your score to the investigator's self-score.

	<i>Degree of Skill Proficiency</i>					
	LOW				HIGH	
PERSONAL SAFETY and KNOWLEDGE OF SAFETY PRACTICES						
Consistently uses safe work practices, such as lifting techniques and PPE	1	2	3	4	5	
Can identify the potential hazards that exist in a variety of workplace types	1	2	3	4	5	
Knows the location of emergency equipment and evacuation routes	1	2	3	4	5	
Has a working knowledge of key legislation affecting work and operations	1	2	3	4	5	
Able to help groups complete key safety documentation, such as JHAs and permits	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Able to show how safety performance is measured	1	2	3	4	5	
Can explain the different steps of the organization's investigation process	1	2	3	4	5	
EVIDENCE COLLECTION						
Can define the key document types that should be collected as part of an investigation	1	2	3	4	5	
Able to show how to effectively photograph and document evidence at the scene	1	2	3	4	5	
Demonstrates the effective use of interview questions with different witness types	1	2	3	4	5	
Can define the types of evidence needed for effective TapRoot® root cause analysis use	1	2	3	4	5	
Can describe the process used to help facilitate rapid and thorough evidence capture	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Knowledgeable about possible best practices for improving safeguard effectiveness	1	2	3	4	5	
Able to assess the general quality of different safeguards that are in use	1	2	3	4	5	
SNAPCHART CONSTRUCTION						
Demonstrates the ability to build an incident timeline with sufficient detail	1	2	3	4	5	
Effectively uses dates and times on events to help ensure timeline accuracy	1	2	3	4	5	
Able properly define causal factors across the timeline (initiating, stop/catch, mitigating)	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Can effectively assemble a wide complement of evidence under each causal factor	1	2	3	4	5	
Able to ask 2-3 basic open ended questions for each of the seven Basic Cause Categories	1	2	3	4	5	
ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS (using TapRoot® Process)						
Effectively uses evidence to answer root cause dictionary questions	1	2	3	4	5	
Works through dictionary systematically by answering questions at different levels	1	2	3	4	5	
Can explain how the root cause dictionary flows from the top of the tree to root causes	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Listens to the thoughts of others when working through the root cause tree with a group	1	2	3	4	5	
Uses dictionary notes to help clarify the intent of a question or set of questions	1	2	3	4	5	
CORRECTIVE ACTION DEVELOPMENT						
Utilizes the hierarchy of controls to help optimize potential corrective action impact	1	2	3	4	5	
Writes recommendations that clearly define how the desired change will be implemented	1	2	3	4	5	
Can write actions to address both short (correction) and long term (prevention) needs	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Recommendations mix matches with the potential incident severity and risk levels	1	2	3	4	5	
Actions focus on minimizing the potential for root cause and causal factor reoccurrence	1	2	3	4	5	
ATTITUDE AND TEAMWORK						
Can effectively lead groups through all key steps of the investigation process	1	2	3	4	5	
Consistently shows respect for all co-workers and team members	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Takes initiative to help out others, avoid team problems, and promote team success	1	2	3	4	5	
Participates in workgroup meetings in a positive, helpful manner	1	2	3	4	5	
TOTAL SCORE						

How to Improve Your Investigations

Timeline

- Use three evidence sources – place, paper, and people
- Reflect investigation findings as events or conditions
- Reorganize your chart around errors as evidence is collected

Interviewing

- Don't stop the train of thought – don't ask 'Why?'
- Create a comfortable interview environment
- Ask open ended questions that begin with 'How', 'What', 'Describe'

RCA Process

- Human error and equipment failure are not root causes
- Use evidence to validate each root cause selected
- Remember that systemic causes most likely exist

Corrective Action Plan

- Link root causes to corrective actions
- Strive to assemble an effective mix of corrective actions
- Track 'at risk' behaviors to gauge corrective action impact

Investigation Tools

- Create a one-page list of key investigation questions
- Build a 'Who Collects What?' evidence collection plan
- Define your formal investigation process and train investigators

Here are links to more Great Systems website content with an incident investigation – root cause analysis focus. If you have questions, feel free to ask!

- [How to Measure Investigation Process Effectiveness](#)
- [Evaluating Root Cause Analysis Processes](#)
- [Root Cause Analysis FAQs](#)
- [Five Bad Root Cause Analysis Questions](#)
- [Environmental Root Cause Analysis Best Practices](#)
- [Explore the 3-day TapRoot® virtual root cause analysis training course](#)

About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.



As a contract trainer for the TapRoot® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025.

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at kevin@greatsystems.com.

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"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Kevin McManus, Great Systems!

Great Continuous Improvement Books by Kevin McManus!



Pursuing Process Excellence

- 150 pages of ideas and examples that will help you accelerate and sustain your process improvement efforts
- Over 25 examples of 'best practice' assessment tools that leaders can use to encourage and support high performance work
- 12 team exercises that you can use to begin applying each concept as it is learned



Mistake Proofing and Corrective Action Writing

- 156 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of mistake proofing and corrective action writing
- 14 exercises you can use to practice the five key mistake proofing tactics and identify tasks and processes to target for improvement
- Over 100 proven techniques to help minimize the risk and error potential associated with daily job completion



Error Proof

- 162 pages of examples, strategies and dialogue questions to help you stop daily goofs for good
- Over 100 proven best practices that you can use to help error proof your key work processes
- Can be paired with the 100-page workshop workbook that contains 13 team exercises to help you begin applying key ideas



Facilitating and Leading Teams

- 182 pages of ideas, tools, and examples to help you improve work team, project team, and focus team effectiveness
- 10 assessments that will help you identify areas of strength and weakness relative to work and project team support
- Over 20 team exercises that will help you optimize your use of teams and improve meeting effectiveness, while also practicing your facilitation skills



Lean Tool Use Basics

- 150 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of lean thinking
- 13 exercises you can practice to learn more about using the five key lean tools, creating a lean culture, and planning for lean success
- Two assessments to help you gauge the degree of support your lean efforts require and how much progress you make

kevin@greatsystems.com
206.226.8913

greatsystems.com

