

The importance of accreditation

Accreditation is important for laboratories - it provides the marketplace confidence that your laboratory has a well-established quality management system producing reliable and competent test and calibration results. Perry Johnson Laboratory Accreditation (PJLA), headquartered in the US, provides global accreditation for testing and calibration laboratories. An MRA Signatory of the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and of the Asia Pacific Accreditation Cooperation (APAC) for both testing and calibration, PJLA has 1,500 accredited facilities. *Instrumentation Monthly* caught up with PJLA's president, Tracy Szerszen, to find out more about the importance of accreditation and how the company is able to continue its activities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

WHAT DOES PJLA DO?

TRACY SZERSZEN (TS): PJLA offers accreditation to laboratories of all sorts for the ISO/IEC 17025 Standard. ISO/IEC 17025 is an International Standard designed for the accreditation of testing and calibration laboratories. It demonstrates that each laboratory has a quality management system in place and also gives assurance to their customers that their test results can be reliable. The Standard ensures that when an assessment is conducted, laboratories can show that they have appropriate protocols in place; they have the appropriate personnel; the right equipment; their environmental conditions are stable; and they have supporting data for the tests and calibrations that they are performing. ISO 17025 Standard is a competency standard - it is a way for customers and regulators to know that they are using a competent laboratory.

WHEN DID PJLA START FULLY OPERATING IN THE UK?

TS: PJLA ventured into the UK around two years ago based on client demand, providing an alternative option for labs to utilise. We've been offering accreditations in Japan, Mexico, the Middle East and Italy, so we've been doing global accreditations outside of the US for years. We have auditors at our offices across the globe to support our client bases in different countries.

Brexit was a consideration for us when we decided to move into the UK. At the moment, the UK follows EU regulations but that requirement may no longer exist in the future. We want companies to know that we are a competent accreditation organisation that offers accreditation services in the UK.

WHY SHOULD LABS GET ACCREDITED?

TS: Laboratories have a marketing advantage over labs that do not have accreditation - it enhances your customers'

confidence in your products and the services you provide. It also helps you save on risk and cost. If you have an established ISO 17025 system, you are going to reduce non-conforming work and your workforce is going to be committed to a well-designed system. The Standard tells a lab how it should operate so accreditation should reduce risk and cost to the organisation as everyone is following the same procedures.

Another reason for accreditation is that lack of it could impact product development. Products may go anywhere around the world and, in many cases, checks are going to be made to ensure that the test report or calibration report has been provided by a competent, accredited lab.

Additionally, it is always in everyone's best interest to have another pair of eyes view your work.

WHAT DO LABS NEED TO DO TO PREPARE FOR ACCREDITATION?

TS: The first thing a lab should do is purchase the ISO Standard and that can be purchased from iso.org. They then need to review the standard and evaluate their current working practices to identify what needs to be done. They then need to implement the required procedures and processes as required by the Standard. Labs have to do their own implementation. Once they feel that they have achieved that, they apply for accreditation. It is important for labs to come up with a game plan on how they are going to attack the standard.

WHAT PROCEDURES DO LABS NEED TO HAVE IN PLACE?

TS: Labs should have an internal audit. It is part of the ISO Standard anyway but it is there so that labs know what problems they need to address. So prior to accreditation, have a good internal audit, possibly use an outside source so you have an independent review and then fix any non-conforming areas. Internal audits really help labs know where their gaps are with regards to the standard.

If someone is brand new to accreditation PJLA also offers a pre-assessment. It is not an internal audit or a consultation, but instead is a one day review of their system where we identify non-conforming areas that they can address.

Additionally, it is important to look at the training options that are available. It is recommended to ensure all staff involved with the accreditation is trained on the standard requirements. PJLA provides a variety of free training sessions for our clients globally. During the COVID-19 Pandemic we have been making every effort to increase our free on-line training sessions since all face to face sessions have been suspended. We also provide monthly ISO 17025 technical seminars where we go over various aspects of

the Standard. One month we may do something on quality systems and another month it will cover another technical aspect. These presentations are available on our website and can be accessed for free at any time. We've received great feedback from our clients regarding this resource.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED ON ACCREDITATION ASSESSMENTS?

TS: In March, when the world was impacted by Covid-19, and we were put on various lockdowns, PJLA had no option but to come up with a different way to assess our clients that would still comply with our requirements. As such, we have developed our Virtual Assessment tool. At this time, our Virtual Assessment Tool is being used for every type of assessment, whether clients are brand new, on surveillance or are up for a renewal. We spend the same amount of time, if not more, with labs and we do everything through software that allows us to share screens and has camera capability. It gives us the ability to be online and assess the labs as if we were physically there. We ask labs to give us a tour so that we can ensure that the correct equipment is there and we can view tests being completed. We ask labs to set up cameras and to have a technician in the lab that we can witness doing a test. We do the whole lab tour via camera.

Before we decide whether a virtual assessment can take place or not, we ask our clients to fill out a survey that asks if they are capable of using certain software in their facility; have a good wifi connection; are allowed cameras etc. Laboratories that cannot meet our requirements may not qualify for a virtual assessment and will have an on-site assessment as soon as the pandemic eases up.

If a virtual assessment can be successfully complete clients receive a full system report and continue the post assessment criteria as normal.

Overall, our Virtual Assessment Tool has been good. However, in the future, we'd like to go back to onsite assessments. Virtual assessment isn't our preferred method but we think that we'll be able to use this tool for lower risk activity like pre-assessments or if a lab has moved - this tool will be phenomenal for that and it will save clients a lot of money on travel.

Accreditation is incredibly important as it reduces costs and inspires customer confidence. PJLA is able to offer accreditation around the world and has adapted its working procedures to ensure accreditation is still possible, even when site visits are not. So if you are considering accreditation to ISO 17025, please get in contact with PJLA on 01908 440046 or email pjlabs@pjlabs.com.

PJLA www.pjlabs.uk