

Interviewing Key Managers and Staff in Support of MSAT Objectives

Sofema Aviation Services (SAS) Considers Techniques, Best Practices, and Training Requirements for Optimum Engagement.

Introduction - In the context of using the EASA Management System Assessment Tool (MSAT), effective interviewing of key personnel is a critical technique for evaluating not only the presence and suitability of management system (MS) processes, but also their operability and effectiveness.

- Interviews provide insight into the lived experience of the organisation's safety management system (SMS), compliance monitoring, and the organisational safety culture—far beyond what can be gleaned from documentation alone - Consider the following :

Purpose of Interviewing in the MSAT Context

Interviewing is used to:

- Confirm understanding and engagement with safety and compliance policies at all organisational levels.
- Evaluate whether procedures are actively used, respected, and effective.
- Validate the operational reality behind documented processes.
- Identify differences in perception between management levels (e.g. Accountable Manager vs front-line staff).
- Assess maturity indicators such as safety culture, reporting culture, and decision-making behaviour.

The interviews help the assessor move beyond compliance to assess “how well” the management system is functioning.

Key Interview Techniques - Structured-Open Format

Use a structured interview guide aligned with MSAT elements, but allow flexibility to explore answers in depth. Avoid rigid checklists; instead, prepare open-ended prompts such as:

- “How does your team manage operational safety risks?”
- “Can you describe how changes are assessed and managed here?”

- “How are safety objectives communicated and tracked?”

Structured-Open Format: A Strategic Balance of Consistency and Flexibility

The Structured-Open Format is a critical interviewing technique that blends the systematic alignment of questions with MSAT objectives while allowing for open dialogue and exploration of the realities behind documented systems. It ensures the interview is purposeful and aligned with regulatory expectations but also capable of uncovering operational nuance, behavioural indicators, and cultural insights.

Purpose and Application in MSAT Oversight

The goal of this format is to provide the assessor with a flexible yet focused means to:

- Systematically cover key areas of the management system, mapped to MSAT domains (e.g. Safety Policy, Risk Management, Safety Assurance).
- Encourage interviewees to describe their lived experience, perceptions, and behaviour—thus moving the assessment from surface-level compliance toward operational effectiveness.
- Identify inconsistencies between policy and practice, between leadership intent and front-line implementation.

This technique is particularly valuable in performance-based oversight, where understanding the effectiveness and maturity of systems is more important than verifying checkboxes.

Designing the Structured Interview Guide

The interview guide should be mapped directly to the MSAT structure, covering the four core ICAO pillars and the EU’s Compliance Monitoring and Interface Management components. Each domain (e.g., Safety Objectives, Internal Reporting, Change Management) should have several open-ended prompts designed to:

- Encourage narrative responses;
- Explore causality and behaviour;
- Provide insight into performance outcomes.

Example prompts include:

- Safety Risk Management:
“Can you walk me through how your team identifies and prioritises operational safety risks?”
“What happens when someone flags a hazard—how is it handled?”
- Management of Change:
“Tell me about a recent operational change—how was it assessed for safety impact?”
“Who was involved in the decision-making process?”

- Safety Promotion:
“How do you ensure that safety lessons learned are communicated throughout the team?”
“What does the organisation do to reinforce a just culture?”
- Compliance Monitoring:
“How do you track and follow up on internal findings or audit observations?”
“What happens if a procedure is found to be impractical?”

Why Avoid Rigid Checklists - Rigid checklists limit engagement and often lead to:

- Binary (yes/no) answers that lack depth;
- Missed opportunities to explore organisational behaviour;
- Superficial assessments focused on documentation, not outcomes.

Instead, the structured-open format uses checklists as a reference, not as a script. The assessor should be prepared to follow the interviewee’s response into deeper territory, asking follow-up questions that may reveal unanticipated insights.

Active Exploration Through Probing

Open-ended questions should be followed by probing techniques, such as:

- “Can you give me an example?”
- “What happened next?”
- “How did you know it was working?”
- “Who else was involved?”
- “What would you do differently next time?”

This helps the assessor to:

- Validate the maturity level (e.g. whether a process is truly “Operating” or “Effective”);
- Understand the decision-making flow and communication structures;
- Spot gaps in understanding or inconsistencies in role execution.

Practical Tips for Executing Structured-Open Interviews

1. Prepare Core Themes in Advance
Align questions with the MSAT structure, considering the target role (e.g., Accountable Manager, Safety Manager, Line Supervisor).
2. Keep the Flow Natural
Let the interview feel like a conversation, not an interrogation. Transition smoothly between topics based on responses.
3. Start Broad, Then Narrow Down
Begin with general prompts and move toward specific operational examples or performance indicators.

4. Take Notes Strategically

Focus on capturing key themes, supporting quotes, and behavioural cues. Don't try to transcribe everything.

5. Use Silence and Wait Time

Allow space for interviewees to reflect and elaborate. Avoid interrupting their thought process.

Outcome of the Structured-Open Approach

This method supports the MSAT's intention to assess not just the presence or suitability of systems but to:

- Understand how processes are embedded in operational practice;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of communication, leadership, and culture;
- Validate that the organisation is capable of proactively managing safety in a complex, dynamic environment.

It provides the oversight assessor with qualitative evidence that complements documentation review and formal audits—critical in building a performance-based, maturity-focused picture of the management system.

Layered Interviewing

Interview across multiple levels and roles:

- **Accountable Manager:** Confirm strategic oversight, commitment, resourcing decisions, and leadership in safety.
- **Nominated Postholders / Department Heads:** Assess how MS responsibilities are delegated, monitored, and embedded.
- **Compliance and Safety Managers:** Verify system operation, risk identification, and change management mechanisms.
- **Front-line Staff:** Explore the practicality of procedures, safety reporting usage, and perception of safety culture.

This triangulation helps detect gaps between intention, implementation, and perception.

Behaviour-Based Inquiry

Focus on observable behaviour rather than opinions. Ask:

- “Can you give me an example of when...?”
- “How was that issue resolved?”
- “What happened next?”
- “Who was involved in the decision?”

This reveals not only *what* is done, but *how* it’s done and *why*.

Behaviour-Based Inquiry in the context of MSAT interviews conducted by Competent Authority assessors:

Behaviour-Based Inquiry – Best Practices for Evidence-Oriented Interviews
Behaviour-Based Inquiry (BBI) is a structured interviewing technique focused on gathering real-life examples of past actions and decisions rather than generalised statements or opinions.

In the MSAT context, this method helps assessors uncover evidence of system operation and effectiveness, and to understand how people behave in practice—not just how they describe their procedures or roles.

This approach is aligned with the “Operating” and “Effective” levels of the MSAT maturity scale and is vital in distinguishing between a system that is merely documented or suitable, and one that is embedded and delivering results.

Core Principles of Behaviour-Based Inquiry

1. Past behaviour is the best predictor of future performance.
Rather than accepting abstract responses such as “we always follow procedure,” the assessor asks the interviewee to recount a specific instance that demonstrates their actual behaviour in a real situation.
2. Behaviour is more revealing than belief.
Opinions like “I think safety is important” are less useful than action-based answers like “Last month, we paused a scheduled operation to reassess a hazard identified during a toolbox talk.”
3. Exploring the sequence of actions provides insight into effectiveness.
Understanding the full chain of behaviour—from problem recognition to resolution—provides evidence of both process maturity and decision-making culture.

Best Practice Techniques for Applying Behaviour-Based Inquiry

1. Ask for Specific Examples

Prompt the interviewee to recall a concrete situation that illustrates a key MSAT element. Use openers like:

- “Can you describe a time when...?”
- “Tell me about a situation where...”
- “What did you do when...?”

Example: - Instead of asking “Do you conduct risk assessments before changes?” ask:

“Tell me about the last operational change you were involved in—how did you identify and assess the risks?”

2. Follow the STAR Pattern (Situation, Task, Action, Result)

This helps structure and deepen the inquiry:

- Situation: What was happening? What was the context?
- Task: What was your role?
- Action: What specific steps did you take?
- Result: What was the outcome? What did you learn?

Example follow-ups:

- “How did the team become aware of the issue?”
- “What role did you play?”
- “What alternatives were considered?”
- “What did you do differently next time?”

3. Probe with Sequencing Questions

Use follow-up questions to explore the depth and maturity of the response:

- “What happened next?”
- “Why was that decision made?”
- “Who was consulted before taking action?”
- “Was there any review or follow-up after the event?”

This helps assess not only whether a process was followed, but also the quality of decision-making, communication, and learning.

4. Look for Consistency and Depth

Assessors should interview multiple people at different levels about the same topic. If behaviour-based examples are consistent across the organisation, this provides strong evidence of an “Operating” or “Effective” process. If responses vary significantly, this may reveal gaps in implementation, awareness, or culture.

5. Avoid Hypotheticals

Avoid “What would you do if...” or “Do you think...” as these lead to speculation and wishful thinking. Behaviour-based inquiry seeks evidence, not intentions.

Behavioural Indicators Aligned with MSAT Objectives

Safety Policy Implementation

Ask: “Can you give me an example of when a safety concern was escalated to senior management? How did they respond?”

Indicator: Evidence of commitment, accessibility of leadership, and responsiveness.
Risk Assessment and Mitigation

Ask: “Tell me about a time when you identified a new hazard in your operation. What actions were taken?”

Indicator: Proactive hazard identification, team involvement, closure of the loop.
Safety Reporting and Just Culture

Non-Threatening Environment

Create a psychologically safe setting:

- Conduct interviews in a neutral space.
- Avoid recording devices unless essential.
- Begin with rapport-building questions.
- Ensure confidentiality and explain the purpose clearly—this is a learning, not blaming, exercise.

Active Listening and Reflection

- Use silence effectively.
- Paraphrase responses to confirm understanding.
- Look for non-verbal cues (e.g., hesitation, discomfort) that may indicate uncertainty or deeper issues.

Active Listening and Reflection – A Foundational Oversight Skill

Active listening and reflection are core interpersonal techniques that enhance the quality, depth, and accuracy of MSAT interview outcomes. In the context of assessing a management system’s effectiveness and maturity, these skills help the assessor

gather more than just information—they uncover meaning, motivation, and potential discrepancies between intention and reality.

Where structured questions and behaviour-based inquiry guide the conversation, active listening gives it depth and credibility. It transforms the interview from a scripted interaction into a genuine diagnostic dialogue, helping assessors to explore how the management system works in practice and whether it's delivering the intended safety outcomes.

Key Elements and Their Role in MSAT Oversight

Use Silence Effectively - Silence is not a void—it's a tool. In a regulatory oversight context, silence allows the interviewee:

- Time to reflect on a question before answering.
- Space to recall a genuine example rather than default to a rehearsed or generic response.
- Opportunity to expand on their response unprompted, often revealing important operational nuances.

For the assessor, silence is useful when:

- You sense the interviewee has more to say but needs time or encouragement.
- A question has made them pause—indicating it's meaningful or revealing.
- You want to avoid rushing to the next question and instead let the narrative deepen.

Best Practice Tip: After asking a probing question like “Can you tell me what happened next?”, resist the urge to fill the silence. Wait. Count silently to five if needed. You'll often receive richer information.

Paraphrase Responses to Confirm Understanding

Paraphrasing is the process of restating what the interviewee has said in your own words to:

- Confirm you've interpreted it correctly.
- Demonstrate attentiveness and respect.
- Give the interviewee a chance to clarify or elaborate.

Example: - If a safety manager says, “We deal with risk assessments mostly through the team leads who know the systems best,”

you might respond with:

“So you’re saying that risk assessments are generally handled at the operational level by team leaders, rather than centrally by the safety office—is that right?”

This not only confirms your understanding but subtly checks:

- Whether the safety process is formalised or ad hoc.
- Whether the risk identification is reactive or proactive.
- Whether delegation aligns with documented responsibilities.

Paraphrasing also helps detect gaps or inconsistencies, especially if different interviewees paraphrase the same process in different ways.

Look for Non-Verbal Cues

Much of what people communicate is non-verbal—particularly when discussing sensitive issues such as:

- Internal safety concerns.
- Incident reporting and just culture.
- Management of change and workload pressure.
- Organisational accountability or leadership behaviour.

Key non-verbal indicators to observe:

- Hesitation or long pauses: May indicate uncertainty, discomfort, or an attempt to think of a “safe” answer.
- Defensiveness (crossed arms, shifting posture): Could signal fear of blame or resistance to the subject matter.
- Overly rehearsed tone: May suggest scripted compliance, not genuine practice.
- Facial tension or avoidance: Can indicate concern, lack of confidence in the system, or poor engagement.

These signals should not be judged in isolation. However, when paired with the content of the response, they often indicate areas where:

- Safety processes are not fully embedded;
- Staff lack confidence in management support;
- Procedures are technically present but culturally weak.

Example: An engineer who pauses significantly when asked “How comfortable are you filing a voluntary safety report?” may be signalling a lack of trust, even if they respond “It’s fine” verbally.

Putting It All Together in the MSAT Interview Context

An active listening assessor:

- Asks clear, open questions.
- Waits patiently through silence.
- Listens *between the lines*—to tone, hesitation, and emotion.
- Paraphrases to build mutual understanding and identify misalignment.
- Observes body language and vocal cues without jumping to conclusions.
- Responds with empathy and curiosity, not judgement or interrogation.

This approach helps uncover:

- Cultural issues (e.g. fear of speaking up, siloed communication).
- Implementation gaps (e.g. procedures that are known but not used).
- Opportunities for improvement (e.g. clearer roles, more safety promotion).

Training Requirements for Developing Active Listening and Reflection Skills

Assessors must be trained not only in technical regulations, but also in:

- Communication psychology and human behaviour awareness.
- Active listening workshops, including practical exercises with feedback.
- Role-playing interview scenarios, especially where interviewees are hesitant or inconsistent.
- Video analysis of body language and emotional cues in interviews.
- Regular calibration sessions across teams to compare interpretation of complex or ambiguous responses.

Best Practices for Conducting MSAT Interviews

- **Prepare thoroughly:** Understand the organisational structure, recent audits or occurrences, and known challenges.
- **Tailor questions to role:** Ensure relevance and clarity based on interviewee responsibilities.
- **Record themes, not transcripts:** Focus on assessing maturity (present, suitable, operating, effective) rather than collecting raw dialogue.
- **Stay neutral and inquisitive:** Avoid leading questions or expressing personal opinions during the discussion.
- **Identify cultural indicators:** Look for alignment between declared values and actual practices. Is there evidence of a just culture? Do staff feel empowered to report?

- **Validate against evidence:** Use documentation, records, and observations to cross-check the interview content.

Training Requirements for Assessors

To ensure high-quality and consistent interviews in support of MSAT application, Competent Authorities should provide dedicated training that covers:

Technical Competence in SMS and MSAT

- Deep understanding of EASA management system regulations and MSAT methodology.
- Familiarity with key MS components: safety policy, risk assessment, compliance monitoring, change management, and promotion.

Interviewing Skills

- Training in structured interviewing and conversation control techniques.
- Scenario-based roleplays to practice interviewing across different roles and behavioural contexts.
- Techniques to extract meaningful insights from reluctant or junior staff.
- Handling defensive or misaligned managers without confrontation.

Interviewing Skills – Developing Competence for Performance-Based Engagement

Interviewing within the framework of the EASA Management System Assessment Tool (MSAT) is not simply a matter of asking questions it is a performance-based dialogue.

The purpose is to uncover the *true state* of a management system: whether it is present, suitable, operating, or effective, as defined by MSAT maturity levels.

To do this, assessors must be equipped with a refined set of interviewing skills, enabling them to explore complex topics, navigate interpersonal dynamics, and extract actionable insights from all levels of staff—from accountable managers to junior technicians.

Training in Structured Interviewing and Conversation Control Techniques

Structured Interviewing - Structured interviewing involves preparing a framework that aligns with the assessment objectives—such as safety policy, reporting systems,

change management, or safety culture. The interview is guided but not rigid, ensuring all relevant areas are covered while allowing the interviewee to share insights freely.

Assessors should be trained to:

- Develop interview templates linked to specific MSAT sections.
- Formulate open-ended and follow-up questions tied to safety and compliance functions.
- Use anchoring techniques to stay focused on the MSAT topic area, especially when conversations drift into unrelated territory.

Conversation Control - Maintaining focus while remaining open and approachable is a core interviewing competency. Assessors must learn how to:

- Gently redirect the conversation if the interviewee becomes evasive, emotional, or off-topic.
- Maintain neutrality to avoid influencing responses through tone or body language.
- Use transition phrases (e.g., “Let’s go back to...” or “That’s interesting—can we link it to...”) to steer the discussion constructively.
- Control interview length while still extracting meaningful insights.

This type of discipline in conversation helps ensure that the interview yields relevant, balanced, and performance-oriented evidence.

Scenario-Based Roleplays to Practice Interviewing Across Different Roles and Behavioural Contexts

The most effective way to develop interviewing competence is through simulation and rehearsal. Scenario-based training enables assessors to develop confidence, adaptability, and resilience in live interviews.

Examples of Roleplay Scenarios:

- Interviewing a confident but vague accountable manager who uses abstract language to deflect specifics.
- Engaging with a junior technician who is uncertain about the importance of safety reports and hesitant to speak.
- Questioning a safety manager in an organisation with a poor internal reporting rate—exploring accountability without confrontation.
- Discussing a failed change process with a compliance manager who is defensive and protective of their team.

Through such roleplays, assessors develop skills to:

- Adjust tone and pacing depending on the interviewee's rank and personality.
- Recognise when to pursue a topic more deeply and when to pause.
- Test the credibility of responses by probing for examples, evidence, and follow-up actions.
- Observe behavioural indicators of misalignment, such as body language or contradictions.

Feedback and debriefing after each exercise is critical. Peer discussion and facilitator guidance help assessors refine technique and understand how responses correlate with MSAT maturity levels.

Techniques to Extract Meaningful Insights from Reluctant or Junior Staff

Junior or less experienced staff often feel unsure of what they're "allowed" to say during oversight interviews. They may be intimidated by the presence of a regulator or fear reprisal for being honest. However, these individuals are often closest to the operational reality and may provide the most accurate insight into how the management system actually functions.

Key Techniques:

- Build rapport early. Ask informal warm-up questions to create comfort: "How long have you been in this role?" or "What's a typical day like for you?"
- Explain the purpose clearly: "This is not about blaming individuals—I'm here to understand how the system works from your point of view."
- Use reassurance: Emphasise confidentiality and that their insight is valued.
- Ask for experience-based examples: "Can you describe a time when something didn't go as planned? What did you do?"
- Break down technical language: Avoid jargon. Speak in plain terms and invite clarification.
- Use reflective listening: Repeat or summarise their points to show understanding and encourage elaboration.

By gaining the trust of junior staff, assessors can access ground-level information that validates or challenges management narratives.

Handling Defensive or Misaligned Managers Without Confrontation

Occasionally, assessors will encounter managers who are:

- Defensive due to past findings or perceived threats to reputation.
- Unwilling to acknowledge weak areas.
- Overconfident, offering rhetoric instead of substance.
- Dismissive of feedback or unwilling to consider alternative viewpoints.

Strategies to Manage These Situations:

- Stay calm and neutral: Avoid emotional reactions or pushback. Let facts guide the dialogue.
- Use evidence-based probing: Refer to observed data or inconsistencies gently. For example, “Your reporting volume is significantly lower than the sector average—what do you think explains that?”
- Ask about intentions and improvements: “What changes have been made since that incident?” or “How are you planning to address that?”
- Reframe weaknesses as opportunities: “Some organisations are looking into new ways to engage staff in reporting—are you exploring similar approaches?”
- Use the MSAT structure as an anchor: If challenged, refer back to the assessment framework. “These are standard maturity indicators we apply across the industry.”

The goal is to encourage honest reflection without triggering resistance. This leads to more meaningful dialogue and better opportunities to assess system performance and maturity.

Evaluation and Judgement

- Techniques for assessing maturity across PSOE (Present, Suitable, Operating, Effective) levels based on qualitative data.
- Use of standardised observation and scoring sheets for consistency.
- Calibration exercises to align judgement across different assessors.

Soft Skills and Cultural Sensitivity

- Training in rapport-building, active listening, and non-verbal communication.
- Awareness of organisational dynamics and power distances that can affect responses.
- Managing interviews in multilingual or cross-cultural environments.

Ethical Awareness

- Instruction on the limits of oversight, interviewee confidentiality, and handling sensitive information appropriately.

Post-Interview Integration into Oversight Reporting

Following the interviews, the results should be:

- Synthesised with documentation reviews and audit findings.
- Used to evaluate each relevant MSAT item (e.g. safety communication, resource allocation, change management).
- Clearly annotated in assessment reports with reference to interview insights, especially when supporting a rating of “Operating” or “Effective.”
- Used to generate observations or developmental feedback, not just findings

Next Steps

Sofema Aviation Services (SAS) provides the following training as Classroom or Webinar - Using The EASA Management System Assessment Tool (EASA MSAT) – 2 Days

<https://sassofia.com/course/using-the-easa-management-system-assessment-tool-easa-msat-2-days/>