Document Approval and Revision Control

For most companies it is important to keep track of current revision of the approved documents, whether it comes to product development, purchasing, production, service or administration.

In practice it may be difficult to manage the documentation if there are no defined and implemented set of rules for document management.

This article describes some simple ways to ensure approval and revision control of documentation.

Document identification

When you get a document there must be no doubt as to whether the document has been through an approval procedure as a basis for releasing this or whether it is a note without accurate identification, approval and revision control.

There are a few essential details to be included in any controlled document to ensure its identification, approval and revision control. The following figure is an example of information, which should be readily available on a controlled document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revision</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Document status/change</th>
<th>Reviewer</th>
<th>Approver</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>In preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>01/10/2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Ready for review</td>
<td>DEF, GHI</td>
<td></td>
<td>09/10/2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Approved after review</td>
<td></td>
<td>JKL</td>
<td>12/10/2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Page x and y have been updated</td>
<td></td>
<td>JKL</td>
<td>15/11/2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Re. Document ID:

Document ID is a unique number for the document and the number may be supplemented by letters indicating the specific document type. In this example the "TP" could mean: Test Procedures.

To always be able to identify all the pages in a document the document ID and eventual revision identification should appear on all pages in the document. Page numbering incl. specifying the maximum number of pages should also appear in all pages in the document.
Re. Document review:

The revision indicates the individual updates of the document. In this example, the following notation is used:

- A, B, C,...  Specifies the revision of non-approved document
- 0  Specifies the first revision of an approved document
- 1, 2, 3,...  Specifies subsequently approved updates of the document

This notation helps to ensure that unapproved working documents can be kept separate from the approved documents.

If only letters or numbers are used for revision indication, there may very easily be doubts about whether a given document is approved or not - depending on whether a signature on the document is required or not.

Re. Roles:

In the above example is given 3 types of roles as a basis for approving a document. The individual roles are as follows:

- **Author**  The employee responsible for the content of the document
- **Reviewer**  The employee(s) who have commented on the content
- **Approver**  The employee who approved the document

Author cannot simultaneously be reviewer and approver

**Approval of the document with or without signature**

It is vital that there can be confidence that a signature or initials in the field "Approver", means that the person actually gave his consent and approved the document.

This can be ensured by the physical signature in the field "Approver", and then eventually scan the document as PDF file for electronic archiving and distribution.

There are also alternative solutions without the need for additional manual handling and where the document is approved electronically using dedicated software for document management.

**Review of documents**

The purpose of the document review is to ensure high quality documentation. This is done by involving key stakeholders in the control of the document's content. It also helps to ensure broad acceptance and understanding of the content.

A document review also has the objective to assess whether a given document can be set for approval, once the comments from the completed review have been included.

A document review can be implemented in several different ways depending on document types and consequences of any errors or omissions in the document. However, it is important that at an early stage it is determined whether a given document can be approved based on a review by method 1, method 2 or an entirely different method.
Re. Review method 1

The simplest approach is that the author of the document requests an employee to review the document and provide comments, if any. This approach is usually not recommended for general use for all document types, since there is some risk that the review does not become sufficiently thoroughly.

Re. Review method 2

An alternative and much more secure approach is to ask 2-3 employees to give written comments on a document, and then arrange a meeting with reviewers and authors in order to review all comments. In this context it would be appropriate to appoint a review leader who plans and ensure implementation of the review.

The review leader cannot be the author of the document, but can easily be reviewer.

The review leader should have the power to stop a review if the document is not judged to be of sufficient quality or if the document has not been sufficiently reviewed by the designated employees.

The review leader could be the employee or manager who subsequently has to approve the document, and thus have a strong interest in ensuring that the document has the required quality.

Agner Hansen
Process consultant
Product-Quality ApS

www.product-quality.dk
agner@product-quality.dk