Why Supplier Evaluations Take So Long

And Why Excel Becomes the Default Anyway

Findings from supplier quality practitioners across industries

Prepared by SupplierLens

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Executive Summary

Supplier evaluations routinely consume far more time and effort than organizations expect.

Across industries and company sizes, practitioners report that a single supplier review can take roughly one full working day of focused effort—even when data already exists in QMS tools, spreadsheets, and audit systems.

This time burden is not driven by a lack of tools or process discipline. Instead, it reflects a structural mismatch between how supplier quality data is captured (transactionally, record by record) and how it is later expected to be reviewed (aggregated, trended, and defensible).

As a result, teams consistently fall back to manual synthesis in Excel, even when they dislike it, and even when enterprise software is available.

Why This Matters

For audit readiness: When auditors ask for supplier trends, effectiveness evidence, or continuous monitoring documentation, teams often shift into forensics mode—reconstructing context under time pressure rather than retrieving it. The data exists. The synthesis does not.

For recurring cost: The time burden isn't a one-time implementation problem. It repeats every review cycle. Organizations that invest in supplier evaluation processes often find themselves paying the same reconciliation cost year after year, with little compounding benefit.

For risk concentration: The same suppliers tend to consume disproportionate evaluation time—not because they're necessarily problematic, but because their records are scattered, their CAPAs are complex, or their history requires more interpretation. This creates a hidden workload imbalance that's difficult to plan around.

> **Supplier evaluations are not slow because teams lack effort. They are slow because synthesis happens manually, every time.**

The Time Cost Adds Up Quickly

> **~1 working day per supplier review**

When multiplied across a real supplier base, the cost becomes obvious. A mid-sized manufacturer might have 120 to 160 suppliers. Critical suppliers are typically reviewed annually. Others are reviewed every two to three years.

> **160 suppliers ÷ 3-year cycle = ~53 reviews/year = 2+ months of QE time**

At one day per review, that represents more than two months of a quality engineer's time spent purely on supplier evaluation—not counting the work that triggers reviews in the first place.

Importantly, this time is not spent doing audits. It is spent assembling context.

What Evaluation Work Actually Involves

On paper, supplier evaluations appear straightforward: review NCR history, assess corrective actions, update a scorecard, document conclusions.

In practice, evaluations involve far more reconstruction than review.

A typical workflow requires collecting NCRs from one or more systems, locating related CAPAs or SCARs stored separately, verifying closure status (sometimes manually), assessing effectiveness without clear criteria, grouping issues by supplier or failure mode, and summarizing trends into a format suitable for management or auditors.

Each step requires interpretation, judgment, and reconciliation across inconsistent data. The work is not conceptually difficult—it is structurally inefficient.

Why Reviews Cluster and Become Painful

Supplier evaluation schedules are often shaped by history, not intent.

When organizations first implement supplier evaluation processes, they tend to qualify suppliers in batches—often during a push toward certification or in response to an audit finding. Three years later, all of those reviews come due simultaneously.

This creates Q4 crunches that become self-reinforcing. Teams scramble to complete reviews before year-end. The scramble leaves little time to restructure the schedule. The same bottleneck reappears the following year.

Deadline anxiety compounds the problem. Practitioners report receiving nonconformities for reviews that were only days overdue. When small delays trigger formal findings, teams understandably prioritize completion over quality.

Everyone Uses Excel—Even When They Dislike It

Regardless of what enterprise tools are available, supplier evaluations tend to happen in spreadsheets.

The advice to "just use Excel" appears repeatedly in practitioner discussions—indicating that the bar for dedicated tooling is high, and that practitioners have learned from experience that spreadsheets are often the path of least resistance.

> **Excel wins because it tolerates messy data and allows humans to impose meaning after the fact.**

Homegrown tools, however crude, often outperform commercial platforms because they reflect how people actually work. They evolve with the process. They accommodate exceptions. They don't force users into predetermined workflows.

Commercial platforms, by contrast, often require users to adapt their work to the tool. When the adaptation is too costly or too rigid, users route around the system—exporting data to Excel, maintaining parallel spreadsheets, treating the official tool as a compliance artifact rather than a working environment.

The Template Economy

One of the most consistent signals across practitioner communities is the persistent demand for templates.

Year after year, quality professionals ask for supplier scorecard templates, Excel examples, scoring methodologies, and industry-specific formats. The same questions repeat across forums spanning multiple years, with little apparent resolution.

This persistence suggests that no standard solution exists, each company rebuilds from scratch, and outputs matter at least as much as process.

What people are really asking is: "What does 'good' look like?"

The Manual Reconciliation Burden

The underlying work of supplier evaluation involves constant reconciliation across inconsistent data sources.

NCRs live in one system. CAPAs live in another. Supplier master data lives in a third. Audit findings are stored as documents. Correspondence happens via email.

Each system is internally coherent. None of them are designed to be analyzed together. The work of supplier evaluation is, fundamentally, the work of making these disparate sources cohere—manually, repeatedly, under time pressure.

SCAR Effectiveness Is Hard to Verify

SCAR processes are intended to demonstrate control and improvement, but in practice they expose the limits of verification-based workflows.

Corrective action tracking is not the same as understanding impact. Auditors care deeply about effectiveness—not just activity—and effectiveness is precisely where supplier quality processes tend to break down.

Why verification is difficult:

- Corrective actions are implemented at the supplier, but verification requires seeing whether the fix worked
- For low-volume parts, the next shipment might be months or years away
- Pressure to close administrative records persists even when outcomes remain unclear

> "You don't really expect us to keep a SCAR open for 10, 12 months, do you?"

Common failure modes:

- "Closed pending verification" statuses that never resolve
- Assumptions of effectiveness substituting for evidence
- Overuse of SCARs causing the process to drift into paperwork theater

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Continuous Monitoring Exists—On Paper

Many quality standards require ongoing supplier monitoring. In reality, the infrastructure for continuous monitoring rarely exists.

Practitioners report receiving nonconformities not for failing to monitor suppliers, but for failing to demonstrate that monitoring clearly. The work was happening—NCRs were logged, issues were addressed—but the aggregate picture wasn't visible without manual assembly.

Annual or triennial snapshots tend to substitute for trends. Data exists but is not aggregated continuously. Evidence gets reconstructed during audits rather than maintained proactively.

Small Companies Feel Overwhelmed

For small organizations, the burden of supplier evaluation often feels disproportionate.

ISO requirements don't scale down gracefully for companies with ten employees and twenty suppliers. The same clause that makes sense for a large manufacturer with dedicated quality staff becomes onerous for a small shop where one person handles quality alongside other responsibilities.

The fear of getting it wrong—of being found non-compliant by an auditor—tends to drive conservative behavior. Small companies over-process because they're unsure what "enough" looks like.

People Are Often Thrown Into These Roles Unprepared

Supplier quality responsibilities frequently land on people who have not been trained to handle them.

Practitioners describe being put in charge of QMS implementation with zero experience, passing audits for years without fully understanding what they're doing, and learning by trial and error rather than formal training.

> "We have passed for 2 years without knowing or understanding what we are doing."

In these environments, templates substitute for training. Checklists substitute for judgment. Manual effort substitutes for infrastructure.

Industry-Specific Complexity

Beyond general ISO 9001 requirements, specific industries add layers of complexity.

In aerospace and defense, customer-specific requirements sit on top of AS9100. Boeing, Airbus, and other OEMs each have their own flowdowns—sometimes totaling hundreds of pages of additional requirements.

Medical device environments (ISO 13485) require Quality Agreements for critical suppliers, more prescriptive supplier classification schemes, and change notification tracking. Contract manufacturers create special challenges: the OEM remains responsible for quality outcomes while having limited visibility into the CM's operations.

What Practitioners Actually Want

Across discussions, practitioners consistently express interest in capabilities their current processes don't provide:

Professional, audit-ready outputs. Reports need to look credible when presented to auditors or leadership.

Trend visibility over time. Point-in-time snapshots don't answer the questions that matter: Is this supplier improving? Are issues recurring?

Supplier-level views. Individual NCRs and CAPAs are inputs. What's needed is a synthesized picture of each supplier's trajectory.

Evidence of effectiveness. Not just closure—actual evidence that issues were resolved and didn't recur.

Continuous monitoring they can demonstrate. When an auditor asks how suppliers are monitored, practitioners want to point to something concrete.

Notably, there is little appetite for more questionnaires, more supplier self-assessments, or more complex forms. The problem is not insufficient data collection. It is insufficient data synthesis.

This Is a Structural Problem—Not a Performance Problem

Supplier evaluations take a long time because data is scattered across systems, records are transactional rather than analytical, relationships between NCRs, CAPAs, and suppliers are implicit rather than explicit, and humans must reconstruct context repeatedly.

The work gets done—but inefficiently, and often under pressure.

Excel persists not because teams lack tools, but because it is the fastest way to impose structure after the fact.

The same complaints appear in practitioner discussions spanning years. The same questions get asked. The same workarounds get adopted. The patterns persist because the structures that produce them persist.

What's missing is not motivation or discipline. It's structure—data structures, process structures, and organizational structures that treat supplier evaluation as an analytical activity, not just a compliance activity.

Methodology

This brief synthesizes publicly available practitioner discussions across industries, including ISO 9001, AS9100, and ISO 13485 environments.

Themes are aggregated and paraphrased from quality forums and auditor commentary. Direct quotes are limited and anonymized. No proprietary data or confidential sources were used.

The patterns described here reflect recurring themes across hundreds of practitioner accounts, not isolated incidents.