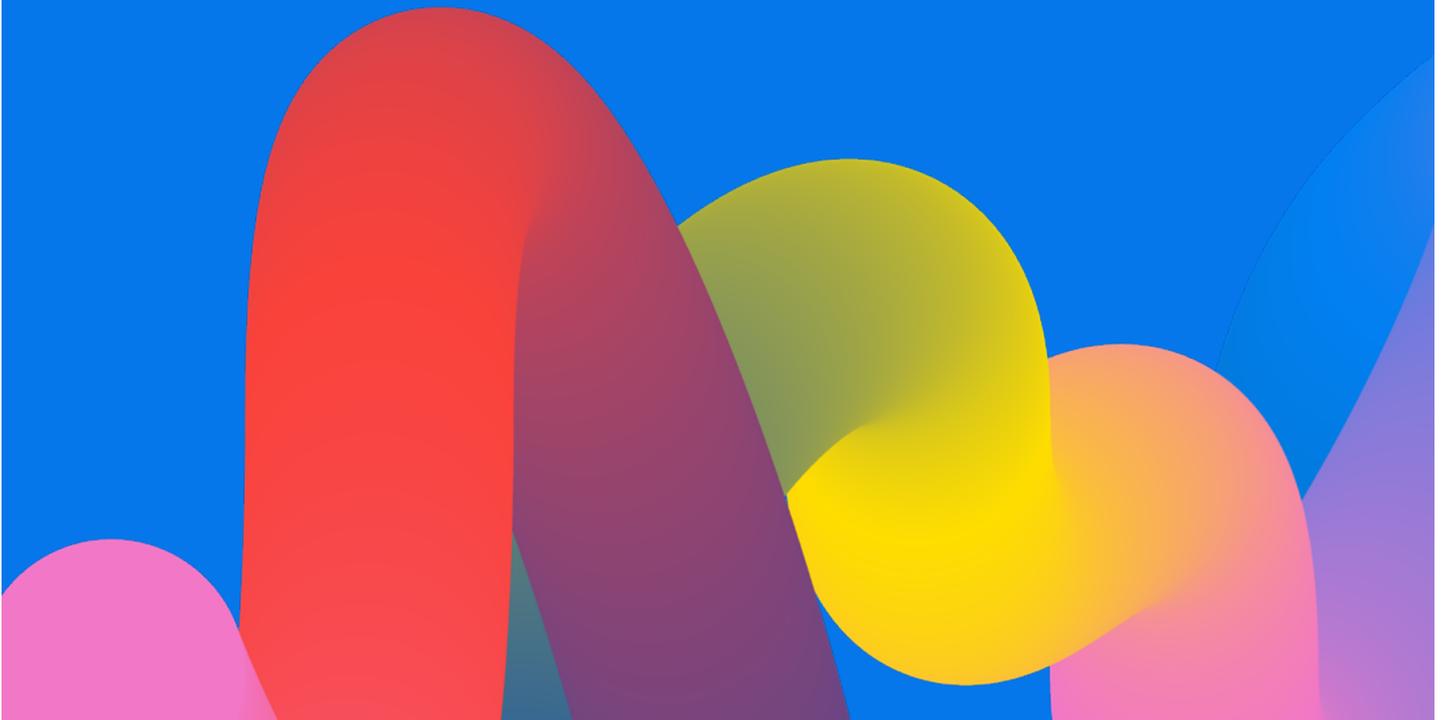


# The definitive guide to financial audit preparation

A preparation how-to for CFOs, audit  
committees, and internal audit



# The term audit doesn't exactly fill the average person with hope and joy.

There's almost something sinister about the word, right? Foreboding? An uneasiness that makes itself home in the pit of your stomach, feeding off of fear and uncertainty?

Which is a shame because an audit isn't a time to run and hide. It's a moment to revel in your successes, identify areas for improvement you can shore up, and make your organization even more sure-footed and confident. That is, if you're perpetually preparing, navigating, or learning from the audit process.

And that, in a nutshell, is exactly what we're doing with Embark's Definitive Guide to External Audit Preparation – giving you the insights and best practices you'll need to transform the external audit from a constant thorn in the side to a genuine strategic asset. Seriously.

In fact, we're taking a deep dive into the entire process, providing insider tips that will help you before, during, and after an audit, covering essential areas like:

- Understanding External Audits
- The Many Reasons for External Audits
- Early Pre-Audit Preparation
- Key Areas to Focus on for an Upcoming Audit
- During the Audit Process
- Post-Audit Activities
- Audit Prep Timelines and Planning
- Tools and Resources for Audit Preparation
- Leveraging Third-Party Audit Advisors

So, if that sounds like a rock-solid plan – and we're pretty sure it does – join us for this definitive look at all things audit preparation and support. It's time to turn that external audit into a singular source of strength and improvement for your business.

## Understanding External Audits

First and foremost, it's important to understand that not all audits are created equally. While the AICPA and PCAOB are both the big leagues when it comes to auditing standards, [they suit up for different financial teams](#) – private versus public – and play by rules that serve their respective audiences.

Scope and Style: The [AICPA](#) tailors the audit process for private companies, often using a flexible approach that fits with the diverse accounting needs of growing businesses.

Public Interest Protector: The [PCAOB](#), forged in the fires of financial scandals of the early 2000s, upholds investor protection for public companies with a stringent set of audit standards that leave no stone unturned.

Recognizing the differences between these two auditing beasts helps a company to align its financial reporting and internal controls accordingly, ensuring a smooth process when the auditors come knocking.

Whether private or public, though, each company faces distinct challenges, held to a unique promise in an audit. Thus, understanding these differences allows CFOs to prepare with precision and foresight, helping ensure the audit serves as a stepping stone to greater things.

## The Strategic Stepping Stone for Expansion and Success

Speaking of stepping stones and greater things, an external audit isn't just a compliance exercise for burgeoning enterprises—it's a rite

of passage, a signal to investors, regulators, and the market that a business is mature, reliable, and ready for growth. Put another way, an audit isn't just an audit.

- **A Gateway to Growth** – An audit provides a clear, unbiased view of a business's financial health for investors, which is indispensable for attracting future capital and financing. Further, audits help lay the groundwork for a successful IPO, merger, or expansion, ensuring the financial landscape is as solid as a company's ambitions.
- **Strategic Planning and Decision-Making** – Audits offer strategic insights to improve operations, governance, and financial controls. In the bigger picture, they're a confidence catalyst that can lead to bold new ventures in the market.

By understanding the many benefits of external audits, both growing enterprises and mature businesses can leverage the process to build and fortify trust and confidence. These traits resonate with stakeholders and position the company for

strategic opportunities they might otherwise miss. And that right here is the best way to look at an audit—as an opportunity.

## The many reasons for external audits

Of course, there are plenty of less fanciful, more practical reasons for an external audit as well. And while they might not tell quite as sexy of a story, they're still oh-so-very vital to an organization.

- **Regulatory Compliance:** For public and private entities, audits ensure adherence to legal and regulatory requirements, promoting corporate transparency and accountability.
- **Investor Confidence:** Audits enhance investor and stakeholder trust by verifying the authenticity and integrity of a company's financial statements.
- **Financial Integrity:** Audits affirm the precision and clarity of a company's financial records, contributing to informed decision-making and operational improvements.
- **Risk Management:** By revealing vulnerabilities, audits catalyze fortifications in risk management architecture.
- **Funding Opportunities:** Audits can swing open potential investment gates and financing previously out of reach.
- **Stakeholder Expectations:** Audit assurance can foster an environment conducive to long-term stakeholder relationships.
- **Mergers & Acquisitions Insight:** For companies on the brink of M&A transactions, audit findings flesh out the financial realities necessary for wise decision-making.
- **Private Equity Holdings:** In the private equity arena, an audit provides the clarity and due diligence necessary for high-stake investments.
- **Creditworthiness:** Lenders may predicate refinancing terms on the assurance an audit can provide, gauging a company's creditworthiness with a fine-toothed comb.
- **Grant Incentives:** Grants or special funding often come with strings attached, necessitating clean audits to keep the resources pumping.

# Audit drawbacks

None of this is to say, of course, that audits are the end-all-be-all of corporate finance and strategy. They can be seen as a complete drag for a reason—many reasons, in fact:

- **Costs on the Ledger:** Audits aren't cheap. The financial investment can be substantial, particularly for smaller companies where these dollars could be channeled into growth initiatives.
- **Costs on the Clock:** Time is another currency where audits aren't exactly spendthrifts. Preparing for an auditor's visit can take a long time, sidetracking teams from their core duties and eating into the very productivity the audit aims to safeguard.

And beyond the resource squeeze, there are other shortcomings within the process itself:

- **A View, Not the Full Picture:** While audits focus on financial statements and compliance, they don't give a 360-degree view of operational effectiveness or market potential.

- **Inherent Limitations:** Even the most thorough audits may fail to catch everything. After all, it's an assessment based on sampling and professional judgment – there's always a chance something might slip through the net. Remember, an audit only provides reasonable – not absolute – assurance that your financial statements as a whole are free of material misstatements.

So there you have it—the audit journey may have a few bumps. Still, with the right strategy and tools, you can navigate even the shortcomings successfully, transforming the audit from a necessary evil into a powerful asset for business insight and assurance. And with that, let's get to the main event – preparing for an external audit.

## Early pre-audit preparation

This is what you came here for—to master the art of audit preparation and readiness. And that begins with a few key steps to ensure you start off heading in the right direction.

### Reviewing Previous Audits and Identifying Risks

- **Trends and Trajectories:** If this isn't your first audit rodeo, examine the trends and themes in past audits. What weaknesses shined bright? How have they evolved? How did your implemented improvements fare? The answers can guide your current strategy, turning audit history into valuable foresight.
- **Strategic SWOT:** Holistic risk management isn't about putting out fires but knowing where the sparks might fly. Apply SWOT as an integral part of your strategic financial planning and not in isolation. Evaluate risks beyond financials, including operational efficiencies, market shifts, and even sociopolitical influences that could impact your business.

## Conducting an audit readiness assessment

Examine every corner of your company's financial landscape and assess it through the lens of the most scrutinous observer imaginable.

- **Internal Practice Assessing:** Perform in-depth assessments of your internal controls. Are they robust, not just on paper, but in practice? How do they stand against industry benchmarks?
- **Strategies to Seal the Cracks:** Transform your control assessment findings into actionable strategies, addressing each area with tailored solutions. For instance, if invoice tracking were a weakness, a new electronic invoicing system could streamline the process.

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## Assembling necessary documentation

Every financial document is a piece of a grand puzzle that reveals your company's true fiscal picture. Have explanations at the ready since auditors appreciate clarity in an ocean of complexity.

## Training and preparing staff

Involve everyone from the ground up in the audit narrative. When each member of your crew appreciates the significance of their role in audit success, it creates a proactive culture that permeates your organization.

While the finance department may need technical training, the customer service or marketing and sales team might benefit from understanding how their data influences financial reports. Designate "Audit

Ambassadors" within departments as the go-to people for audit-related queries.

## Assessing internal capabilities

Audit preparation may unveil strengths you never knew your team possessed or weaknesses silently lurking, unseen. To root out both the good and bad, utilize tools like skills gap analyses to discover strong suits to showcase during the audit and weak spots that may require hiring temporary advisors to reinforce your positions or backfill an overtaxed team.

## Communication with auditors

Continuous dialogue with auditors ensures harmony and rhythm in the audit process. Transparent, proactive communication helps avoid last-minute surprises and facilitates a

partnership that could make the audit a far smoother sail.

Try scheduling periodic check-ins well before the audit to establish a consistent back-and-forth that will clarify the audit scope and timeline, address concerns, and lay out expectations on both sides.

## **Avoid common pitfalls in first-time financial audits**

For many, the first-time audit process can feel like you're traveling the Oregon Trail—unpredictable and fraught with peril. And dysentery.

Equip yourself with a map of common pitfalls—unreconciled ledgers, unrecorded liabilities, understated expenses—and the respective solutions to each. It's equal parts troubleshooting and crafting a forward-thinking strategy, both helping to set you up for success from day one.

## **Designating a point person for audit management**

Nominate your audit czar—an individual who personifies your preparedness and champions the cause of a seamless audit, the individual who can bridge gaps internally and externally, keeping the ship steady.

## **Make an organizational commitment to the audit process**

The tone leadership sets can amplify the importance of the audit throughout your organization. When executives treat the audit as critical to operations and commit to making the necessary resources available, it trickles down to all levels, creating an environment fertile for audit excellence.

## Key areas to focus on for an upcoming audit

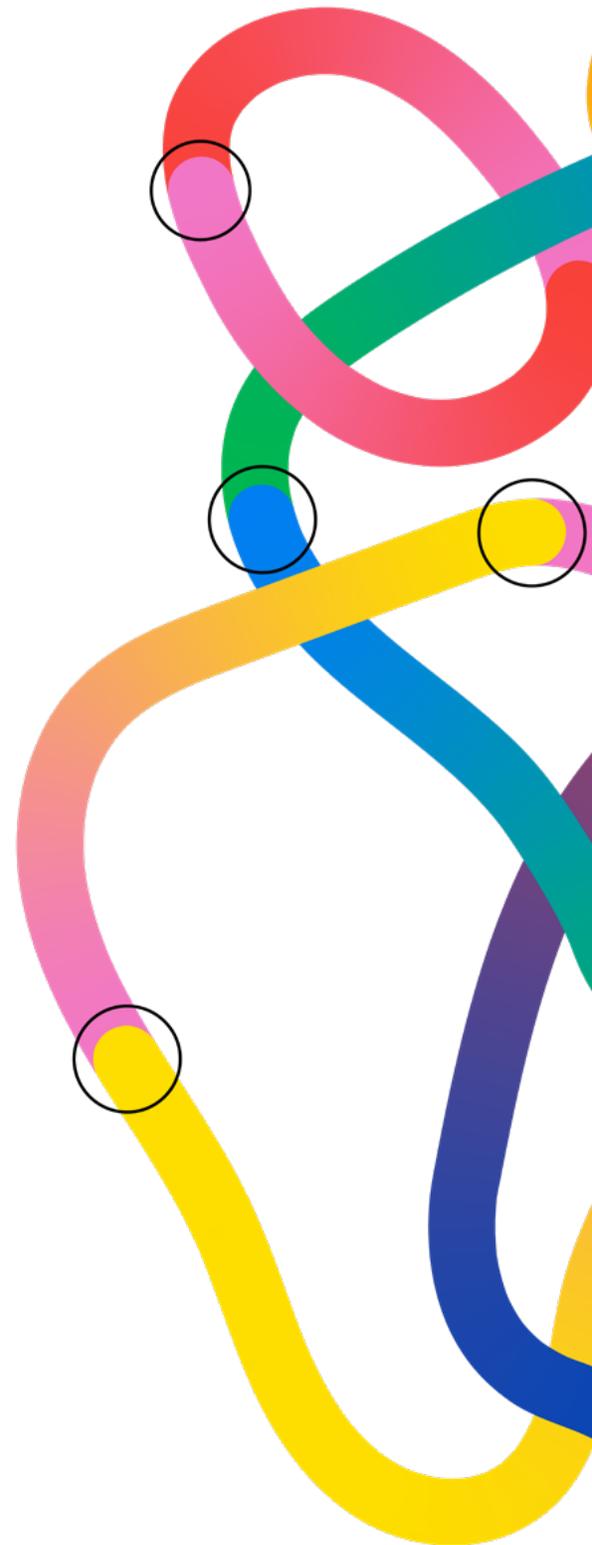
As your audit approaches, there are several important areas to concentrate on. This stage is about fine-tuning your financial details and ensuring everything is in order for the audit.

## Important accounting estimates and judgments

Pay close attention to your estimates and judgments as they are key parts of your financial statements. Ensuring these are accurate builds trust in your financial reporting.

## Understanding asset values

For example, when valuing intangible assets like brand recognition or proprietary technology, you need to assess their worth accurately. This involves looking at market trends, future predictions, and past performance. Clear documentation and reasoning are essential to support [your valuations](#).



## Explaining estimates clearly

When dealing with complex estimates, be ready to explain how you arrived at them. Have a clear story that shows the data and thinking behind these estimates.

## Data accuracy and completeness

Data is crucial to financial reporting, and it must be accurate and complete. This means:

- Implementing strong controls, like checking data regularly, to prevent errors
- Encouraging careful record-keeping in all aspects of your financial records.

## Managing third-party risks

If you rely on external service providers, you need to manage the associated risks carefully.

- Check the controls of these providers by reviewing their audit reports to ensure they meet your standards.
- Keep a close watch on these relationships and communicate regularly to maintain control.

## Internal controls and documentation

Strong internal controls are vital for managing risks. Keep detailed records of any changes in processes or procedures. Regularly review your controls, especially when there are new regulations or big business changes.

## Risk management practices

Effective risk management helps you identify and deal with potential financial issues early.

- Use frameworks like [COSO](#) or [ISO 31000](#) to structure your risk management. These help you evaluate and manage risks.
- Make your [risk management strategy](#) a

core part of your company culture, so everyone is aware and involved in managing risks.

By focusing on these areas, you prepare a strong narrative for your audit, showing careful planning, accuracy, and a strong commitment to financial integrity.

## During the audit process

But what can you do during the actual audit to prepare and maximize your chances for ‘success,’ however you define that term in light of the audit process? Well, plenty, as it turns out. And hiding in your car, waiting for the storm to pass, isn’t one of the action items, believe it or not. It’s all about being proactive.

## Steps in the audit process: planning, testing, reporting, follow-up

The audit process unfolds in a series of strategic steps or movements, each significant in its own right:

### **Planning**

The planning phase is where auditors outline what needs to be checked and what goals need to be met. They start by formally taking on the client, making sure they can work independently, putting the audit team together, and deciding on the details of the audit process, such as timing and tasks.

In Planning, they also assess potential risks, looking at the company’s business and industry context, to decide what financial areas need a closer look and setting specific objectives for the audit.

## Testing

During testing, the audit team looks closely at transactions and internal controls, checking everything against strict criteria to catch any significant mistakes or issues. They're cautious and critical, sometimes even asking for outside proof for big items like cash balances. The auditors focus on ensuring that what's reported in the financial statements is a true reflection of the company's transactions.

## Reporting

Once the audit work is finished, auditors write a report that clearly outlines their findings, highlighting any problems they found. The report aims to make the company's financial situation easily understandable to those involved in the business, like management and investors, and is crucial for being open and guiding future business choices.

## Follow up

After the audit, it's time to take action based on the auditor's suggestions to fix any issues they found. This step is about making changes and getting better, not just ticking off items on a list. It's an opportunity to strengthen financial processes for the next audit.

# Managing communication and information flow

Continuing what's already a common theme in this guide, transparent, robust, and flowing communication throughout the audit team is your lifeline. Maintain open channels to ensure the auditor receives your messages, clarifies queries, and provides consistent updates.

Your designated point of contact takes the lead here, ensuring messages from the auditors quickly and accurately reach the right people, allowing you – as a team – to effectively formulate a response when necessary.

## Handling audit challenges and queries

Building on the previous insight, challenges and queries can quickly become significant impediments if you allow them to. When faced with queries regarding unusual transactions – say, a significant, non-recurring expense – provide the context, justified with documentation, that explains its nature and its placement within your financials.

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Further, preemptive measures like scenario planning and staff training can stave off potential queries, keeping your audit on an agreeable course.

## Status updates and meetings

Schedule recurring status meetings to review where you and the audit sit. These sessions offer a collaborative bridge, allowing every team member to pitch in, addressing any issues that might affect your audit.

Likewise, use these gatherings as a navigational aid to keep the audit aligned with the organizational compass, correcting course wherever needed.

## Troubleshooting Scenarios

Brace for potential challenges – uncover document gaps, weaknesses in control systems, incorrectly categorized assets, and other potential vulnerabilities that audits will likely bring to light.

- **Combat Scenarios:** Equip your team with a war chest of responses for typical audit challenges. Shifting the tide means not just fixing the found issues but using them as a beacon to steer clear of similar ones in the future.
- **Post-Combat Analysis:** After each challenge, reflect and retrace how the gap emerged, plugging it firmly for the next go-around, and always improving for future audits.

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While the audit process can be complex with layered steps and dynamic interactions, understanding each of the components during an audit and anticipating both challenges and maneuvers can lead to a much smoother audit and, ultimately, letting your company's financial integrity shine bright.

## Post-Audit Activities

Post-audit activities offer some incredible insights to help you perfect your future financial narratives. They're not simply the closing chapters of an audit story but prerequisites for an ongoing saga of growth and refinement.

As we're about to discuss, savvy finance leaders can optimize each pattern and clue revealed during an audit to forge stronger fiscal practices and propel their organizations forward.

## Analyzing Audit Findings

After the audit curtain falls, the post-audit activities kick off by dissecting the relevant findings.

- **Room for Reflection:** Conduct an in-depth review session examining the auditor's observations to reveal their

underlying message. These findings are a masterclass on your financial controls and provide invaluable feedback on where and how to bolster your financial reporting framework.

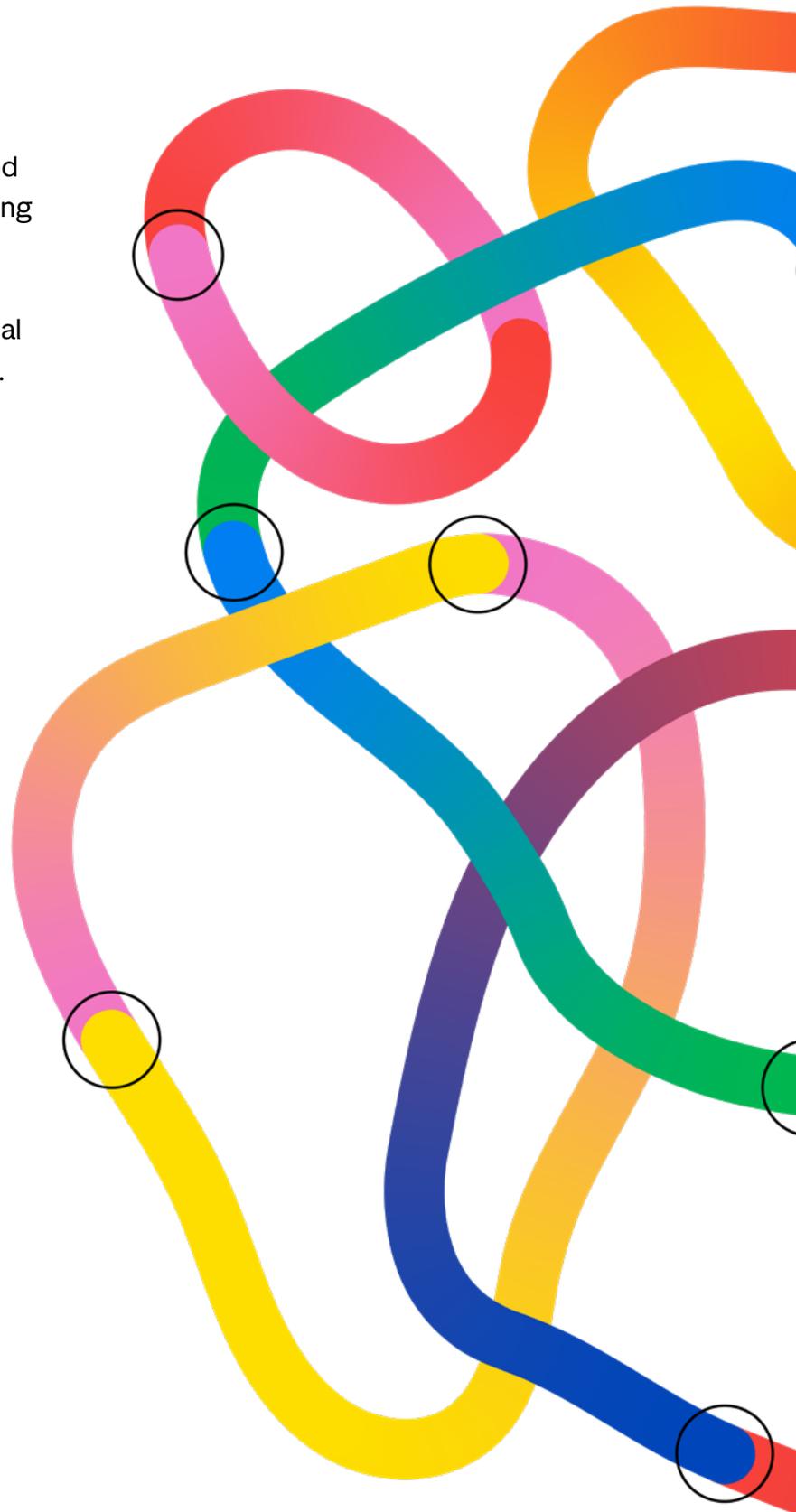
- **Prioritizing Pain Points:** Utilize tools like impact matrices or risk heat maps to classify findings according to urgency and magnitude. This helps create a tiered response that aligns with your broader business strategy, ensuring you efficiently allocate resources to where you need them most.

## Debriefing and Post-Mortem Analysis

[Post-audit debriefing sessions](#) are incredibly valuable in distinguishing actionable insights from the stew of experiences gathered throughout the audit process.

- **Transparency as Policy:** Encourage a company-wide policy of candid post-mortem analysis, where there's no such thing as criticism that's too constructive or biting. See these sessions as opportunities to fortify your company's culture of accountability and continuous learning.

- **Collective Intelligence:** Facilitate forums where you can collaboratively dissect the audit process, findings, and subsequent recommendations. Creating a cross-departmental understanding enhances the collective intelligence across the enterprise, turning individual lessons into organizational knowledge.



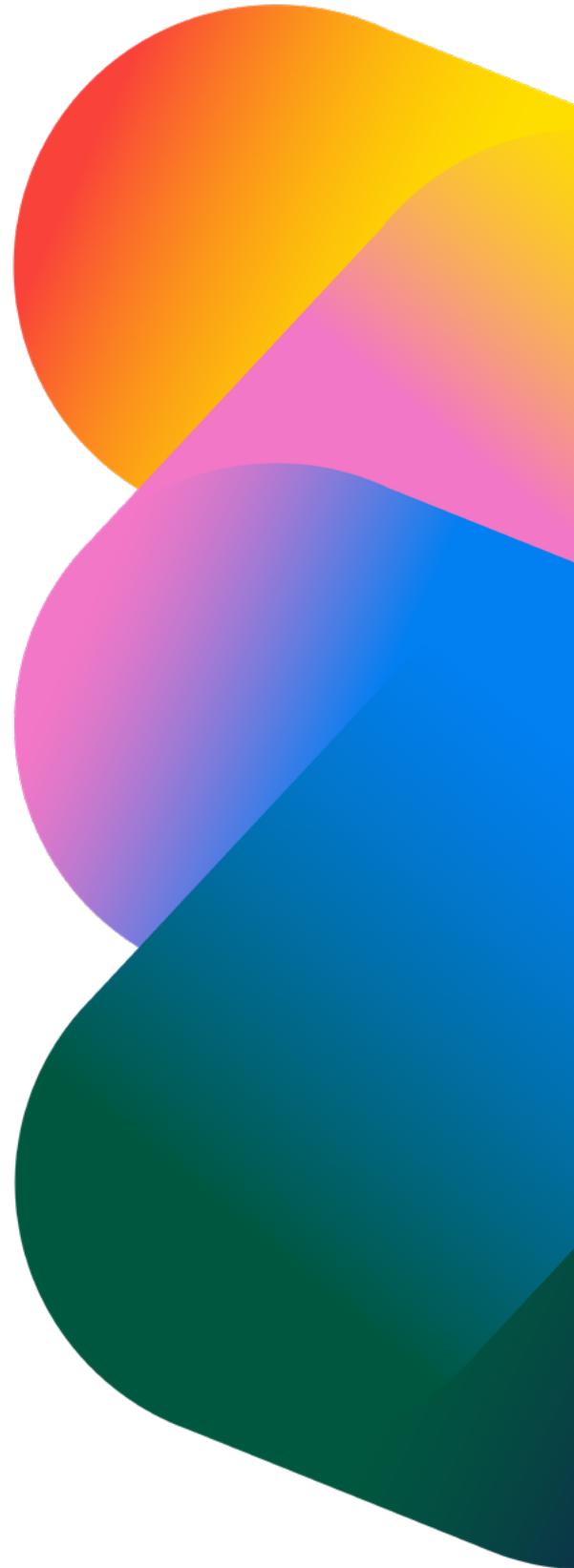
## Implementing Recommendations

Each auditor's recommendation is a seed – when properly nurtured, it grows into more robust governance and controls. To that point, assign project leads for each recommendation and empower them with the tools and authority to drive change. Create a balanced scorecard that not only tracks progress but aligns it with your strategic objectives.

Remember, implementing changes isn't a matter of checking off a box. It should be about genuine enhancements that you anchor into your regular workstreams and operational zeitgeist.

## Preparing for Future Audits

Post-audit is also a prime time to evolve your audit preparation playbook for the next season, where you can convert



audit insights into future prevention. For example, if the audit highlighted shortcomings in your [revenue recognition processes](#), prioritize a strategy to both fix and enhance this area in preparation for the next audit.

Likewise, work on developing a culture where audit readiness isn't a cyclical mad scramble, but a steady state of operational excellence. That's the successful audit secret sauce.

## Continuous Improvement: Utilizing Audit Results

Think of continuous improvement as both a mindset and a methodology. For instance, with your policy evolution mechanisms, introduce regular review cycles where you examine and refine your financial processes. Use auditor feedback as one of the benchmarks in these reviews, encouraging an

environment where your team constantly seeks and applies improvements.

Further, embedding audit results into daily routines ensures that improvements are tangible and your operations reflect a commitment to excellence.

## Audit Prep Timelines and Planning

Achieving audit readiness is less a sprint and more an exercise in time management. A meticulously composed timeline is the backbone of effective audit planning, providing a clear chronology of the tasks at hand while ensuring a poised approach to every phase of the audit.

Long story short – a well-crafted timeline is a guide and tool to

mitigate stress, allowing for a far more comprehensive and controlled audit process.

## Developing a Timeline for Audit Preparation

Yes, crafting a detailed audit preparation timeline entails marking dates on a calendar.

But you also need to recognize milestones as significant progress markers.

- **Timeline Essentials:** Begin with the end in mind. Identify the audit start date, then work backward to establish critical benchmarks – document preparation cut-off dates, internal review deadlines, and team readiness check-ins. your company’s culture of accountability and continuous learning.
- **Avoiding the Eleventh Hour:** A strategically designed timeline helps sidestep the harried pace of last-minute rushes, allowing you to proceed with methodical and thoughtful preparation. It enhances your ability

to conduct a thorough and nuanced audit, worked at a measured pace, and free from unnecessary pressures.

## Scheduling and Meeting Key Milestones

Designating key milestones serves as a guide, leading you through your audit preparation processes.

- **Identifying Milestones:** Pinpoint crucial milestones such as completing a risk assessment, finalizing schedules for recounting inventories, or reconciling key accounts.
- **Ensuring Timeliness:** Establishing regular check-ins and progress reports ensures an audit and audit prep flow smoothly toward these milestones without interruption. Assign responsible parties to each milestone, tethering them to achievable objectives and clear accountability.

# Interactive Timelines

Interactive timelines bring the abstract concept of time into a more tangible, manageable framework.

- **Dynamic Tracking:** Interactive timelines, which you can share and update in real time, offer a living document that visualizes progress toward audit readiness Valhalla, allowing for agile responses to emerging challenges or delays.
- **Cultivating Coordination:** By utilizing dynamic tools like interactive timelines, you foster an environment where team members have a shared, visual understanding of deadlines and dependencies, promoting active engagement and collaboration throughout the pre-audit process. Assign responsible parties to each milestone, tethering them to achievable objectives and clear accountability.

# Advanced Planning and Implementation

Laying the groundwork for your audit with foresight can make all the difference.

- **The Rewards of Early Starts:** Encourage beginning audit preparations well in advance. Instilling a culture of early planning helps cut procrastination off at the knees, allowing teams to work with a sense of purpose and direction.
- **Pre-Audit Risk Assessments:** Implementing pre-audit risk assessments lets you put fires out before they start, while early engagement with auditors can clarify expectations, build relationships, and refine your preparation approach based on their preliminary feedback.

Through thoughtful planning and timing, finance leaders can pivot the audit process from a daunting task into a structured and seamless operation. Implementing a calculated timeline with clear landmarks, adopting interactive tools for dynamic tracking, and embracing proactive strategies can make an audit far smoother sailing.

# Tools and Resources for Audit Preparation

A well-forged toolkit can be the difference between an audit that's more stepping stone than stumbling block. And that's always a good thing. Because, in this digital age, there's a wealth of resources at your disposal, from advanced software to the wisdom of seasoned professionals. To harness these assets is to turn the audit process into an opportunity for refinement and confidence-building.

## Software and Technology Solutions

Granted, it's a big ol' world of high-tech toys and tools that can streamline the myriad processes leading into your audit. So, for brevity's sake – or has that ship already sailed? – we're going to take

a look at how some of our preferred software solutions can factor into audit success, either directly or indirectly.

## Tools

- **Workiva:** [Workiva](#) provides an effective solution for companies looking to enhance their narrative alongside regulatory compliance efforts. By digitizing the compliance process, Workiva offers a connected platform that prioritizes data integrity and consistency. This interconnected approach helps organizations streamline their compliance efforts, making audit preparation smoother and more efficient.
- **Anaplan:** [Anaplan](#) offers a valuable tool for strategic financial planning that seamlessly integrates with audit readiness. It provides a synchronized planning platform that allows companies to adapt to the rhythm of audits. By bridging financial forecasting and audit preparation, Anaplan helps organizations maintain accuracy and alignment between their [financial planning](#) and audit requirements.
- **Alteryx:** [Alteryx](#) is a boon for data enthusiasts. It offers a robust analytics solution that simplifies the journey from complex datasets to audit-ready insights. With automation, [Alteryx transforms raw](#)

[data](#) into actionable information, making the process of preparing audit reports more efficient and data-driven.

- **NetSuite:** [NetSuite](#) empowers businesses with a holistic view of their financial health in real time. The cloud-based ERP provides comprehensive insights into transactions, expense reports, and cash flow, aligning your financial story with what auditors aim to validate. This unified business suite ensures that your financial data is readily available and accurate for audit purposes.
- **BlackLine:** [BlackLine](#) is a market leader in streamlining records and refining financial processes. Its suite of tools enhances controls and efficiency, making it an excellent choice for businesses committed to maintaining orderly, timely, and accurate financial statements. BlackLine's solutions help ensure financial records are audit-ready and in compliance with regulatory standards.

Remember, this is just a small sample of the many, many audit-helpful solutions available today. Our advice is to do your due diligence – perhaps starting with the five we've already covered – to find tools that fit your specific goals and needs well. You'll be thanking us later.

## Checklists and Templates

Checklists and templates are the compass and map for your audit preparation trek.

- **Checklists:** Detailed, role-specific checklists can serve as a touchstone for all involved, ensuring each department and team member understands their responsibilities and deadlines.
- **Templates:** Templates act as a scaffolding for consistently recording and reporting information. These structured frameworks keep data organized, making the auditor's navigation through your financial statements as straightforward as possible.

Implementing these tools can drastically reduce errors and omissions, providing a clear path for all involved and ensuring the auditors' microscope finds your business in an orderly state.

# Continuous Auditing Tools

Continuous auditing tools represent the progressive edge of financial compliance, a concept that we've [spoken at length about](#) in the past.

- **Automated Assurance:** Employ solutions that can audit countless data points in real-time, transcending the constraints of manual examination and presenting a detailed, continuous assessment long before the official auditors are knocking at the front door.
- **Integration Considerations:** When it comes to integrating continuous improvement tools and processes, try to use a strategic approach that considers factors from data privacy to workflow alignments, building a seamless throughway from data entry points to reportable insights.

Also, continuous auditing tools offer benefits beyond preparedness, providing a constant pulse on the financial health of your business and revealing insightful trends that drive decision-making. They're an x-ray into your operations, the type of thing CFOs dreamed of just a few years

ago. But here they are – a reality. So take advantage of them.

## Leveraging Third-Party Audit Advisors

Last but not least, engaging the right third-party advisors brings skill, knowledge, and experience into your audit preparation efforts that you would otherwise miss, helping you steer through regulatory and compliance currents with seasoned precision.

Partner with the right ones and advisors can greatly streamline your audit preparation process, bringing professionalism, impartiality, and a breadth of knowledge that might be difficult to wrangle from internal resources alone.

Obviously, this is where [Embark fits into the equation](#). Because as thorough as we've tried to be with this massive guide, we really only scratched the audit readiness surface. So, yes, an awful lot more goes into preparing for your audit – whether it's AICPA or PCAOB, for an IPO, a PE investment, or a bank covenant.

## Leveraging Third-Party Audit Advisors

The bottom line – Embark just might be your ace in the hole. The team that transforms an audit from pain to opportunity. [So let's talk.](#)



[embarkwithus.com](http://embarkwithus.com)

