

ISO Design Risk Playbook

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Brian Lisiewski, P.E.

Continuing Education and Development, Inc.

P: (877) 322-5800
info@cedengineering.com

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Introduction: Quality, Risk, and the Engineering Design Process

In today's engineering environment, quality management and risk management are inseparable. ISO 9001, a globally adopted quality management standard, emphasizes building quality and risk awareness into all organizational processes, including design and development. For engineers, this translates into "risk-based thinking" — proactively identifying and addressing potential problems in designs rather than reacting to failures after the fact. Adopting this mindset helps prevent costly design revisions, field failures, safety incidents, and project delays.

Risk-Based Thinking in ISO 9001

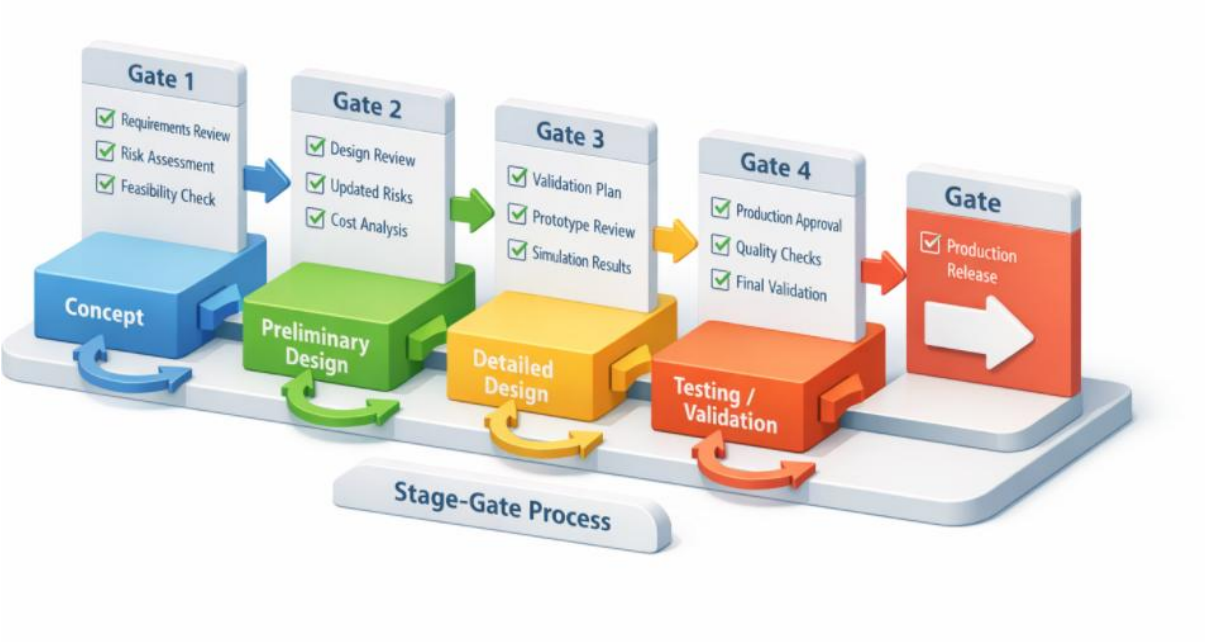
The 2015 revision of ISO 9001 introduced an explicit focus on **risk-based thinking** as a core principle. Instead of treating risk management as a separate activity, ISO 9001:2015 expects organizations to **weave risk consideration into the planning and execution of processes**. In practice, this means engineers need to recognize risks and opportunities early, define mitigation actions, and allocate appropriate controls where risks are higher. For example, when designing a bridge, recognizing the risk of extreme wind loads or seismic events early allows the team to incorporate mitigation measures — such as higher safety factors or special damping systems — as part of the design requirements.

Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)

ISO 9001 is built on a continuous improvement cycle. The PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act) is a guiding framework to embed risk and quality into iterative practice. In the design context:

- **Plan**: Define design objectives, requirements, and identify risks up front. Plan how to mitigate key risks and verify the design.
- **Do**: Execute the design activities (drawings, calculations, prototypes) and implement risk controls — such as safety design margins and redundancy — as planned.
- **Check**: At each gate or review, verify and test the design outputs against requirements and assess whether mitigations are effective. Document any issues or new risks identified.
- **Act**: Improve or adjust the design based on review findings. Take corrective actions for any problems, update risk assessments, and move to the next stage when all criteria are met.

By using PDCA and risk-based thinking, engineers create a feedback loop where lessons learned and identified issues are continuously fed back to refine the design before it is finalized. This approach improves reliability and reduces costly late-stage changes.



Documented Information and Traceability

A key ISO 9001 principle is maintaining documented information (controlled documents and records) for traceability. In design projects, this means keeping clear records of requirements, design changes, test results, and risk assessments. For example, if a design requirement in an electrical system is to comply with a safety standard, the design outputs (schematics, simulations, test plans) should trace back to that requirement and demonstrate compliance. All decisions — including trade-offs and mitigations — should be documented so they can be reviewed at gate meetings and audited when needed.

Risk Identification and Mitigation in Engineering Design

Understanding Risk in Engineering Projects

In an engineering context, *risk* typically refers to the combination of the **probability of an undesirable event** (such as a failure or non-compliance) and the **severity of its consequences**. For instance, a risk in mechanical design might be the chance of a gearbox failure (probability) that could cause machine downtime or a safety hazard (impact). ISO 9001 encourages teams to identify such risks early so they can plan to avoid or reduce them.

Identifying Risks

Engineers use several tools and techniques to uncover potential problems during design:

Brainstorming and Checklists

The design team can brainstorm anything that might go wrong based on past projects, or use checklists of common failure modes — for example, material fatigue or foundation settlement for a bridge design.

Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA)

FMEA is a structured method to list possible **failure modes**, their **causes and effects**, and then evaluate each for **Severity (S)**, **Occurrence likelihood (O)**, and **Detection difficulty (D)**. Each issue receives a **Risk Priority Number (RPN) = S × O × D**. Higher RPN values indicate higher-priority risks requiring action.

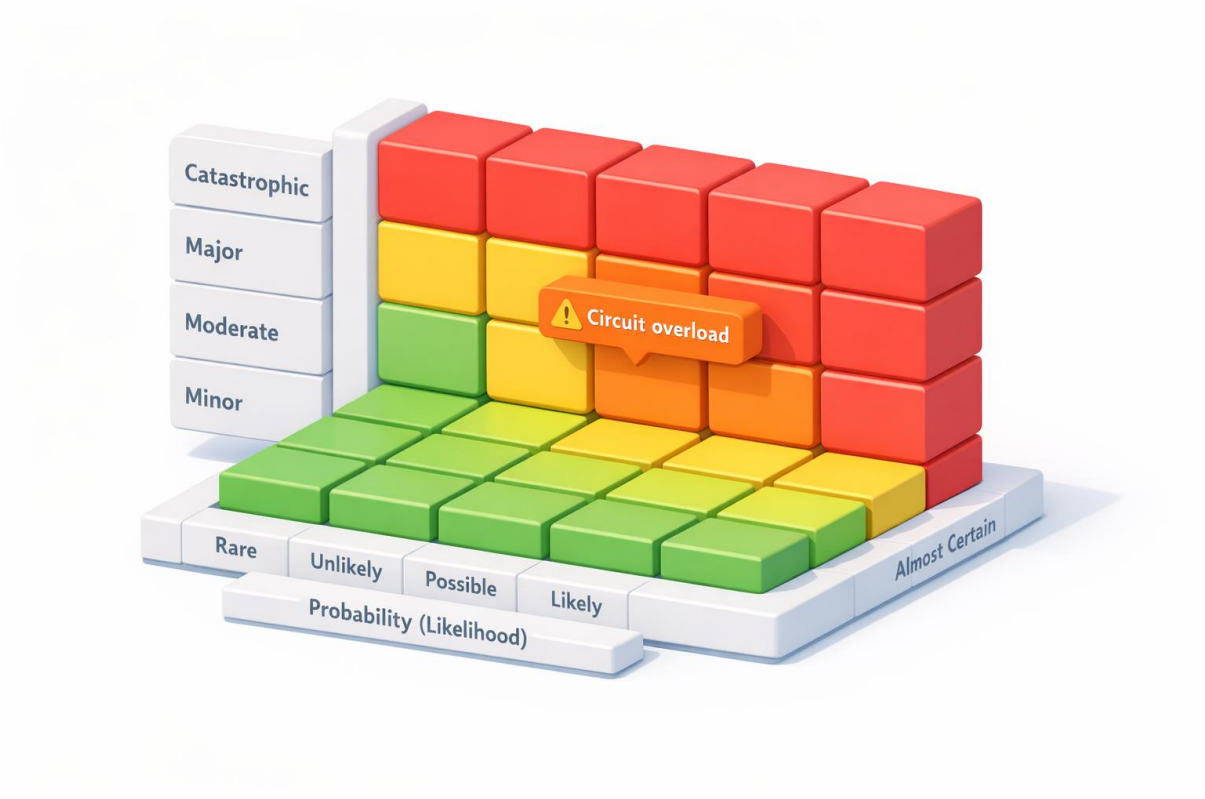
Example: In an electrical circuit design, a failure mode could be "Power supply overheats and fails." The team might rate Severity as 7 (device shutdown risk), Occurrence as 4 (design runs near component limits), and Detection as 5 (failure may only surface in final testing). RPN = 7 × 4 × 5 = 140 — high enough to trigger a mitigation such as adding a cooling fan or higher-capacity components.

Risk Register

A **risk register** is a living document that tracks identified risks, their assessment (likelihood and impact), and the mitigation actions planned for each. It assigns risk owners and tracks status (open, mitigated, closed). This ensures no risk falls through the cracks during a project. Many organizations formalize this as part of design planning.

Risk Matrix

Risks can be prioritized using a **risk matrix**, a visual tool mapping *Likelihood* vs. *Impact*. A 3×3 or 5×5 grid categorizes risks as Low, Medium, or High priority based on where they fall. High-impact, high-probability risks are flagged immediately; low-impact, unlikely risks may be accepted or simply monitored.



Risk Mitigation Strategies

Once a risk is identified and rated, engineers choose how to address it:

- **Avoidance**: Change the design approach to eliminate the risk entirely. (Example: replace a flammable material with a non-flammable alternative to remove fire risk.)
- **Reduction (Mitigation)**: Take action to reduce the probability or impact. (Example: add a backup pump in a wastewater treatment system to reduce the impact of pump failure, or install surge protectors in electrical designs to reduce the likelihood of voltage-spike damage.)
- **Transfer**: Shift the risk to another party or use insurance. This is less common within the design itself and applies more to project-level risk management.
- **Acceptance**: Acknowledge the risk and proceed — typically for low-level risks or those that are impractical to mitigate. Accepted risks must still be documented and periodically revisited.

Mitigating Requirements

Planning for risks often generates specific requirements or tasks that must be fulfilled as part of the design process. For example, if a civil engineering team identifies soil instability as a risk for a new building foundation, a mitigating requirement might be: "Perform a geotechnical survey and incorporate results into the foundation design." In an environmental engineering project for a water treatment plant, identifying the risk of feed-water variability might lead to the requirement: "Design redundancy in filtration stages to handle peak contaminant loads." Such mitigating requirements ensure risk treatment is built into the design rather than addressed as an afterthought.

Continuous Risk Monitoring

Risk management is not a one-time event. Risks should be re-assessed at each design stage — each gate review will cover open risks — and new risks should be added as the design evolves. For instance, during prototype testing a new failure mode may emerge, such as a wear issue in a mechanical component; this becomes a new risk to mitigate in the next iteration. ISO 9001's emphasis on monitoring and updating plans aligns with maintaining an actively updated risk register throughout the project.

The Gated Design Process: Phases, Tasks, and Reviews

A **gated design process** (also called a phase-gate or stage-gate process) breaks a project into sequential **phases** separated by **gate checkpoints**. At each gate review, the project must meet defined criteria — tasks completed, documents prepared, issues resolved — before advancing to the next phase. This method is widely used in engineering project management to ensure structured progress and quality control, and it aligns with ISO 9001's requirement to plan and control design and development in a structured way.



Typical Design Phases and Gates

Phase 1 — Concept Development (Gate 1: Concept Review)

Gather stakeholder requirements and initial design ideas; evaluate feasibility.

Tasks: Define project scope, identify customer needs, list initial risks, consider regulatory requirements, and draft design inputs.

Gate 1 Review: Confirm requirements and feasibility; ensure risks have been identified and a plan exists to address them; approve proceeding to design work.

Phase 2 — Preliminary Design (Gate 2: Preliminary Design Review)

Develop a high-level design including basic schematics, layouts, and initial analyses.

Tasks: Create preliminary drawings; perform initial calculations (e.g., load calculations for a bridge or circuit simulations for an electrical system); update the risk assessment with newly discovered issues; identify key design inputs and expected outputs.

Gate 2 Review: Evaluate whether the preliminary design meets fundamental requirements; review the updated risk register; confirm planned mitigations are on track before detailed design work begins.

Phase 3 — Detailed Design (Gate 3: Critical Design Review)

Complete the detailed engineering design and all supporting documentation.

Tasks: Finalize all drawings, specifications, and models; perform detailed analyses (e.g., stress analysis for mechanical parts, hydrological modeling for a stormwater system); complete a detailed FMEA. Implement risk mitigations in the design — such as adding redundancy, selecting more robust materials, or incorporating safety factors.

Gate 3 Review: A formal design review checks that the design outputs align with design inputs, that verification plans are in place, and that no high-priority risks remain unaddressed. This is a key ISO 9001 control point.

Phase 4 — Testing and Validation (Gate 4: Test/Validation Review)

Build prototypes or trial sections and test the design against requirements.

Tasks: Conduct verification tests (does the design output meet specifications?) and validation tests (does the product meet user needs and regulatory standards under real conditions?). Examples: for electrical — test a circuit board for performance and safety; for civil — test soil compaction or structural elements; for mechanical — lifecycle fatigue testing of a component; for environmental — pilot-test a treatment process on actual water samples.

Gate 4 Review: Verify test results; confirm the design outputs fulfill all inputs and user needs; confirm that any issues found during testing are fully resolved before proceeding.

Phase 5 — Release and Continuous Improvement (Final Gate: Design Release)

Finalize and hand off the design to production or implementation.

Tasks: Complete final documentation (released drawings, bill of materials, user manuals); obtain required certifications or approvals (e.g., UL listing for electrical devices, building permit sign-offs for civil projects); hand over to manufacturing or construction.

Post-Release Continuous Improvement: Collect performance data from the field (product reliability data, customer feedback, incident reports) and feed these lessons learned back into future projects. This may involve a post-project review meeting consistent with ISO 9001's focus on learning and improving over time.

Design Reviews as Control Points

At each gate, a design review meeting occurs with a cross-functional team (engineering, quality, operations, safety, etc.). The purpose is to evaluate the design's readiness to advance. A formal review typically:

- Checks that **design inputs** (requirements) are addressed by the current **design outputs** (drawings, analyses, prototype results).
- Verifies that all **planned tasks** for that stage are complete — simulations run, FMEA updated, documentation current.
- Examines the **risk status**: are high risks mitigated or acceptably managed? Are new risks identified that must be addressed before proceeding?
- Ensures **documented information** is organized, accessible, and version-controlled — including the design plan, meeting minutes, and all design files.
- Assigns **action items** (e.g., "Perform additional test X before next review") and either authorizes progression to the next phase or requires further work and a repeat review.

This gating approach prevents advancing before critical work is done, thereby reducing the risk of costly rework later.

Example: Gated Process in Practice

An electrical engineering team is designing a new solar-powered battery backup system for a telecommunications tower. At Gate 1 (Concept), they gather requirements: backup capacity, environmental operating conditions (temperature range), regulatory codes (electrical safety standards), and potential risks (battery thermal runaway, power failure modes). They draft a design plan capturing these inputs and initial mitigation tasks — for example, requiring a fail-safe battery management circuit to prevent overcharge.

At Gate 2 (Preliminary Design), they present preliminary schematics and calculations showing how many batteries and solar panels are needed, initial simulations for power requirements, and an updated risk list

including the risk of lightning strikes, which requires surge protection. The Gate 2 review identifies an additional risk — extreme weather performance — and tasks the team with testing components at temperature extremes.

During Detailed Design, they size wiring and select components with a safety margin above maximum loads, and perform an FMEA on critical components (power converters and battery systems), implementing mitigations such as redundant converters for high-RPN failure modes. By Gate 3, all drawings and the FMEA are complete, and all high risks have mitigation plans.

At Gate 4, they build and test a prototype system for capacity and safety — verifying against specs and validating against simulated field conditions. Only after resolving all issues (such as adding an improved cooling system identified during testing) do they reach the Final Gate, where the design is approved for production. After deployment, the team monitors field performance and compiles a lessons-learned report for continuous improvement.

Integrating ISO 9001 Principles in Design and Development

The gated process described above provides a structured way to satisfy ISO 9001's high-level requirements for design and development. The following connects key ISO 9001 principles to elements of the gated design approach.

- **Design Planning and Stages**: ISO 9001 requires planning the design and development process, considering the project's complexity and stages, responsibilities, and required resources. In practice, this is achieved by defining the gates ahead of time and specifying what each stage must accomplish. A civil engineering project, for example, might define stages of Concept, 30% design, 70% design, Final design, and Construction-ready.
- **Design Inputs and Outputs**: ISO 9001 emphasizes having clear design inputs (requirements), reviewing them for adequacy, and defining design outputs that satisfy those inputs. Early phases focus on capturing all relevant requirements — customer needs, industry standards, safety and regulatory codes, performance criteria, and potential failure consequences. Gate reviews check that outputs (drawings, specifications, calculations, test results) align with the inputs.
- **Design Reviews (Controls)**: ISO 9001 expects organizations to have design and development controls, typically implemented as periodic design reviews. In the gated process, each gate meeting functions as a design review — verifying the design is on track, that verification and validation activities are planned or completed, and that any problems are identified and resolved before moving on.
- **Verification and Validation**: Designs should be verified (outputs meet input requirements) and validated (the final product meets user needs). In a gated process, verification tasks (technical reviews, inspections, analyses) and validation tasks (functional testing, user trials) are assigned to specific gates. Gate 4 (Validation) typically includes prototype testing to validate the product under real operating conditions.
- **Design Changes**: ISO 9001 requires that design changes — especially those made after initial approval — are controlled and reviewed for impact. If an issue is discovered late, engineers must go through a formal engineering change process (evaluating effects on function, safety, and compliance, with appropriate approvals before implementation).
- **Document Control**: All design documents, risk assessments, meeting minutes, test plans, and related records are maintained under document control — versioning, approvals, and structured storage — per ISO 9001's requirements for documented information. A standardized folder or database structure for storing design records is a best practice for large teams and audits.
- **Continuous Improvement**: Beyond the specific project, ISO 9001 emphasizes continual improvement of processes and products. After completing a design, teams should reflect on what worked and what did not, and capture lessons learned for future projects. This might include updating design checklists, adding a standard test earlier in the process, or revising risk templates based on surprises encountered.

Tools and Techniques: FMEA, Decision Matrices, and Trade-off Analysis

Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA)

An FMEA table typically includes columns for *Failure Mode*, *Cause*, *Effect*, *Severity (S)*, *Occurrence (O)*, *Detection (D)*, *RPN*, and *Recommended Actions*. By calculating the Risk Priority Number (RPN = S × O × D) for each failure mode, engineers prioritize which issues need attention first.

Example — Hydraulic Lift System: One potential failure mode is "Hydraulic hose rupture." Cause: material fatigue or overpressure. Effect: lift failure and oil leak (safety hazard). Initial ratings: S = 9, O = 3, D = 4. RPN = 9 × 3 × 4 = 108. Recommended actions: use a hose with a higher-pressure rating (reduces O) and add an inspection schedule (improves D). After mitigation, estimated O = 1 and D = 2, yielding a new RPN = 9 × 1 × 2 = 18 — a significantly safer level.

Table 1. Simplified FMEA Entry: Hydraulic Lift System

Failure Mode	Cause	Effect	S (1–10)	O (1–10)	D (1–10)	RPN	Mitigation Action
Hydraulic hose rupture	Fatigue or over-pressure	Lift stops, oil spill (safety risk)	9	3	4	108	Use a hose with a higher-pressure rating (reduces O)" to "use a hose with a higher pressure rating and replace on a defined schedule (reduces O by addressing fatigue-driven rupture)

Note: The initial RPN is 108. After mitigations, the team would recalculate — expecting a much lower RPN — thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of the risk reduction measures.

Decision Matrices (Trade-off Analysis)

When engineers face multiple design options, a decision matrix (also called a Pugh matrix or weighted scoring) provides a systematic way to choose. Options are listed against weighted criteria, and each option is scored on each criterion. By including risk as a criterion (e.g., technical risk or reliability of each option), this method integrates risk directly into the design decision.

Table 2. Decision Matrix: Filtration Technology Comparison

Criteria (Weight)	Option A: Sand Filter	Option B: Membrane Filter	Option C: Carbon Filter
Capital Cost (30%)	5 (lowest cost)	2 (high cost)	4 (moderate cost)
Filtration Efficiency (30%)	3 (moderate)	5 (very high)	4 (high)
Maintenance Burden (20%)	4 (low maintenance)	3 (regular cleaning)	5 (minimal maintenance)
Risk and Reliability (20%)	3 (simple, low risk)	4 (membrane fouling risk)	4 (moderate risk)
Weighted Score	3.8 / 5.0	3.5 / 5.0	**4.2 / 5.0**

In this example, Option C (Activated Carbon) achieves the highest weighted score (4.4/5.0), indicating it is the preferred choice when balancing efficiency, cost, maintenance, and risk. The structured approach ensures risk considerations are quantitatively factored into design decisions.

Tolerance Analysis (Mechanical)

Ensuring parts fit and function requires analyzing mechanical tolerances. Engineers calculate a tolerance stack-up — summing worst-case dimensional variations to determine whether parts will still assemble or function correctly. If the stack-up reveals potential interference or excessive gap, the mitigation may be to tighten certain tolerances, adjust dimensions, or add adjustment features to accommodate manufacturing variation.

Reliability Calculations (Electrical)

In electrical or electronic systems, risk often relates to reliability. Engineers may calculate an estimated Mean Time Between Failures (MTBF) using component reliability data to understand baseline system performance. Adding redundancy is a common mitigation strategy: for example, if a power supply has two independent parallel circuits and each has a 10% annual failure probability, the probability that both fail simultaneously drops to approximately 1% (0.10 × 0.10) — far lower than either circuit alone. This illustrates how redundancy significantly reduces the risk of total system downtime.

Hazard and Operability Study (HAZOP) and What-If Analysis

Particularly in chemical or environmental engineering projects, teams perform HAZOPs or structured what-if brainstorming to identify hazards (such as chemical spills or emissions) and ensure safety features are built into the design. For example, in designing a water treatment plant, a HAZOP might raise the question: "What if the chlorine dosing pump fails?" The mitigation might include dual dosing pumps or an auto-shutdown interlock that activates if disinfectant levels fall below threshold, ensuring regulatory water quality standards are still met.

Discipline-Specific Applications and Examples

This section illustrates how the general principles of ISO 9001, risk management, and gated design apply across different engineering disciplines. Each discipline confronts unique types of risks and uses particular methods for mitigation, but the foundational approach remains the same: plan for quality and risk from the start, and carry those considerations through every design stage.

Electrical Engineering: Ensuring Circuit Reliability and Safety

Consider designing a backup power supply system for a data center. Key requirements include delivering stable power for a defined number of hours during outages, meeting electrical codes (such as NFPA 70, the National Electrical Code), and ensuring user safety (no electric shock or fire hazards). Identified risks include battery failures, power surges, short circuits, and overheating.

- **Design Inputs**: Load capacity, regulatory compliance, environmental conditions (temperature, humidity), and potential failure consequences (e.g., battery thermal runaway causing fire).
- **Mitigation in Design**: Add fuses or circuit breakers to address overload and short-circuit risk. Specify cooling fans or heat sinks to manage thermal risk. Select all components rated above worst-case loads (design margin).
- **Analysis Tools**: Perform an electrical FMEA on critical components. For example, a failure mode — "Power inverter transistor fails shorted" — might lead to requiring automatic shutdown circuits and improved heat dissipation. Use simulations to ensure power quality and reliability across battery strings.
- **Design Reviews and Testing**: At the detailed design gate, include cross-discipline reviewers (e.g., a fire protection engineer to review electrical fire risk mitigations). Test a prototype under overload conditions to validate safety features. Document all results and corrective actions.
- **Outcome**: The final design carries documented evidence of risk mitigation — test reports showing compliance with safety standards and FMEA records showing no high-RPN issues remaining — exemplifying ISO 9001's influence on quality and safety throughout the design process.

Mechanical Engineering: Safe and Robust Machine Design

Consider a project to design a lifting crane mechanism for a manufacturing facility. Key quality aspects include meeting load capacity, reliability, and operator safety.

- **Risk Identification**: Engineers identify hazards such as mechanical failure (cable breaking, motor stalling under load) and operational misuse (overloading, collisions). Applicable standards include the ASME B30 series for cranes and OSHA safety regulations.
- **Mitigating Requirements**: These risks drive design requirements: "Design with a Factor of Safety of 5 for all load-bearing components" and "Include limit switches to prevent over-travel of the crane hook."

- **Detailed Design and Analysis**: The team performs stress calculations on beams and bolts, uses finite element analysis (FEA) to verify deflections and stresses are within safe limits, and conducts a mechanical FMEA on critical parts. If the FMEA identifies "Brake overheating leads to failure to hold load" with high severity, the mitigation is to specify a fail-safe brake that defaults to locked when power is lost.
- **Prototyping and Testing**: Simulation of worst-case load scenarios confirms the actual Factor of Safety meets or exceeds 5. Physical tests may include loading above rated capacity to verify the safety margin.
- **Gated Reviews**: At each stage, the review team confirms all analysis reports (stress calculations, FEA results) are documented, all high-priority FMEA issues are resolved, and a maintenance plan is in place (since regular cable inspection mitigates long-term risk).

Civil Engineering: Managing Construction Project Risks

Consider designing a stormwater management system for a new urban development, including detention basins, sewers, and culverts that must handle flood events and last for decades.

- **Risk and Requirements**: Early risks include flooding from storms exceeding the 100-year recurrence interval, soil instability, and construction safety hazards. These inform design inputs: "System must safely convey 100-year storm flows" and "Design slopes to minimize erosion risk."
- **Design Process**: Tasks include hydrologic calculations, hydraulic modeling of culverts and channels, geotechnical analysis for earthworks, and structural design for concrete structures — all performed with factors of safety required by code, or greater when risk analysis warrants it.
- **Risk Mitigation**: A risk matrix is used for construction safety and schedule risks. For technical risks such as foundation settlement, the team plans extra soil borings and conservative design assumptions to handle worse-than-expected soil conditions.
- **Gate Reviews and Validation**: At the final design review (approximately 90% design completion), the team confirms all analyses meet criteria and contingency measures are in place — for example, an emergency spillway added to a detention basin to handle overflow beyond design capacity. Computational fluid dynamics (CFD) simulation may be used to validate water flow through the design.

Environmental Engineering: Quality and Risk in Process Design

Consider designing an industrial wastewater treatment system. The goal is to ensure effluent meets environmental regulations (such as Clean Water Act standards) under variable operating conditions.

- **Risk Factors**: Key risks include fluctuations in influent pollutant levels, equipment failures leading to discharge violations, and hazardous byproducts. These pose environmental compliance and public health risks.

- **Integrating Requirements**: Design inputs include regulatory limits on effluent composition, lessons learned from previous projects, and documented failure scenarios such as "membrane fouling causing overflow" or "chemical overdosing causing a toxic byproduct."
- **Mitigations in Design**: If a treatment tank could overflow upon valve failure, the design includes an overflow diversion system or backup valves. If pollutant concentrations might spike, an equalization basin buffers against surges, ensuring steady processing.
- **Analysis and FMEA**: An FMEA focusing on environmental and safety impacts — for example, failure mode "Chlorine injector fails to shut off," effect: chlorine overdose — leads to installing an automatic sensor and interlock that stops the pump if chlorine levels exceed a threshold.
- **Gate Reviews**: With multiple disciplines involved (process, electrical/instrumentation, civil), gate reviews are critical to coordinate requirements. A pilot study treating sample wastewater may serve as the validation step.
- **Final Outcome**: The design includes robust features addressing initial and newly discovered risks. All documentation — treatment capacity calculations, risk assessments, pilot test results — is filed. The plant, once built, should reliably meet its permit requirements.

Conclusion: Ensuring Quality by Design

ISO 9001-driven design processes encourage engineers to take a proactive approach: plan thoroughly, design with risk in mind, and verify at each step that the product meets requirements. The gated design process serves as a practical framework to implement these ideas — breaking work into manageable phases with clear objectives and quality checkpoints. By integrating risk management tools such as FMEA and decision matrices, engineers across Electrical, Mechanical, Civil, and Environmental disciplines can make informed decisions that enhance reliability and safety.

Importantly, this is not just about compliance — it is about improving engineering outcomes. Designs that undergo rigorous risk-based review are less likely to fail unexpectedly, and when issues do arise, they are caught early when changes are far less costly. Adopting these practices leads to higher confidence in design results, satisfied stakeholders, and a strong record of safety and effectiveness — the ultimate goals of both ISO 9001 and professional engineering practice.

As a licensed Professional Engineer, applying these principles fulfills your ethical obligation to ensure public safety and welfare, while also streamlining project delivery. Continuous improvement is not the final step — it is a mindset. After each project, carrying forward lessons learned will make the next design process smoother and more robust, creating a cycle of ever-improving quality.

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