



## Annual Reviews and SEC Compliance Programs

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November 28, 2025

The first quarter each year for an SEC registered investment adviser (“RIA”) is a busy time.<sup>2</sup> An RIA must prepare and file its annual amendment to Form ADV Parts 1 and 2A (if required, Form CRS). It must send Form ADV Parts 2A and Part 2B and, if applicable, Form CRS and the Regulation S-P Privacy Notice to its clients and post Part 2B and, if applicable, Form CRS and the Regulation S-P Privacy Notice on its website. This is an opportune time for the chief compliance officer (“CCO”) to conduct or cause to be conducted the annual review (“AR” or “annual review”).

Good practice is to complete the annual review as you prepare your Form ADV annual amendment. Plan in Q4, start in January, complete your AR and file your Form ADV annual amendment before the end of Q1. Do not wait for the last minute.

### I’m an RIA. What are my Advisers Act compliance requirements?

Rule 206(4)-7<sup>3</sup> under the Investment Advisers Act of 1940 (“Advisers Act”) imposes three compliance requirements on an RIA.

*First*, an RIA must adopt and implement written policies and procedures “reasonably designed” to prevent violations by it and its Supervised Persons<sup>4</sup> of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder.

*Second*, every RIA must review its written policies and procedures (“WPPs”) annually to determine “their adequacy” and “the effectiveness of their implementation.”<sup>5</sup> The AR should focus on matters that arose during the year, changes in the business and personnel and developments in law and regulation. It is a review and analysis of the adequacy and effectiveness of WPPs, how these performed during the year and how you used the output of your monitoring tasks and forensic testing to validate the WPPs and address issues *as they arose*. Under Advisers Act Rule 204-2(a)(17), an RIA must keep any records that it generated when conducting the Rule 206(4)-7 required AR.

*Third*, the RIA must designate a CCO.

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<sup>2</sup> We discuss annual reviews for an RIA with a December 31 fiscal year end. Firms with a different fiscal year end – March 31, June 30 or September 30 – would shift dates and deadlines accordingly.

<sup>3</sup> [Rule 206\(4\)-7, 17 CFR §275.206\(4\)-7.](#)

<sup>4</sup> “Supervised Person” is defined in Advisers Act Section 202(a)(25) as a partner/director (or a person holding a similar status or performing a similar function), officer or employee of an RIA, or a person who provides investment advice on the RIA’s behalf and is subject to the RIA’s supervision and control. [15 U.S.C. §80b-2.](#)

<sup>5</sup> Rule 206(4)-7(b).

## **I'm a CCO. I believe that I do a good job. Can I be held liable?**

The Rule 206(4)-7 adopting release<sup>6</sup> states that an RIA must ensure that its CCO is knowledgeable, competent and empowered with authority to administer the compliance program. A CCO is not a guarantor of compliance but an adviser. The business is responsible for compliance.

SEC Commissioner Hester Peirce believes that a CCO plays “a vital role in ensuring that investment advisers ... comply with the securities laws. A good CCO expertly weaves compliance into all of a firm’s activities. Attracting well-qualified people to the profession is important, and fears of facing liability for someone else’s missteps can dissuade excellent candidates from seeking compliance jobs.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Being knowledgeable and competent**

An RIA that does not have an Advisers Act knowledgeable and competent CCO might receive a deficiency letter from the Division of Examinations (“EXAMS”) or be the subject of an enforcement action.

- *In the Matter of Modern Portfolio Management, Inc., G. Thomas Damasco II, and Bryan F. Ohm.*<sup>8</sup> The principals “... tasked an employee with less than three months of experience with overseeing compliance ... even though that employee had no Advisers Act compliance knowledge, experience or training.” “MPM designated the employee as MPM’s CCO without ensuring that the employee had adequate knowledge, training or resources to assess MPM’s compliance with the Advisers Act.”<sup>9</sup>
- *In the Matter of Wunderlich Securities, Inc., Tracy L. Wiswall, and Gary K. Wunderlich, Jr.*<sup>10</sup> The newly hired CCO “had little or no practical experience with the regulatory requirements applicable to investment advisers when he joined WSI, including those regulatory requirements specifically applicable to Commission registered advisers. Wunderlich knew that Wiswall had little or no such practical experience when Wunderlich hired Wiswall.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Being liable**

Generally, a CCO would be liable where they are involved as an actor in misconduct; when they aided and abetted a violation;<sup>12</sup> when they impeded, misled or obstructed the SEC Staff; or turned a blind eye to improper behavior or ignored red flags. In a speech, former SEC Director of Enforcement Gurbir Grewal noted three areas where a CCO would be liable: “where compliance personnel affirmatively participated in misconduct unrelated to the compliance function; where they misled

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<sup>6</sup> “Compliance Programs of Investment Companies and Investment Advisers”, Advisers Act Release 2204, 68 F.R. 74714, 74720 (December 24, 2003), <https://www.sec.gov/rules/final/ia-2204.pdf> (“Compliance Release”).

<sup>7</sup> “Chief Compliance Officer Liability: Statement on In the Matter of Hamilton Investment Counsel LLC and Jeffrey Kirkpatrick”, Statement by Commissioner Hester Peirce (July 1, 2022), <https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/speeches-statements/peirce-statement-hamilton-investment-counsel-070122>.

<sup>8</sup> Admin Proc 3-15583 (October 23, 2013), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2013/ia-3702.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Admin Proc 3-14403 (May 27, 2011), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2011/34-64558.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., *SEC v Arete Wealth Management LLC et al*, 1:25-cv-00616 (E.D. Ill. January 17, 2025), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/complaints/2025/comp-pr2025-27.pdf> (“The SEC also charged Arete Wealth Advisors and its Chief Compliance Officer and General Counsel, ... with various violations of the federal securities laws related to a coverup of the representatives’ allegedly fraudulent conduct and other compliance failures, and charged Arete Wealth Management with recordkeeping violations.” – citing Press Release 2025-27 <https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025-27>).

regulators [impeded an examination]; and where there was a wholesale failure by them to carry out their compliance responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup> A dual hatted CCO (e.g., CCO and Head of Operations) might held be liable if they failed one portion of their dual role – for example, allowing non-compliant advertising (not in compliance with Rule 206(4)-1, the Marketing Rule) to be issued when obligated to compliance clear it but failing to do so. There are several enforcement actions on issuing non-compliant advertising or disclosing third-party ratings without proper disclosures.<sup>14</sup>

Two recent enforcement actions outline the liability of a CCO during an SEC examination. In one, the CCO “modified” Code of Ethics documentation.<sup>15</sup> In the other, the CCO drafted, backdated and signed annual review calendars as if the documents had been contemporaneously created.<sup>16</sup> Both resulted in fines and one resulted in a three-year ban from compliance or supervisory roles.

In addition to learning lessons from these and other enforcement actions,<sup>17</sup> you’ll find insights into the SEC’s views on CCO liability in speeches and statements given by Andrew Donohue, former Chief of Staff; Andrew Ceresney, former Director of the Division of Enforcement,<sup>18</sup> Commissioner Peirce<sup>19</sup> and Peter Driscoll, former Director of EXAMS.<sup>20</sup> Consider, also, the New York City Bar Association framework for CCO liability.<sup>21</sup>

### **What happens if I don’t conduct an annual review? Or don’t consider adequacy or effectiveness?**

EXAMS will review the records of your AR to evaluate what you have or have not done and how you used the findings. *See e.g.*, “Examiner Oversight of “Annual” Reviews Conducted by Advisers and Funds”<sup>22</sup> and source materials at “Compliance Outreach Program – Resources and Handouts.”<sup>23</sup> If EXAMS discovers that an RIA has failed to conduct an annual review it will issue a deficiency letter or sue an RIA or a CCO for not doing this.<sup>24</sup> As an example, in *IIA*, the SEC found that IIA “failed to adopt

<sup>13</sup> “Remarks at New York City Bar Association Compliance institute”, Speech by Enforcement Director Gurbir Grewal (October 24, 2023), <https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/grewal-remarks-nyc-bar-association-compliance-institute-102423>.

<sup>14</sup> *See, e.g.*, “SEC Charges Nine Investment Advisers in Ongoing Sweep into Marketing Rule Violations”, Press Release 2024-121 (September 9, 2024), [https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-121?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-121?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery) (“settled charges against nine registered investment advisers for violating the Marketing Rule by disseminating advertisements that included untrue or unsubstantiated statements of material fact or testimonials, endorsements, or third-party ratings that lacked required disclosures”).

<sup>15</sup> *In the matter of Suzanne Ballek*, Admin Proc 3-22493 (July 15, 2025), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2025/ia-6896.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> *In the matter of Colin Michael Moors*, Admin Proc 3-22489 (July 11, 2025), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2025/34-103437.pdf> (“Moors”).

<sup>17</sup> *Hamilton Investment Council, LLC and Jeffrey Kirkpatrick*, Admin Proc 3-20920 (June 30, 2022), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2022/34-95189.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Speeches by: Andrew Donohue (October 14, 2015) ([Donohue Speech](https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/remarks2016.html)) and (October 19, 2016) (<https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/remarks2016.html>); Andrew Ceresney (May 20, 2014) ([Ceresney Speech](https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/remarks2016.html)) and (November 4, 2015) ([Ceresney 2015 Speech](https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/remarks2016.html)).

<sup>19</sup> “Costumes, Candy and Compliance”: speech by Commissioner Hester Pierce (October 30, 2018), [www.sec.gov/speech](https://www.sec.gov/speech/2018/spch103018.htm), and “Statement on In the Matter of Hamilton Investment Counsel LLC and Jeffrey Kirkpatrick” (July 1, 2022), <https://www.sec.gov/news/statement/peirce-statement-hamilton-investment-counsel-070122>.

<sup>20</sup> “The Role of the CCO – Empowered, Senior and With Authority”, speech by Peter Driscoll (November 19, 2020), <https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/driscoll-role-cco-2020-11-19>.

<sup>21</sup> “Framework for Chief Compliance Officer Liability in the Financial Sector”, New York City Bar (June 2, 2021), [https://s3.amazonaws.com/documents.nycbar.org/files/NYC\\_Bar\\_CCO\\_Framework.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/documents.nycbar.org/files/NYC_Bar_CCO_Framework.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Gene A Gohlke, (September 15, 2006), [https://www.sec.gov/info/cco/ann\\_review\\_oversight.htm](https://www.sec.gov/info/cco/ann_review_oversight.htm).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.sec.gov/compliance/complianceoutreach/compliance-outreach-program-investment-adviser-investment-company-chief-compliance-officers/iaiccco-resources>.

<sup>24</sup> *See Moors*, note 16 *supra*. *See, e.g.*, *In the Matter of Apexium Financial LP*, Admin Proc 3-21747 (September 28, 2023), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2023/ia-6437.pdf>; (“Apexium”); *In the Matter of Ascension Asset Management LLC and Greenville M Gooder, Jr*, Initial Decision Release 1400, Admin Proc 3-19024 (April 3, 2020), <https://www.sec.gov/>

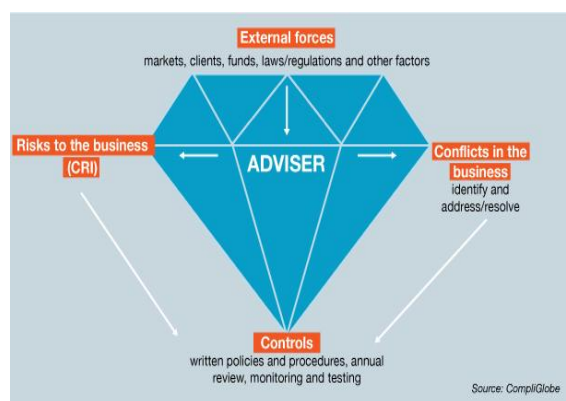
and implement written policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act and its rules, and ... failed to conduct an annual review of the adequacy of such compliance policies and procedures.”<sup>25</sup> Similar findings were noted in *Apexium*.

### The best place to start: a bespoke Advisers Act compliance program

Your WPPs must be *bespoke*. You can’t have an off the shelf or cookie cutter/precedent WPPs.<sup>26</sup> If EXAMS sees this, it will issue a deficiency letter or, if severe, make an enforcement referral.

The “reasonably designed” language in Rule 206(4)-7 means the following.

- The SEC expects that an RIA will identify and record the risks in its business in a Compliance Risk Inventory (“CRI”) and review and update this regularly – we suggest at least quarterly.
- The SEC requires that the RIA will identify the material conflicts of interest in its business and the means to address (mitigate) them, record these in a Conflicts Log, review and revise these regularly (again, at least quarterly) – and disclose them in its Form ADV Part 2A.
- The RIA must use the CRI and Conflicts Log entries, the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder, firm policies and procedures and applicable legal and regulatory requirements as the basis for its WPPs. Each policy and procedure should address one of these.
- The RIA should validate WPPs by using the output of monitoring tasks, forensic tests and the AR.



When it adopted Rule 206(4)-7, the SEC stated that an RIA must ensure that its WPPs are based on and address Advisers Act requirements (and other relevant provisions of law and regulation) as well as the risks and conflicts of interest in its business – this is the “reasonably designed” language. The SEC will expect you to *demonstrate* this. You must prove that your WPPs are mapped to reflect the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder, relevant laws and regulations and your risks and conflicts. Not doing it means inadequate WPPs that may lead to a deficiency letter or an Enforcement action.<sup>27</sup>

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[ali/aljdec/ 2020/ id1400cff.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2020/id1400cff.pdf); *Aria Partners GP LLC*, Admin Proc 3-18657 (August 22, 2018), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2018/ia-4991.pdf>; *Finser International Corporation and Andrew H Jacobus*, Admin Proc 3-20068 (September 24, 2020), [https:// www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2020/ia-5593.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2020/ia-5593.pdf); *Criterion Wealth Management Insurance Services Inc, Robert Allen Gravette and Mark Andrew MacArthur*, Complaint, 2:20-cv-01402 (C.D. Cal filed February 2, 2020), [https://www.sec.gov/ litigation/complaints/2020/comp24738.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/complaints/2020/comp24738.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> *In the Matter of Institutional Investor Advisers, Inc.*, Admin Proc 3-18303 (December 8, 2017), [https:// www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2017/33-10443.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2017/33-10443.pdf) (“IIA”), ¶ 26.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. *In the Matter of Consulting Services Group, LLC and Joe D. Meals*, Admin Proc 3-12863 (October 4, 2007), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2007/34-56612.pdf> (“pre-packaged” compliance manual).

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. *In the Matter of Dupree Financial Group LLC*, Admin Proc 3-17616 (October 5, 2016), [https:// www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2016/ia-4546.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2016/ia-4546.pdf); and *Western Asset Management Company*, Admin Proc 3-15689 (January 27, 2014),

An RIA must adopt a Code of Ethics (Advisers Act Rule 204A-1) and comply with other Advisers Act requirements, applicable provisions of other U.S. federal securities laws and, for non-U.S. RIAs, local laws, rules and regulations. Every RIA must file an annual amendment to its Form ADV Parts 1 and 2A (and if applicable Form CRS) and deliver or offer to deliver to its clients Form ADV Part 2A and Part 2B<sup>28</sup> and, if required, Form CRS and the Regulation S-P Privacy Notice.<sup>29</sup> And amend these when required.

Every RIA has on-going responsibilities. Conducting the AR, reviewing and updating the CRI and Conflicts Log, updating and filing the Form ADV annual amendment (and filing an “other than annual” amendment for material changes) and updating and delivering other required documents are connected. What will you do to achieve this in a timely manner? If you plan and set the groundwork in Q4 for the AR to start in January and finish this and your document review and revisions in February for an early or mid-March filing, you will succeed. If not, you may struggle.

### **Your WPPs must be “evergreen” and must be followed**

Reviewing your WPPs once a year is an invitation for trouble. As your annual review is a look back at how your WPPs fared during the year, you must review your WPPs when there are changes to your business (e.g., new lines of business, changes in strategies, etc.), new laws, rules or regulations, risks and conflicts of interest, when these are no longer relevant or the means to address these need to be adjusted.

In addition to reviewing WPPs for adequacy and effectiveness, you should review activities against topics discussed in Risk Alerts and enforcement actions, consider what you did to implement policies and procedures for legal and regulatory changes and changes to the business and consider how you addressed breaches.

Not having, administering or following your WPPs has consequences.

- In *Marathon Asset Management, L.P.*, an RIA was sued for failing “to establish, maintain, and enforce written policies and procedures reasonably designed, taking into consideration the nature of its business, to prevent the misuse of material, nonpublic information (“MNPI”) relating to its participation on ad hoc creditors’ committees.”<sup>30</sup>
- If you are required to file Form 13F because you exercise discretion over portfolios with more than \$100,000,000 of Section 13F securities, file those reports on a timely basis.<sup>31</sup>

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<https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2014/ia-3763.pdf> (“WAM”). More cases involving the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder may be found on the Division of Investment Management page under “Litigation” at <https://www.sec.gov/investment/im-litigation.html>.

<sup>28</sup> We suggest delivery as well as a covering e-mail or letter explaining each of the material changes from the previously filed and delivered Form ADV Part 2A and, if applicable, Form ADV Part 2B and Form CRS.

<sup>29</sup> We suggest sending the Regulation S-P Privacy Notice with Form ADV Parts 2A and 2B and, if required, Form CRS.

<sup>30</sup> *Marathon Asset Management, L.P.*, Admin Proc 3-22219 (September 30, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2024/ia-6737.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., “SEC Charges 11 Institutional Investment Managers with Failing to Report Certain Securities Holdings”, Press Release 2024-135 (September 17, 2024), [https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-135?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-135?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery) (with links to the 11 enforcement actions).

## **I'm a non-U.S. RIA – what applies to me and what do I do?**

An RIA must comply fully with all requirements of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder – and other applicable U.S. laws, rules and regulations.

The SEC and the SEC Staff have taken the view that the “substantive provisions” of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder may not apply to a non-U.S. RIA that does not have a direct U.S. person<sup>32</sup> client (a U.S. person with a separately managed account (“SMA”)) and where a U.S. person is present only as an investor in a non-U.S. private fund (the private fund is the client, not the underlying investor).<sup>33</sup> If a non-U.S. RIA manages an SMA for a U.S. person, all the requirements of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder apply. EXAMS has stated in some deficiency letters that a non-U.S. RIA must complete an annual review even if it does not have and SMA U.S. person clients. If you are such an RIA, avoid the possibility of such a deficiency finding and conduct a proper annual review.

**Be prepared:** *RIAs have been examined in countries where previously EXAMS had not conducted examinations, for example, India, South Korea and Singapore. UK RIAs are being examined. With the end of the moratorium on registering non-U.S. non-UK firms as RIAs, the SEC is re-starting to examine these firms.<sup>34</sup> RIAs in Switzerland are being examined – we have for several years advised Swiss firms, and others, to be ready for an examination. Be ready. Know and learn lessons from EXAMS Risk Alerts,<sup>35</sup> Division of Investment Management (“IM”) Guidance<sup>36</sup> and SEC enforcement actions.<sup>37</sup>*

## **How and how quickly do you respond to developments?**

The world changes, often quicker than we can cope. The use of AI is increasing. Social media amplifies events. Political and economic turmoil from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, issues in the Middle East, inflation and interest rates, supply chain issues and market volatility present issues for RIAs. As portfolio managers work to address these and other issues, each RIA must consider how these have an impact on its WPPs.

At the same time, you'll be expected to address remote working issues (supervision, record keeping, BCP and remote access/IT/cybersecurity), prevent “information leakage”, protect non-public client information, supervise staff, protect assets, handle conflicts of interest, handle issues related to valuations and fee calculations, make required filings and respond to market developments.

Act when breaches or trade errors are first identified. Taking prompt and proportionate action demonstrates compliance tone at the top. Taking excessive or unnecessary time to understand problems and address issues can turn something easy to address into a willful violation.

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<sup>32</sup> The definition of “U.S. person” (some call this “U.S. client”) is based upon residency as this term is defined in Rule 902 of Regulation S under the Securities Act of 1933. [Rule 902, 17 CFR §230.902](#).

<sup>33</sup> *Goldstein v SEC*, No. 04-1434, D.C. Cir (June 23, 2006) <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-dc-circuit/1479991.html>.

<sup>34</sup> See “SEC to Resume Processing of Registration Applications From Swiss-Based Investment Advisers”, SEC Press Release 2025-83 (June 10, 2025), <https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025-83-sec-resume-processing-registration-applications-swiss-based-investment-advisers>.

<sup>35</sup> These are available at <https://www.sec.gov/exams>, click on “Risk Alerts” under “Office Resources.”

<sup>36</sup> These are available at <https://www.sec.gov/investment/im-guidance-updates.html>.

<sup>37</sup> These are available at <https://www.sec.gov/investment/Article/litigation.html>, <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin.shtml> and <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/litreleases.shtml>.



## **Planning makes perfect**

EXAMS reviews how RIAs respond to hot topics, as well as points highlighted in its Examination Priorities – read the just published 2026 Examination Priorities.<sup>38</sup> The topics that are the subject of examinations, and enforcement actions, are “off-channel communications”, conflicts of interest, discharging fiduciary duty, cybersecurity, the marketing rule<sup>39</sup> and failure to have reasonably designed policies and procedures or having them but not administering or following them.

The SEC charges you, as noted in the *Compliance Release*, to consider “significant compliance events, changes in business arrangements and regulatory developments.”

- Do you have policies and procedures to address off-channel communications? Do you permit staff to use personal devices or social media for work purposes? How do you monitor communications and address issues when they arise? If you permit this, how do you satisfy record keeping requirements? The SEC is not shy when it comes to bringing cases that involve “longstanding failures ... to maintain and preserve electronic communications in violation of recordkeeping provisions of the federal securities laws.”<sup>40</sup> Note the views of Commissioner Mark Uyeda and Commissioner Peirce.<sup>41</sup> The CFTC has brought such cases.<sup>42</sup>
- Did you amend your policies and procedures to comply with the Regulation S-P amendments that come into force on December 3, 2025 (larger entities) and June 3, 2026 (smaller entities)?<sup>43</sup>
- For regulatory developments, review what you did when a law, rule or regulation changed – for example, how did you amend your WPPs and compliance train staff when Rule 206(4)-1, the marketing rule, came into force?<sup>44</sup> Did you learn lessons from the marketing rule FAQs?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.sec.gov/files/2026-exam-priorities.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g., “Investment Adviser Marketing”, Advisers Act Release 5653 (“Marketing Release”), March 5, 2021, 86 F.R. 13024 at 13040, 13041, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-03-05/pdf/2020-28868.pdf> (adopting release, amended rule, Form ADV amendments and amended Form ADV Glossary of Terms). See also “Marketing Compliance FAQs” (updated February 6, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/investment/marketing-faq>.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g., “Eleven Firms to Pay More Than \$88 Million Combined to Settle SEC’s Charges for Widespread Recordkeeping Failures”, Press Release 2024-144 (September 24, 2024), [https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-144?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-144?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery); “Twenty-Six Firms to Pay More Than \$390 Million Combined to Settle SEC’s Charges for Widespread Recordkeeping Failures”, Press Release 2024-98 (August 14, 2024), [https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-98?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024-98?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery); and “SEC Charges 16 Wall Street Firms with Widespread Recordkeeping Failures”, Press Release 2022-174 (September 27, 2022), <https://www.sec.gov/press-release/2022-174>. See *In the Matter of Qatalyst Partners LP*, Admin Proc 3-22167 (September 24, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2024/34-101143.pdf>; *In the Matter of Atom Investors LP*, Admin Proc 3-22155 (September 23, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2024/ia-6719.pdf>; and *In the Matter of Senvest Management LLC*, Admin Proc 3-21900 (April 3, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/admin/2024/ia-6581.pdf> (“Senvest”).

<sup>41</sup> “A Catalyst: Statement of Qatalyst Partners LP”, Statement by Commissioners Mark T Uyeda and Hester Peirce (September, 24, 2024, <https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/speeches-statements/statement-peirce-uyeda-qatalyst-09242024>).

<sup>42</sup> “CFTC Orders Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce to Pay \$30 Million for Recordkeeping and Supervision Failures for Firm-Wide Use of Unapproved Communication Methods”, Press Release September 24, 2024, <https://www.cftc.gov/PressRoom/PressReleases/8975-24>; See also “CFTC Orders Four Financial Institutions to Pay Total of \$260 Million for Recordkeeping and Supervision Failures for Widespread Use of Unapproved Communication Methods”, Press Release August 8, 2023) <https://www.cftc.gov/PressRoom/PressReleases/8762-23>.

<sup>43</sup> “Regulation S-P: Privacy of Consumer Financial Information and Safeguarding Customer”, Exchange Act Release 100155 (June 21, 2024), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2024-06-03/pdf/2024-11116.pdf>. See also Final Rules: Enhancements to Regulation S-P (June 21, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/files/34-100155-fact-sheet.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> *Marketing Release*, and SEC Bulletin “Investment Adviser Advertisements” (November 8, 2022), <https://www.investor.gov/introduction-investing/general-resources/news-alerts/alerts-bulletins/investor-bulletins/investment>.

<sup>45</sup> “Marketing Compliance FAQs, updated March 19, 2025, <https://www.sec.gov/rules-regulations/staff-guidance/division-investment-management-frequently-asked-questions/marketing-compliance-frequently-asked-questions>.

- How do you supervise staff, and document and act on issues?<sup>46</sup>
- To address compliance events, review the output of your monitoring tasks and forensic testing and entries in the breaches log, the trade errors log, the Code of Ethics breaches log, the complaints log and any findings, letters or other feedback from clients, third parties, service providers or regulators during the year. What did you learn from these and how did you use the results? Probe shortcomings. Look for patterns and outliers. Review the areas that had the most issues the prior year. Not doing this is a **red flag**.
- Consider the impact of changes in business, new staff, new/changed investment strategies, the launch of new funds or products, M&A activity – anything that has an impact on your business.
- How do the 2019 Standard of Conduct Interpretation<sup>47</sup> and the Staff Bulletin on Standards of Conduct for BD and RIA Conflicts of interest<sup>48</sup> impact you?
- Have you read proposed rule amendments and the comments filed in response to them?
- Read and digest SEC speeches, press releases and public statements – note a seminal SEC Staff speech on conflicts of interest.<sup>49</sup>
- Ensure that you understand and implement SEC and SEC Staff interpretations.<sup>50</sup>
- Understand confidential client information (non-public information in the Rule 204A-1 definition of Access Person), monitor and enforce your Code to prevent the misuse of such information and, if this occurs, address it in a swift, proper, proportionate and firm manner.<sup>51</sup>
- Read and understand Risk Alerts. These are posted on EXAM's home page. Topics include how RIAs will be examined with respect to the marketing rule, fee calculations, issues in managing private funds, principal and agency cross trading, compliance, supervision and conflicts of interest, safeguarding customer information and information storage, compliance, best execution, cybersecurity, outsourced CCOs, Codes of Ethics issues, whistleblower compliance, supervision, business continuity planning and others.
- Enforcement actions are lessons learned.<sup>52</sup> Do not become a test case or the next case.

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<sup>46</sup> *In the Matter of Horter Investment Management, LLC and Drew K Horter*, Admin Proc 3-20531 (November 3, 2022), [https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2022/ia-182.pdf?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2022/ia-182.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery).

<sup>47</sup> "Commission Interpretation Regarding Standard of Conduct for Investment Advisers", 84 F.R. 33669 (July 12, 2019), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2019-07-12/pdf/2019-12208.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> "Staff Bulletin: Standards of Conduct for Broker-Dealers and Investment Advisers Conflicts of Interest" (September 9, 2024), <https://www.sec.gov/about/divisions-offices/division-trading-markets/broker-dealers/staff-bulletin-standards-conduct-broker-dealers-investment-advisers-conflicts-interest>.

<sup>49</sup> "Conflicts, Conflicts Everywhere!", Speech by Julie M. Riewe, former Co-Chief, Asset Management Unit, Division of Enforcement (February 26, 2015), <http://www.sec.gov/investment/im-guidance-2015-03.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., "Commission Guidance Regarding Proxy Voting Responsibilities of Investment Advisers" (August 21, 2019), <https://www.sec.gov/rules/interp/2019/ia-5325.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> *In the Matter of Brahman Capital Corp.*, Admin Proc 3-18295 (December 5, 2017), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2017/ia-4819.pdf>; and *In the Matter of Parotish Gupta, et al.*, Admin Proc 3-18296 (December 5, 2017), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2017/ia-4820.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g., *In the Matter of SignalPoint Asset Management LLC et al*, Admin Proc 3-15955 (July 2, 2014) (RIA did not disclose control relationships and conflicts of interest), [www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2014/34-72515.pdf](http://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2014/34-72515.pdf); *In the Matter of Blackrock Advisors, LLC and Bartholomew A Battista*, Admin Proc 3-16501 (April 20, 2015) ("*Blackrock*") (failure to disclose conflict of interest concerning outside business activity of portfolio manager and compliance failures with respect to outside business activities), [www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2015/ia-4065.pdf](http://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2015/ia-4065.pdf); and *In the Matter of the Bennett Group Financial Services, LLC*, Admin Proc 3-16801 (September 9, 2015) (misstatements in AUM and returns), [www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2015/33-9910.pdf](http://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2015/33-9910.pdf).



- Are your IT, identify theft red flags and cybersecurity controls operational, current and tested? How do you respond to hacks, breaches and intrusions?<sup>53</sup>
- Do you have, follow and check (independently), policies, procedures and methodologies for fee calculation and billing matters – the *Equitas* case<sup>54</sup> presented these and other issues.
- If required, be aware of the need to file suspicious activity reports (initial and continuing).<sup>55</sup>
- Disclose material conflicts of interest and the means to address (mitigate) them.<sup>56</sup>
- Learn from IM Guidance – see, for example, guidance on financial conflicts of interest relating to RIA compensation<sup>57</sup> and personal account trading in discretionary accounts.<sup>58</sup>
- Understand lessons learned from non-U.S. broker-dealer cases. If you are not an SEC registered broker-dealer, other than as set out in Rule 15a-6 FAQ 9<sup>59</sup> you should not take U.S. resident client orders to buy or sell securities – and do not solicit orders.<sup>60</sup>
- “Cherry picking” (selective allocation) is deemed to be fraudulent, manipulative and deceptive, and must be avoided at all costs.<sup>61</sup> Do not think that the SEC cannot discover this – the SEC Staff used data analytics to detect this and other suspicious trading patterns.
- Ensure that valuations are based upon disclosed methodologies and are accurate and tested.

Understand how the SEC and the SEC Staff handle issues such as big data/alternative data, covered in informal SEC Staff guidance and laws and regulations and a topic of examinations, enforcement actions such as the failure to have WPPs to prevent the misuse of material non-public information (“MNPI”) and other hot topics.

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<sup>53</sup> *Voya Financial Advisors Inc.*, Admin Proc 3-18840 (September 26, 2018) (policies and procedures to protect customer information and prevent and respond to cybersecurity incidents not reasonably designed to meet these objectives), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2018/34-84288.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> *In the Matter of Equitas Capital Advisors, LLC, Equitas Partners, LLC, David S. Thomas, Jr, and Susan Cristina*, Admin Proc 3-15585 (October 13, 2013), [www.sec.gov/litigation/2013/34-70743.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/2013/34-70743.pdf) (despite repeated warnings from [EXAMS], Equitas engaged in over billing and under billing certain clients, negligently making false and misleading disclosures to clients and potential clients about historical performance, compensation, conflicts of interest and prior examination deficiencies, failing to conduct required annual reviews and failing to maintain written compliance policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act and its rules. The CEO and the CCO were charged).

<sup>55</sup> *Wells Fargo Advisors, LLC*, Admin Proc 3-18279 (November 13, 2017), [www.sec.gov/2017/34-82054.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/2017/34-82054.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> See e.g., *Versus Capital Partners LLC*, Admin Proc 3-20361 (June 7, 2021), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2021/ia-5748.pdf>; *Kestra Advisory Services LLC*, Admin Proc 3-20390 (July 9, 2021), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2021/ia-5770.pdf>; *MVP Manager LLC*, Admin Proc 3-19334 (August 13, 2019), [www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2019/ia-5319.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2019/ia-5319.pdf); and *Robare Group Ltd*, Admin Proc 3-16047 (November 7, 2016), [www.sec.gov/litigation/2016/ia-4566.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/2016/ia-4566.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> “SEC Staff Guidance: Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Disclosure of Certain Financial Conflicts Related to Investment Adviser Compensation” (October 18, 2019), [www.sec.gov/investment/faq-disclosure-conflicts-investment-adviser-compensation](https://www.sec.gov/investment/faq-disclosure-conflicts-investment-adviser-compensation).

<sup>58</sup> “Personal Securities Transactions Reports by Registered Investment Advisers: Securities Held in Accounts Over Which Reporting Persons Had No Influence or Control”, IM Guidance Update 2015-03 (June 2015), <https://www.sec.gov/investment/im-guidance-2015-03.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> “FAQs Regarding Rule 15a-6 and Foreign Broker-Dealers” (updated/modified April 14, 2014), <https://www.sec.gov/divisions/marketreg/faq-15a-6-foreign-bd.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> *In the Matter of Bank Leumi le-Israel B.M., Leumi Private Bank, and Bank Leumi (Luxembourg) S.A.*, Admin Proc 3-17631 (October 18, 2016), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2016/34-79113.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., *SEC v Steven J Susoeff and Ste Susoeff, LLC*, Case 2:23-cv-00173 (D.C.Nev)(February 1, 2023), <https://www.sec.gov/files/litigation/complaints/2023/comp25629.pdf>; *Gregory David Paris and Barrington Asset Management Inc.*, Case 1:21-cv-03450 (N.D. Ill)(June 28, 2021), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/complaints/2021/comp25126.pdf>; *SEC v Remiro Jose Sugranes et al* (and relief defendants), Case No 1:21-cv-22152 MGC (S.D. Fla) (June 10, 2021), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/complaints/2021/comp-pr2021-105.pdf>; *SEC v. RRBB Asset Management, LLC, et al.*, Civil Action No. 2:20-cv-12523 (D. NJ filed September 10, 2020), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/complaints/2020/comp24894.pdf>; *In the Matter of Laurel Wealth Advisors, Inc.*, Admin Proc 3-19387 (August 26, 2019), [www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2019/ia-5330.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2019/ia-5330.pdf); and *SEC v Michael Bressman*, D. Mass (September 12, 2018), [www.sec.gov/litigation/comp-pr2018-189.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/comp-pr2018-189.pdf).

### **The annual review is not a “yes, we have it” or a “tick the box” exercise**

Do not treat your annual review as a “validate the Compliance Manual exercise” or “let’s see if we have what we need.” Do not send your WPPs to someone and ask for an update. Do not write an “all is OK, no changes this year” memo to the Board of Directors. Do not be complacent. Do not skip an annual review or complete a “do we have it?” checklist. Do not back-date or falsify annual review records or reports. The person(s) that conduct the annual review must bring together all the materials that comprise the Advisers Act compliance program and review, evaluate and analyze them, free from influence and with adequate time and resources. Consider the current WPPs and changes made during the year, and why and when. Include regulatory filings including Form ADV, Form CRS and, if necessary, any Form PF, Form 13F, Schedule 13G and Form 13H filed or amended. Complacency, unaddressed items, outliers and patterns, failing to act to prevent recidivist behavior and ignoring **red flags** are regulatory hot spots.

**Ask:** *When our business, laws or rules and regulations changed, when we promoted new strategies, what did we do? Did we amend our Form ADV disclosures? Did we update our WPPs? Did we compliance train staff? Did we update our monitoring and testing program?*

Although not required by Rule 206(4)-7 as it is for an SEC registered investment company (“RIC”) under Rule 38a-1 under the Investment Company Act of 1940 (“1940 Act”), give the results of the review to the Board of Directors and senior management for their consideration and action. Issues arising from the review should be addressed as a priority. Compliance train staff.

### **What are my options for an annual review?**

You may conduct your annual review any way you prefer, as long as you do it! Your choices are:

- concentrated annual review, a “big bang” – once a year;
- rolling topical review – pick one or two topics each month and review them, or use quarterly reviews to cover the review of all policies and procedures and assemble the results annually; or
- event-driven review – when a compliance event occurs or a law or rule or regulation or the business changes, review the policies and procedures in question.

You can leverage your Advisers Act annual review with another exercise, such as the NFA Annual Questionnaire, but you must examine each policy and procedure against Advisers Act standards.

For the newly registered RIA, the first annual review is to be completed after it has been registered for one year. An RIA that has not been registered for a full year should at least conduct an interim review to ensure that it implemented its policies and procedures in a proper manner.

### **Step by step**

You have options. You might wish to approach your annual review with these steps.

1. Keep a list of all developments as they occur – new strategies, new portfolio managers, open/closed lines of business, changes to your firm, new, amended or rescinded laws, rules or regulations, Enforcement actions, Advisory Committee recommendations, court cases and so on. (If developments are material or involve line-item (form required) disclosures in Form ADV, amend your Form ADV as required.)

2. Assemble materials – WPPs, Code of Ethics,<sup>62</sup> output of monitoring and testing, change control (versions of WPPs and Code of Ethics changed during the year), training materials, breaches log, trade errors log, Code of Ethics violation log and other materials. Don't forget last year's annual review and how you addressed the issues that arose out of that.
3. Take each development in #1 and ask: "when these occurred, how did the materials in #2 stand up? Did I need to make changes and, if so, did I put these into effect? Did I use the output of my monitoring and testing the right way? Did I amend my Form ADV when required?"
4. Using this approach, review each policy and procedure to confirm whether, during the year, it was adequate and effective, and how.
5. When you determine whether a policy or procedure was adequate and effective, #4, do not just state your finding/conclusion – document your analysis with facts and evidence.
6. Compliance train staff.
7. Amend Form ADV and, if required, Form CRS, and distribute them to clients.
8. Change when/as required, build your compliance calendar ... and begin the process again!

A valuable exercise is to validate all disclosures in Form ADV and reconcile them to your WPPs – are they identical and how are they being administered, reviewed and enforced. Identify how you used the results from a monitoring task or forensic test for each policy or procedure to validate it.

No matter what approach you take, be sure that you review each policy and procedure.

### **What is adequate and effective?**

An annual review is a review and analysis of the adequacy and effectiveness of your WPPs.

*Adequate:* Adequate means that your WPPs are reasonably designed and reflect risks, conflicts of interest, Advisers Act requirements and other applicable legal and regulatory requirements – and the risks and conflicts in your business. For example, an RIA that effects transactions in equity securities on a discretionary basis will have best execution policies and procedures. You must disclose in your Form ADV Part 2A (and in your WPPs) the factors used to seek and to measure best execution and the criteria used to select brokers with whom you place orders.<sup>63</sup>

Adequate means that the WPPs and Form ADV disclosures reflect identified risks and conflicts of interest and the means to address (mitigate) them. WPPs are dynamic, not static, and you must keep them and your Form ADV disclosures 4Cs compliant: materially correct, current, clear and concise. The current, accurate factors that the trading desk (or portfolio managers who trade) use when selecting a broker and placing an order. How accounts are opened. How trades are bunched and pre-trade allocated. Requirements for supervision. How client mandates are amended, and investment objectives and restrictions are recorded and followed. Code of Ethics personal account dealing requirements. Social media use requirements. How you use AI.

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<sup>62</sup> We consider a Code of Ethics to be a written policy and set of procedures under Rule 206(4)-7.

<sup>63</sup> See *Fidelity Management & Research Company and FMR, Co., Inc.*, Admin Proc 3-12976 (March 5, 2008), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2008/ia-2713.pdf> (failure to, *inter alia*, disclose broker selection criteria and best execution factors in Form ADV Part II (as it was then known – now called Part 2A)).

To check adequacy, validate all Form ADV disclosures, WPPs and CRI and Conflicts Log entries. Ask whether the factors or desk procedures changed and remain relevant to your business. If they have changed, did you amend your Form ADV disclosures and WPPs and change your monitoring and testing plan – if not, why not? If you send orders solely to an affiliated broker, have you disclosed this conflict of interest in your Conflicts Log and Form ADV Part 2A and do you require it to provide you with data with which to evaluate whether it achieved best execution for you? If these are based on your business and the risks and conflicts arising from it, and Advisers Act and related SEC pronouncements (interpretations, no-action letters, exemptions and Enforcement actions) and changes are made at the right time, these would probably be adequate.

*Effective:* Effective means that the WPPs are reasonably designed and are being followed, that Form ADV disclosures are verified and that the CRI and Conflicts Log are current, that issues are addressed as they arise, that management supervise and ensure a proper Compliance tone at the top and that WPPs and Form ADV disclosures are amended as required.

Indicators of WPPs not being effective are issues not being addressed as they arise or are spotted but ignored. Other indicators are repeat trade errors or breaches that are not addressed or not dealt with in a proper and proportionate manner to prevent them from reoccurring. Or problems that arise and are escalated to the Board of Directors who ignore red flags or delegate but do not follow up.<sup>64</sup> Or that monitoring and testing is wrong or that there are unspotted or unaddressed patterns and/or outliers, or that they are identified but not addressed. Or failures to supervise that lead to repeat, unaddressed breaches or light touch remedies.

Do not wait for someone to spot these for you. Do not ignore reminders from consultants, counsel or auditors.<sup>65</sup> Review what trading desk staff and portfolio managers do and ensure that changes, if any, are reflected in your Form ADV and WPPs. Monitor and test to ensure that you achieve best execution, and if you find anomalies address them forthwith. If issues arise repeatedly or are not identified, or are identified but WPPs are not changed, your WPPs can't be effective.

Your goal as an RIA is to have WPPs that prevent issues from arising and catch problems as they occur – not to spot them well after the fact, fail to uncover evidence of them or fail to act.

### **What is *not* an annual review?**

An annual review is not sending your WPPs to someone for updating. It is not a “tick the box” exam. If you are a member of a group that has two or more RIAs, do not take their WPPs for yours (absent proper Umbrella registration) or their review for yours – firms are different and you must do your own AR and keep your own records. You should not compare your WPPs against those of another

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<sup>64</sup> See *In the Matter of Morgan Asset Management, Inc.; Morgan Keegan & Company, Inc.; James C. Kelsoe, Jr.; and Joseph Thompson Weller, CPA, Respondents*, Admin Proc 3-13847 (June 22, 2011), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2011/34-64720.pdf>; (“Morgan Asset I”), and *In the Matter of J. Kenneth Alderman, CPA; Jack R. Blair; Albert C. Johnson, CPA; James Stillman R. McFadden; Allen B. Morgan Jr.; W. Randall Pittman, CPA; Mary S. Stone, CPA; and Archie W. Willis III*, Admin Proc 3-15127 (June 13, 2013), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2013/ic-30557.pdf> (“Morgan Asset II”).

<sup>65</sup> *In the Matter of Quattro Global Capital, LLC*, Admin Proc 3-12725 (August 15, 2007), [www.sec.gov/litigation/2007/34-56252.pdf](https://www.sec.gov/litigation/2007/34-56252.pdf) (repeated failure to file Form 13F with the SEC after having been advised to do so by outside counsel and auditors, and in spite of WPPs outlining this filing requirement).

RIA who you think matches your profile, follows market practice or “did OK in an SEC exam.”<sup>66</sup> You should not use a service provider that is unfamiliar and inexperienced in the intricacies and nuances of SEC practice – actual, demonstrated SEC compliance experience and knowledge is a prerequisite. Do not give the Board of Directors a 10-minute summary that you checked the Compliance program and have nothing to report.

- The SEC stated in *I/A* that: “[b]etween at least 2011 and 2016, IIT’s [a RIC] board received one-paragraph annual letters, signed by IIA’s president, indicating that an annual compliance review of IIA and IIT had been conducted. In fact, IIA did nothing more than draft and send these letters. No reviews were conducted or documented.”<sup>67</sup>
- Note what the SEC wrote in *Moors*: “After receiving the [Examination] request letter, rather than responding that APA did not have any records responsive to the staff’s request, Respondent created three documents which were styled as “Annual Compliance Calendars” and purported to memorialize contemporaneous annual compliance reviews for the years 2018, 2019, and 2020. These documents were laid out in a checklist-like format listing compliance items to be completed, the frequency with which they should be completed, and a blank field to denote when the item had been completed, all of which were filled in by Respondent as completed during the respective years. Respondent signed and backdated his signature on each of the three documents to 2018, 2019, and 2020. He presented them to APA’s President, who also signed and backdated the documents. APA, through Respondent, then provided the backdated documents to Commission staff. Respondent voluntarily admitted to Commission staff in testimony that he created, signed, and backdated the calendars.”<sup>68</sup>

#### **What policies and procedure should be reviewed?**

Each of them. Each year. Distribute your WPPs and Code of Ethics to all Supervised Persons and have each sign and return to the CCO an acknowledgment attesting to the fact that they have received, read and understand the WPPs. Document compliance training. Train and re-train staff.

When the SEC adopted Rule 206(4)-7,<sup>69</sup> it noted the following policies and procedures (a summary):

- portfolio management processes, including allocation of investment opportunities, consistency of portfolios with client investment objectives, disclosures and applicable regulatory restrictions;
- trading practices, including procedures by which you satisfy your best execution obligation, use client brokerage to obtain research and other services and allocate trades;
- accuracy of disclosures, including account statements and advertisements;
- safeguarding client assets;
- having a business continuity plan;
- the accurate creation of required records and their maintenance in a way to secure them from unauthorized alteration or use and protects them from untimely destruction;
- marketing advisory services, including the use of solicitors;
- safeguards for the privacy protection of client records and information;

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<sup>66</sup> After an exam, EXAMS can only say no further comments, issue comments in a deficiency letter or make an Enforcement referral. There is no such thing as a clean bill of health, clearance or acceptance. See “*Examination Information for Entities Subject to Examination or Inspection by the Commission*”, SEC 2389 (6/14), <https://www.sec.gov/files/exam-brochure.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> *I/A*, note 24 *supra*, at ¶ 23.

<sup>68</sup> *Moors*, note 16 *supra*, at ¶ 5.

<sup>69</sup> *Compliance Release*, 68 F.R. at 74716.

- proprietary trading of the RIA and personal account trading of Access Persons<sup>70</sup> – proprietary trading by an affiliate is attributable to the RIA; and
- processes to value client holdings and calculate fees based on those valuations.

Market, business and legal and regulatory developments have updated this list – add “pay to play”, marketing rule compliance, AI, off-channel communications, cybersecurity, identity theft red flags and whistleblowing rules. Do Access Persons buy or sell digital securities? Be current!

Not all of these are applicable to every RIA – some RIAs do not have custody or have it because a related person has custody, some only give advice but do not trade, some only make loans through private equity firms, others do not use solicitors (firms that refer or solicit clients), some send orders to custodian trading desks and require that these firms give best execution.

Policies and procedures must be bespoke. The business plan that you created before you registered should be updated and set out the activities in which you engage and how you do these. You should have a CRI and Conflicts Log reflecting the risks and conflicts in your business upon which to base your WPPs and your monitoring and testing plan. From these you should adopt, implement, administer and enforce bespoke WPPs. And review and amend all three – CRI, Conflicts Log and WPPs – when required.

Clarify who is responsible for each policy and procedure: it is the RIA’s responsibility, under Rule 206(4)-7, to adopt and implement WPPs, not the CCO. The CCO is a trusted adviser and not the doer or guarantor of compliance – or a supervisor. This is key when the SEC Staff examines a firm or when the Division of Enforcement investigates suspected violations of the Advisers Act and/or the rules thereunder. It is prudent to have the RIA via the CEO/management adopt, implement, administer and enforce all WPPs and to delegate the responsibility to certain persons to administer each policy and procedure. It helps establish “compliance tone at the top” and proper supervision. The CCO as trusted adviser monitors, tests, ensures that management keeps the CRI and Conflicts Log current, handles Form ADV disclosure (approved by management) and performs Code of Ethics analysis – and conducts other activities within their purview – but is not a supervisor or guarantor of compliance.

### **Be Proportionate and scalable**

An annual review is a *process*. It must be proportionate and scalable. Each policy and procedure must be assessed for its adequacy and effectiveness. This includes the monitoring and testing plan. For example, for allocation, in addition to the points noted above, an RIA should verify adequacy review its policies and procedures to assess whether these are current, correct and proportionate for the trading activity in which the firm engages. For effectiveness, and in addition to the points above, the RIA would review the exceptions log for breaches, the record of changes to allocation (post-trade vs pre-trade), the output of the monitoring and testing done for this and how trading patterns have gone to validate that the policy and its procedures are working as intended or

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<sup>70</sup> “Access Person”, defined in Rule 204A-1(e)(1), is a Supervised Person who has access to non-public information about client purchases and sales or non-public information about the holdings of reportable funds, are involved in formulating or giving advice or recommendations to clients or who have access to such non-public information. The Rule 204A-1 adopting release refers to safeguarding client holdings, so the prudent approach would be to include both the rule’s requirements and the interpretative positions in this release. Keep your list of Access Persons current. See “Investment Advisers Codes of Ethics”, Advisers Act Release 2256, 69 F.R. 131 at 132, 133 (July 9, 2004), [www.sec.gov/rules/final/ia-2256.pdf](http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/ia-2256.pdf).



whether changes should have been made. The level of review depends upon the number of trades, securities traded, low vs high volume trades and other relevant factors. All of this would be recorded as part of the annual review – remaining true to a level of analysis proportionate to the RIA's profile.

### **How do I document my annual review?**

Keep the records that you generated to document that you conducted your annual review.

There is no SEC approved checklist. This is up to you. One option is to record WPPs headings, policies and procedures and applicable legal and regulatory requirements in an Excel spreadsheet and leave columns to record the source document where it's found (WPPs or Code of Ethics), work done, by who, dates, your methodology and the results. (We will be happy to provide you with samples.) Record how or why a policy or procedure is or is not adequate and effective and the action plan for the coming year. Involve as many people as possible. Involve the CEO and management as they are responsible for compliance tone at the top. You should involve them in your compliance training.

### **I'm not alone!**

*Multiple RIAs in a group:* An RIA may be one of several registered investment advisers in a group operating in and with different markets and clients. Even if they are identical and operate in a coordinated manner, each RIA should conduct its own annual review. A non-U.S. RIA with a U.S.-based RIA affiliate can receive support from the U.S. entity but should conduct its own review – there should not be a single group annual review. This is because each operates in a different market and is subject to differing requirements – in a group with a U.S. RIA and, say, a Hong-Kong RIA, the former is subject only to U.S. requirements while the latter entity must comply with both U.S. and SFC requirements. A group AR might cover points from the top down but can miss issues.

*Relying advisers:* It may be the case that an RIA may have one or more relying advisers – where, relying on Umbrella registration, a U.S.-based RIA has related advisers (whether or not they are based in the United States) in a control relationship that conduct a single advisory business with a unified Compliance program and all are registered with the SEC on a single Form ADV. (Today, this is not possible where the RIA is not incorporated and operating in a state in the United States.) One annual review will suffice but it must include the primary RIA and its relying advisers. Remember, also, to document oversight for the relying advisers and carry through a check of all Advisers Act requirements, including, in particular, safeguarding confidential client information, record retention, Code of Ethics requirements and advertising.

*Participating affiliates:* Participating affiliates are entities in a *bona fide* control relationship with an RIA that provide research, advice or recommendations to the RIA for it to use for its U.S. clients. The affiliate does not need to register under the Advisers Act if it complies with the following:

- sign a participating affiliate agreement with the RIA;
- have the RIA treat as Associated Persons (of the RIA) the affiliate's employees that develop or give research, advice or recommendations to the RIA for U.S. clients, and has these Associated Persons comply with provisions of the RIA's Code of Ethics as if they were Access Persons (personal account dealing and reporting);
- identify the Associated Persons in the RIA's Form ADV Part 2A;

- keep accurate books and records and make them available to the SEC in an examination (and make Associated Persons available for an interview); and
- submit to the jurisdiction of the SEC and the U.S. courts, appoint an agent for service of process.

Keep the following in mind.

- Both firms must establish bona fide affiliation through control.<sup>71</sup>
- The RIA must exercise oversight over and supervise the participating affiliate – failure to do this is actionable under Advisers Act Section 203(e)(6).
- One cannot “engineer” a participating affiliate relationship to avoid registration – this is doing indirectly what cannot be done directly (Advisers Act Section 208(d)).
- The participating affiliate no-action letters<sup>72</sup> (recognized by the SEC in a 2011 rulemaking<sup>73</sup>) by their terms do not address whether or if an Associated Person may exercise discretion over the RIA client’s portfolio or trade or give orders to the RIA (in a facts and circumstances analysis, this may be brokerage). These no-action letters were issued by the IM Staff pursuant to delegated authority under the Advisers Act and deal only with matters arising under Advisers Act Section 203. They were not issued by the Staff of the Division of Market Regulation (“MR”, now Trading and Markets) and do not give relief under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Exchange Act”) – IM had no authority to act on matters outside the Advisers Act – in particular, the Exchange Act and brokerage. This would have required action by MR and MR took no position in these letters. As such, there does not appear to be authority under these letters for an Associated Person to give orders to buy or sell securities for the U.S. clients of the RIA or to manage their assets on a discretionary basis.

*RIAs with unaffiliated sub-advisers:* Here, the RIA uses non-affiliated firms as sub-advisers. These firms might, given the facts, have as their client either the RIA or the underlying clients and must, in each situation, consider whether they themselves might be subject to Advisers Act registration. Apart from this, the RIA must exercise oversight over these firms and those activities must form an integral part of the annual review.

*Sub-advisers to RICs:* RIAs as sub-advisers to mutual funds or other investment vehicles registered with the SEC under the 1940 Act must include in their annual reviews a comprehensive review of all activities caught by both the Advisers Act and the 1940 Act. The requirements for an annual review under the 1940 Act are different from those under the Advisers Act and include, among other items, thorough documentation and a written report to the RIC Board of Directors.

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<sup>71</sup> Control is defined in the Form ADV Glossary as “[t]he power, directly or indirectly, to direct the management or policies of a person, whether through ownership of securities, by contract, or otherwise.” Examples are given for certain types of persons.

<sup>72</sup> *Mercury Asset Management plc* (April 6, 1993); *Kleinwort Benson Investment Management Ltd, et al.* (December 15, 1993); *Murray Johnstone Holdings Ltd, et al.* (October 7, 1994); *ABN AMRO Bank N.V., et al.* (July 1, 1997); and *Royal Bank of Canada, et al.* (June 3, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> “Exemptions for Advisers to Venture Capital Funds, Private Fund Advisers With Less Than \$150 Million in Assets Under Management and Foreign Private Advisers”, Advisers Act Release IA-3222, section II.C.4 (June 22, 2011) (“*Exemptions Release*”), [www.sec.gov/rules/final/2011/ia-3222.pdf](http://www.sec.gov/rules/final/2011/ia-3222.pdf).

## **Code of Ethics**

An AR is prime time to review your Code of Ethics. Thirty calendar days after each year end, Access Persons and their Connected Persons<sup>74</sup> file annual holdings report required by Advisers Act Rule 204A-1, the Code of Ethics rule. Take Code matters that arose during the year – reports, breaches and Code amendments – and review these. Document through analysis what occurred and what needs to be changed, if anything, or addressed, if it was not addressed at the time – not reviewing Code activity or addressing issues as they occur is itself a violation of this rule.

EXAMS will expect you to have recorded in your breaches log instances of non-compliance with your Code of Ethics (and your WPPs), and action taken because of such non-compliance. This discloses missteps that have been uncovered, whether by your monitoring and testing, an admission or otherwise. Examiners will want to see what you have done to identify and correct issues and improve your compliance program as a result, and how you will ensure that future violations do not occur. Not finding issues or ignoring them when they arise is a serious matter.

## **Coordinate your annual review with your Form ADV annual amendment**

Reviewing WPPs, the CRI and the Conflicts Log in the annual review also helps to validate Form ADV disclosures and prepare the annual amendments.

Preparing your annual Form ADV Parts 1, 2A, 2B and Form CRS updates is not a weekend or a "save it for a quiet day" exercise. This requires time, attention, having all the relevant information to hand, doing an assessment (this links the annual review to the Form ADV review) and getting it right. Conducting a thorough annual review will generate the information that you need to help ensure that your Form ADV update accurately reflects your business.

Consider Item 2 of Form ADV Part 2A, "material changes." The instructions read: "If you are amending your brochure for your annual update and it contains material changes from your last annual update, identify and discuss those changes on the cover page of the brochure or on the page immediately following the cover page... ." Your "changes in business arrangements" and reactions to significant regulatory developments may form the basis of your response to Item 2.

Form ADV Part 2A requires that an RIA must disclose its material conflicts of interest and the means to address these. This disclosure must be clear and concise so that a reader clearly understands the conflict and how it is addressed.

Item 6 is "performance-based fees and side-by-side management." The instructions make this sound complicated, but it requires you to identify the risks and conflicts that arise if you have clients who pay you incentive compensation alongside clients who do not pay. The concern is that you might give performance fee clients benefits ranging from well-performing allocations to an unjustified share of winning trades. You must find and address this. Some RIAs merely explain their aggregation and allocation policies and procedures – query how this explanation alone could address the conflicts that arise out of the side-by-side issue. Any response to this is not complete until you test your WPPs to confirm that they are working as required or, if you find exceptions or patterns, you

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<sup>74</sup> "Connected Persons" (a term of art) are (1) immediate family members (2) living in the same household and (3) sharing beneficial ownership (direct or indirect pecuniary interest) in Reportable Securities with the Access Person. Beneficial ownership for Code of Ethics purposes is interpreted in accordance with Exchange Act Rule 16a-1(a)(2), [17 CFR §240.16a-1](#).

address them and change controls to prevent recurrences. Consider factors like client restrictions that affect returns and analyze the performance of incentive-fee paying and non-incentive fee paying accounts managed according to the same investment style. Compare the performance of all accounts eligible to participate in IPOs. Understand the reasons why certain accounts perform better or worse than average, determine if favoritism is there and act accordingly.

### **Document your annual review**

Record all findings, keep your report as a required record under Rule 204-2, amend and file your Form ADV Parts 1, 2A and Form CRS, deliver Form ADV Parts 2A, 2B and, if required, Form CRS and the Regulation S-P Privacy Statement. Update your Code of Ethics and WPPs. Implement findings. Use the results of your monitoring tasks and forensic tests. Do not ignore or fight findings, take no action or fire the messenger.

Address issues as they arise so that they do not reoccur. EXAMS will want to see the documentation for your annual review and any report prepared by a service provider/consultant and want to know why findings were ignored or challenged, issues missed or glossed over or the messenger given a hard time. A “silent” Board of Directors, one that glosses over/ignores red flags or issues found in an AR or that are brought to its attention by the RIA or a service provider would be deemed to demonstrate a lack of Compliance tone at the top and face regulatory scrutiny.

Review results with management. They, as supervisors, must ensure that the CCO has adequate resources to fulfil their role. In turn, the CCO must bring all matters to the attention of the CEO and management, including the Board of Directors, and not be rebuffed.<sup>75</sup> Everything must be documented, and if at any time the CCO feels that they do not have adequate resources or support from the RIA, the CEO, management or the Board of Directors, they must not leave a single stone unturned in their efforts to have matters resolved and be properly resourced.<sup>76</sup>

### **Regular monitoring and testing help validate your WPPs**

Just as regular checking and preventative maintenance helps reduce unexpected auto repair bills, administering properly your SEC compliance program helps eliminate the possibility of unpleasant discoveries in your AR or during an SEC examination. A well-designed, maintained and resourced Compliance program will mean that your AR is not a once-a-year peek at the program that turns up embarrassing issues, gaps or cries of “how did I miss that?!” Monitoring and forensic testing is the key to validate WPPs as well as the formula for a good night's sleep.

The SEC Staff set forth the importance of monitoring and testing in its 2022 Examination Priorities<sup>77</sup> and these remain relevant. “Periodic review and testing of policies and procedures is necessary to ensure the on-going adequacy and effectiveness of a compliance program. ... reviews should consider compliance matters that arose previously, changes in business activities, and regulatory changes. Testing is also critical, as it provides a means to affirm that policies and procedures are

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<sup>75</sup> *In the Matter of Pekin Singer Strauss Asset Management Inc., Ronald L. Strauss, William A. Pekin, and Joshua D. Strauss*, Admin Proc 3-16646 (June 23, 2015) (CCO rebuffed when he escalated matters to the President who “dedicated insufficient resources to compliance, which contributed substantially to Pekin Singer’s compliance failures”), <https://www.sec.gov/litigation/admin/2015/ia-4126.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> *Morgan Asset I and II*.

<sup>77</sup> “2022 Examination Priorities” (March 30, 2022), <https://www.sec.gov/files/2022-exam-priorities.pdf>.

operating as designed and to ensure the detection of outlier events or unusual patterns. An effective testing program, such as one that includes testing on a routine periodic basis at set intervals, when certain transactions occur, and over extended periods to look for patterns or emerging trends, deployed in conjunction with periodic reviews, significantly contributes to the on-going resiliency of a compliance program.”<sup>78</sup>

When the SEC examines you, they will want proof that you mapped your WPPs against the risks and conflicts arising from the business. They will want to see the output of monitoring and compliance testing, including any compliance reviews, quality control analyses, surveillance and/or forensic or transactional tests performed. This should include significant findings, both positive and negative, of such testing and information about corrective or remedial actions taken regarding these findings.

Forensic testing looks for patterns or outliers. The SEC stated in the Compliance Release that: “[w]here appropriate, advisers’ policies and procedures should employ, among other methods of detection, compliance tests that analyze information over time in order to identify unusual patterns, including, for example, an analysis of the quality of brokerage executions for the purpose of evaluating the adviser’s fulfillment of its duty of best execution... .”<sup>79</sup>

Transactional tests look at a specific act to determine if it was compliant. A transactional review might consider whether, on a given purchase of a privately offered security for their own account, an employee had obtained clearance as required by the firm’s policies. Another forensic test, “10 up and 10 down”, compares how the 10 best and 10 worst performing purchases or recommendations performed in light of similarly situated accounts (strategy, etc.) and helps identify instances of favoritism, or cherry picking – giving higher paying clients better stock picks inconsistent with the allocation policy of fair and equal treatment.

A CCO should spend time with the business and operations and understand what happens; this is observational testing. Sit with portfolio managers and with traders, ask questions and ensure that you understand the business and everyone’s roles. It will give them comfort that you understand what they are doing and make it easier for them to ask questions and share information with you. Make sure that you map operational processes; for instance, the lifecycle of a trade from the research team-generated idea through settlement. Use this to confirm your WPPs.

- Compare what portfolio managers and traders do when they seek best execution – are they following the steps outlined in the WPPs and disclosed in Form ADV Part 2A Item 12?
- Are portfolio managers documenting pre-trade allocation (splits) before placing an order?
- Are personal account trades mirroring client trades?
- Are required books and records maintained as required?

Conduct forensic, transactional and observational tests regularly. Use the results. Have these feature in your compliance calendar, which is a resource that plots work for the year (everyone will have responsibilities under this). It should reflect your daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual tasks and reviews. Test regularly and your annual review will be less painful. Find and fix as you go.

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<sup>78</sup> *Id* at p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> *Compliance Release*, 68 F.R. at 74716 n 15.

### **Mind the gap analysis – be thorough**

Be creative and use a variety of types of tests. Probe for inconsistencies, the unexplainable and missed items and gaps. One good annual review tool is a gap analysis. This is an assessment that identifies gaps, disconnects and inconsistencies between the requirements the compliance program should have and what you have. Test for gaps between Advisers Act requirements and what you say you do (in, for instance, your WPPs and other disclosures). Then, test for the differences between what you say you do and what you do in practice. We use these to help take new registrants through the registration process and for annual reviews, mock exams and health checks.

We mentioned this list of areas to be reviewed. Leave no stone unturned.

- Are your CRI and Conflicts Log current?
- Have you reviewed your disclosure materials to ensure they are materially correct?
- Are all your disclosures 4Cs compliant – current, materially correct, clear and concise?
- Are documents consistent – WPPs, Form ADV disclosures and other internal memoranda?
- Are you current with your regulatory filings, home country and SEC?
- Have you reviewed the effectiveness of your anti-money laundering program?
- Cybersecurity – are you doing what the SEC would expect from you?
- Have you conducted compliance training? Train staff on Code of Ethics issues, preventing the misuse of confidential client information and inside information, and the pitfalls involved with making campaign contributions and other topical matters.
- Conduct an all-hands compliance meeting (remote offices can participate via video conference) in which colleagues are encouraged to ask questions and make suggestions?
- Evaluate service providers? Third-party oversight is necessary, as is the independent verification of trades, cash and assets held by custodians and other key data. And, as noted above, a rule proposal by the Commission. EXAMS will ask for “[t]he names and location of all service providers and the services they perform and for both affiliated and unaffiliated providers, information about the due diligence process to initially evaluate and monitor thereafter the work provided and how potential conflicts and information flow issues are addressed.”
- DDQs and inspection reports, like a SOC 1 Report, can be effective elements of a service provider assessment. Visit the location where work is performed and conduct a substantive review.

### **An independent perspective is good, if used wisely**

Some RIAs engage a third party to conduct the annual review. This works where the third party has demonstrated expertise conducting annual reviews and understands SEC compliance. Law firms help, but they practice law in one jurisdiction and generally do not perform compliance. When possible, consider a firm with experienced and SEC-knowledgeable compliance specialists and a track record with multiple clients.

You should strive to conduct your AR as a mock examination at least once every two years.

### **How your annual review prepares you for your SEC examination**

Whether or not examined, you must remain in full compliance with the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder. Your ultimate regulator are clients - if they are not happy the SEC will be concerned.



The SEC notifies an RIA of an examination with a telephone call/e-mail and a document request.<sup>80</sup> Two weeks are given to supply the requested documents. The examiner will ask for the names of key employees to schedule interviews. The examination might be a correspondence exam or an on-site review. EXAMS has set out how it will examine RIAs in a recent Risk Alert.<sup>81</sup>

How will the CCO gather and produce the reams of information in such a short period of time? How does the CCO explain absences during the examination – “my CIO could not change her holiday dates.” What happens if I do not have the requested records? What happens if I did no testing or short-cut my annual review? How will the CEO and other senior managers manage a two-hour interview with multiple examiners? What happens if the SEC uncovers something big or finds patterns, reconciliations or outliers that were overlooked or ignored?

Had the RIA and the CCO been prepared, these questions might be moot, and the exam would be handled with confidence. Documents sought by EXAMS should be in existence when the request comes in – not produced for the examination.

Conduct your annual review as if it were an examination.

- Keep a current examination document request (we can supply you with one) and ensure that you have all the requested documents, perform required tasks and monitor and test.
- Document all findings and address each.
- Leverage the gap analysis that you used for your SEC registration.
- Ensure that your WPPs reflect the risks in the CRI and the conflicts in the Conflicts Log.

A good way to prepare is the “30 minute” test: in this time, analyze your breaches log, the trade errors log, the results of the two most recent annual reviews and Code of Ethics reports and reviews.

Notice of an examination is no cause for alarm if you and your firm have conducted yourself honestly and ethically and demonstrate that you have a “reasonably designed” compliance program. You would do well to use your annual review to ensure that you will be able to respond expeditiously to such a document request list when one finally — inevitably — arrives, to say nothing of testing, identifying areas for attention and fixing issues before the SEC arrives.

In an examination, the SEC follows the money and looks to confirm whether the RIA told the truth and is doing what it said it would do how it said that it would do it.<sup>82</sup> These are representative areas:

- off-channel communications and use of social media;
- conflicts and risk identification and resolution;
- advertising;

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<sup>80</sup> As an example, the SEC stated in *Moors* that: “... Commission staff sent an initial request letter to APA, addressed to Respondent as Chief Compliance Officer (“CCO”). Among other things, the staff noted in its request letter that it was conducting an examination of APA pursuant to Section 204 under the Advisers Act to assess APA’s compliance with the federal securities laws and rules thereunder. The staff requested certain information from APA, including any records documenting APA’s most recent annual compliance review performed pursuant to Rule 206(4)-7 under the Advisers Act and any records documenting compliance testing performed during the examination period of January 2019 through March 2021.” *Moors*, note 16 *supra*, at ¶ 4.

<sup>81</sup> “Investment Advisers: Assessing Risks, Scoping Examinations, and Requesting Documents” (September 6, 2023), <https://www.sec.gov/files/risk-alert-ia-risk-and-requesting-documents-090623.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Remarks at *CCOs and SEC Examinations*, London (November 8, 2019): Mavis Kelly, Assistant Director, OCIE (now EXAMS); David Bartels, Deputy Chief Counsel, Division of Investment Management; and Mark Berman, CEO, CompliGlobe Ltd.

- business continuity;
- cybersecurity and identity theft;
- weaknesses in compliance and controls;
- related persons and affiliations;
- pay-to-play;
- safe keeping of client assets (custody);
- undisclosed compensation arrangements, fees and valuations;
- trading practices (allocations, best execution, broker arrangements and trading);
- Code of Ethics and personal account dealing; and
- valuations and fee calculations.

The document request list contains nearly everything that an RIA should have to satisfy its Advisers Act requirements. This includes records that you generated and kept of your annual reviews, Code of Ethics materials, advertising and breaches and trade errors logs, as well as all trades completed for clients and by Access Persons. The SEC will ask for results from forensic testing, compliance-cleared advertising and the CRI – referred to as *“a current inventory of the Adviser’s compliance risks that forms the basis for its policies and procedures, including any changes made to the inventory and the dates of the changes.”* Every RIA requires one to be able to establish that its WPPs are “reasonably designed” (in the words of the compliance rule). Note the impact of WAM where the SEC cited language from the *Compliance Release* as a warning to RIAs who do not complete a CRI and Conflicts Log and use them to design and implement written policies and procedures “reasonably designed”:

“Rule 206(4)-7 requires investment advisers to “[a]dopt and implement written policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violation” of the Advisers Act and its rules. The [SEC] has stated that an adviser’s failure “to have adequate compliance policies and procedures in place will constitute a violation of our rules independent of any other securities law violation [emphasis added].” [Compliance Release, 68 FR 74714, at 74715]. The Compliance Release further provides that “[t]he policies and procedures should be designed to prevent violations from occurring, detect violations that have occurred, and correct promptly any violations that have occurred.” 68 FR 74714, at 74716. The Compliance Release also states that “[e]ach adviser, in designing its policies and procedures, should first identify conflicts and other compliance factors creating risk exposure for the firm and its clients in light of the firm’s particular operations, and then design policies and procedures that address those risks [emphasis added].””<sup>83</sup>

Do not respond to a document request list with “my lawyers told me that I didn’t need a CRI” or “the compliance manual we received didn’t refer to it so why do this now?” Do not think that because you are outside the United States you do not have to comply with Advisers Act requirements on the basis (wrongly) that local law trumps the Advisers Act. You must evaluate and respond to the risks and conflicts you face and adopt and implement bespoke WPPs. Your WPPs must reflect who and what you are, your risks and conflicts and are specific and measurable, that “take into account the nature of [your] operations.”<sup>84</sup> No one wants to have the SEC find the words “These Policies and Procedures have been created using the [name of firm] Compliance Manual Wizard,” “This is the Compliance Manual of [Name of Adviser]” or include materials that are not relevant or inconsistent.

Not identifying material conflicts of interest and the means to address them and not disclosing them in your Form ADV Part 2A would be actionable. Form ADV Part 2A disclosure must be clear and

<sup>83</sup> WAM, page 6 and 7, ¶ 23, citing the *Compliance Release*, 68 F.R. at 74715.

<sup>84</sup> *Compliance Release*, 68 F.R. at 74716.

concise. Keep in mind that you may be sued if your disclosures are materially incorrect, for example, if there is a material omission such as an undisclosed conflict of interest,<sup>85</sup> failure to disclose conflicts or using “may” or “might” to describe possible or potential conflicts.

For more perspectives on examinations, read speeches given by former EXAMS (then OCIE) Director Marc Wyatt,<sup>86</sup> former Chief of Staff Donohue<sup>87</sup> and former EXAMS Director Driscoll.<sup>88</sup>

Do not find out about issues when the SEC arises. “CCOs and GCs should not be hearing about compliance deficiencies for the first time when the SEC visits ... to conduct an examination.”<sup>89</sup>

## **Conclusion**

An annual review is the time to demonstrate how you comply with Advisers Act requirements. Use a document request list and your WPPs as the basis of your monitoring and testing. Each policy and procedure should be tested to ensure that it is adequate and effective. If the WPPs say that you’re to do something, do it as stated. If things change during the year, amend your WPPs.

Be skeptical. Leave no loose ends or accept explanations that, on reflection, don't wash. Ask your Supervised Persons what's working and what's not. Use your annual review to prepare for the day the SEC visits. Use your CRI and Conflicts Log entries to help form the basis for your WPPs. Give this special consideration in your annual review.

Be proud of your SEC compliance program and your firm will be proud of you.

*For more information on CompliGlobe and materials for RIAs, please contact:*

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<sup>85</sup> See *Blackrock*, n. 52 *supra*.

<sup>86</sup> “Inside the National Exam Program in 2016”, speech by Marc Wyatt (October 17, 2016), [www.sec.gov/news/speech/inside-the-national-exam-program-in-2016.html](http://www.sec.gov/news/speech/inside-the-national-exam-program-in-2016.html).

<sup>87</sup> “Remarks”, speech by Andrew Donohue, SEC Chief of Staff (October 19, 2016), [www.sec.gov/speech/html](http://www.sec.gov/speech/html).

<sup>88</sup> “Remarks at SIFMA Operations Conference & Exhibition: Staying vigilant to Protect Investors”, Speech by Peter Driscoll, Examinations Director (May 8, 2019), <https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/driscoll-remarks-sifma-operations-conference-050819>, and “How We Protect Investors”, Speech by Peter Driscoll, Examinations Director (April 29, 2019), <https://www.sec.gov/news/speech/speech-driscoll-042919>.

<sup>89</sup> Remarks by Mark Berman, “Emerging Landscape of CCO and GC Liability”, RCA Asset Management Thought Leadership Symposium (November 10, 2011).