Complaint report: The formal route to raising defects in B2B procurement

The complaint report is the formal, usually written or system-supported objection to a defective or non-conforming delivery or service. It documents the nature, extent and evidence of a defect vis-à-vis the supplier and forms the basis for rights such as rectification, replacement delivery or price reduction. In industrial procurement, it is a central element of quality management and has a lasting influence on the supplier rating.

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Key facts at a glance

01 The complaint report formally documents defects in goods or services and preserves evidence and deadlines vis-à-vis the supplier.

02 The basis is frequently the German Commercial Code (HGB) or the German Civil Code (BGB), plus quality agreements concluded with the supplier.

03 8D reports, defect categories and photos are proven components of a robust report in practice.

04 Complaint KPIs typically feed directly into the supplier rating and thus into award decisions.

05 Without timely and comprehensible reporting, missed deadlines and loss of claims loom.

Definition: complaint report

The complaint report is the documented notification of a defect in delivered goods or services rendered to the supplier. It generally contains the purchase order and batch reference, defect description, extent, evidence and the buyer's demand.

Distinction from objections in everyday usage

An informal objection by telephone call or email is no substitute for a full complaint report. For evidentiary matters and deadlines, what matters is a documented notification that can be attributed to the supplier. Professional procurement organisations therefore use standardised forms or portals in which every report is recorded with a unique case number. Only then are reliable evaluations produced and the basis for retrospective analyses and supplier development measures.

Legal framework

In commercial transactions, duties of inspection and notification of defects apply under the HGB: apparent defects must be reported immediately and hidden defects after discovery. In practice, hidden defects must often be reported within a few days of discovery; the exact deadlines arise from the contract. Many supply relationships in the automotive and mechanical engineering industries additionally govern notice periods, inspection obligations and process documentation in quality agreements. Whether and to what extent claims exist should be examined professionally on a case-by-case basis.

Methods and procedure: how to produce a robust complaint report

An effective report follows a fixed sequence: visual inspection and documentation at goods receipt, immediate blocking of the affected stock, structured defect recording and subsequent transmission to the supplier with a clear demand and deadline.

Documentation and defect classification

Every report should contain the purchase order number, material number, quantity, batch or lot reference, delivery document reference and a precise description of the defect. Photos, measurement records and measuring equipment certificates considerably strengthen the evidential value. Defects are frequently classified according to standardised categories, such as critical, major and minor, and assigned the corresponding inspection level. In most ERP or QM systems, this creates a unique complaint case that facilitates subsequent analysis and the distinction from delivery note or master data issues.

Immediate measures at goods receipt

For apparent defects, such as transport damage, securing the evidence is crucial: note the finding on the freight document, photograph it and segregate the affected packages. For road transport, the CMR consignment note is the customary basis on which damage is to be noted. Irregularities in incoming quality should, wherever possible, be recorded at goods receipt before the goods pass into production or stock, as the allocation of responsibilities becomes considerably more complex thereafter.

Processing after the report: 8D and causation costs

For serious defects, the 8D report is an established instrument: the supplier analyses the cause, defines containment and corrective actions and demonstrates their effectiveness. The buyer tracks the processing deadlines, examines the allocation of costs, such as sorting, retooling or replacement delivery costs, and records the result in the supplier rating. In the event of recurring systemic defects, the incident should be fed into the supplier audit score and, where applicable, a risk mitigation plan.

Key KPIs and evaluation of complaint quality

Complaint data is one of the most revealing sources for evaluating supplier quality. It typically feeds into KPIs such as incoming quality, complaint rate and processing time, and thus into the supplier rating.

Key performance indicators

The complaint rate, frequently expressed as complained-about quantity or number of cases relative to delivery volume or number of deliveries, reveals systematic quality problems. The average processing time until the supplier's final response is a second key indicator. In addition, many companies assess the quality of the immediate response, such as whether containment action or unambiguous identification of the affected stock was delivered within the agreed deadline.

Distortions and fair evaluation

Complaint rates can only be compared across suppliers to a limited extent: differing inspection depths, material classes and order quantities distort the comparison. Clean benchmarking in procurement therefore adjusts for industry, material group and volume. Furthermore, a distinction should be made between one-off defects and recurring systemic deviations, as only the latter indicate process deficiencies at the supplier.

Risks and controls relating to the complaint report

The greatest risks lie in belated or inadequately documented reports, in unclear cost allocation and in findings for supplier development going unused. Controls and clear governance address these weaknesses.

Deadline, evidence and organisational risks

Underestimated notice periods and unclear internal responsibilities frequently lead in practice to claims being forfeited or cost allocations becoming unenforceable. A clear allocation of responsibilities between goods receipt, quality and procurement, together with standardised system workflows, reduces this risk. For cross-border deliveries, differing warranty rights and transport responsibilities additionally complicate the allocation; early contractual clarification is recommended here.

Cost allocation and negotiating position

Defects often cause consequential costs: scrap, rework, production interruptions, replacement logistics. Robust complaint reports form the basis for charging back such causation costs or for negotiating

positions such as claims for extras, price reductions or credit notes. Without a properly documented report, the buyer significantly weakens their negotiating position, particularly in disputes over responsibilities or quantities.

Integration into supplier management

Findings from complaints should flow systematically into supplier development: into the supplier rating, upcoming awards, the risk mitigation plan for critical components and the risk analysis of the procurement portfolio assessment. For critical or single-source items, a recurring complaint history can be a trigger for seeking alternatives or for a risk heatmap at supplier level.

Current developments: digitalisation and integrated processes

Complaint processes are increasingly moving onto digital platforms and becoming more closely integrated with goods receipt, quality management and source-to-pay processes. This reduces processing times and improves data quality for supplier evaluations.

Digital complaint processes

Modern systems link incoming goods inspection, complaint cases and supplier communication. Supplier portals enable the supplier to provide direct feedback on the 8D status, the position taken and cost approval. Standardised master data and sound master data governance are prerequisites for complaint cases being uniquely assignable to material, supplier and purchase order. Without consistent master data, the evaluation otherwise remains incomplete and yields distorted results.

Prevention rather than rework

Increasingly, the focus is shifting from follow-up to prevention: upstream processes such as a robust production part approval process, clear drawing and specification statuses and structured change management via change orders reduce the root causes of complaints. Even in co-development for new parts, quality criteria and inspection concepts are agreed early with the supplier in order to minimise later complaints.

Typical metrics

Metric	Typical value
Complaint rate	typically < 1 % of delivery volume *strongly dependent on industry and material, comparable only with caution*
Complaint processing time	often < 30 days to final response *significantly shorter target values are common for critical parts*

Incoming quality (delivery quality)	> 98 % defect-free deliveries *usual target value in series production*
8D closure rate	> 90 % on time *measures the supplier's response discipline*

Practical example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company receives a delivery of around 5,000 housing parts. During sampling at goods receipt, a non-conforming paint thickness is identified. Goods receipt blocks the entire delivery, documents the finding with photos and a measurement record, and enters a complaint report in the QM system within 24 hours, linked to the purchase order, batch numbers and delivery note. The supplier is informed via the supplier portal with a clear demand for immediate containment.

- Complete blocking and labelling of the affected stock to avoid mixing with good material.
- Preparation of a structured complaint report with photos, measurement values and batch reference within one day.
- Request for an 8D report with containment action, root cause analysis and verification of effectiveness within the agreed deadline.
- Inclusion of the case in the supplier rating and derivation of tightened incoming inspection until effectiveness is confirmed.

Conclusion

The complaint report is far more than a formality: it secures claims, creates the data basis for cost allocation and provides key findings for supplier development. Companies that record reports in a standardised, timely and digital manner shorten processing times and strengthen their negotiating position. At the same time, the findings feed into ratings, audits and risk assessments and thus have a preventive effect. Those who view complaints as a source of learning and a management tool sustainably reduce defect costs and improve incoming quality. The prerequisite is a clear organisation with defined responsibilities, deadlines and documentation standards.

Frequently asked questions

? What belongs in a complaint report?

A complete complaint report contains the purchase order and material number, quantity, batch or delivery note reference, a precise description of the defect with photos or measurement records, and the buyer's demand, such as rectification, replacement delivery or credit note. In addition, any consequential costs and a deadline for the response should be stated where applicable.

? How quickly must a notice of defect be sent to the supplier?

In mutual commercial transactions, short notice periods apply under the German Commercial Code (HGB): apparent defects must be reported immediately after goods receipt and hidden defects immediately after discovery. Specific deadlines arise from the contract and the agreed terms and conditions. Since oversights can jeopardise claims, the deadline situation should be examined on a case-by-case basis.

? What is the difference between a complaint and a notice of defect?

The notice of defect is the legally relevant notification of a defect, the omission of which can result in the loss of warranty rights. The complaint report is the organisational and operational process behind it, including forms, QM system and follow-up. In practice, a properly prepared complaint report typically also fulfils the function of a notice of defect.

? What is an 8D report in the context of a complaint?

The 8D report is a standardised eight-step problem-solving method that suppliers complete following serious complaints. It covers the team, problem description, interim containment actions, root cause analysis, corrective actions, verification of effectiveness and closure. The buyer uses it to verify the traceability and lasting effectiveness of the correction.

? What costs can be claimed in the event of a justified complaint?

In practice, sorting, rework and retooling costs, additional transport costs for replacement deliveries and costs of production interruptions are frequently claimed, insofar as they can be attributed to the supplier. The prerequisites are clean cost documentation and a clear contractual basis. Actual enforceability depends on the individual case.

? How does a complaint affect the supplier rating?

Complaint rate, processing time and response quality are factored into supplier ratings in many companies with a weighted evaluation. Recurring systemic defects can additionally trigger audits or targeted development measures. Over several periods, the complaint history thus also influences award decisions.

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