“Got Standards?”
10/01/02

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Imagine a world in which standards varied from one country to another. Trade between these countries would be quite useless. The idea that one country has for specifications of a good would be different than that of another country. Therefore, a common ground must be drawn and maintained in order to bring harmony to global standards for international trade. Enter ISO 9000.

The Basics
In order to fully understand the concept of ISO 9000, it is very important to have a good idea of what a standard is. Standards are documented agreements. They contain technical specifications that can be used consistently as rules or guidelines to ensure that goods are fit for their purpose. Thus, international standards increase reliability and quality, not to mention, make life a whole lot easier.

Standards now known as ISO 9000 standards were developed by the International Organization for Standardization, which was founded in 1946. The purpose of the organization was to promote the development of international standards and related activities. They chose ISO as the prefix of their numerical standards because it is Greek for equal. Contrary to what many people believe, it is not an acronym for the International Organization for Standards.

ISO 9000 standards are sometimes called “generic management system standards.” “Generic,” in this situation, tells us that the same standards may be applied to any product or organization. It does not apply to a specific product and does not guarantee that a manufacturer produces a quality product. The standards enable a company to assure that it has a quality system in place. The product may also be a service such as a cleaning company or a consulting agency. “Management System” refers to the certain way that a company or organization chooses to manage their activities.

Obtaining ISO 9000 Certification
Implementing the ISO 9000 standards isn’t just a snap of the fingers. A company or organization must first receive certification that they are commendable of receiving such standards. This is done for the same reason that universities don’t just let anybody into their school. They are keeping a reputation as having quality standards. The very first step to obtaining certification is to have an in depth analysis of the company’s own quality procedures and compare them to the ISO 9000 standards. Companies’ procedures, good communication in management, and documentation must be compliant with ISO 9000 standards.
If companies lack these qualities, certification is often hard to obtain, and they should hire an external consultant to help them take the necessary steps to conform them to ISO 9000 standards. Steps include a corrective system to stop reoccurring problems and evaluation of new training needs.

The next step is the assessment process. A system of audits by a third party is involved to inspect the organization, documentation, employees, and their knowledge of the quality system. Finally, a third party registration agency will issue certification, assuming the company complies with the standard of ISO 9000. The ISO 9000 certificate will usually expire after 3 years, forcing companies to annually audit their processes.

The cost of obtaining ISO certification will vary across different companies. It depends on the size of the staff, the amount of employees, the location of the company and how closely the company abides the standards of ISO 9000.

**Variations of ISO 9000**

While many companies try to obtain ISO 9000 certification, there are many other different ISO certifications available. Some of these certifications include ISO 9002 1994, ISO 9003 1994 and ISO 9001. These different certifications are given to different companies according to the company’s individual quality needs. For example, the 9001 version covers requirements for businesses whose operations include the entire production process, which starts from the design of the product, to the manufacturing of it and the aftermarket service. ISO 9002 is for a company that does not design its product. This certificate is exactly like ISO 9001 just that it leaves out the design requirements. Don’t forget, however, that all of these variations are upgrades of the base ISO 9000 system.

Currently, the most popular upgrade is to ISO 9001. ISO 9000 can be described as a standard requirement while ISO 9001 can be seen as an “enterprise standard”. The enterprise standard relates to different parts of a system so that they can be better managed to perform at optimum levels of the company. Another goal of the new enterprise standard is the idea of continuous improvement throughout the company. It is believed that for a company to survive in the competitive business world, they must consistently and continuously improve or they will not thrive. This is an example of a quality management system, Other examples are introduced below.
Foreign customers are increasingly expecting ISO 9001 certification for US companies. In order to get this ISO certification, a third party auditor must “conduct an on-site audit of a company’s operations against the requirements of the appropriate standard”. The remaining processes remain the same as obtaining a certification for ISO 9000.

**Quality Management Principles**

ISO 9000 standards are based on several quality management principles, each of which is used to help improve organizational performance and achieve success. These principles act as a framework for companies to guide their organizations towards improved performance. A few examples of these principles are:

1. **CUSTOMER FOCUS**  
   Organizations rely on customer to increase revenue and market share. They can do this by meeting, understanding and exceeding customer needs and expectations.

2. **LEADERSHIP**  
   Organizations rely on good leadership because this can increase employee motivation towards company goals and objectives. Not only will activities be evaluated, aligned and implemented in a unified way, the miscommunication between levels will also be minimized.

3. **PEOPLE INVOLVEMENT**  
   Organizations rely on people. Plans must be undertaken to encourage the involvement of people at all levels and help them develop and use their abilities. The more people involved in a decision, the more innovative solutions are to further company goals and objectives.

4. **PROCESS APPROACH**  
   Organizations are more efficient and effective when they use a process approach to manage resources. This would lead to decrease costs and cycle times through effective resource management. Other benefits include improved and consistent results and improvement opportunities.

5. **MANAGEMENT SYSTEM APPROACH**  
   Organizations need to assimilate interrelated processes as a system. Integrate and align the processes that best achieve the desired results.
6. CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT
Organizations are more efficient and effective when they continually try to improve. Competitive advantages can be gained through improved company capabilities and a faster response to opportunities can be achieved.

7. FACTUAL DECISION MAKING
Organizations perform better when their decisions are based on facts. They must base effective decisions on the analysis of data and information. This has the advantage of increasing their ability to review, challenge and change opinions and decisions.

Continual Improvement and the Future of ISO 9000
After implementing the quality management principles in operations, many new companies will see measurable benefits, usually due to improvements in communication within their organization. But that is only half of the battle. Maintaining these benefits is often the hard part. Effective internal auditing and the review of system performance by the management are good ways to strengthen the benefits and to keep the improvements in check. The system will change either by improving or by becoming less effective. If the latter is the case, monitoring the system and changing the standards may help maintain system improvements.

Periodically, the standard requirements are reviewed by a team of experts from certain businesses and other organizations. This team, called ISO/TC 176, monitors the use of the standards and finds new ways to improve them to meet their users needs. ISO 9000 standards, in general, are reviewed and updated every 5 years. This latest revision took place this year (2002), and is scheduled again for 2007. ISO is committed to maintaining the quality standards that they have built upon. These quality standards make for a safe investment for future companies or existing companies looking to develop.

The International Organization for Standardization will continue to develop industry-specific standards to break the barriers of individual standards throughout the world. In the US alone, the movement has made its way into industries such as steel, chemical, automotive, and electronics. On a world level, 91 countries have signed an agreement to abide by these standards. As this number grows larger, free trade throughout the world will improve due to a continuing worldwide acceptance of the same standards.
Works Cited


