

Quality not Quantity

Andrew Cairns, Projects Manager, PDMS

July 2003

Quality, what does it mean? If you ask the average person they will more than likely respond by naming brands such as Rolls Royce, Mercedes, Porsche, BMW, Dior, Cartier or some other well known name or label. Ask others and they will reference an experience of service whether this is at a hotel, restaurant, shop or garage. So does this mean that quality is something that is only available from multinational corporations, or is it something that can only be accomplished when customer and supplier interact on a one to one basis? We often hear “look at the quality”, or, “feel the quality”, so does this mean that quality is something that we can only see or feel? To be honest quality means different things to different people, from a paint finish to leather interior, to quality of materials to the cleanliness of a restaurant or how clean your car comes back after a service. Interpretation of quality is something that you cannot formalise and therefore it seems to follow that quality is difficult to achieve. Ask any manager who has been around for the last 15 to 20 years what they think of quality standards and the reaction you get will vary tremendously, from a positive response to the effect it can have on a business, to unprintable mutterings about how it ties business down. Having experienced both of the above feelings through properly and thought out implementation of the standard, to rushed and ill thought out implementation, I can agree with both camps.

Going back into the mists of time, I believe that the BS5750 standard is the main culprit for many of today’s misgivings about quality standards. For those not old enough to remember, BS5750 was the predecessor to the ISO9000 series (including parts 1, 2, 3 & 4) which itself in turn is the predecessor to the current standard ISO9001:2000.

BS5750 evolved to live within manufacturing environments and is well remembered for being very labour intensive to maintain. It wasn’t uncommon in a factory employing circa 250 people to have a quality department consisting of a Quality Manager assisted by 2 or 3 ‘Quality Engineers’, whose job it was to proceduralise all activities undertaken on the shop floor and those key activities undertaken by support staff. This often resulted in a very impressive display of 25 to 30 lever arch files full of procedures in the Quality office, thus giving the Quality Manager reason for existence. In some instances, and I have seen it, the poor secretary even had a procedure on how to open letters and heaven help him or her if they strayed from the procedure and got caught out during an audit. This failure to comply with the procedure would be followed up with a non-conformance report, which had to be responded to with a corrective action report and followed up by another audit.

As the standard became more widely accepted in Europe and the USA, the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), decided to adopt the standard, changing and enhancing it where necessary to create the 9000 series of standards. It was at this point in the standards life that companies outside of manufacturing either chose or were persuaded by their clients to

adopt the standards and this is where the problems really started. It is one thing to document how widgets are manufactured and control which material to buy, how to machine it, how it is packed and then despatched, but another entirely to document and proceduralise the kind of human interaction that takes place in the service sector. Of course you can decide response times, create complaints procedures and measure them, but how do you control the human side of the business without restricting the most important aspect of any service business offering a service, creativity and personal service? It is this strangulation of certain aspects of the business that led to the standard getting a 'bad' name. Implementing the standard as it was, meant that companies had to change to fit the standard rather than the standard being flexible enough to fit the business. The reason for this was that the standard worked on the principle that quality is only achieved by controlling the 'doing' part of the business, and for the main part, in manufacturing this worked; unfortunately other businesses out side of manufacturing required something different and this is where ISO 9001:2000 fits in.

In the above 2 standards, management, if they chose, could have very little 'buy in' to the businesses achievement of the standard; of course they would be involved in providing the words for mission statements and quality policies, but in the main other than financial input, that was where their involvement ended. All the focus was at the production end of the business to provide compliance to the quality standard.

ISO9001:2000 however changes all of this, rather than focusing on the 'doing' side of the business, the focus of the standard now rests on the management of the business; ensuring that the business has controls in place to enable good management and so flush the philosophy of quality down into the business rather than pulling it up through the various processes of the business.

The IT industry, is a good example of a sector that has benefited from the new approach to quality as defined by the ISO 9001:2000 standard. If we look in particular at the software sector, I can speak with recent experience as PDMS have just been awarded certification, it would have not only been very difficult to achieve the old standard but it would have brought very little benefit to the business and ultimately to its customers. This is because every IT project is different with different requirements; and the business processes and procedures need to be flexible to accommodate this diversity. The 9001 standard reflects this and the quality system that drives the business I work in is concentrated, not on a static system consisting of pages and pages of documents dictating how things must be done for the good of the company, but on dynamic business systems that ensure that we deliver successful projects whatever the requirements of the customer.