

## ISO9001:2000 and Quality in guidance services

*Interviewer: Did you use procedural manuals available in your factory?*

*Bill (A Canadian steelworker): It was ISO demanded. They had to do it. That's the only reason. But I can take you down there and I can show you, you know, piles of dust on them or they're hidden under here or whatever else. It's the only reason they're there....*

*I: Do those manuals come out when there's an audit?*

*Bill: They'll dust them off.*

*I: They'll dust them off!*

*Bill: I'm serious, they'll dust them off. They'll go along and just.... you know, they might be in a drawer or underneath a desk or sometimes it's right on the floor in the corner.*

*The guy'll take them, dust them off, put them somewhere where they can be seen. I'm not kidding you (Interview with Bill, 2 June 1999, quoted in Smith, & Dobson, 2003, p. 36).*

**Abstract:** In several European countries, careers guidance service providers are being required to adopt the ISO9001:2000, one of the most widely used quality management systems. This article examines the fundamental aspects of the system and its ability to ensure quality service, both in general and in guidance activities in particular. The ISO9001:2000 is characterised as being a Quality Management System which ensures uniformity of products and services. The claim, however, that it assures quality services is questionable, as it can only do so in sectors where regulatory authorities have already defined rules and procedures for delivering services. But in those sectors too, its adoption is inadvisable in view of the high cost to organisations in terms of the consequent extra burden on business management of having to considerably tighten up the organisational structure. For these reasons, in order to assure quality in guidance services, it is better to rely on other systems and approaches.

Quality in careers guidance is currently under the spotlight of the OECD, the European Commission and many national governments. An increasing number of European countries, wanting to see value for money, are requesting that guidance organisations prove the quality of their services and adopt quality assurance systems. The ISO9001:2000 is currently the most widespread Quality Management System and several governments (Italy, Slovenia, Hungary) are asking guidance service providers to adopt it (Guidance Council, & National Institute for Careers Educational and Counselling, 2004; Plant, 2001). However, it appears that the system, which is quite complex and has recently undergone major modifications, is not well known within the careers guidance world and it may be worthwhile, therefore, describing it in detail in a journal aimed at the guidance community.

### **An outline of the ISO9001:2000**

The ISO9001:2000, developed by the Geneva based International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), is a list of requirements considered necessary to achieve an optimum system of Quality Assurance Management and, more broadly, business

management itself. The number 2000 refers to the version of the regulations approved in 2000 and from now on, for the sake of brevity, we will omit it.

In all countries, there are accredited companies which, on behalf of the ISO, are authorised to conduct audits for organisations which approach them. Before the audit, organisations usually turn to consultancy firms for help in structuring their business management system according to ISO9001 guidelines and in compiling a Quality Manual together with other associated documents. The Quality Manual defines the business objectives and the structuring of the Quality Management System. Having completed the audit which includes at least one on-site inspection, the accredited company issues a certificate showing the organisation concerned is in compliance with ISO9001 regulations on Quality Systems Management. Organisations which pass the inspection process can declare themselves to be 'ISO 9001:2000 certified'.

At the centre of the ISO9001 approach is the belief that sound business management requires strict control over all phases of production. This is to be achieved by rigidly defining the business structure and by standardising and formalising the majority of internal procedures (ISO 2000a). Standardisation means evaluating current procedures within the organisation and establishing prescribed methods for carrying them out. Formalisation means making standardised procedures official by setting them down in apposite documents annexed to the Quality Manual and ensuring that all employees follow them. Once procedures have been formalised, unless the relevant documents are modified, it will no longer be possible for any given stage in a process to be carried out using a different method to that stipulated. In other words, it will no longer be possible for individual employees or groups of employees to informally decide on methods of performing a particular stage of a process. Nor will it be possible for methods to be varied according to a particular situation or according to whoever is carrying them out. In addition, in order to facilitate audits, organisations must ensure that all formalised procedures can be verified subsequently by independent external parties (i.e. auditors from firms which issue the ISO9001 certificate of compliance).

Another important aspect to bear in mind in assessing the ISO9001's ability to ensure the quality of careers guidance services is that the system is intended to be applicable to organisations 'in any industry or economic sector regardless of the offered product category' (ISO 2000a, point 2.2.). It is concerned, purely, with defining how business activities should be organised and controlled, and does not cover management options and product or service specifications. For example, it stipulates that a set of rigid procedures for the management of human resources must exist and be documented, but it does not stipulate what these procedures should be. In the version of the regulations approved in 2000, this general principle has been tempered by the inclusion of the monitoring of customer satisfaction levels (ISO 2000b, point 8.2.), and by a new philosophy towards the carrying out of audits. Since 2000, in addition to evaluating the structure and operation of the Quality Management System and verifying the organisation's actual observance of statutory regulations (that is the legal regulations to which the organisation is subject), audits must also take into account the existence of any 'guidelines, specialist material, or schools of thought' which may demonstrate the effectiveness of adopted procedures including those for supplying services (SINCERT 2000, p.2 -quotation- and SINCERT 2001, p.8. SINCERT is the body which supervises

the application of ISO regulations in Italy). This additional provision effectively means that product and service specifications have been indirectly introduced into the ISO9001 and whilst careers guidance organisations are still free to choose their methods of supplying services, they must demonstrate their effectiveness to auditors.

### **Discussion**

ISO9001 certification is purported to be a system which can reassure external parties (clients, customers, regulatory authorities) concerning an organisation's ability to provide quality products and services (ISO 2000a, point 0.1.). Now let's see if, and in what measure, the features we have described so far are able to guarantee this result with regard to careers guidance services.

In unregulated sectors (and in countries where careers guidance delivery is not regulated), each organisation is free to choose its own rules and procedures for delivering services, as long as there are 'guidelines, specialist material, or schools of thought' which can justify them. In these cases, the ISO9001 auditor is unable to certify that a particular method being followed is the optimum one and can merely say that it is one of the possible methods. So, at best, the ISO9001 can only guarantee the minimum acceptable standard. This point is fundamentally important and warrants closer scrutiny. Roughly speaking, the ISO9001 system simply guarantees that an organisation follows procedures laid down in its documents associated with the Quality Manual. In other words, provided it is adopted correctly, the system ensures that methods of supplying services are fixed. If the public authorities responsible for a certain sector (in our case, careers guidance) have not previously defined a set of rules and regulations regarding the delivery of services, the ISO9001's ability to assure a precise quality standard cannot be assumed. If two ISO9001 accredited organisations adhere to two different 'schools of thought', the services they deliver may be very different and may achieve very different levels of quality. It should also be taken into account that a true assessment of methods of supplying services depends on the inspectors' actual in depth knowledge of the sector in which the organisation operates. Such knowledge cannot be taken for granted: for example, companies which carry out audits tend to specialise by sector but, in Europe alone, hundreds of existing economic sectors are subdivided into 40 large divisions. The inclusion of customer satisfaction doesn't alter the picture. Results of measuring customer satisfaction depend to a large extent on the method used. For example, in a questionnaire given to the same cross section of service users, it is possible to obtain very different satisfaction levels merely by altering the formulation of the questions and the reply options. Lastly and most importantly, customers are not always in a position to assess the quality of products and services. For example, in careers guidance, clients are able to assess the speed and efficiency of the service they receive at the reception desk, the courtesy shown by the adviser and the clarity of his explanations, but they are not qualified to assess some of the most important elements, namely the completeness and accuracy of the information they receive, and the validity of the action plan drawn up with the help of the adviser.

In sectors where the supply of services is already directly regulated and enforced by regulatory authorities, such as Careers Guidance in the UK, the ISO9001 system can be considered superfluous.

It would seem, then, that the only place for the ISO9001 system is in countries (or sectors) where rules and procedures for delivering services have been laid down but are not directly enforced by regulatory authorities. Only here can the ISO9001 help to achieve a precise quality standard and ensure that quality standards are raised. Unfortunately, this comes at a price as the system has a series of serious consequences on business operations and these are worth highlighting.

As we have already said, the system requires the business structure to be rigidly defined and the majority of internal processes formalised. Usually, organisations will have formalised only those whose standardisation was considered crucial for assuring optimum products and services. In a cost-benefit context, control on the part of management is actually at its greatest for key processes and less in evidence for others. The formalisation of the majority of processes creates, instead, a diseconomy due to loss of flexibility and the need for improved controls. Furthermore, the adoption of the ISO9001 compels organisations to set up a series of additional procedures, for example, maintenance and control of documents and records, quality management reviews, internal audits, analysis of statistics, corrective and preventive actions (see ISO 2000b, points 4.2.3., 4.2.4., 8.2.2., 8.3., 8.4., 8.5.2., 8.5.3.), thereby giving rise to a further waste of resources. The other major drawback as regards business management is the ISO9001 proviso that organisations must ensure that their standardised procedures for carrying out their business activities can be verified, at a later date, by ISO accredited auditors. Generally, this entails keeping filed records (paper based or computerised) and ensuring they are easily accessible. The point is that many business activities are carried out by telephone or at informal meetings and are not usually documented. So, to meet ISO 9001 requirements, an organisation must, therefore, replace a large part of its procedures with ones that can later be verified by third parties. That is to say, procedures established according to criteria of efficacy and efficiency must now be replaced because of the ISO9001 requirement that auditors must be able to subsequently verify them. This also leads to further diseconomy. For these reasons, ISO9001 turns out to be cumbersome and some organisations develop a two track system: they continue to carry out their old pre-ISO9001 procedures, usually creating fake records to show to auditors, and only occasionally (when being inspected) follow those laid down in the Quality Manual and related documents (see opening testimony).

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the theory behind the ISO9001 system and its ability to deliver what it promises, namely the supply of quality products and services on the part of organisations which adopt it. The evidence we have collected shows the ISO9001 is characterised as being a Quality Management System which ensures uniformity of products and services. The claim, however, that it assures quality services is questionable, as it can only do so in those sectors where regulatory authorities have already defined rules and procedures for delivering services. But in those sectors too, its adoption is inadvisable in view of the high cost to organisations in terms of the consequent extra burden on business management of having to considerably tighten up the organisational structure. So, for the reasons stated, quality in the delivery of guidance services should be assured by using different systems and approaches.

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