CASE STUDY

ISO 9000 – Key Skills for Squeezing the Lemon
ISO 9000 – KEY SKILLS FOR SQUEEZING THE LEMON

by

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Now that Pakistan has close to 600 ISO 9000 certified organisations, it is time to both ask and answer some of the key questions relating to this important subject. This paper, based on a study of sixty such organisations, aims to discuss the two most fundamental and core questions, that most frequently come under debate.

a. What benefits were accrued as a result of achieving certification to ISO 9000 standards?
b. What should a company do to achieve its documented or perceived objectives?

Our study showed that even after many months of achieving their certification, most CEOs could not clearly articulate as to what exactly were they looking for, and what exactly did they actually get. Even when many of them were euphoric over their well decorated certificates, their notion of its benefits bordered on such generalised statements as “streamlined system”, “improved housekeeping”, “records for all occasions”, and “greater accountability”. Still many others had totally missed the boat, and were pretty happy with the “Pajero Syndrome” that underlines our endless pursuit for status symbols. This led us to arrive at two basic conclusions. First that it was comparatively easier to get a certification, but much more difficult to get its real benefits. Second that the fault does not lie with the standard, which has provided ample space for obtaining endless benefits and improvements, but in its ritual-orientated spiritless implementation. (The standard modestly refers to itself as the minimum requirements.) While the requirements of getting a certification are pretty much well defined in the 20 clauses of the standard, the techniques of squeezing the lemon (getting real benefits from the system) require a greater and in-depth understanding of various skills and techniques. This paper focuses on three such key skills, the use of which are considered fundamental to obtaining benefits from a quality management system. These three skills are:

a. The managerial skills to be able to carry out an effective management review.
b. The technical skills to be able to investigate the causes of nonconformities, and take effective corrective actions.
c. The statistical skills to be able to monitor and improve products and processes.

It may be clarified, that while these three issues are referred to in the ISO 9000 standards, they require distinctly higher skills (and knowledge) as compared to other clauses of the standard in order to provide meaningful results.
Let us begin with the first key skill. It is the skill of the management to meaningfully review its own quality system. Many organisations seem to consider this as a periodic ritual of holding a certain meeting and recording its minutes. Unless a management learns this vital life-saving skill, there is no way it can hope to reap serious benefits from the 9000 series of standards. It requires a management to learn techniques that would enable it to figure out if its own quality system is operating effectively (as per the requirements of the standard), and that if it is meeting its own defined policy and objectives. This primary but vital requirement of the standard, requires at least two pre-requisites to be met.

a. What is it that a management wishes to achieve from its quality system. Is there a clearly defined set of quality objectives that one is in pursuit of? How do you know you are meeting them, and to what extent? Are they quantified? Is there a time frame to meet these objectives? How do you measure them? One can promptly identify that with the run-of-the-mill, stereotyped, two-liner quality policies that frequently adorn the first page of the quality manuals, one is not likely to achieve any of these objectives.

b. Is there a system which can monitor and record these parameters on an on-going basis, so as to be able to provide meaningful facts and data, on the basis of which, management could draw its own logical conclusions about the extent to which it is meeting its objectives? Is a management review meeting preceded by a comprehensive collection and presentation of facts relating to the sought out objectives? Certainly this cannot be achieved by management sitting around a table one morning to conduct a management review meeting, simply to fulfil yet another procedural requirement of the standard. The sole purpose of clause 4.1.2.3.b was to create a structured mechanism which would enable such a factual review of the performance of a quality system.

The next important skill required to draw the real benefits of a quality system is the technical skill of being logically able to investigate the root cause of a non-conformance. The first issue in this context relates to how an organisation defines as to what does it consider to be a non-conformance. We found most organisations not being able to say exactly what level of rework, return, regrade, reject or customer complaint, would constitute a non-conformance. Many thought that only acts resulting in major losses could be placed in this category, and investigated upon. This approach allows them to comfortably live with their daily friction (problems), by accepting them to be an inherent and ordained part of the destiny of their process, and thus never seek genuine improvements. Even when a non-conformance was considered important enough to be recorded on a non-conformance report, it failed to receive its due respect. The root cause, as the name suggests normally does not lie on the surface. It lies at the root, and thus requires some careful analysis and looking into. When an organisation considers investigating root cause to be a burden or a non-value-added extra assignment, it is not likely to take it seriously. One can find most non-conformance reports conspicuous by absence of the real cause of their stated anomaly. In most cases one would not find evidence that the implemented corrective action was adequate to avoid recurrence of the defect. This defeats the entire purpose of the corrective action mechanism, which could in fact be used by the management to seek lasting improvements in its products and processes.
Finally the standard has eluded most organisations of its potential benefits, because of a general lack of understanding of the statistical techniques that could be used to improve products and processes. This aspect has also escaped scrutiny of auditors, as many of them are themselves not well versed with the powerful control and improvement possibilities offered by the use of these techniques. Many would happily accept an organisation’s statement in its quality manual stating that, “this clause is not applicable to this organisation.” Before an organisation could decide as to which statistical techniques it could use to control which product or process parameters, it needs to know what these techniques are, how they are used and how do they help to improve quality. Most organisations after presenting some form of data on a bar chart feel as if they have hit the ultimate in this field. The fact that many of these statistical techniques are not one-time or stand-alone systems, but are used as a part of the larger PDCA cycle, is totally ignored. Less than 5% organisations used an actual in-process control chart (like an X bar or R chart), and none used techniques like design of experiments or gauge capability studies. It was thus only natural that the organisations were failing to take advantage of the possible usage of statistical techniques in their quality management systems.

In conclusion, it is reiterated that the 9000 standards offer an organisation a remarkable platform to improve the quality of its product, process and system. This would however remain a distant dream unless the skills, relating to management review, investigation of non-conformances and the use of statistical tools are truly understood and implemented.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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