

4 December 2009

Quality

Make what you will

David Hoyle, well-known author on ISO 9001, gives his take on the standard's use in the supply chain

BS 5750-1, the forerunner to ISO 9001, was created with a desire to reduce multiple supplier assessments and improve competitiveness in the supply chain. In the 1960s and 1970s, customers audited their suppliers' systems, which resulted in requests for suppliers to be audited all over the place at a huge cost and a lot of time. There was then a call from the motor industry and from the public sector to reduce these assessments and to create harmonisation of quality assurance requirements.



Overall, ISO 9001 has been successful in spreading the quality message and aligning customer quality assurance requirements in supply chains. We're now buying goods from all over the world to a better standard than 50 years ago with greater confidence that they will meet our requirements.

The standard has had the most benefit in large organisations and supply chains such as in the automotive sector. It standardised a lot of the things that were common but still allowed customers to impose individual requirements. It didn't remove the individual's right to be specific.

There are two areas where ISO 9001 has gone wrong. One is its applicability. ISO 9001 is often imposed on suppliers even though it contains no requirements for customers to do so. It got so extreme at one stage that local authorities were imposing ISO 9001 on window cleaners and garden services. It was never designed for this purpose. It was only ever intended to be used where the quality of the product or service could not be verified on completion by the purchaser.

When deciding whether to ask suppliers for certification to ISO 9001, you need to ask the question, what measures do I need to take to be confident that the product or service being purchased will meet my requirements? If the supplier has been supplying that particular product or service for many years and has had no problems, but suddenly that customer requires certification to ISO 9001, then it will harm the relationship. If the customer had no problem with the quality of the product why change the arrangements? If it's a new supplier and you can't verify quality on receipt, you're trying to forge a new relationship and it's used in the initial discussions in order to get confidence in the capability to meet requirements, then I think it's reasonable.

While ISO 9001 has helped spread the quality message, that message is not always clear. It has in many cases resulted in too many organisations chasing paperwork and losing sight of the original objective of achieving economic performance through satisfying customer requirements. The standard is too open to interpretation and this may be the source of problems that has led to the acceptance of ineffective management systems by third-party auditors and a lack of confidence in the certification scheme throughout the supply chain.

One of the problems with international standards is that they have to be written in such a way that they can be translated into many different languages, but still have the same meaning. Unfortunately, English is one of the few languages that has many different words for the same thing and this makes it extremely difficult to reach common understanding in global supply chains.

There is certainly scope in the future for making ISO 9001 less open to interpretation and for improving auditor competence. These are just two ways to improve confidence in global supply chains.

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