

Quality Standards Lack Quality

There are a number of key characteristics shared between project management and process management. Yet there is a profound lack of understanding of some basic process management concepts which have jeopardised the reputation of "quality" standards. The "quality" profession could learn much from project management concepts and standards.

A Scottish expert has called for radical change to the international quality management system standard ISO 9001 which is used by almost a million companies worldwide.

He claims that the ISO system is cumbersome and that the reluctance to implement significant change results, at least in part, from the fact that simplifying it might have a direct impact on those with a vested interest in maintaining its complexity - consultants, assessment bodies, professional associations and even the ISO committee members from all continents.

The aim of the standard is to give customers confidence they will receive a consistently acceptable quality of goods and services from any supplier which is certified. It should be the hallmark that the supplier is well managed and everyone in the organisation understands the process by which it delivers its products or services.

However Peter Fraser, an Aberdeen-based consultant in business management systems, says that too often ISO 9001 is being incorrectly used to formulate business systems instead of to assess them and the end result is that they achieve compliance with the standard but fail to achieve the businesses gains they should.

Mr Fraser's business process software company MandOS supplies major energy companies around the globe and is used by local authorities, health services and police as well as by specialist consultancies in risk management and HR.

He told the Institute of Business Consulting at a meeting in Edinburgh (November 2009) that the root cause of the problem may lie with the wording, interpretation and application of some of the fundamental concepts in the ISO standard itself.

"The fact that it is 'an international standard' seems to make managers shy away from criticising it, and this remains one of the main obstacles to resolving what is a real area for concern," he said. "More fundamentally, the problem is not acknowledged by the authors of the standard themselves.

"Managing 'business processes' needs a fundamentally different approach from the traditional view of running a business. But for this change to be successful, a solution must be found to the widespread confusion caused by the 'standard' definition of the apparently simple concept of a 'business process.'"

He told the IBC he believes the chances of rectifying the flaws in the system in short term are slim because, as with MPs in the expenses controversy, there is self interest and inertia at work.

The ISO structure (more than 100 countries have a vote) means that committees meet around the world developing a plethora of new standards and tinkering with existing ones.

"The assessment bodies seldom take radical action as a result of audit visits in what is now a competitive marketplace for them, and many consultants fail to explain even the basic concepts to their clients, who often see compliance as a necessary evil," he said. "The longer the situation

stays the same, the more difficult it will be for any of those involved to admit that they have got it wrong."

There is firm evidence that external assessments do not always highlight or trigger any constructive response to weaknesses in an organisation's management system (or its definition). The situation is further devalued by the fact that some non-accredited bodies issue worthless certificates which "confirm" that an organisation's management system meets the requirements of an international standard such as ISO9001, despite the fact that the system was defined by the very same company.

The naivety of companies which believe that a current ISO9001 certificate always guarantees "quality" (or benefits the organisation concerned) is only matched by those that claim (either in complete ignorance or bare-faced self-promotion) that their "certificate" from a non-accredited body is worth more than the cost of a blank sheet of A4 paper.