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Is ISO 9000 really a standard?

**Jim Wade is a director of Advanced
Training and founder of The Business
Improvement Network.**

**This hard-hitting article, drawing its
insights from practical inputs offered
by members of the Network, highlights
some of the basic issues that stem from
treating ISO 9000 as a standard.**



In November 2001, ISO Secretary-General Dr. Lawrence D. Eicher said that the conformity assessment community was “facing a serious challenge caused by a certain number of certification bodies which acted without integrity”. He warned that “ISO 9000 certification bodies and the accreditation bodies that approve them need to do a better job of policing their community to weed out malpractice and dishonest operators”. Dr. Eicher’s statement caused quite a reaction. More precisely, it caused two quite separate types of reaction.

The first was that if such things are happening, it is mainly because of organizations that operate outside recognized formal structures and rules (certification bodies which are unaccredited, “alternative” accreditation schemes, and so on). The “official” ISO 9000 conformity assessment community has rigorous methods to preserve integrity. So no real problem there, then.

The second type of reaction, however, is much more intriguing and deserves our deeper attention. It raises fundamental questions about the integrity of the official channels by which ISO 9000 is developed, promoted and deployed.

In the debate which followed the ISO Secretary-General’s claims of malpractice, Frank Steer, Director General of Britain’s Institute of Quality Assurance (IQA), makes a critically important point. He says that to refer to ISO 9000 as a standard “carries with it the taint of an old engineering dogma, concerned with little more than the perfection of a finished, manufactured product”. He prefers to view ISO 9000 as a model – “a root and branch means of developing quality across its full breadth and throughout the complete depth of management”.

Isn’t this simply a question of terminology? No, it is not – it is much more important than that. Promoting ISO 9000 as a standard,

Is ISO 9000 really a standard?

BY JIM WADE



Jim Wade is a director of Advanced Training and founder of The Business Improvement Network, a group of United Kingdom-based managers interested in sharing information about continual business improvement.

His views, not only on ISO 9000, but also on other models such as the Excellence Model and the Balanced Scorecard, have been shaped and honed by the practical inputs offered by members of the network, of which membership is free.

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or set of standards, is a prime cause of some key problems with its implementation.

Problem: too much emphasis on conformance

We have bred a generation of quality managers, consultants and auditors which believes that ISO 9000 is mainly about conforming to the requirements (now in clauses 4 through 8 of ISO 9001:2000).

If you do not believe this, take a close look at ISO 9000-related training programmes and at the Web sites offering “QMS solutions”. They focus almost entirely on ISO 9001:2000, and usually on the requirements clauses. Why? Because, when we get right down to it, on the street where the money changes hands, the ISO 9000 “standard” is contained only in those clauses.

What a waste of an opportunity! A review of the ISO 9000:2000 series will confirm that only a small part – about 12 % of its content – is “auditable”. Several hundred smart and hard-working people from more than 60 countries around the globe laboured within ISO technical committee ISO/TC 176 during at least six years to create the 100+ pages that make up the new ISO 9000 concept. They created “the consistent pair” and they told us, “We strongly recommend that you read the new standards, particularly ISO 9004 in conjunction with ISO 9001, and ensure that your quality management system effectively adds value to your organization’s activities”¹⁾.

1) FAQ 036 – one of 48 answers formulated by ISO/TC 176 (and last revised in March 2001) to Frequently Asked Questions on the ISO 9000:2000 series. The FAQ’s and numerous other documents to assist in the transition to the revised standards and in their implementation are posted on ISO’s Web site: www.iso.org.

And what do we do? Because of our training and our bad habits, we ignore the expert advice and we largely ignore 88 % of the ISO 9000:2000 series. We focus almost the whole massive international machine of consultancy, accreditation, certification, training, quality management and internal auditing on the 12 “requirements” pages of ISO 9001:2000!

This encourages the belief that conforming to the requirements of ISO 9001 means we have a management system that somehow represents a desirable level of quality. This is “the root cause of the problem”, says Joe Goasdoué, Chief Executive of the British Quality Foundation. “Many companies... have been led to believe that an ISO 9000 certificate guarantees a high standard of quality and service. This is manifestly untrue.”

Problem: ISO 9000 implementation not true to concept

Some companies appear to have been misled quite deliberately. The relentless promotion of certification flies directly in the face of the advice given by those responsible for ISO 9000. In 1994, for example, ISO/TC 176 laid out the correct sequence for using the various documents in the ISO 9000 family:

“...first consult ISO 8402 for a grounding in quality terminology, then turn to ISO 9000-1 and ISO 9004-1 for guidance on how to set up an effective quality management system as a foundation for continuous improvement.

“It is only after the organization has implemented an internal quality management system...that it becomes appropriate to employ – if desired by the organization, or

required by its customers or regulatory authorities – one of the three external quality assurance models: ISO 9001, ISO 9002 or ISO 9003.” Even as recently as 1998, we were still advised (source: *Selection and use of ISO 9000, 1998*) to “use ISO 9004-1 as a basis”.



In short, ISO’s excellent advice was that we should first build ourselves a system that will get us continually improving business results. Only then might we choose to seek a certificate (using a model).

But what happened? Having been advised by the experts that it is inappropriate to use an external quality assurance model to set up a quality management system, we went ahead and encouraged users to do exactly that. We shifted the whole emphasis away from setting up an effective system as a foundation for continuous improvement, and we focused blindly on the measure of success being the number of nonconformities to the “standard”.

And now, in the latest guidance from ISO/TC 176 (source: *ISO 9000 – Selection and use, 2001*)²⁾ we are advised to make a choice: either to use ISO 9001 or, if we want “to prepare for a national quality award”, to use ISO 9004. Has this change in approach been made as an improvement, and if so to what? Has it been made reluctantly to reflect what is happening in practice (the rigid focus on certifica-

tion)? Or, bearing in mind the current starkly contrasting advice also from ISO/TC 176 – that we use ISO 9004 in conjunction with ISO 9001 to add value – are we simply witnessing a system in disarray?

Problem: Lack of incentive to set own standards

The purpose of a quality management system is to help us achieve objectives. The objectives, in essence, define an organization’s quality standards. If, however, we believe that “meeting the ISO 9000 standard” equates to “quality”, it removes the motivation to set meaningful objectives.



We mainly ignore 88 % of the ISO 9000:2000 series

And this is exactly what has happened in many – I suspect most – ISO 9000 implementations to date: objectives are, typically, completely absent. This means the system has no purpose and that the organization, having no clear quality standards, cannot measure whether or not it is improving.

It also means that a majority of organizations have been issued with a certificate for a system with a major nonconformity! ISO 9001:2000 should help redress this situation, provided that its requirement for the newly rediscovered concept of measurable objectives is taken seriously.

²⁾ The full text of the *ISO 9000 – Selection and use* brochure is available as an electronic version on ISO’s Web site: www.iso.org. Hard copies of the brochure may be ordered from ISO’s national member institutes (a list with contact details is available on the ISO Web site) or from ISO Central Secretariat (sales@iso.org).



ISO's excellent advice was that we should first build ourselves a system that will get us continually improving business results

Problem: malpractice... or lack of competence?

Most reactions to the ISO Secretary-General's claims have been along the lines that any lack of integrity is mainly due to the non-official bodies. However, it looks as if there is at least some concern about the official channels also:

- "It would appear that there is cause for concern. There is enough smoke to suggest fire. In particular, we hear of allegations that certification bodies mix certification with the provision of consultancy in such a way as to undermine the independence of the certification process" – *Linda Campbell*, Chief Executive of UKAS (the official United Kingdom accreditation body)
- "IAF is aware of the commercial pressures on certification/registration bodies and the suppliers they certify that may lead them to act inappropriately" – *Noel Matthews*, Secretary of the International Accreditation Forum

A specific sub-theme which has also emerged is concern about the competence of those

responsible for assessing organizations against the more stringent requirements of ISO 9001:2000.

The IQA's Frank Steer says, "We all know it will be difficult for auditors to come to grips with the new model", and Linda Campbell confirms that the new model poses "a very real challenge to the competence of the certification bodies and their auditors".

These concerns are certainly justified. ISO 9000:2000 – even its ISO 9001 subset – takes us firmly out of traditional conformance-related quality assurance territory into a world more interested in the application of management principles and best practice.

One wonders to what degree the attitudes and skills of auditors are able to keep pace with the change? A recent letter to the editor of a leading quality journal, by a Fellow of the Institute of Quality Assurance, is an example of current attitudes. He was at pains to explain why there is no need to measure customer satisfaction, pointing out that ISO 9001:2000 does not

require it (he was correct in so far as the relevant subclause, 8.2.1, requires the organization to monitor customer satisfaction). But he was apparently oblivious to the fact that ISO 9004:2000 advises us unambiguously that "management should use measurement of customer satisfaction as a vital tool".



We focused blindly on the measure of success being the number of nonconformities to the 'standard'

Problem: misplaced emphasis on Lead Auditor qualification

A key factor that has surfaced in Business Improvement Network (www.bin.co.uk) discussions is the poor behaviour encouraged by promoting a belief that "Lead Auditor" is the pinnacle of "quality" qualifications.

Again, this locks us into narrow compliance thinking. This is particularly true when you consider the value that we assign to this qualification, not only when it is held by the people whose job is to do third party audits, but also when it is on the CV of consultants who advise organizations on the construction of their management system, or when it has been achieved by internal auditors.

Even more disastrously, the belief in the superior value of the Lead Auditor qualification applies to quality managers, whose job, involving leadership in the principles and habits of continual improvement,



is vastly more important and challenging and difficult than that of an auditor.



Promoting ISO 9000 as a standard is unhelpful. It focuses us too narrowly and incorrectly on the requirements clauses

There are so many cases of misplaced and misleading emphasis on the Lead Auditor qualification and so little space here. A typical example is the promotional material I received this week from BSI Business Solutions Ltd. (part of the same group as the major international certification body and using the same logo). They offer “training services supplemented with bespoke consultancy to help you achieve your business objectives and implement plans successfully”. Their concept is a “Ladder of Learning... ultimately leading to business improvement”. The top rung of the ladder is – you guessed it – Lead Auditor!

Solution: back to ISO’s Plan A?

From the information gathered during Business Improvement Network workshops over the past five years, user experience (certainly in the United Kingdom) supports the opinions expressed above.

Promoting ISO 9000 as a standard is unhelpful. It focuses us too narrowly and incorrectly on the requirements clauses, it helps to mislead companies into thinking that certification means better quality, and it undermines the need for an organization to set its own quality standards.

Adopting the party line that ISO 9001:2000 is a first step and that continual improvement comes later with ISO 9004:2000 is a huge cop-out. An ISO 9001:2000 certificate is supposed to confirm to the outside world that an organization is continually improving both its effectiveness and its process performance.

Let’s take seriously the fact that ISO/TC 176 emphasizes the importance of using ISO 9004:2000, *Quality management systems – Guidelines for performance improvements*, in conjunction with ISO 9001:2000, *Quality management systems – Requirements*, as a “consistent pair”. Let’s put much more emphasis on the eight quality management principles³⁾ and other basics in ISO 9000:2000, *Fundamentals and vocabulary*.

Preferably, let’s get back to ISO’s Plan A, where the guidance came first and what has now become the “standard” was intended to be of secondary importance! We cannot rely solely on auditors and on those bearing auditor qualifications to help organizations properly implement the ISO 9000:2000 series. We need to think about what happens between audits, which is where all the work of continual improvement is done.



We must expect that the proper, good practice deployment of ISO 9001:2000 will result in a (hopefully temporary) marked reduction in the number of ISO 9000 certificates issued

Fewer certifications – a positive sign?

Finally, consider this: the ISO 9000:2000 series claims to be a much tougher principles-driven set of standards, requiring new behaviours and knowledge from senior management. Taking on board this knowledge and making such behavioural changes will, as we all know, take a long time. Does it not then follow that some significant percentage of currently registered organizations will initially fail to qualify for an ISO 9001:2000 certificate?



We need to think about what happens between audits, which is where all the work of continual improvement is done

Therefore, we must expect that the proper, good practice deployment of ISO 9001:2000 will result in a (hopefully temporary) marked reduction in the number of ISO 9000 certificates issued. But will the facts reflect this expectation?

And what conclusions must we draw if they do not? ■

3) These principles have also been published by ISO as a separate brochure, *Quality management principles*, with additional explanations from ISO/TC 176. Hard copies of the brochure may be ordered from ISO’s national member institutes (a list with contact details is available on the ISO Web site – www.iso.org) or from ISO Central Secretariat (sales@iso.org). The full text of this brochure is available as an electronic version on ISO’s Web site.