

From waste collectors to entrepreneurs with ISO 9000

The livelihood of the socially disadvantaged waste collectors of Medellín, Colombia, appeared to be under threat when the waste dumping area was replaced by a modern sanitary landfill. However, creation of the Recuperar cooperative gave them fresh hope, joint ownership, housing, education and health assistance, and an enthusiastic commitment to quality spurred on by successful ISO 9002 implementation and certification.

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In 1983, the city administrators of Medellín, Colombia, decided to close down its waste dumping area and open a modern sanitary landfill in a separate location away from the city. The new facility was designed to be run in a modern and efficient way to avoid contaminating the environment.

Closing the old dumping area was bad news for more than 320 families who derived a living from collecting the waste. However, the administrators, and *Empresas varias de Medellín*, in charge of the site, were eager to generate employment for the former *basureros* or waste collectors of Moravia, where the old dump was located. So they called on private enterprises to cooperate in solving the problem by creating added value jobs for these poorly educated people whose only skill was collecting waste.

That was the beginning of the *Cooperativa de trabajo Asociado Recuperar* – Recuperar Work Cooperative¹⁾. A fundamental condition was that the organization should be owned by the workers, a decision that bestowed dignity on their lives, enhanced their working conditions and encouraged a high level of commitment to quality.

Recuperar started with the original 320 waste collectors, but has since opened the door to other family members and local people with diminished resources. To date, the results have been excellent, not only for the companies participating in the programme but also for the workers.

Recuperar today

Today, the cooperative comprises three business units employing 1400 associate workers. The first unit handles the collection and selling of recyclable solid residues, with the aim of creating a “no garbage” culture. The second unit, Environmental Services, offers cleaning and gardening services to customers and their families. The third unit is Administrative Services, which offers a variety of manual labour activities.

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During its 19 years of existence, Recuperar has grown economically and productively. The challenge for the future was how to maintain that growth and keep developing its services. In July 1998, the organization decided to design, document and implement a quality management system that would enable it to reach such objectives.

Towards certification

The cooperative started on the route to ISO 9000 quality system certification as a process of continual improvement in order to achieve services of the highest quality, and greater customer confidence. With this objective in mind, Recuperar reorganized all its services with customer satisfaction and continual improvement as the central focus. Standardization of processes, improved productivity and enhanced competitiveness were also recognized as key needs.

Steps in the quality certification process

1. Training

Training was organized in two different phases. The first was to establish an ISO 9000 support team comprising managers and unit chiefs. This group studied the standards and the best way of applying them at Recuperar, and defined the quality policy.

The second phase was the training of service personnel in subjects such as "what is a quality service?", "how to work with quality", and "the quality policy of the cooperative and its components". This developed a simplified approach to achieve better understanding among participants.

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2. Documentation

The documentation process was implemented in parallel with training of the support team. This was done through close cooperation between Recuperar staff and the workers actively involved in delivering the services in each area. All workers documented the processes and the procedures using graphics to facilitate understanding.

3. Implementation

Since the documentation phase was carried out in conjunction with the workers, the implementation of procedures was comparatively quick and easy: all involved in the various services had a clear idea of their specific duties and responsibilities.

4. Certification

Once the procedures were implemented and the commitment of all workers gained, the final phase of the project to obtain internationally recognized certification began. All employees were well prepared for the challenge and the audits to come.



Armando Montoya, General Manager of Recuperar and an associate at a performance award celebration during the ISO 9002 implementation phase prior to certification.

These happy workers and joint owners of the Recuperar waste disposal and recycling cooperative have committed themselves to raising the quality of their services through ISO 9002 implementation and receive social benefits in housing, educational and health assistance from the organization.



Recuperar choose ICONTEC²⁾, the Colombian standards and certification institute because it is the only Colombian organization providing certification services in the country and because ICONTEC enjoys international recognition through its membership of IQNet, the international certification network.



A waste collection truck enters Recuperar's ISO 9002-certified headquarters in Medellín City, Colombia, where waste is separated, classified and recycled.

Remarkable commitment

Considering the disadvantaged background of the workers, it was remarkable how eagerly they accepted and committed themselves to the quality culture. Indeed, the commitment of all personnel played a vital role in the continual improvement of Recuperar services. In turn, the organization recognises that the workers are its most valuable asset.

ICONTEC awarded the cooperative ISO 9002 certification in October 2000. At the award ceremony, the certification body praised Recuperar for having strengthened its commitment to, and relationships with, customers through continual improvement of services.

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More important that the 'bottom line'

One of the cooperative's most important tasks is to improve the quality of life of its associates in a number of ways through the activities of the "Social Work and Human Resources Department". For example, it helps members in home improvements and children's education, and advises on bank loans and health care. In essence, Recuperar is employing an unskilled work force, which it empowers through ownership of the cooperative and by helping to improve their way of life. This win-win relationship makes Recuperar a very strong organization, and the commitment of all employees guarantees the best service in the field of waste collection and recycling.

For the cooperative, this form of social assistance and the well being of its workers is more important than the "bottom line" on the financial balance sheet. The real added value of Recuperar to Colombian society is not how much profit it makes but how much social benefit it provides.

Today, Recuperar is proud to confirm that 19 associates are studying at the University in Medellín, and two of its administrators have already obtained degrees in accountancy and business administration. The cooperative is keen to help its associates receive a better education, seeing this as the only way to remain in business and improve the quality of life of its people.

Indeed, Recuperar is a wonderful example of what a small cooperative business can achieve in human terms, and in raising the quality of its services. It also demonstrates how the application of ISO 9000 quality standards can help enhance the quality of life of poor people performing unskilled and low paid jobs. ■

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