BY OLIVIER PEYRAT

Olivier Peyrat is Managing Director of the France-based AFAQ certification group.

Groupe AFAQ, 116, avenue Aristide Briand, BP 40, 92224 Bagneux cedex, France.
Tel. + 33 1 46 11 37 37.
Fax + 33 1 46 11 39 40.
E-mail info@afaq.org
Web www.afaq.org

New ISO 9000 standards: generic, attractive, but not as simple as they look

The ISO 9000 standards originated in the industrial sectors, mainly those of the defence, nuclear and aeronautic branches, and applied more specifically to the manufacture of mass-produced, tangible products. These standards, particularly at the time of their first issue in 1987, were heavily criticized in fields such as services or the construction industry.

Much of the criticism was founded, but part of the criticism – a substantial minority, at least – was probably due to an acquired reflex to throw the baby (the quality management system concepts) away with the bathwater (a sometimes inappropriate or incomprehensible language – whoever has tried to talk of metrology or traceability in the field of services on the basis of the 1987 version of the ISO 9000 standards must have run into some difficulties). Or perhaps the standards were just a little too remote from some fields where a number of clauses of the standard were happily – and mistakenly – relegated as "non applicable".

With the publication of the 1994 versions and after several years of additional experience, the ISO 9000 standards gradually acquired a reputation of being fairly easily transposable management system standards. Indeed, they have been implemented by all types of organization, from multinational corporations to SME's, from humanitarian NGO's to public services.

Today, we are facing a new challenge. The 2000 version of the ISO 9000 series is truly generic. What human organization, on which continent, does not at the same time have management, processes, resources, and an obligation to satisfy its customers, today and tomorrow – which implies a continual improvement approach?

Customer orientation

The prime objective of these standards is indeed customer orientation: the ISO 9000:2000 series focus on satisfying the customers (whatever they are called or designated) of the organization[1)] in the case of ISO 9001, and on satisfying all interested parties (society in the broadest sense, shareholders, etc.) in the case of ISO 9004 and ISO 14001.

All organizations have customers or interested parties, or both, and are therefore potentially concerned with this series of standards. These contain no obligations as far as means are concerned, but an obligation, on the other hand, in terms of results which is further strengthened in the 2000 version of the ISO 9000 series.

1) "Organization" in this article is used in the sense specified in ISO 9001 and ISO 9004 (group of people and facilities with an arrangement of responsibilities, authorities and relationships).

An organization wishing to build up its quality management system should therefore start by taking into account the needs and expectations of its customers.

This system will be constructed around the normal operation of the organization, which will have to identify the processes and then control these processes through its management system to ensure the sustained satisfaction of its customers (ISO 9001) and interested parties (ISO 14001).

The concept of process, already present in the ISO 14001 standard, makes a noted entry in the new version of ISO 9001/ISO 9004. Process is the basic concept that reverses previous trends and, rather than encouraging organizations to adapt their management system to a standard, enables the standards to be adapted to any type of organization, provided the latter's general operation is effective and efficient. Therefore, there can be as many quality management systems or environmental management systems (according to the ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 models) as there are organizations. ISO 9001:2000 states, for example, that the documentation implemented by the company should be adapted to the organization and not to the structure of the model.

Varying needs

In its great wisdom, the new standard specifies in addition that the design and implementation of the quality management system should take into account varying needs, specific objectives, products supplied, processes used, and the size and structure of the organization. One could hardly be more flexible! But at the same time, the critical importance of management, resources, processes and continual improvement mechanisms for an activity will of course vary according to the sector and/or size of the company.

Similarly, the number and intricacy of the processes will vary significantly from one sector to another. Some areas of activity feature a dominant process (solar architecture –

Photo 1: This 'solar' architecture consists of a dominant process and a number of subordinate 'satellites'. It is an architecture often found in small structures.

Photo 2: Individually, the processes of this organization are pretty well controlled, but their interfaces cannot work, or at least not without considerable friction. With such a set-up, the activity as a whole cannot be managed optimally and customer satisfaction or that of the interested parties cannot be assured.

Photo 3: All the gear-wheels work. The company has properly identified all its processes thanks to the good control it has over its management system. It must now endeavour to maintain (and improve!) the effectiveness of its processes with a view to ensuring sustained satisfaction of its customers' needs.

Photos: François-Xavier

"Can generic management system standards really fit all sizes?..."

see photo 1), to which all other processes in the organization are subordinated. This situation is also very often found in very small structures. With time, or as the organization grows, other processes will gradually gain importance, whether because of the need for differentiation or to increase the added value. This will increase the complexity [2] of the system and, therefore, its vitality.

In a way, this is the phenomenon that can be observed when a company whose activity is subcontracting for excess capacity tries to change course and become a specialized subcontractor, or establish a design capacity. It is then a matter of creating new processes within the company and of ensuring that the required resources, the process improvement loop, and the way they are managed is suitable. This is far from always being the case at the outset.

In the case of large organizations, there are cases where individual processes are generally well controlled, but where the interfaces between processes are not optimal (gaps in the information chain, rigid planning, losses under load, loop completion problems, etc.) – see photo 2. For such large organizations, the new standards may have a very positive impact in terms of breaking down departmental barriers, which is always desirable in order to achieve greater client satisfaction.

The 2000 version of the ISO 9000 standards is truly generic. What human organization, on which continent, does not at the same time have management, processes, resources, and an obligation to satisfy its customers, today and tomorrow – which implies a continuous improvement approach?

A few more thoughts

Before concluding, one last point about some areas of activity where the process of creating processes takes on particular significance and can be of critical import: this concerns practically all areas linked with major projects. Some additional thinking is therefore needed at the international level at this stage, in order to take into account the full potential of project management and to minimize the corresponding risks.

As a general conclusion, the size, the field of activity and the rate of integration of the organization have a significant impact on the means required to maintain effective and efficient processes leading to customer satisfaction: the processes of two organizations may be formally identical, while the resources, the improvement methods and the leadership may be extremely different.

As far as the certifiers are concerned, increased attention will have to be given to the scope of certification and the certificates which, today even more than yesterday, will have to be described in accurate, meaningful and consistent terms, both for the organizations in that sector and for the customers of those organizations.

We believe that certifiers who (like AFAQ since its creation, with sectorial committees grouping representatives of the organizations in a specific sector and their customers) have implemented processes (!) that enable them to take into account sector-specific needs of organizations,

2) The concept of complexity is very different from the concept of complication. An alarm clock is a complicated object. A living organism, even the simplest, is of a complex nature. Readers interested in the subject of complexity may refer to the work of Edgar Morin, one of the authorities on the subject.

whether this concerns the audit or certification decisions, will be more ready to provide a relevant answer, bringing added value in terms of their customers' expectations and those of the parties with an interest in the certification. The "certifier/shoemaker" should not be the worst shod...

As a personal conclusion, I would say that the new series of standards is both interesting and flexible and contains the seeds of a number of opportunities for improvement for any organization ready to take the time to discover them. To my mind, however, there is a potential danger lurking in these standards: that of being deceptively simple.

In very broad terms, while the old series focused essentially on a "set figures/ form/means" approach, the new series is turned more towards "free figures/ substance/results". This is a new frame of mind which needs to be cultivated in order to reap all the desired benefits while constantly developing the organization's vitality. Otherwise, there may be some sobering or even painful awakenings when making the transition to the new version.

Generic MSS are technical abstractions – competition drives enterprises in the 'real world'

BY GUIDO GUERTLER

Guido Guertler is Co-Chair of ICSCA, the Industry Co-operation on Standardization and Conformity Assessment. ICSCA is a forum of globally acting enterprises from America, Asia and Europe. Members include large and medium-sized companies, and industry associations. Members share a vision of increased trade and commerce through the appropriate application of industry guided international standards and the belief that such standards should add value to products. ICSCA's work focuses upon ways to improve the global 'system' for standards development and the associated conformity assessment requirements.

Guido Guertler, ICSCA Co-Chair.
Tel. + 49 89 636 40700.
Fax + 49 89 636 40705.
E-mail guido.guertler@mchp.siemens.de
Web www.icsca.org.au

The challenges created by global competition make it imperative for enterprises to continually rationalize and improve all resources and processes. Separation of responsibilities for the processes that underpin organizational outputs is unsustainable in today's competitive environment.

Current understanding of management system standards

The existing ISO management system standards (MSS), ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 are tools to document organizational processes, but they cannot ensure a well functioning management system. The Firestone case is a significant example; it may become a juncture in the perception of MSS and related certificates.

The term "management", in this context, is somewhat misleading, because the related standards suggest more than they can achieve: they cover only some of the required management elements but not a "management system".

The complexity of management

A management system comprises several "layers" (enterprise functions), such as research, development, production, sales, marketing, maintenance, service, personnel, budgeting, investment, etc.

The performance of each layer is determined by "factors" such as customer and supplier relations, personnel qualification and motivation, human relations, a decision process