

A Stamp Of Quality

It is no surprise that solution providers are increasingly opting for the coveted ISO certification

Competition is the name of the game and staying ahead is the key for survival.' Like others, this rule also applies to the solutions provider community. Against the face of growing business, and hence increased competition, solution providers have begun to realize the need to provide their customers a differentiation factor, in terms of service, products, price and technology. And one of the many ways to do that, they believe, is acquiring various kinds of process-related certifications, like the ISO. While these certifications by themselves do not help increase business, they certainly seem to help companies get an edge over the competition.

ISO stands for 'same' in Greek. The International Organization for Standardization issued the standard to promote the development of international standards and facilitate the exchange of goods and services worldwide. The ISO 9000 series was published in 1987 and revised in 1994. Its implementation and certification is being applied to a wide range of operations in services as well as industries. In fact, in many cases, compliance to standards like ISO 9001, 9002 or 9003 is required by customers or government bodies in their purchasing specifications.

Why ISO?

ISO has a universal appeal and its new model released in 2000 is well suited to IT, compared to the 1994 version. Companies today believe that the right kind of interpretation of this model and adherence to the same

in letter and spirit enables them to reap the maximum benefits. Solution providers believe that in order to provide significant value to the customer, they need to constantly improve organizations. This success requires robust processes and rigorous quality standards.

In addition, to be the best in the business, solutions providers have to continuously improve and benchmark themselves against the best-in-class quality organization. Certifications are, therefore, an external validation of quality standards. And importantly, most solution providers believe in the need to leverage on these quality certifications as a strength and differentiator to aid sales efforts.

According to Rajeev Arora of TQ Vision, a certification provider based in Delhi, "A certification to ISO 9000 QMS increases the customer's confidence in the supplier's quality and delivery commitments. Since ISO 9000 QMS is universally recognized, it helps companies to penetrate global



markets, while also improving the performance." Besides, ISO certification helps in standardization of key processes in a company. "And once they are defined, ISO encourages organizations to focus on continual improvement," asserts Kapil Nakra of Whizlabs,

another company that helps organizations to obtain quality certifications.

Getting It

All ISO requirements are generic and are intended to be applicable to all organizations, regardless of type and size. Companies need to define, document, and implement the requirements of the standard ISO 9001:2000 to get certified. Certifying bodies like TUV Rheinland, TUV Sutherland, KPMG, and BVQI, could help obtain certification. After selecting the certifying body, the company has to give information to the certifying body about its nature of business, number of employees and its geographical presence. Depending on the size of

The Cost

The cost of obtaining an ISO certification depends on the company's number of employees and offices. For instance, for a company which has a single office and 25 employees, the certification body will charge between Rs 40,000-60,000 and the consultant another Rs 50,000. The total amount comes to something between Rs 1.2-1.5 lakh, including fees to the certified bodies and consultancy charges for the initial ISO certification. Consultancy, training, certification fee (includes application fee, audit fee, certificate or license fee) would be the major areas of expenditure, besides fee for calibration of devices. The same cycle of fees is repeated during renewal every three years.

the organization, an ISO certification can be obtained three to 18 months after the process has begun.

For this, first, they need to consult an individual quality auditor or a firm of quality consultants well versed in ISO matters, seeking a detailed orientation for understanding and, thereby, adequately meeting the requirements of quality standards. The top brass should then identify the ISO category under which their organization falls, for example, ISO 9001, 9002 or 9003. There ought to be some system already in existence, either written or oral, with regard to adherence to quality of the product produced by the organization, be it a produce or service. The organization has to review the existing oral/documentated quality system, identify procedural areas for modification, and then decide on what needs to be implemented and how to format the ISO 9000 required quality manual.

Once through, different members of the organization involved in the procedure need to agree on a feasible deadline for inviting the certification body for conducting the necessary audit required for the ISO certification. Then, they have to make a documented report on planning and implementation of procedures for ISO Certification. With the help of the report, they are then required to identify the appropriate personnel/departments for working on the procedures required to have a compliant quality manual to review and update the QA manual(s) for compliance with the ISO standard. Here, it is advisable to produce a flow chart to illustrate the interrelation of all the procedures. The company also has to arrange for training of the appropriate personnel at all levels of the organization on the procedures detailed in the quality manual.

A Must Have

The organization needs to conduct internal quality audits at pre-agreed

intervals to verify compliance with quality procedures. It is the main requirement of ISO. Then, the organization has to initiate corrective actions on any deviation found and conduct periodic management meetings to review the performance of the quality system and the corrective action process.

Finally, it is now the time to bring in the registrar of the certifying body to conduct the certification audit, which is a very detailed audit procedure, from auditing the management team to the line team. All the clauses are thoroughly checked to ascertain whether the employees have understood the concepts well. An ISO certificate is issued for a period of three years, after which it has to be renewed. The certifying body conducts periodic audits every six, nine or 12 months during this time, depending upon the size and operations of the organization to make sure that they

are adhering to the ISO certification standards.

The Difference

According to Saket Kapur, MD of Green Vision, "The non-tangible benefits of the exercise were evident from the existing and prospective customers who thought of us as a more quality conscious and serious player. Certain businesses, which required ISO as a pre-qualification, became accessible. Moreover, the written down procedures and processes brought in more accountability with the working staff." Though it is very difficult to assign the increased business solely to getting the ISO certification, Saket believes that the certification was certainly a necessary step to gain elevation in business.

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