

ISO 9000 – Myths vs. Reality

By Sunil Thawani

Introduction of quality management system standards (ISO 9000) in 1987 started off a " quality movement" world wide. As every " movement " like Business Process Reengineering, Management by Objectives etc. is not without its criticism, ISO : 9000 also has its own share and has been a subject of continuous debate and criticisms like it has failed to improve quality, it adds to a lot of unnecessary paperwork, stifles creativity etc.

There is a regular talk in business circles that " craze " for ISO 9000 is diminishing and the standard is on its way "out"! But the ever growing number of certifications (see table below) worldwide continue to defy the criticism. The next revision of ISO : 9001 : 2000 due anytime this month, significantly improved version over 1994 revision, movement may further gain momentum.

In my opinion ISO : 9000 is here to stay. If so, there is a need to address some of the commonly held myths about the intention and applicability of ISO 9000 standards. Myth, as most of us know is "an honestly held wrong belief". By definition, it implies that a myth exists because of the limitation of present understanding of that subject. One of the best ways to overcome a myth is to develop and gain proper understanding and knowledge of facts.

From my experience of developing, implementing, maintaining ISO : 9000 and wide interaction with some of the most learned men in the field of Quality, I attempt to dispel some of the myths about ISO 9000.

Myth 1: Purpose of implementing ISO 9000 is to increase sales.

Reality 1: The primary purpose of ISO 9000 is to motivate the management and its employees to understand, document, implement, streamline and continuously improve its business processes/ practices, which in turn should deliver consistent quality of products/ services. It may help organizations to become preferred suppliers in the market place.

Myth 2: It does not improve product Quality and/ or reduce costs.

Reality 2: If implemented in letter and spirit, it certainly does bring in consistency in product quality, reduced rework, cost and thereby enhance productivity. Several Quality journals have published many evidences.

Myth 3: It is costly to implement

Reality 3: It is not a cost, but an investment, which pays back many times over, if implemented in its true spirit. (Refer " The Dying Father and His Sons" story at the end)

Myth 4: ISO is not applicable to our business, e.g. we are a small firm or we are from service sector or we make wide variety of products etc.

Reality 4: It is a generic system standard applicable to any type of business, e.g. education, parks, hospitality, manufacturing, service, government departments etc. irrespective of size and type.

Myth 5: Our culture is not suitable.

Reality 5: It provides the opportunity to bring people together. It can be used to create an environment to inculcate discipline and induce cohesive team working. Organizations can evolve their own unique work culture in line with their business needs.

Myth 6: ISO 9000 is nothing but documentation.

Reality 6: Yes, there is lot of documentation, but documentation helps to define and standardize routine and repetitive work activities affecting Quality, so as to achieve consistency of process and product quality. The standard does not require documentation for the sake of documentation. Documentation can be used to train others.

Myth 7: ISO 9000 kills creativity in the organization

Reality 7: On the contrary, it provides a proactive mechanism to identify nonconformance and initiate improvement action. Organization can use techniques like 7 QC tools, brain storming etc. to identify creative solutions on a continuous basis and integrate these in routine management.

Myth 8: ISO 9000 increases records keeping.

Reality 8: If retention periods are realistically defined and records disposed off as per the retention periods, records will definitely reduce.

Myth 9: Even though we have implemented ISO 9000, we still have problems in our business.

Reality 9: It is not panacea to all the problems of a business. It is one of the improvement tools.

Myth 10: Implementing ISO 9000 will disturb our existing system of working.

Reality 10: Not necessarily. Instead it may improve and simplify it and make it more dynamic to meet continually varying business needs.

Myth 11: It is a product standard.

Reality 11: It is a systems (not information technology system) standard.

Myth 12: ISO 9001 is superior than ISO 9002 or 9003.

Reality 12: None is superior to the other. It is a question of applicability. E.g. 9001 is applicable for businesses involved in design, development, production, installation & services, whereas 9002 is applicable for production, installation and service. (In ISO : 9001: 2000 revision 9001, 9002 & 9003 will be merged into single standard ISO : 9001)

Myth 13: ISO 9000 registration is a battle between you and your Assessor.

Reality 13: No, the Assessor evaluates quality system (business) with “a fresh pair of eyes” and provides valuable feedback/ insight into the business system. On the contrary many Assessors are highly experienced and help us review and improve our business processes.

Myth 14: We will invite Assessors only after our system has been perfectly implemented and there is no nonconformity.

Reality 14: Businesses do not operate in ideal situations and it may not be wise to wait for perfection (no nonconformity) before third party assessment.

Myth 15: Do I have to increase salaries of my employees to implement ISO 9000.

Reality 15: No, it is not the requirement of the standard.

Myth 16: It is the end of our quality journey. (We have achieved ISO 9000 and now we don't need any more quality initiative).

Reality 16: It is only the beginning of an endless journey to achieve excellence.

[Is the fad for ISO : 9000 fading?](#)

Following data should help us decide the answer to this nebulous question (source ISO survey for 1999 ninth cycle report):

Period	No. of Certificates Issued
Jan'93	27,816
Dec.'95	1,27,349
Dec.'96	1,62,701
Dec.'97	2,23,299
Dec.'98	2,71,847
Dec.'99	3,43,643

- Number of certificates experienced their biggest ever annual increase of 71,796 (26%) over last year.
- Number of countries involved in certification activity has increased from 48 in 1993 to 150 till Dec.'99
- In line with spirit & structure of ISO 9000 standards, several new standards have been evolved like:

QS 9000 - Common quality program of big three (GM, Ford, Chrysler)
ISO 14000 - Environmental management systems standard
AS 9000 - Quality standard for aerospace industry
TL 9000 - Quality standards for telecommunication industry

Does implementing ISO : 9000 help ?

Apart from several tangible benefits, an organizations stands to gain substantial other benefits, which are hard to quantify. Let me take help from stories of Aesop, the famous Greek Fabulist who lived in the fourth century B.C and used stories for communicating effective messages.

The Dying Father and His Sons

“A father on his death bed told his sons that there was a great treasure to be found in his vineyard. After he had died the sons raced out into the fields and overturned all the soil in search of the prize. No treasure was found, but due to the revitalization of the soil, the vineyard yielded a bountiful harvest.”

Many companies pursue registration to ISO 9000 under pressure from their customers or as a marketing strategy. Along the way to implementation, they discover they have so improved their “invisible” processes and procedures that benefits exceed the expectations and the organization improves and prospers over a period of time.

The Wild Boar and the Fox

“A fox observed a wild boar sharpening his tusks. There appeared to be no imminent danger, so the fox asked, “Why do you sharpen your teeth when your enemies are not around? The boar responded” I would have no time to sharpen them if my enemies were upon me”.

Organizations need to be ready, in time to face the emerging competition.

The Beginning:

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Geneva has provided us an invaluable tool to improve our business processes. Result will depend on the way we use the tool and not on the tool itself. The choice to begin the journey in right earnest is entirely ours.

Sunil Thawani is responsible for Quality management in a leading oil company in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He is Six Sigma Black Belt and has served as member of the Jury and Senior Examiner & Team Leader - Sheikh Khalifa Excellence Awards. He is Principal QMS: 2000 Auditor, IRCA, UK, BPR Facilitator, Westinghouse PQC, USA and ASQ Country Councilor- UAE. He can be contacted at thawanis@hotmail.com