

VIEWPOINT

The Quicksand of Quality Procedures

By J. Ajith Kumar

Most negative tendencies breed in stagnant conditions when everyone wants to maintain status quo. I am afraid a similar situation is developing in the case of Quality Assurance Managers (QAMs) in services sector who survive on Quality Procedures and Internal Audits. One of the first things they do whenever new QAMs take over in a company is to encourage and coerce their colleagues to go in for newer or additional procedures under the guise of covering as many Business Processes involved in the business as possible. The name of ISO (and even WTO) will be brought in at all times to substantiate their suggestion and impress the colleagues about the absolute necessity of having procedures for anything and everything. But little do the executives realise at that stage that the 'clever climber' is preparing noose for hanging them at a not-so-distant future.

In a Quality environment, those who do the real work are the owners of any procedure they make for themselves. And any procedure we make for ourselves is very much dependent upon the various external factors prevalent at that particular point of time. This dependency is much more acute in the case of services than in manufacturing sector. While in a manufacturing environment one deals with machines, in the services sector we are dealing with human beings of various characteristics, capabilities and moods. It is very easy to draw up procedures for dead machines than live humans. The impossible task of standardising human beings and their activities is what is being attempted by way of ISO certification in the services sector. The harm that it brings is much larger than the pleasure one gets by way of watching a team of innovative humans being forced to perform as robots in a uniform manner but in an inefficient way.

Procedural Traps

Any procedure will bring in rigidity and inflexibility. The true meaning of services, be it engineering, education, management or administration, is to provide the right solution to a particular customer in an efficient way as needed. There is absolutely no use in giving services as per a pre-determined procedure but not in tune with the requirements of the customer. The delivery vehicle must be flexible enough to accommodate the changing requirements of the customer and make profit for those who are providing the services. In the modern world when time is money, the single factor that can determine the fate of any services company is its flexibility. Quality certification, procedures and plan are all secondary or tertiary when it comes to clinching a deal and making profit for survival.

Most quality procedures are traps that the so-called owners make for themselves. To make any procedure for any business process, there are assumptions to be made. And it is these very assumptions that turn out to be the stumbling blocks in implementation. No one is against having a pre-determined policy on doing things and giving a prior idea to customer about how the services he require will be provided. And we always used to have them in olden days in the form of method statements or execution plans. But the era of procedures ushered in by the QAMs has changed all that. What we have now in all erstwhile efficient companies are only procedures and policies but no services. Every employee in such companies is handicapped by a set of procedures he or she was coerced to make for his or her work. Fulfilling the requirements of the procedure and not the customer's requirements has become more important. The net result is loss for the organisation and dissatisfied customers.

ISO Misuse

Misuse of ISO name is becoming rampant in the services sector now. For anything and everything, the QAMs are calling for procedures in the name of ISO requirements. Their only aim is to prolong their existence by periodic internal audits based on these procedures. But does the core policy of ISO insist on such procedures? My own firm opinion is negative in this regard. ISO does not call for detailed written procedures for each and every one of those processes involved in any business. Those who have formulated the basic requirements for ISO certification are not foolish enough to insist on rigid procedures for inherently flexible activities like business development and invoicing. Any business runs on certain unique skills of a single or set of individuals. And none of the activities or processes that depend on those special skills will be amenable to written down procedures applicable at all times. It would be foolish to tie down human creativity to ISO procedures.

Engineering industry is the most hit by the QAMs' misinterpretation of ISO policies. In many companies we can find procedures for even frivolous activities. The dirty work of an incompetent survivor in the form of QAM in the company will be very much evident in such cases. Under the guise of an ISO requirement, the cheeky QAM will force the vulnerable CEO to go in for procedures in all areas of operation. It is now common knowledge that almost all aspects of Design and Engineering are standardised by the work of several professional bodies and associations. The need for additional ISO procedures to cover these activities is either unwanted or counter productive. Yet many such organisations fall into the trap set by the Quality Assurance brigade and become white elephants in no time.

The whole services sector is flooded with QAMs at present. And many of them are outdated professionals past their expiry date. One quick survey of the average age and health of QAMs in the services sector companies in one metropolis is enough to prove this point. The only way for these hangers-on to survive in the industry is to make procedural cocoons and trap those who are doing the real work. Regular internal audits and making 'arrangements' for external auditors are some of the most 'sophisticated' exercises they can survive on. The immense damage they are doing to the name of ISO in the industry is something that shouldn't miss the attention of the ISO office bearers. The sooner ISO come crystal clear about their minimum requirements in the service industry the better for the prestigious organisation. Otherwise, ISO's would become an unwanted certification very soon, buried deep in the quicksand of unwanted procedures.

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