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The Devil is in the Details

Planning is key to successful ISO 9000 preparation

In the early 1980s, American companies -- battered by more nimble entrepreneurs and global competitors -- were struggling to catch up. Instead of weaving elegant stratagems and devising long-term plans, companies scrambled to improve quality, restructure, “downsize,” and “reengineer.”

Now, after more than a decade of shrinking to increase productivity, companies are eager to increase the profitability of their “streamlined” operations. As a result, strategic planning has taken on renewed importance. Ripe new corporate labels and customized acronyms aside, planning is seen as “rising above the noise and confusion of day-to-day business” in order to ponder the future of markets and competitors.

Major American companies such as Sears, IBM, Hewlett-Packard and Searle have decided to make strategic planning a major focus in their search for higher revenues and profits. U.S. consulting firms and business college professors agree that business strategy is now one of the most important management issues and a main agenda item for many organizations.

Business strategists believe the concept of “core competencies” is very important in order for companies to recognize new areas of growth possibilities. And the ISO 9000 preparation process is a logical solution for today's business challenges.

ISO 9000 provides a foundation for strategic planning. It provides the company “benchmark” and establishes the feedback mechanisms (management review and internal quality audit) that can be used to determine if strategic plans are effective.

The “new” strategic planning emphasizes the customer perspective, or an “outside-in” view of strategy. Generally, many American business leaders believe that lack of customer focus caused many of their previous business problems, and they see an ISO 9000 quality system as an important first step in making management more quality- and customer-oriented.

Preparing for ISO 9000 success

Successful ISO 9000 registration requires a number of carefully planned and executed phases and steps. Before starting on the actual registration process, however, successful companies use some very important techniques to determine where they are now and what needs to be done to reach the registration goal.

The first step is to conduct a “baseline assessment” of the existing quality management system. This is a complete review of the existing documentation - both formal and informal - that is used to conduct business. The baseline assessment also includes observation of the actual practices used by management and workers to perform their jobs. Ultimately, the purpose of the baseline assessment is to honestly and objectively determine the management system and work practices that are currently being used.

The next step is to prepare a “gap analysis” report based on the results of the baseline assessment. This report is an explanation of the specific requirements for implementing an ISO 9000 quality management system, and focuses on what “gaps” need to be filled before the company can meet the standards.

An important part of conducting the baseline assessment and preparing the gap analysis is to determine the company’s “best practices.” The positive and effective methods and practices that are in use must be emphasized in order to build upon the company’s existing strengths.

The process of conducting the baseline assessment, preparing the gap analysis, and determining the best practices establishes an “internal benchmark” for the company. Another technique associated with “benchmarking” is comparing the company preparation activities and results to other, similar companies. To help you develop this “external benchmark,” there are survey statistics available from industry groups and registrar companies, written case histories, and companies that are willing to share information about their registration efforts.

All of this information is available and useful in saving time and money, and allows you to learn about the ISO registration process from others.

Being successful and remaining competitive in business requires strategic planning and the ability to make changes to plans. The baseline assessment, gap analysis and best practices used to prepare for the ISO 9000 registration are excellent techniques for companies preparing to meet today’s rapidly changing business requirements.