



Getting Back to the Basics of Quality

Let's stick to what we do best.

The boundaries of the quality professional continue to expand. Quality's original concern was with end products, but it soon took a step back to control the processes that produced the end product and its parts. That, in turn, led to supplier quality control. During the 1940s quality's scope of responsibility expanded to include design. This created the need for a new type of quality professional called a "reliability engineer." During the 1970s we realized that quality applied not only to products but also to services. As a result, the American Society for Quality Control (as it was then called) created its Administrative Application Division, which focused on quality in institutions such as banks, hotels and insurance agencies. During the 1980s quality moved into the tool-design arena and introduced concepts like the "one-minute changeover" into the quality toolkit. This was nothing new; I was introduced to the concept at IBM during the 1940s when I worked there as an apprentice toolmaker.

Quality's next takeover bid occurred in the production-control domain when just-in-time became a quality tool. The first just-in-time system I worked with was at IBM during the 1950s, when the final assembly, final test and shipping line was combined with subassembly, providing a continuous-flow process from incoming to subassembly to final assembly to final test to shipping. At that time it wasn't a quality program because it didn't improve quality; it just reduced inventory and costs.

Until the 1980s the ASQC focused on the basics of statistical quality, trying to gain professional engineering status for the quality professional based on the statistical applications spearheaded by Walter Shewhart. But during the early 1980s, when Phil Crosby became president of ASQC, the technological side was

de-emphasized and ASQC's focus shifted to the quality of management. This opened up many opportunities for quality professionals.

These days I worry about the future of quality professionals. We're trying to put them everywhere, into areas that are beyond the average quality professional's knowledge: strategic planning, cost management, inventory control, behavioral modification, corporate governance, social responsibility and quality of family life. For example, during an ISO 9001 audit, Lloyds of London wanted to audit marketing and finance. At the recent Outlook on Quality Systems Conference, it was suggested that quality professionals should be the auditors for the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOx).

As we become jacks-of-all-trades, we become masters of none. Is the quality professional the most qualified person to provide leadership technology to the organization, or is the human resources professional better trained and qualified? Is the quality professional the best person to lead the organization's strategic planning activities, or would a specialist be a better choice? Most quality professionals have never managed an organization and aren't in a position to give really sound business advice to management.

If we're going to expand our quality scope, I suggest we focus on the quality of sales organizations, because they have a major effect on external customers. In that sphere, poor quality costs represent about 80 percent of the total budget, if you don't include lost opportunity. If you do, that cost more than doubles.

It's time to get back to basics. The quality professional hasn't done a good job of implementing preventive methodologies. We need better decision-making processes and a breakthrough in preventing

problems. It's time to stop focusing on problem solving and start paying closer attention to our prevention tools.

The quality profession is declining, not growing. American Society for Quality membership has declined steadily during the past five years. The Project Management Institute's membership is now greater than the ASQ's and growing fast. Many companies have decided that they won't recertify to ISO 9001:2000. We need to define what unique skills and advantages the quality professional brings to stakeholders, and then invest to improve on these unique skills. We shouldn't try to take over where others have better backgrounds and skills.

I can best improve customer satisfaction in most companies by putting in a customer-relationship management system, not by installing a Six Sigma program, but that doesn't mean I should start writing software packages. Let's concentrate on what we do best. If quality comes before cost and scheduling, let's work on quality and leave cost and scheduling to those who are trained in those areas. In organizational design, best practices suggest that everything except core competencies and capabilities should be outsourced. As quality professionals, we must focus on our core competencies and capabilities.

About the author

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