

6 February 2003

Do You Need a Quality Department Anymore?

Errors and defects have been a major concern in the companies since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Up until now, no tool or method has been developed that is capable of keeping a process error-free. So, organizations have developed ways to keep these errors from reaching the customer. One effective way of doing this was to set up checkpoints in various stages of the manufacturing process to keep errors and defective products from reaching the next stage in the process. The hope was that at each checkpoint, a higher percentage of the total number of defects would be found, so that at the end, no defective products would reach the customer. This ensured quality, but added to the overall production costs. '*Cost of Quality*' was a phrase invented to rationalize these costs.

In the same respect, most quality initiatives focused on finding defects. In some cases, this has led to the quality inspector being viewed as an opponent to be tricked by those involved in the actual production process. While the job of the inspector was to detect faults and report them, the job of the worker in the assembly was to conceal the defects. It became an endless cycle of 'cat and mouse', which only added to the costs eating into the profits.

However, over the last couple of decades organizations have evolved from "finding defects" to "preventing defects". Organizations have seen the emphasis go from quality control (focus on products) to quality assurance (focus on processes). Employees that are properly trained to utilize quality processes are less prone to committing errors. In turn, the quality professional has become a part of all aspects of manufacturing, such as strategic planning, design, process control, training and development. The importance of developing a quality culture is also being realized and incorporated.

With quality becoming a key aspect of every area of business, the time has come to make it an integral part of providing products and services rather than viewing it as a separate discipline. *It's time to dismantle the separate quality departments that exist in organizations and to integrate the practice of quality into the work process.* This might sound far-fetched, but consider some of the elements of quality.

Design Control: Design of products has evolved from being a purely theoretical exercise to being customer focused and interactive. It involves all parts of the product delivery process. The design team does not need another organization to take up the case of quality if they have clear-cut, measurable, customer focused objectives.

Inspection: The prime objective of those who are in the production process is to deliver quality to the next in the value chain. With each link in the value chain concerned about delivering and receiving quality, is a third entity called inspection and testing authority required to ensure quality? If the defect rates are measured, and if each entity is held accountable for delivering a quality product or service to the next entity, there should be no reason for checkpoints and inspections.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Quality Documentation Audits: An employee involved in the production process is the best person to ensure they have proper documentation. If they do not, their work will necessarily suffer, and they should demand more precise and clear process documentation. This friction will also ensure better communication between the employees at different levels of the value chain.

These are just some of the elements that can be integrated into the actual production process instead of having a separate department to take care of them. Similar judgment can be applied to other elements like quality training, quality management, procurement control, process control, metrology, non-conformance control, training and statistical methods.

These quality elements cannot be done away with. However, they can be made an integral part of the delivery process, rather than be forced and enforced by a separate quality organization. Of course, a change in the basic culture of the organization is essential. All involved in the value chain must take responsibility for the quality of the product and of the processes passing through their hands. When each one is responsible for his internal and external customer, and when the proper measures and incentives exist, a separate quality department will not be necessary.