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## Continuous improvement projects in certified organizations in Iceland: traditional projects or not?

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### Abstract

Globalization, new technology and competition make today's surroundings ever changing for organizations and customers' needs and wants change rapidly, making customer retention and market shares an uphill battle. Benchmarking organizations place importance on continuous improvement and systematic approach to projects. There is an interest amongst Icelandic organizations to become certified according to the ISO 9001 standard. The standard is based on quality management principles, such as a customer focus, process approach, and continual improvement. In order for actions taken to continually improve the organization there has to be some kind of objectives and performance measures in place. This paper analyses how certified organizations support continuous improvement by studying what kind of process is in place to support continuous improvement; whether continuous improvement is handled like a formal project; who is responsible for carrying out continuous improvement projects; and which project management tools are mainly used for these projects.

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*Keywords:* Continuous Improvement; ISO 9001; Performance Measures; Project Management Tools; Quality Management Systems.

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization, new technology and competition make today's surroundings ever changing for organizations. Customers' needs and wants change rapidly making customer retention and market shares an uphill battle. Organizations have realized that improving the quality of their products and/or services is important as customers' standards of satisfaction are ever increasing (Reid, 2006). A trait of benchmarking organizations is that they emphasize the importance of continuous improvement (CI) projects and a systematic approach of projects is put in place to achieve this (Gunnarsdóttir & Ingason, 2007). There is an increased interest amongst organizations in Iceland to become certified according to the ISO 9001 standard. "The standard is based on a number of quality management principles, such as a strong customer focus, the motivation and implication of top management, the process approach and continual improvement" (ISO, 2008). The subject of this research is to study what kind of process is in place to support CI in ISO9001 certified companies and who is responsible for implementing CI projects. Classification of CI projects in this study is based on the ISO 9001 standard which asserts that projects related to the organization's way of continuously improving are related to the quality policy, quality objectives, outcome of audits, data analysis, preventive and corrective actions, and management review. Other general projects are described as any other internal projects such as software-, innovative-, and development projects. The aim of this paper is to examine if actions supporting CI of certified organizations are handled as projects and if so, in what way?

It will be interesting to discover if objectives are defined and performance measures are employed for CI projects within Icelandic organizations. A research into which project management tools certified organizations in Iceland use for their CI has not been done before. There will be a comparison of whether the same tools are used for CI projects and other general projects of the respondents' organizations.

## 2. Literature review

Continuous improvement philosophy is that whatever success an organization may previously have had regarding customer satisfaction, it has not reached its desired state as customers' needs and wants are constantly changing. What drives the organization's constant search for improvement is competition and ever increasing standards of customer satisfaction (Reid, 2006). There are many Quality Management Systems (QMS) the organizations can choose to implement: Benchmarking; Just-In-Time; Lean Six Sigma; Balanced Scorecard; and ISO 9001, just to name a few. What really matters is that the top-level managers believe that the QMS chosen is the best fit for their organization. Organizations that consider their quality program as successful say that their organizational culture supports both continuous improvement and learning (Oliver, 2009). A trait of benchmarking organizations is that they emphasize the importance of CI projects and a systematic approach of projects is put in place to achieve this (Gunnarsdóttir & Ingason, 2007). Organizations tend to view quality as a continuously improving process rather than a static product and, therefore, develop quality improvement processes. ISO 9000 is a never-ending cycle of planning, controlling, and documentation (Kerzner, 2009).

More than one million organizations use the ISO 9001 QMS (Ollila, 2012). This QMS is based on quality management principles such as a customer focus and continual improvement (ISO, 2008). ISO 9001 QMS encourages organizations to take on management responsibility, resource management, product realization, and measurements, analysis and improvements, as an on-going continuous improvement process where customer requirements and satisfaction is the focus. In Iceland there are two organizations that are internationally accredited bodies; Vottun hf and BSI á Íslandi. By March 2013 they had certified 59 organizations operating in Iceland compared to 53 organizations in 2011 (Hróbjartsson, 2012). The increase of certified organizations in Iceland from 2011 to 2013 is 10%. Research shows that the main drive of organizations regarding certification is both customer requirements and the organizations' own interest in improving their competitiveness (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2010). It is tempting to say that an organization with a QMS is more likely to control operating cost and, therefore, do better financially than organizations without an effective QMS. An Icelandic study shows that organizations with ISO 9001 certification have higher gross profit margin than companies without certification within the same sector and

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