

Does ISO 9000 Certification Affect the Dimensions of Quality Used for Competitive Advantage?

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Garvin's [Garvin, D.A. (1987) *Competing on the eight dimensions of quality. Harvard Business Review* 65(6), 101–109] eight dimensions of quality have become a widely accepted taxonomy for discussions of product quality. These dimensions were used as the basis for evaluating the impacts of ISO 9000 certification on companies' product quality. Eleven ISO 9000 certified companies in Europe were studied to determine if and how ISO 9000 certification impacted the dimensions of quality relevant to their success. Results indicated that, for the companies studied, quality does improve as a result of ISO 9000 certification. Furthermore, results suggested that the reasons for seeking certification can influence the degree to which quality is improved.
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Introduction

The signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 catapulted the ISO 9000 quality standards into the global arena. The standards, introduced in 1987 by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), had been developed to facilitate global trade by harmonizing quality terms, systems, and standards. But the incorporation of these standards into the European Community's 1989 global assessment procedures was

the impetus for the broad acceptance of the standards by companies worldwide. The contribution the standards have made to global quality system conformity is evidenced by the number of firms worldwide that have achieved certification: from fewer than 30,000 at the end of 1992 to over a million as of the end of 1998 (International Organization for Standardization, 1999).

The ISO 9000 series provides the basis for demonstrating a company's compliance to a quality system by establishing the documentation and procedural standards that must be met (Anderson *et al.*, 1999). Under these standards, controls must be established for every aspect of the production process and all operational procedures and managerial actions must be documented (Zhu and Scheuermann, 1999). Additionally, 'These standards are ...designed to demonstrate to customers that the supplying organization has achieved a basic level of quality assurance by the formalization and documentation of its quality management system' (Beattie and Sohal, 1999). The ISO 9000 standards do not require third party assessment and periodic audit of the quality system, however, achieving certification is based on both third party assessment and periodic audit to confirm that the system meets and adheres to the ISO 9000 standard (Anderson *et al.*, 1999). While ISO 9000 certification does not regulate or control product quality, *per se*, the high documentation requirements may serve to identify deficiencies in processes or quality controls leading to the implementation of improve-

ments (Anderson *et al.*, 1999; Beattie and Sohal, 1999; Docking and Downen, 1999).

Perceptions of quality and its role in firms' competitiveness have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Consumerism, the global marketplace, and e-commerce have been key factors in these shifts. Consumers and businesses demand high quality products, and now, with the popularity and availability of doing business on the internet, they can 'shop the world' to find them. The global supply chain has become a reality. Thus the role of quality in a firm's competitiveness has evolved into a strategic one (Ismail and Hashmi, 1999) and, as a result, quality is an imperative that no firm can ignore. According to Garvin (1987), effectively competing on the basis of quality requires the identification and enhancement of those dimensions from which the firm can gain a strategic competitive advantage. To facilitate the incorporation of quality into firms' strategic planning, Garvin (1987) proposed eight dimensions of quality to serve as a framework for the discussion and analysis of product quality (see Table 1). Firms must determine the best way to incorporate this imperative into their strategic planning and operations.

Many quality philosophies and initiatives have appeared in recent years, and virtually every manufacturing organization has pursued some type of quality system. For a number of years TQM appeared to be the most popular quality strategy (Mann and Kehoe, 1994), however, it is now generally accepted that ISO 9000 has become the most prevalent global quality initiative (Tsiotras and Gotzamani, 1996; Ismail and Hashmi, 1999; Lee and Palmer, 1999; Zhu and Scheuermann, 1999). According to the literature, pursuit of ISO 9000 certification is primarily motivated by the need for an entrée into the global marketplace, competitive pressures, or customer requirements (for examples, see Anderson *et al.*, 1999; Carlsson and Carlsson, 1996; Lee and Palmer, 1999; Rayner and Porter, 1991; Beattie and Sohal, 1999). These factors, among others, are used to explain the prevalence of ISO 9000 certification among firms in the world today (Tsiotras and Gotzamani, 1996). Thus, achieving ISO 9000 certification contributes to a firm's competitiveness from the perspective of serv-

ing as a 'license to compete.' An issue that deserves attention is the contribution that ISO 9000 certification makes to competitiveness. Anderson *et al.* (1999) attempted to address this issue and reported evidence that firms are highly motivated to seek ISO 9000 certification for reasons beyond regulatory or customer requirements. Their analysis revealed that firms seek ISO 9000 certification as 'credible public signals of effective quality management practices' (Anderson *et al.*, 1999, p. 40). Others have reported that ISO 9000 certification results in a perception of higher quality (Docking and Downen, 1999). While these signals may contribute to some public awareness of a firm's efforts regarding quality systems, it is not clear that such awareness actually affects competitiveness. On the other hand, if there is some evidence that ISO 9000 certification has positive impacts on the dimensions of quality from which a firm gains its competitive advantage, then such 'public signals' would have more value. Thus, an important question that needs to be answered is whether ISO 9000 certification contributes to a firm's competitiveness by enhancing the dimensions of quality it uses for competitive advantage. This study seeks to answer this question.

A plethora of articles about ISO 9000 exists in the literature today. Many articles have appeared in trade magazines and other practitioner-oriented publications. These works are primarily prescriptive or descriptive and relate to such issues as implementation steps, justification for certification, benefits and costs of certification (for examples, see McFayden and Walsh, 1992; Houghton, 1993; Morrow, 1993; Reddish, 1994). In general, these publications are speculative, impressionistic, anecdotal, and typically based on the experiences of a single company.

The literature also abounds with journal articles addressing a variety of issues. Numerous studies have presented evidence that ISO 9000 certification enhances other quality initiatives, particularly TQM (Beattie and Sohal, 1999; Ismail and Hashmi, 1999; Lee and Palmer, 1999). Empirical studies have addressed issues such as costs and benefits of certification (Atwater and Discenza, 1993; Rayner and Porter, 1991), motivation for adopting ISO 9000 standards (Anderson *et al.*, 1999; Beattie and Sohal, 1999),

Table 1 Dimensions of Quality

Quality dimension	Definition
Performance	A product's primary operating characteristics
Features	The 'bells and whistles' of products and services that supplement their basic functioning
Reliability	The probability of a product malfunctioning or failing within a specified time period
Conformance	The degree to which a product's design and operating characteristics meet established standards
Durability	The amount of use one gets from a product before it deteriorates
Serviceability	The speed, courtesy, competence, and ease of repair
Aesthetics	How a product looks, feels, sounds, tastes, or smells
Perceived quality	Reputation

From D.A. Garvin (1987).

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