

Quality management in South African architectural practices

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Abstract

The building and construction industries worldwide are experiencing ever closer scrutiny of their operations as pressure mounts from clients to address the inefficiencies inherent therein. The issue of quality is of pivotal concern in this regard and this paper examines the status quo of a number of South African architectural practices with respect to how they are managing quality, and tests their opinions with regard to ISO 9000 certification as a means of addressing the issue. The results indicate that the architects in question generally have a poor grasp of quality management theory, although many of the eight main principles required for its implementation are already intrinsically present in the way they manage their practices; probably as a result of the small size of the average practice. A systematic and documented approach to quality management is however largely lacking in the profession and a great deal of negativity exists with regard to ISO 9000 certification.

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1. Introduction

South Africa, notwithstanding its geographically remote location, does not exist in isolation from the global economy. As such the contemporary trend toward globalisation, together with the advent of the Internet and recent advances in information technology and desktop processing expose local business to the full brunt of international competition and the complexities of the global market place. In this highly competitive climate the pressure is constantly mounting for local business to meet international standards in order just to maintain their market position. Since the recession of 1998 it has also become a common survival strategy among South African contractors, as well as building industry professionals, to expand their operations into the international arena, thereby mitigating the effects of the local economic cycle on business turnover.

This trend is likely to continue into the foreseeable future, and will have an ever-increasing reach into ever-

smaller local businesses. While the urgency and pertinence of quality to the architectural profession has been receiving attention in the UK since the mid eighties [1], in so far as the building industry professions in South Africa are concerned it appears that the architectural profession is slow at realising the benefits of quality management, and will in all probability take yet some time to embrace the discipline wholeheartedly. At present the South African association of consulting engineers (SAACE) [2] have implemented an incremental plan as of January 2006 whereby all of their members are required to initiate the development and application of a quality management system to their business processes over the subsequent 3 years. As yet there is little talk of other professional bodies following suit but it is envisaged that the requirements of influential clients/client bodies and the constant pressure of competition are likely to enforce the trend in the near future. This should not be seen in a negative light, as the benefits of applying quality management (QM) can be highly advantageous to such firms and their professional staff [3]. It is therefore in all probability only a matter of time before the other professions are compelled to follow suit.

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Worldwide the building and construction industries are increasingly in the spotlight, as clients demand that the procurement processes in these sectors be closely re-examined. This is in a large part due to the fact that these industries have been slow to modernise and incorporate the benefits of recent technological advances, and are still highly wasteful and inefficient. This was highlighted in the UK by the Latham [4] and DTLR [5] reports, commissioned by the Prime Minister, and which resulted in the publication of the three best practice standards that now define the culture, relationships and processes of UK construction procurement. Internationally, the 1995 report by the Construction and Building sub committee of the Committee on Civil Industrial Technology (CCIT), part of the National Science and Technology Council of the United States, sets a similar standard. All these documents aim to radically reform the building industry and improve performance by 30–50%, and are set to fundamentally alter the face of these industries within the next decade. All of the issues are quality related, and professionals in the industry can expect to experience increasing pressure to conform to international quality standards in the wake of the reforms that these reports aim to bring about.

A study by Rwelamila, [6] indicates that quality related problems also prevail in the local industry, and that at the end of the day “site managers, along with their supervisors, establish quality and their decisions are highly arbitrary”. This is despite the existence of specifications that extensively reference British and/or South African Standards and codes of practice.

The architectural profession often lags behind other building industry professions in the realm of enterprise management, possibly as a result of the strong task orientation and design focus of top management [7]. The fact that most architectural practices are small consultancies with one or two principles may also contribute to the tendency, as time spent on management is always at the expense of production. The extent to which quality management is applied in the practice locally is unknown, and few detailed guidelines exist for the implementation thereof to professional architectural service providers. It is in this context that this study was carried out, with the intention of shedding some light on the status quo and the way forward.

2. Research methodology

The aim of the study was to obtain an understanding of the manner in which quality is presently being managed within the South African architectural profession, to establish the extent to which current quality management theory and standards are being applied to such management practices, and to test the opinions of Architects in relation to ISO 9000 registration. The nature of the problem required that both a descriptive qualitative and a descriptive quantitative approach to the body of research be adopted.

In order to establish the quantitative criteria whereby architects could be evaluated a literature study was conducted from which the descriptive parameters relating to quality management in the architectural profession were composed. Due to the sample size and its distribution it was not feasible to adopt a qualitative approach that utilised personal interviews, and a questionnaire was circulated via email to architects registered with the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP) in order to capture the requisite data. This data was then analysed to provide a description of the status quo of QM among the respondents.

3. Quality management and professionals

When viewed against the abundance of literature relating to QM and total quality management (TQM) in the production and service industries, a relative paucity of publications relating the discipline to professionals and professional service firms is apparent. This is confirmed by Haywood-Farmer and Nollet [3] as well as McAdam and Canning [8], and as such professional service providers can be considered relative latecomers to the discipline of formally applied quality management systems. However, the subsequent decade has seen a trend among developed nations, especially in Europe, whereby professionals are under increasing pressure from powerful client bodies such as government, to subject themselves to disciplined and structured quality management devices.

In places, particularly the UK, this and other factors have often resulted in an inordinate emphasis on certification and quality assurance, rather than total quality management and customer satisfaction [9]. This is confirmed by McAdam and Canning's [8] finding that the reasons cited for ISO 9000 registration and the implementation of a quality management system among professionals surveyed in Ireland are not a drive toward improved quality as a competitive business strategy, as the literature would suggest it should be. Rather, these organisations were motivated primarily by the perception that certification would improve their market image and the firm's chances of procuring work from public sector clients. Overall, the results of the study indicated a disturbing lack of association between business improvement and ISO 9000 among these professional firms, thus calling into question one of the central tenets of ISO 9000. This is an important finding and should be borne in mind when considering a course of action for South African professionals, as it would appear that if the drive toward the implementation of a quality management system (QMS) and certification is not motivated by a real determination and commitment to improve quality and satisfy customers the results can be disappointing.

Professional service firms are possessed of a number of characteristics that profoundly influence the manner in which quality is managed by them, and which differs from large scale production industry where much of the QM

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