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ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group **Guidance on:**

Service organizations

1. Introduction

Although ISO 9001 is intended to apply to all kinds of organizations, regardless of type, size or product provided, there are a number of characteristics of service organizations that require specific attention during a third party audit. Consequently, this document aims to provide auditors with guidance on auditing the conformity of service organizations to the requirements of ISO 9001.

2. Service Organizations

According to ISO 9000 a *Service* is the *output* of an *organization* with at least one activity necessarily performed between the organization and the *customer*.

The provision of a service can involve, for example, the following:

- an activity performed on a customer-supplied tangible *product* (e.g. a car to be repaired);
- an activity performed on a customer-supplied intangible product (e.g. the income statement needed to prepare a tax return);
- the delivery of an intangible product (e.g. the delivery of *information* in the context of knowledge transmission);
- the creation of ambience for the customer (e.g. in hotels and restaurants);

Most organizations also have an element of service in their products. This may range from almost 100% service (in the case of a law firm, for example), to a relatively small service component in the case of a manufacturing organization providing, for example, an after-sales service. The combination of product and service systems have an increasing importance in today's business environment.

3. Auditing Guidance

3.1 Design and development of the service

ISO 9001 requires: “the organization shall establish, implement and maintain a design and development process that is appropriate to ensure the subsequent provision of products and services”.

The question of applicability of this requirement may create disagreement between the auditor and the audited organization. “Exclusions” of the requirements of ISO 9001 are no longer possible; however organizations might determine that these requirements are not applicable in the scope of their management system.

For determining their applicability, an organization will have to ensure that the requirements on design and development do not affect its ability or responsibility to ensure the conformity of its services and the enhancement of customer satisfaction.

When an organization makes a claim for non-applicability of this requirement, auditors need to see documented objective evidence that the following two conditions are both fulfilled:

- 1) the requirement cannot be applied
- 2) by not applying the requirement there is no effect on the organization’s ability or responsibility to ensure the conformity of its services and the enhancement of customer satisfaction.

Only if these can be proven, should an auditor accept the non-applicability.

It is quite common for organizations to consider primarily their products when addressing the requirements for Design and Development. The design and development of a service often is not carried out in technical “design departments” but under a title such as “Business model development”; however the relevant requirements still apply. Auditors should identify carefully the organization’s unit in which the design and development of services is carried out.

The auditor should also examine whether the organization has an effective design and development process that sufficiently defines the characteristics of its service, and of its service delivery processes, that are needed to meet customer needs and expectations.

3.2 Validation of processes for service provision

In terms of the processes needed to realize the service, we can identify two types of service processes:

- those involving the customer in the realization of the service itself (real time delivery) and
- those in which the output is delivered to the customer after the realization of the process.

Using the example of a hotel, the guest “check-in” and “check-out” processes would probably involve “real-time” delivery of the service, whilst the cleaning of the guest’s room would generally be “delivered” to the guest only after completion of the process (which could be subject to inspection and rework if necessary, to correct any nonconformities).

Similar processes can also be found in manufacturing organizations providing services related to their products, for example, the handling of claims and warranties; the repair of products by the organization's service units; or product maintenance activities performed at a client's facilities.

Those processes that involve real time delivery, and are carried out directly at the organization/customer interface can rarely (if ever) have their output (“the service”) verified by subsequent monitoring or measurement before they are “delivered” to the customer. Instead, such processes need to be subject to validation, in accordance with the requirements of ISO 9001 in clause 8.3. This is also essential in order to **prevent** nonconformities from occurring.

In order to ensure adequate control over the quality of the service to be provided, the auditor should:

- understand the service characteristics, the service provision processes, and their acceptance criteria, as defined by the organization (this should be done during Stage 1 of an initial certification audit; see the ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group paper on “The need for a 2 stage approach to auditing”.)
- determine whether validation of "real-time" service provision processes (or any other process that requires validation) has been performed and if this has taken into account the associated risks;
- assess if the appropriate tools, training and empowerment have been provided to the personnel involved.

For many service industries, the service provided is instantaneous (i.e. via "real-time" processes), which does not readily allow for inspection before delivery of that service. Quality thinking says that the most cost-effective way of doing business is to apply the philosophy of “special processes” to ALL processes: the more the organization gets its processes right, the less the organization needs to worry about the outcome of its processes. Therefore it is very likely that this requirement will be applicable.

3.3 Control of nonconforming outputs

In the cases of service processes directly involving the customer, “the control of nonconforming outputs” is the way the organization deals with nonconformities in the service provision until the appropriate corrective action is defined and implemented.

Where a nonconformity is identified, the auditor should examine:

- whether the personnel involved are sufficiently empowered with the authority to decide the disposition of the service, for example:
 - to immediately terminate the service
 - to replace the service provided
 - to offer an alternative
- the organization’s customer claims and complaints processes
- any temporary corrections that are implemented to mitigate the effect of the nonconformity (e.g. refund, credit, upgrade, etc.)
- the identification, segregation and replacement of the relevant service equipment, service providers and environment.

This will enable the auditor to judge whether the control of such nonconforming product is effective.

Note: In such situations the quality management system should have provisions to capture data on the nonconformities and to feedback information, at the appropriate management level, for the effective definition and implementation of corrective actions.

For cases in which the output of the service is delivered after the realization of the process, or during or after the service provision, “control of nonconforming outputs” may be based on usual monitoring and measurement techniques. Evidence will need to be sought of the adequacy and effective implementation of these techniques.

For further information on the ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group, please refer to the paper: *Introduction to the ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group*

Feedback from users will be used by the *ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group* to determine whether additional guidance documents should be developed, or if these current ones should be revised.

Comments on the papers or presentations can be sent to the following email address: charles.corrie@bsigroup.com .

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