

Choosing An ISO 9000 Consultant: Why, When & How

Amy Zuckerman

One of the key questions confronting any company considering ISO 9000 certification is, how much is this going to cost? The up-front fees are only the beginning. Dissect the ISO 9000 certification procedure with an eye for hidden costs, and two segments of the process will leap out — the cost of consultants and the cost of making in-house improvements for the sake of passing certification. Most of these costs can be controlled by careful selection of the right consultant in the first place.

Because there is no regulating body in the United States setting rates for consulting fees, those fees will vary. The lack of regulation also means that there

is no organization to fall back upon when and if the decision is made to hire a consultant. The American Society for Quality Control will release a list of consultants who work in the quality field. But unlike the British National Registration Scheme, the ASQC does not screen consultants or offer certification to those who meet its standards.

The lack of similar regulation and standards in the U.S. bothers officials of the U.S. Registrar Accreditation Board. The American RAB, based in Wisconsin, advises U.S. companies thinking of hiring a consultant to learn as much about potential consultants as they can ahead of time, and not just from brochures and sales pitch-



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es. Get references from companies that have employed them in the past and check for their experience outside of ISO 9000.

Do I Have To Hire A Consultant At All?

Can you avoid hiring a consultant? The answer depends on your company, its makeup and the circumstances surrounding your decision to seek ISO 9000 certification. Many large corporations have sufficient staff levels to free up several employees, send them to seminars on ISO 9000 certification and work through the implementation process on their own. Small and mid-size companies may not have this option and may very well need some assistance from a qualified expert.

And how does one go

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Hire a consultant as you would a vendor: Do your homework; demand references; talk to other customers.

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about determining who is a qualified expert or deciding whether his/her services are necessary?

Before making this all-important decision, it's crucial to understand how quality ISO 9000 consultants can operate to assist you. There is no single way or method consultants should adopt, nor can they assist every company in the exact same way. But it is possible to determine when a consultant is taking advantage of you through over-advising and increasing the workload or by under-advising or neglecting your concerns.

What Can A Consultant Do For Me?

Consultants should act as facilitators of an in-company process and encourage clients to help themselves as much as possible. A good consultant will not attempt to take over the total pre-certification process to earn higher fees. A quality consultant will realize that quality standards and procedures must be generated from within the organization and become a working part of it.

Consultants can help set direction, determine which form of ISO certification to pursue, provide guidance, encouragement and structure. But it's up to each company to design its own procedures, determine how to implement quality standards and then continue to live up to those standards during the post-audit and post-certification years. These standards should

make sense for the company's long-term operation, not to simply pass ISO 9000 certification.

A good ISO 9000 consultant will constantly emphasize that quality emanates from within, not from the consultant. The company must create its own quality procedures while the consultant can merely guide the process. For this reason, be wary of consultants trying to oversell the certification process. Like any honest salesperson, a good ISO 9000 consultant should want to truly assist a client, not push to earn an unwarranted fee.

Here are some ways you can best utilize a consultant's services:

✓ Consultants may be brought in-house to assess whether a company is an appropriate candidate for ISO 9000 certification and how well this company would perform against ISO 9000 quality standards.

✓ A good consultant can translate the difference between your current quality system and the ISO 9000 standards — should there be one — into an action plan of items to be accomplished before the real ISO 9000 registrar is brought in for the certification audit.

✓ The consultant can work together with company personnel on implementing the action plan. This may mean training personnel to maintain new quality standards, establishing new operating procedures, advising on equip-

ment purchases, recalibration of measuring equipment or any other change that will bring the operation up to acceptable levels under ISO 9000.

✓ A consultant may set up a checks-and-balances system within the organization, thus allowing employees to monitor quality from within.

✓ The consultant may assist the company in applying to the RAB for certification and in hiring a registrar to conduct the certification audit.

✓ Some consultants will act as an "internal"

diture? Be wary of consultants pressuring you to seek certification regardless of your circumstances. Instead, like any good advisor, a quality ISO 9000 consultant should assist you to sort out an appropriate direction.

The kinds of questions he/she should pose to insure that ISO 9000 certification is appropriate for your company appear in the sidebar on the next page.

What Happens Next?

If a consultant, upon posing these questions, finds that a company is operating at top ISO 9000

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If your company is operating at ISO 9000 levels, your consultant should encourage an early audit and then bow out of the picture.

inspector, conducting a pre-audit to insure that all necessary changes have been implemented and that the operation will pass its ISO 9000 certification.

The absolute first step any consultant should take should be to assess whether certification is necessary or even desirable for a particular company. Companies should be advised to look at ISO 9000 like any investment: How much can you afford to pay, and will the ends warrant the expen-

levels, he or she should encourage the company to seek an early audit and bow out of the process. The consultant should also bow out if he or she discovers that an alternate form of certification would be preferable to ISO 9000.

To conduct an audit, the consultant must conduct interviews with crucial members of the company's staff. A good rule of thumb for determining the time needed for this preliminary process is to divide the

The ISO 9000 Quiz

Your ISO 9000 consultant should be asking the following kinds of questions:

1. What is your company's quality policy?
2. How do you determine your customers' needs?
3. Do you have a structured means of retrieving information from your customers?
4. Who is responsible for maintaining quality control in your organization?
5. How do you assure quality?
6. Are all the people in your employ aware of quality and the need for maintaining strict quality control throughout the entire operation?
7. Are all the people in your employ aware of your company's quality procedures?
8. Are your employees well-trained or educated for their current positions?
9. How do you currently measure the performance of your suppliers?
10. How do you keep up with the quality standards within your industry?
11. How do you measure accuracy, whether you deal in a product or a service?
12. How pervasive are your accuracy procedures?
13. How are the results registered?
14. Who is in charge of non-conforming products?
15. Are customer complaints being registered in a structured manner?
16. How is corrective action taken?
17. How well are you controlling these processes (Nos. 12-16)?
18. What kind of measurement equipment is being used (manufacturer)? How do you measure customer satisfaction (service industry)?
19. How often do you calibrate your measuring equipment?
20. Are all of the above (Nos. 12-19) formalized through procedures?
21. Who is responsible for maintaining them?
22. Who initiates improvements?
23. How are suggestions for improvement handled?

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number of employees by six (for six interviews a day). So it would take about four days to complete an audit with a company of 24 employees.

The consultant must then draw up a report of findings, which would add another six or so hours to the 24 already spent with the client. This report should include a list of

as an occasional advisor.

A Case In Point

A Massachusetts precision machine company with 35 employees is a good example of how a consultant can and should help a company through the ISO 9000 process. A consultant was brought into assess this company's quality levels and determined that the shop was operating

at close to ISO 9000 levels. To pass certification, however, this company was advised to better document its quality procedures. The consultant in question offered the shop owner the choice of appointing an in-house ISO 9000 expert — thus going it alone — or

hiring him on for additional hours. The owner chose to hire the consultant to assist with changes in his quality manual on a one-time basis. Cost savings in consulting hours were insured by this approach. The machine shop owner did recognize, however, that the consultant was able to speed up the certification process by acting as a pre-auditor and by serving as an advisor in the creation of the ISO 9000 company implementation plan required for certification.

The Final Analysis

To hire or not to hire an outside consultant to help you with ISO 9000 decision-making remains the question. The answer must be based on an honest

assessment of your company's capabilities. Do you have the time and resources to go it alone?

Once you have made a decision to seek outside help, evaluate potential candidates for the job with the same care you give to any other vendor. Ask for references and recommendations. Don't be snowed by ISO 9000 hype. Scrutinize proposals with care. Ask whether a particular part of the process is really necessary in your circumstances. Look for the consultant who is interested in helping you achieve your ISO 9000 goals, rather than in just making a big profit. Investment in such a consultant can be money well spent. ■

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actions required for the company to meet ISO 9000 standards. At this point the consultant has worked about 30 hours. Depending on the client's needs and staff levels, a consultant can be maintained in-house for the duration of the certification process or to act

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