ISO Certification:
Helping Build Stronger Business Relationships

Why it Matters for Translators, Editors, Clients, and Agencies

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Today's translation agency, whether small or large, is continuously challenged by competitive pressures and market demands. First, customers expect faster, higher-quality deliverables, always at a lower cost. Second, increasingly fierce global competition makes it harder to differentiate one's services. In addition, it is difficult to maintain a core staff of qualified individuals who understand the importance of customer service and do all they can to ensure it. Finding qualified vendors is even more challenging today due to a seemingly unlimited supply of translators and other language vendors offering their services through the Internet.

These factors are certainly indicative of modern commerce in a world where transactions occur anytime and anywhere without so much as a face-to-face encounter between the parties. Moreover, these factors are inherent in

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the uniquely human mode of doing business, in which split-second decisions go hand in hand with long-range planning. Thus, translation agency leadership is always under pressure to address these challenges and build a high-performance organization that can—and will—deliver the requested services at or above the required level of quality. The pressure, of course, is to do that each and every time one is called upon.

A Level Playing Field

The challenge for a small business

is that larger companies often believe that large suppliers are better at providing consistent and predictable performance. A potential major customer will often prefer to choose a supplier of equally significant size because there is a sense that the provider will have the work processes, procedures, and resources needed to handle any foreseeable increase in volume or complexity. This often comes at the expense of personal service and flexibility. However, for the agency in search of growth it becomes necessary to serve larger customers. The agency

that can provide its customers with deliverables of uniformly high quality—as well as personalized service—will stand out from the competition and win the trust of its clients and vendors alike. Achieving this on both sides of the value chain is a challenge and an opportunity. One possible route for companies looking to maintain consistency in terms of quality and work processes is to adopt national standards of practice. ISO certification, if approached and implemented correctly, can be a strong foundation for such growth.

What is ISO?

The International Organization for Standardization is the world's largest developer and publisher of international standards. The organization was established in Switzerland in 1947 to develop common international standards for organizations seeking ways to use more advanced methods of quality management. The organization's logos in its two official languages, American English and French, include the letters ISO, and it is usually referred to by these letters. ISO is not, however, an acronym or initialism for the organization's full name in either official language. Rather, the organization adopted ISO based on the Greek word ἴσοζ (*isos*), which means equal. Recognizing that the organization's initials would be different in different languages, its founders chose ISO as the universal short form of its name. This, in itself, reflects the aim of the organization: to equalize and standardize across cultures.

The organization published a family of international standards, often referred to collectively as the ISO 9000 series. ISO 9001:2000 is a standard within the ISO 9000 family that gives requirements for an organization's quality management system. ISO 9001:2000 is the only standard that can be used for the purpose of conformity assessment. Unlike many other standards, ISO 9001:2000 is a fairly generic standard, which means that it can be applied to any organization regardless of size, products, or services. It is a management system dealing with the work processes and the related quality management.

Having consistent procedures in place benefits an organization as it grows and helps it become more efficient and effective. ISO-based quality management is built on three pillars:

1) Build a common structure based upon standard processes.

2) Create a system and methods to ensure customer satisfaction and continuous improvement.

3) Develop metrics to measure efficiency and effectiveness and to determine the extent to which internal processes are working.

The fundamental premise is to improve results continuously in a manner that is appropriately controlled and well-focused.

A Logical Process

To gain ISO 9000 certification, a company must have:

- A set of procedures covering all key work processes.
- Clear documentation of such procedures.
- A method by which to identify non-conformances to these procedures, and appropriate corrective action when non-conformances are identified.
- A way to monitor the effectiveness not only of these aforementioned processes, but also the quality system as a whole.

This system of regular reviews allows the organization to adapt the quality system to changing business conditions. The company will be in a better position to implement preventive actions and ensure that the quality system continues to improve performance.

To see how this is valuable, let us step back for a moment and consider what happens to an organization that has few standards in place. Imagine a company that has different procedures and forms for each customer. Under this system, project managers write slightly different e-mails to each translator to assign work and generate work contracts. Consequently, the project manager has no way of verifying or comparing the quality received or the quality delivered to the end client. Every day is an exercise in firefighting, and every new fire is different from the previous one. Given that degree of variability, it becomes exceedingly tough to control quality and achieve growth. A small business can find that the situation deteri-

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orates very quickly as the battle continues on two fronts: quality and verification on the one, and time management and economics on the other.

In a situation like this, the ISO 9001:2000 standard can help because it is structured to accommodate the natural conduct of business irrespective of the size or influence of an individual company.

Growing Pains Force Change: Crisis or Opportunity

Research in the dynamics of business growth has shown that businesses face different crises in different

is to put an ISO program to work "correctly." Unfortunately, ISO certification is often perceived as having no direct correlation to performance. Instead, it is seen as an added cost in exchange for a mountain of paperwork and an eventual, inescapable process overload. In other words, ISO certification is prejudicially associated with bureaucracy. This may very well be true if a company goes through the paces of certification and management half-heartedly, without truly understanding and integrating the benefits the ISO system offers to service providers and customers. If a company introduces ISO grudgingly, considering it as a necessary evil and being blind to

flexibility, as well as potentially generate higher costs and setbacks in delivery.

ISO Benefits for Clients, Vendors, and Agencies

First, remember that ISO is a tool. Each organization is in control of how rigid or flexible it makes its quality management system. In a flexible quality management system that is continuously improved, the pros will definitely outweigh the cons.

The benefits for clients are significant:

- Increased customer confidence in the supplier's quality and delivery commitments.
- Improved service performance and reduced uncertainty.
- Regular assessments ensuring that the organization continuously uses, monitors, and improves its processes.
- Compliance with a client's own ISO requirement to use a certified vendor.
- Recognition of the ISO 9000 quality management system, which is a truly global standard that is easily recognized across borders.
- Procedures for corrective action ("warranty for performance") to ensure that the client has recourse in the event of non-conformance.

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phases of their life cycle. The particular kind of crisis addressed in this article is the need to establish internal systems that allow for increased delegation, standardization, and repeatability. A well-managed quality system can help overcome obstacles to healthy growth.

For example, Eric Flamholtz, an expert on business growth, writes: "When an organization has not been fully successful in developing internal systems it needs at a given stage of growth, it begins to experience growing pains. Growing pains are a symptom indicating that an organization needs to make a transition" (http://entrepreneurs.about.com/cs/beyondstartup/a/uc070903.htm).

Part of managing these growing pains and developing internal systems

its values, it will just create an additional layer of bureaucracy, scaring away vendors and clients alike. However, if a company accepts the challenge and is willing to change, it will be able to reap the benefits.

The successful implementation of an ISO quality management system by a translation agency requires the participation of leadership and all staff. It also requires the participation of translators and other language service vendors who show a willingness to be evaluated, to evaluate others, and to follow a series of defined procedures. The client, on the other hand, may worry that the agency will excessively document its practices and clutter and complicate work with unnecessary steps. The assumption is that the system will reduce

The benefits for language service vendors (translators, editors, proofreaders, copyeditors, and graphic designers) include:

- More specific instructions and clearer procedures and processes.
- Clarity regarding roles, responsibilities, and authorities.
- Recruitment and ongoing evaluations (translators and editors).
- Constructive feedback to further growth and development.
- Enhanced reputation (an effective

marketing tool for language service vendors who frequently work with ISO-certified firms).

The benefits for agencies include:

- Increased productivity through streamlined data, equipment, tools, and documentation.
- Decreased operating costs due to fewer problems and reduced re-work.
- Increased employee responsiveness to customer needs and requirements.
- Improved employee understanding of how ISO efforts, quality management systems, and business strategy are aligned for organizational improvement.
- Clear procedures and processes allowing for faster training time and improved performance management by setting and following standards and metrics.
- Enhanced marketplace recognition.
- Improved customer satisfaction.

The more explicit the processes and the more open the communication, the easier it is to build trust along the value chain (client, agency, supplier).

Seven Steps to Successful Implementation of ISO

So how is ISO implemented correctly? There are several factors to keep in mind. First of all, it is essential to adopt the mindset of achieving superior quality for every customer, every day. That mindset is manifested in the way one works with clients, translators, and staff. It means that leadership accepts accountability for creating a culture of continuous improvement where people are comfortable voicing their opinions, using their initiative, and working together in accordance with established procedures. It also means that all those

involved take pride in their work and continuously strive to do a bit better than before. The achievement of this mindset means that one shares a common understanding of the ISO quality management system. ISO is about enhanced performance, not just for the organization but on an individual level as well. It is about creating a standardized, repeatable way

of working, based on the core principles of high customer satisfaction, improved internal efficiency and effectiveness, vendor and client partnerships, and financial performance.

ISO is a culture, an ethos, and a value system that needs to be created, implemented, and maintained. It is not a natural process, but requires ➡

Seven Lessons for Company Leadership

1. **Realize it is a "mindset":** Help people understand that quality is a mindset and consists of a set of core values (e.g., culture).

2. **Understand that a few processes drive the business:** Identify the key business processes that drive results and make it relevant to people's day-to-day jobs.

3. **Document procedures:** Implement documented procedures and standards for these key business processes.

4. **Encourage the use of standards:** Motivate all stakeholders to follow the procedures and standards continuously.

5. **Manage with metrics:** Develop a short list of metrics that will be tracked on a regular basis in order to document progress.

6. **Discipline is not a four-letter word:** Create a disciplined rhythm of reviewing metrics, obtaining feedback, and reviewing the quality system. Leaders must ask the hard questions, reinforce accountability, and be willing to confront performance gaps.

7. **Be on the lookout for unnecessary bureaucracy:** Continuously review the quality system as you encourage those involved to simplify and improve the processes.

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continuous efforts to strive for high values. A vital prerequisite is that leadership believe in the value of a quality management system and be willing to focus on the seven key steps listed in the box on page 15. If followed by all participants, these steps will help build a safe, solid foundation for growth.

Quality: Corporate Goal and Daily Commitment

Quality management under ISO requires a willingness by people throughout the organization to manage the transition to an ISO system, work through the growing pains, and then focus on continuous improvement. Despite the standards of adherence, which at first glance may seem bureaucratic, it is up to the individual firm to decide the depth of its standards and procedures. These are the standards the company will live by on a daily basis, and they should be clearly relevant to improving performance.

Once a company has achieved the first or several successful audits indicating that they conform to given standards, there is a temptation to rest on one's laurels after having implemented the recommendations of the auditor. Audits are great milestones. They present a deadline by which certain processes, forms, and documentation have to be in place. Audit preparation requires a lot of internal communication and a commitment to achieving action items by a set date. Given that most agencies are quite busy with daily project management, it is very important to have a fixed audit date—otherwise internal goals may be delayed endlessly. Audit preparation requires a lot of effort, but if done right, the effect can be felt for months after by a smoother running system. It is comparable to having one's car serviced at regular intervals for optimum performance.

However, true implementation of ISO quality principles goes beyond the auditor's recommendations. Audits are a tool and help pinpoint certain areas for improvement. It is up to the individuals working with the processes and procedures to be open-minded and to help shape and improve the organization. It is important to reconfirm a daily commitment to continuous improvement by learning that:

- It is important to streamline and simplify while being self-critical on an ongoing basis.

- Mistakes and errors are not a nuisance, but an opportunity to learn about weaknesses and improve.

- Errors are not made to satisfy the need for finger-pointing, but to embrace the opportunities inherent in each error.

This requires self-awareness in a business and personal sense, as well as honesty and directness. It consists of fair, factual, and constructive feedback. The process also takes a willingness to step back and reflect in order to determine how to improve for the sake of preventing future errors.

The ISO program has always made it possible for companies and service providers to work cooperatively to meet a higher standard. Today, with the globalization of business in every field, the ISO quality management system is more meaningful than ever. Yet, ISO and quality management are not a guarantee for success. They are simply tools to create a mindset on which one can build a foundation for consistent, verifiable growth. Business relationships are built on predictability, integrity, and delivering on promises. ISO certification can help, if done correctly.

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More Information on ISO Certification

International Organization
for Standardization
www.iso.org

ISO 9001:2000
www.iso.org/iso/iso900014000/
explore/9001supchain.html

9000World.com
www.9000world.com/index.php

American National Standards
Institute/American Society for Quality
National Accreditation Board
www.anab.org

American Society for Quality
www.asq.org

ASTM International
www.astm.org

Quality Systems Update
Publishing Company
www.qsuonline.com

TÜV SÜD Academy Training
www.TUVtraining.com