

ISO 9001 in Education and Training

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While usually associated with manufacturing and service activities, ISO 9001 should be considered equally as effective as a management system for education and training programs. If we consider the desired outcome (learning), education and training is just another form of service; the product is the knowledge, skill and/or ability that is achieved by the program attendees. As with other services, the delivery of education and training incorporates the processes of design, development, verification, validation, delivery, subsequent correction and ongoing improvement. Therefore, when we try to apply the requirements of ISO 9001 to education and training activities, we find that it aligns exceptionally well with generally accepted practices.

A fundamental objective of any quality management system is to ensure that customer needs are met. In order to define these needs as they relate to education and training, we must first define the primary customer of this service - the program attendee. I've used the term "primary customer" in this discussion, as numerous ancillary customers may also be involved, including the parents of the attendee, the state which provides funding to the institution, and possibly even the country in which the activity is performed (as skill development contributes to the national economy). In the case of corporate training, we must also consider the needs of the individual's employer, the industry they serve, as well as regulatory bodies or other interested parties. The list of potential customers can be as varied as the number of offerings that are available; identification of both primary and ancillary customers is a critical part of the initial needs assessment process, and is essential to the overall success of any education or training effort.

Once the above customers have been defined, their needs must be translated into terms that can be understood by the organization, and that can be further developed to serve as a measurement of an individual's competency. Typically, these needs are reflected through the establishment of learning outcome statements, commonly referred to as learning objectives. Upon completion of specific portion of a program (or upon the completion of the program as a whole), the participant should be able to demonstrate a defined level of mastery of the course content, or be able to demonstrate the ability to perform a specific task or activity. To determine if these needs are satisfied, the participants performance throughout this entire process is monitored, and at defined intervals, the individual's ability to meet a defined learning objective is measured against an established set of criteria (be it quizzes, examinations, demonstrations or other evaluation methods). Once the criteria established for competency is met, the objective is considered to be achieved. This process then continues until all established objectives have been met for the program, at which point a certificate or other form of recognition is awarded.

When considering what would be required to properly design, develop and document such a system to meet the requirements of ISO 9001, we find that there is very little difference between the approach needed to develop a system for this application, in comparison to approaches commonly used to develop systems which address manufacturing activities and other services. Proper design should begin with a review of the key processes used by the institution or organization, their ability to meet the customer needs established above and their overall degree of compliance with the requirements of the ISO 9001 standard.



System documentation required by the ISO 9001 standard, including a quality manual, and the six "system" procedures required by the ISO 9001 standard - the control of documents, the control of records, internal audits, the control of nonconformances, corrective action and preventative action all have a place in this system (as do the 19 types of records addressed in the ISO 9001 standard); they are just as relevant in this application as they are with their counterparts in other industries. Additional documentation, addressing the various activities performed by the organization will also be needed, as necessary to address the critical nature of the activities performed, as well as to ensure the customer needs defined above are met.

While the ISO 9001 standard does allow for an organization to take exclusion to the requirements found in Clause 7, there are relatively few instances where such exclusion would be justified. Typical education and training activities encompass Design and Development (instructional design), Purchasing (materials and services) Validation of Processes (pilot programs and peer reviews), Customer property (information) and even the Control of Measurement and Monitoring Devices (quizzes and examinations). While the specific processes used may vary between different organizations and offerings, almost every clause of ISO 9001 could conceivably apply.

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