



Quality Policy: Comply or Compete?

Thorsten Mehnert explores how localization clients evaluate quality-management systems in the language industry

When product life cycles are short, and production highly fragmented and decentralized, quality management (QM) is essential. To get the right products to market at the right time, every element in the supply chain must deliver according to plan. Many industries have tried to master the quality challenge by implementing quality-management systems based on the ISO 9000 series.

Although quality issues have always been discussed in the language industries, QM systems (QMS) based on cross-industry standards like the ISO 9000 series or on quality standards focusing exclusively on translation and interpretation (e.g., DIN 2345 in Germany, UNI 10574 in Italy) have only recently been implemented.

Before deciding on your QM implementation, it might be helpful to look at the QM experience of other industries to understand what clients might expect from their language-service suppliers.

Limitations of QM Compliance

QM does not necessarily bring expected economic benefits. In many cases, companies get quality certification simply to distinguish themselves from their competitors. As one British study put it, "the entire motivation in implementing ISO 9000 has been to get customers off their backs." I call this the *Comply* approach to QM (see table).

However, quality certificates can play a more important role. In many industries,

they are a simple client requirement. But in his survey of 325 quality managers from various industries, C. Malorny concluded that "a mere orientation towards DIN EN ISO 9000 only meets the requirements of a comprehensive quality approach in the sense of improved quality and productivity to a small extent."

With regard to the benefits gained from implementing a normative QMS, only 31 percent of the companies reported increased customer satisfaction, 32 percent reported reduced nonconformance costs, 17 percent shorter throughput times, and 48 percent higher product quality. But in most cases respondents simply could not quantify their gains.

Malorny considers it a shortcoming that ISO 9001-3 does not require customer orientation, systematic quality improvements, or performance measurement. Also the annual audits done on QMSs are often criticized as too rigid and not suitable for improving the QMS itself.

All of which shows the need for a *Compete* approach to QM (see table). This approach incorporates everyone in the process chain, sets up measures for

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continuous improvement, and acts as a driver rather than a bureaucratic obstacle to innovation and change.

This model dates back to 1950s-style Total Quality Control (TQC) and the Deming Application Prize quality award in Japan. Today, it is often referred to as TQM (Total Quality Management)—and is starting to find its way into quality standards, e.g., the ISO 9004 or the QS-9000. US automotive manufacturers Chrysler, Ford, and GM already require their suppliers to be certified to QS-9000.

Clients think they need only turn over the job to a certified supplier. But producing quality can only be delegated to a limited degree and always requires client participation, especially in translation.

Two Approaches to Quality Management		
Comply		Compete
Enhancing clients' trust in the quality of a product/service by obtaining quality certification	Main goal	Creating higher value for the client by continuously improving the way of doing business
Inward-oriented, mainly focusing on internal processes	Focus of activities	Network-oriented, incorporating clients and suppliers
Only parts of an organization	Participation	Everyone in an organization
Short-term	Orientation	Long-term
Setting up a QM system by closely following the requirements of a quality standard	Role of QM standards	Possibly using quality standards as a starting point to set up a system which fulfills the company's QM needs
Little, if any, structured way of measurement	Measurement of increased performance through QM	Tracking how QM influences business performance

QM in the Language Industry

Some time ago, I talked to a company whose subsidiaries kept complaining about the bad quality of the translations they received. The "solution" of the company's central documentation department was to make the suppliers comply to ISO 9002. But supplier quality was not the problem here. The subsidiaries were not integrated into the production process; they checked the translations once a year, did not contribute to defining terminology, and were not motivated to participate.

As this example shows, the *Comply* approach might create the wrong client expectations. The clients lull themselves into a false sense of security, thinking that all they have to do is turn over the job to the certified supplier company, who will be able to deliver a high-quality service. Producing quality can only be delegated to a certain degree and always

requires client participation, especially in translation.

Current QM activities among translation suppliers mainly follow the *Comply* approach. But this alone will probably not offer a winning strategy in the future. Let's look at just one major TQM/*Compete* principle that will be of utmost importance to the language industry: customer-driven quality.

Quality is What The Client Needs

There is no general quality definition for language services. In one case, *high* quality is achieved by creating a translation which closely follows the source text, and in another case, by completely rewriting the source. A quick-and-dirty translation or a summarization of the source can be of *higher* quality than a polished translation, because the latter

might take too much time to serve an immediate information need.

Quality can only be defined for a specific client/supplier relationship, it is always multidimensional and often highly dynamic. Client expectations focus on the product itself, as well as the way it is delivered, and jobs differ in terms of the actual quality dimensions and values expected. In other words, quality is what the client needs.

I wanted to find out how clients ensure that their translation suppliers deliver according to their needs, in particular how they value QMSs and quality certification.

Following a short series of interviews with various clients, my key finding was that no matter how much experience interviewees had with QM and regardless of the size of their translation suppliers (from freelancers to large agencies) they all underscored one fact: a certified sup-



plier does not guarantee higher product/process quality. What counts is the client/supplier relationship. Here are some extracts from the interviews:

Beyond the Q Acronym

Dr. Cornelia Hofmann, technical communications manager at Schneider Automation: "Quality improvement can only be achieved by setting up strong communication ties between client and supplier. I do not expect my translation suppliers to be certified or to declare conformance with a quality standard. But I demand a high level of motivation regarding the further development of the way we do business together today."

Mike Hodshon, localization coordinator at ELSA: "From my own experience, I can say that companies that use the ISO 9000 certificate for advertising purposes are not necessarily better than those which do not have this certificate. I use my own methods for assessing the capabilities of translation companies."

Hartmut Möller, technical documentation manager at Dade Behring: "A QMS is of no use if you can't achieve a commitment to quality from each and every individual. The practical experience with Kaizen [a TQM-oriented approach] has helped me to understand how to avoid errors and how to systematically achieve improvements."

For *Hubert Pabst*, international documentation manager at Minolta BEO, the existence of a "living" QMS indicates that the supplier has the right mindset, "But cooperation with a supplier on the basis of a genuine partnership yields much higher benefits than any QMS." Minolta has decided to invest in a holistic TQM approach; ISO 9002 is a small byproduct.

"Across the whole company, opportunities for change have been identified, and seven business reengineering projects were initiated. In the documentation department, they led to a strategic service and support plan." The first implementation results of this plan are impressive: "The European documentation is ready once our copiers reach the local warehouses after sea transit. And the continuous-improvement process helped us reduce our translation costs by 20 to 50 percent, depending on the product."

Frans Bruinsma, localization and logistics manager at Compaq Computer, EMEA HQ: "Some companies say they are certified to ISO 9002, but the processes they have defined may be a year old and today

nobody cares. I have also seen a QMS resulting in just the opposite of quality, for instance when people have tried to describe it all in every detail.

"But at Compaq, we care a lot about QM, we maintain our processes, and undertake changes where necessary. From our suppliers we do not demand a certification, but structured processes, documentation of routines, as well as an adaptation to our processes."

However, for Bruinsma, the real QM challenge goes far beyond processes and systems—he focuses on people management. "The people working for the supplier—are they highly motivated, well-coached, empowered to make their own decisions, and able to give and receive feedback?" Compaq conducts intensive supplier

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reviews, but to Bruinsma this is not a one-way street: "*Partnerschaft heißt nicht: der Partner schafft*" [a play on words—partnership does not mean that only the partner works].

He also wants to be evaluated by his suppliers; he wants to know where he and his team can get better. "But giving feedback to a client, that's something most suppliers still have to learn."

What Will Clients Need Tomorrow?

Quality expectations are highly dynamic, and being ahead of others in identifying clients' expectations offers an important competitive advantage. It requires setting up close feedback loops between client and supplier which allow tracking of client needs.

These loops have to be established at the operational level (ensuring, for example, that changes in corporate terminology are applied in the creation of new translations, that translators can learn from proof-reading done by the client, etc.), as well as at the strategic level (such as achieving joint optimization in management and logistics of reusable information, avoiding

redundant project-management and proofing tasks, etc.).

But as with the need for information technology more than a decade ago, the need for language support is growing in many corporate areas today. To understand and successfully address these needs, translation suppliers will have to put plenty of effort into cultivating the feedback loops and designing a stronger integration with client processes.

Here are a few of the challenges facing the client/supplier relationship:

- The information-management paradigm changes from creation to reuse/generation of information. Information will be stored in a manner independent of format or presentation and will be transformed for different communication situations (reading manuals, listening to voice instructions, following a software "wizard," etc.).

- Documentation becomes an integral part of the product: "The distinction between what is product [...], what is marketing, and what is technical material is becoming increasingly blurred." (David Brooks, Microsoft)

- Client and supplier will have to jointly manage "an InfoCycle in which companies have control over the creation, maintenance, and distribution (and even consumption) of information within a coherent environment." (Rose Lockwood, Equipe)

In view of challenges like these, will suppliers of multilingual communication services stand a chance of offering the right products at the right time without very close collaboration with their clients?

Certainly not. Trying to produce better quality without intensive exchange with the client means losing sight of the client's needs. Setting up a bureaucratic QM structure might keep a company from being innovative—which is synonymous with producing low quality in the long run.

The *Comply* approach might give some competitive advantage in the very short run, but clients will quickly find out that this is not the road to increased business performance. So *Compete* is an approach well worth considering.

Several TQM approaches are available to provide an appropriate methodology. Implementation might take years, but it will provide a source of sustained com-

petitive advantage for at least one reason: the resulting organization will be a rare bird, difficult to imitate.

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