

Plenary Session E

Quality Management for Services – Does Assurance Matter?

The Issue: In the services sector, quality considerations influence the buying decision to at least the same extent as in the merchandise sector. The problem is, however, that given the intangibility of services, there are no formal international standards by which quality and performance can be measured. The implications are:

- The prospective exporter of services must base his “selling proposition” on the level and reliability of his own quality system and those which govern the sector as a whole (i.e. regulatory requirements and professional certification/registration); and
- For the services sector overall, there is no rationale for creating a quality infrastructure that parallels that of the merchandise sector.

The Proposition: While ultimate responsibility for quality rests with the individual service provider, the public sector must be proactive in initiating and maintaining a quality assurance programme for the sector as a whole.

Ideally, such a programme would be designed and implemented in full partnership with the “services coalition” or professional associations representing the most active services sub-sectors.

The focus of such a programme must be on:

- Building awareness within the sector of the options available for reinforcing the firm’s quality performance and image, specifically through ISO 9001 certification.
- Ensuring that ISO 9001 certification for services firms is available within the country and can be obtained at a reasonable cost.
- Creating the advisory capacity within the country to consult on quality-related systems.
- Maintaining specialized information and advisory programmes targeting the small-scale services firm.
- Supporting the development of “private” quality standards for key services sub-sectors (such as accommodation ratings in tourism), designed on those existing in key markets.

Focus of the Debate: It is recommended that the debate concentrate on the following questions:

1. What considerations comprise the “quality issue” in the international market for services and how do these differ from the merchandise market?
2. Can the “quality issue” be effectively addressed under a strategy covering the entire services sector and if so, what are the principal components of the quality assurance strategy for the sector?
3. Is the development of national standards for services and the certification to these standards an essential element of a country’s competitiveness in the services sector?
4. Is ISO 9001 certification an essential element of the developing country firm’s “selling proposition”, and if not, what are the key quality-related components of the firm’s “proposition”?
5. What are examples of national “best practice”?