'Tested in Hong Kong, Certified in Hong Kong' :

Hong Kong at the fore of ISO 9001 development and adoption

Hong Kong has long embraced the ISO quality management system with various organisations using, certifying and offering consulting services with reference to the standard.

The Innovation and Technology Commission (ITC) of the HKSAR Government, a correspondent member representing Hong Kong in ISO, played host to the 31st meeting of the ISO Technical Committee 176 (ISO/TC 176) held late last year. The meeting provided testing and certification professionals in the territory a chance to connect with their counterparts across the globe, as well as allowed them to stay at the fore of one of the most widely employed standards in the world.

Co-organised by the Hong Kong Council for Testing and Certification and the Hong Kong Productivity Council, the Hong Kong-held event featured a packed schedule of meetings and workshops, as well as breakout and revision sessions. Collectively, the event was attended by about 200 experts from 45 countries/economies, in addition to over 10 international and regional organisations from around the world.

According to ISO, the ISO 9000 family of standards provides guidance and tools for companies and organisations who want to ensure that their products and services consistently meet customers' requirements, and that quality is continuously improved.

As in other parts of the world, the ISO 9000 family of standards are some of the most recognised and adopted standards in Hong Kong. A number of organisations in Hong Kong are ready to offer certification services to companies and organisations wishing to follow the guidelines and requirements set out by ISO, aiming for continual improvement.

One of the most well-known organisations offering such services is the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency (HKQAA). Set up in 1989, it was the first certification body in the territory to offer certification services for ISO 9001.

"The management of an organisation is responsible for achieving the organisation's objectives, whether they are for profits as in the majority of commercial companies or otherwise," said Dr Michael Lam, CEO of HKQAA.

"A quality management system is the controlling of the processes that leads to the objectives of an organisation; from planning, strategy, design to execution and other areas involved in its delivery of services."

Dr Lam, who is a Chartered Quality Professional of the internationally recognised Chartered Quality Institute, explained that to be able to effectively control processes, an organisation should control and manage the parameters that have a bearing on the outcome of the processes in a consistent manner. Parameters, effectively, are customers' expectations, which can be written or unwritten, he added.

An important practice that leads to quality assurance in an organisation is the presence of cross-departmental auditing, which is a kind of internal auditing, within the organisation. Every department keeps an eye on the performance of other departments, resulting in progressive improvement of all.

On how to adopt an ISO quality management standard, Dr Lam said, 'If staff members of a company find the ISO 9001 certification requirements difficult, they may consider joining seminars run by certification bodies'. In addition, there are widespread training classes on understanding and application of the ISO standard. Quality professionals acting as consultants are also available to offer assistance to companies, but Dr Lam explained that it is important for an organisation's staff members to understand the application of the standard.

The ISO 9001 version 2015 comes with added new requirements, including risk-based thinking and the introduction of the four-step management method of Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, as well as the consideration of an organisation's context.

While the ISO 9001 quality management system standard is used among some of the biggest corporations around the world, the standard could in fact be adopted by organisations of any size, regardless of an organisation's field of activity, including a countless number of SMEs. There have been over 1.1 million companies certified to ISO 9001 standard since its launching in 1987, according to ISO. In Hong Kong, the number of companies or organisations certified to the standard was 2,295 in 2014.

Tung Fat Ho Building Materials Limited (Tung Fat Ho) is an SME that has been implementing the quality management system for years. The company is specialised in designing, developing and marketing architectural ironmongery products, such as door hinges, lever handles and automatic door systems, for various kinds of projects. Working alongside architects, the company has been a supplier to contractors of new construction and renovation projects.

According to Simon Leung, General Manager of Tung Fat Ho, the adoption of the ISO 9001 quality management system has come with multiple benefits. "The fact that the company is ISO 9001 certified by a third party gives customers added confidence regarding quality, especially in the case when the customers employ the same standard themselves."

In addition, added Leung, the ISO 9001 standard requires that representatives from different departments assume the role of internal auditors and perform in a manner of prudent and effective control over perceived risks. That kind of internal auditing has actually made his job far easier. Any issue that can threaten the delivery of quality services by the company will likely be spotted by colleagues.

However, the use of the standard also comes with a new challenge internally. "Colleagues have been generally very good at following orders and getting a task done," he said. "But to ask certain people to adopt the mentality of being an auditor can take some time. We had to ensure that everyone realises the change would be for the benefit of the company."

Dr Michael Lam, CEO of Hong Kong Quality Assurance Agency and former member of Hong Kong Council for Testing and Certification

Simon Leung, General Manager of Tung Fat Ho Building Materials Limited

Tung Fat Ho is a family-owned business set up in 1950s. Over the years, the business has evolved and it counts hospital, club houses, governmental and commercial institutions, developers of major exhibition grounds and transportation hubs in Hong Kong and Macau among its customers. Leung considers himself a professional manager who is obliged to keep major shareholders of the company satisfied with the company's development objectives.

"The use of the ISO 9001 quality management system is a proof that the management of a company is sound and progressive, while the management system is independently certified by a third party," Leung said.

The company first considered the idea of using an ISO standard as early as 2003. And by 2008, in the wake of the global financial turbulence, the company decided to adopt the ISO 9001 standard. Tung Fat Ho successfully obtained ISO 9001 certification in 2010 after thorough internal communication with its employees and management executives.

The experience of organisations such as the HKQAA and Tung Fat Ho has clearly shown that Hong Kong boasts an active and dynamic culture as far as the employment of the ISO 9001 quality management system is concerned. Playing host to the latest ISO/TC 176 meeting further served to emphasise the ambition of Hong Kong being at the forefront of the testing and certification industry.

The Hong Kong Certification Body Accreditation Scheme (HKCAS) administrated by the Hong Kong Accreditation Service of HKSAR Government offers accreditation to certification bodies providing quality management system (QMS) certification. HKCAS is a voluntary scheme and only certification bodies that conform to ISO/IEC 17021 are eligible to be accredited. Accreditation will only be granted upon the assessment by independent expert assessors and the accreditation is widely recognised. The government encourages testing and certification bodies to obtain accreditation from Hong Kong Accreditation Service for better recognition. As at 1 March, 14 certification bodies in Hong Kong have been accredited under HKCAS for QMS certification.