

Industry Education Council Gets ISO 9001 Certificate

Result is a stronger, more efficient customer focused organization

by Ted Palmer

As an umbrella organization funded by multiple sources and responsible for facilitating and delivering a wide variety of programs, the Business Education Council (BEC) of Niagara faces complex obligations in terms of management, measurement of goals and accomplishments, and financial accounting and reporting.

BEC's mandate is to facilitate alliances among education, industry, labor and community organizations in the Niagara region of Ontario, Canada, enhance education and employment opportunities, support economic development, and promote personal and professional growth of its citizens.

Funds for programs under the BEC umbrella are received from a variety of sources, including the federal and provincial governments, boards of education and private sector corporate sponsors on a project basis.

BEC's programs include a Job Finders Club, which provides unemployed individuals the training and resources necessary to conduct a professional job search. The Career Opportunity Information Network (COIN) features both a Web site and a newsletter for distribution of information on training, education, entrepreneurship and job searching services.

Organization's challenges

BEC has about 40 full-time staff in

administration and program management. A volunteer board of directors represents business, education and labor. Internally, the management group is comprised of the executive director, two administration managers and five individual project managers.

In late 1999, the board and management group developed a list of challenges facing the organization:

- **Human resources**—recruiting, developing and retaining quality staff.

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- **Administrative**—consistency in job descriptions, functions, management systems and expectations across project areas.
- **Credibility**—being able to prove the quality of our programs and ensure accountability to funding sources, sponsors and the board.
- **Data**—obtaining timely information for decision making.
- **Vision and analysis**—developing an organizational vision and return on investment analysis to choose among opportunities.

- **Outlook**—retaining an entrepreneurial approach as we institute management systems.

At the time, I had been reading about ISO 9000 quality management systems (QMSs) and how they could possibly be applied to a nonprofit. Connie Shoalts, manager of finance and administration, attended a seminar. Some of our directors had ISO 9001:2000 certificates at their businesses and supported implementing the standard as a good way to deal with our challenges.

The decision to proceed was not taken lightly, however. We were confident ISO 9001 would be a good fit, but we also had to consider the impact of the required time commitment on our already busy staff. What would the effort do to morale? Would staff members buy into the process, or would they consider it nothing more than a job performance evaluation? Would the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of BEC be stifled by a regimented and systematic bureaucracy?

Communication with staff

The key to our eventual success may have been our openness with staff about the objectives of the process. The selection of Connie Shoalts to be the ISO 9000 management representative for quality turned out to be a good move because her position within the administrative structure allowed

her to see the overall value to the organization, and as it turned out, she remained committed to seeing certification through to completion.

“It really was a good fit for me because my position is strictly administrative, with no project or program focus,” says Shoalts. “I could focus on the entire organization and look at how things fit.”

As management representative, Shoalts quarterbacked implementation of the QMS. Her responsibilities included overseeing the development of flowcharts and procedures, internal training and communications, coordination and follow-up on our internal quality audit program, development of the organization’s corrective action system and coordination of management review meetings.

In the beginning, as expected, not everyone bought in, but support grew as we moved along. We were able to convince staff members ISO 9001:2000 would not mean more bureaucracy and would actually make all of their jobs easier because processes would be consistently documented across the entire organization. For example, all managers would be able to access detailed flowcharts describing how programs functioned throughout all divisions.

Just meeting regularly and asking for input from everyone was probably the key to achieving staff support. It nurtured a dialogue on the kind of program reporting procedures that had either worked or not worked in the past and sparked an exchange of ideas on possible efficiencies that could be included in our strategic plan.

Consultant support

It immediately became obvious we would need professional help. We hired consultant Rose Johnson, president of Eden Quality Management Inc. in Burlington, Ontario. Johnson helped us take standards originally written for a manufacturing situation and interpret them for a nonprofit, service organization. KPMG in Mississauga, Ontario, was eventually hired to do the registration audit.

“I realized one of the initial challenges was to identify BEC’s customers, because I knew customer satisfaction would have to be measured on an ongoing basis as one of the specific ISO 9001 requirements,” says Johnson. “We quickly determined the customers were the various stakeholders, including funding bodies, program participants, school boards and agencies.”

Johnson let the managers know what she wanted them to do and set deadlines. Managers then established working groups within their own program areas. The working groups met periodically and defined procedures they would then submit to Johnson.

Johnson established and executed a specific process for achieving our goal:

- We held management training sessions to communicate requirements and the registration process.
- Johnson conducted a gap analysis audit to determine areas where efforts would have to be concentrated.
- We appointed document control coordinators to gather and streamline the large volumes of forms and documents used by

each division. The management team developed a simple numbering system.

- To track the myriad small (sometimes large) issues that needed to be addressed, Johnson maintained an ongoing action plan throughout the 18-month registration process. These issues ranged from a minor form modification to documenting a new program area.
- Weekly flowcharting sessions were held, as Johnson worked through all BEC divisions. The appropriate division manager and those who performed the various steps of the process typically participated. The majority of BEC’s staff members regularly provided invaluable input.
- Any relevant forms or documents were identified directly on the flowchart. Johnson formalized the flowcharts off-site and met with the team the following week to review and make any necessary changes. Once a consensus was reached, Johnson developed a formal procedure, using the flowchart as the basis. The manager and team members then reviewed and approved the procedure.
- All key processes were flowcharted and linked to a process map for each division.
- In accordance with the new requirements of ISO 9001:2000, BEC’s management team identified measurable quality objectives throughout all programs. Performance against these objectives is reviewed at quarterly management review meetings.
- Once the documentation phase was completed, Johnson trained staff who had volunteered as

BEC's internal audit team. Each procedure was audited and submitted to Shoalts for follow-up.

Benefits

So what did we gain, and how has the ISO 9001:2000 registration process made BEC a better organization? Has a quantifiable before and after picture emerged? Here are some of the key advances:

- We send a clear signal to our partners and funders that we practice due diligence. This gives us an edge in the ever tightening competition for both public and private sector financial support.
- A comprehensive system of program evaluation has been implemented using, wherever possible, a standardized client evaluation form. If a trend emerges, it sparks an adjustment in program delivery. In fact, based on client feedback, we even change the evaluation form if we believe it's not user friendly or doesn't provide the data we require.
- BEC is now expanding its analysis of customer feedback, including the development of an evaluation tool for internal customers (inter-departmental evaluations). One such example is the measurement of response time by BEC's IT department. Once data are accumulated and analyzed, the department will establish measurable objectives leading to continual improvement.
- BEC has developed a paperless QMS. All current flowcharts, procedures, forms and documents are shared electronically. A shared database tracks quality issues and corrective action requests.

- Efficiencies are being achieved and tracked without impacting the autonomy of each project's funding calculations. For example, we instituted centralized purchasing, and the savings calculated for each program is used for delivery of direct services to clients.

Six projects pooled resources to develop communications materials and purchase newspaper advertising. The number of clients in one program alone increased by approximately 85% thanks to what we believe was our ability to increase the quality and frequency of our advertising.

Case study

Successfully Suited is a program we started to provide a free, job interview appropriate outfit to clients. We believed it would be a very popular program. But we realized there could be problems attracting enough people to make it successful because of conditions in the contract with the funding source that placed severe limitations on who could be accepted as clients. Client target numbers were not met in several months.

Under ISO 9001, planning and measuring objectives is now a disciplined process. At each management group meeting, managers submit activity reports showing program performance and program measurement against targets.

ISO 9001 helped establish a forum for discussion of project performance using a stable set of benchmarks. The group brainstormed some new things to try, and a plan of action was established—something that wouldn't have occurred

in the past.


The process included a report to the funding source that contained well-researched facts and figures on why the program was not achieving its targets. This resulted in the lifting of the restrictions so more people could be served.

In about three months, the client targets were reached, and the objectives of the funding source were achieved. That led to re-funding of the program for another year.

Endorsement

After critically analyzing what has happened at BEC over the past two years, can we say we made the right decision in establishing a QMS? The answer is, absolutely yes.

BEC is now a stronger, more financially efficient, customer focused organization thanks to an operational strategy that uses sound planning principles. I would not hesitate to recommend QMS development to any nonprofit service organization.

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