ALIGNING AT ISO 9001 REQUIREMENTS – A TRUE CHALLENGE FOR ROMANIAN SMEs

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Abstract

Beginning with '90 years in Romania have been created more and more private enterprises, which today form a consistent sector of so called "small and mid-sized enterprises" (SMEs). Focusing on profit and being in favorable conditions with a high market require, the SMEs not always pay attention at the quality of their delivered products and services. Adhering at European Union, in 2007, brought both the internationalizing of Romanian market, but also the higher constrains regarding quality of delivered products and services. So, it's easy to understand why the SMEs begin to think at designing and implementing of an efficient quality management system. The issue presents some conclusions of my research achieved (between Oct. 2007 – Feb. 2008) in the frame of 70 Romanian SMEs.

Key words

SME, management, system, quality, standard, challange**.**

1. Introduction

Following The European Union adhesion, in Romania the business environment became and will become more and more competitive for all enterprises, because they will have to compete with well-recognized European companies, which already act on United Market. In European integration context, SMEs are more exposed at various changes of business environment, provoked by the reorganization of economy. The SMEs which activate in the fields where the Communitarian Aquis stipulates the compulsoriness for implementation of environment, quality, hygiene, safety food, and safety work standards are especially affected.

Designing and implementation of the quality management system in conformity with the requirements of international standard ISO 9001 represents for many SMEs a real challenge. Due to the specific characteristics of SMes, the designing , implementation and certification of the quality management system have some certain characteristics. Let's try to put them in evidence!

2. From decision to the implementation of quality management system (QMS)

In conformity with the explanations of international series of standards elaborated in the 2000 year, the implementation of QMS having the requires of ISO 9001 standard on basis (included in this series) can be done in every kind of organization, indifferent of its field of activity , size or number of personnel. This means that SMEs can also align at these requires. Practically, this thing is not so easy accessible to all SMEs, due to their limited resources. The success of this action depends on more elements, mainly, the following ones:

- Strong commitment and decision of top management;
- Adopting an organization structure accordingly both with business plan of SME, and with the requirements and guides of standards from quality management field, too.

This means that SME (sector in continuously development in Romania starting from 1990) can align to these requirements. Practical, this is not easy to aces by all SMEs, because of their limited resources. The success of this demarche depends on several elements, mainly, the following:

- The decision and the strong commitment of the top management ;
- Adopting an organizational structure according to the business plan of SMEs, but also with the requirements and the directions of the norm/standards in the quality management field.
- Accurate planning of the implementation project of a quality management system
- Allocation of the material, financial and human resources necessary for developing and maintaining of the system;
- Suitable training of the personnel of the organization for the documentation and implementation of the system, but also for its supervising;
- Maintaining of an efficient communication and collaboration with business partners, first, with the suppliers and the clients of SMEs, but also with other interested parts, including their own personnel;

And one more remark: the success of a quality management system in a SME depends on endowment degree and on technological level of the equipments and working and controlling installation of the processes. A

transparent quality management system, well conceived and applied, with adequate trained and motivated personnel, will be efficient and if technological level of endowments (working, supervising, measuring and monitoring equipments of the processes and product, working environment and infrastructure) will be comparable with the level of endowment of the top firms in the same activity area, as of the organization we refer to.

So, adopting a quality management system based on the requirements of the ISO 9001 standard is a strategic decision of the top management of an organization, much more for the management of SME that first of all has to analyse very well all the necessary resources, to put in balance both the necessary costs of the implementation and sustaining in function of a quality management system and the benefits brought, then to decide advisedly. Developing a quality management system gives both direct benefits and a contribution at the cost and risk management, being important not only for organization but also for the satisfaction of its clients and other interested parts.

The decision of designing and implementation of a quality management system in SME is influenced by proposed objectives, by the demand of the market, by products and services offered, as well as by objectives tendency of developing and the continuously improving of the performances of the processes of any organization.

A quality management system contains two essential elements. First, the most critical, refers to human resources and the other necessary resources for constant delivery of the adequate products and services to the client. Second refers to the existence of "documented quality management system" that is, usually, defined by documented policies, objectives, plans, processes, procedures and fabrication standards. The documented quality management system has to reflect the planning and carrying on the activities, made by SME. Both for the audit reported to the ISO 9001 standard's requirements but also for improving activities, will need to generate adequate registrations to document the effective performance and to demonstrate the concordance.

Top management of SME has to be aware that the implementation of a quality management system according to this standard has to be approached as a project, to which are assigned resources and which has to be managed by a defined schedule.

First step is represented by defining the objectives of the schedule with an accent on those that will bring benefits for SME. For each objective must be defined the way in which will be measured his achievement, as well as the reference level.

Schedule must also establish:

- An identification, documentation and continue improving system of SME's processes;
- Stages that must be carried out for achieving the objectives regarding to the quality of the product and for long-term improving of a quality management system of SME;

After establishing the objectives, the next decision of the top management of SME refers to the type of approaching that will appeal to [3].

There are two ways of approaching:

a) to design the whole quality management system and then to be implemented;
b) to evaluate the processes and to appeal to improving techniques to build the system step by step, starting from existing elements.

The advantage of designing the whole quality management system is represented by obtaining a distinct structure, the main disadvantage being the tendency of a theoretical approach, separated from the realities and practices of SMEs. The performances of the personnel can also suffer because of the necessity to apply simultaneous a great number of new procedures.

The essential advantage of step by step approach is that if through evaluation of processes are determined both the adequate practices and the less acceptable, the efforts can be focused on those areas that ensure a maximum benefit. This approach has the disadvantage of the tendency to achieve a quality management system that is not so well structured and so is more difficult to understand and to apply by the personnel of SME.

The optimum approach represents a combination of the two variants. So, initially it is good to be established a general structure of the quality management system and then to be established frame models for documentation of the processes. Implementation activities will have in view identification and solving the problems and then the improving key processes of SME.

Indifferent the approaching way, top management of SME can decide if the conceiving and implementation project of the quality management system will be carried out through internal forces, or will be carried out external appealing to a specialised advising. In case they appeal to an advising firm, must exist an abiding collaboration between the two firm and a well tuned up contract to which will be affixed a plain schedule, with responsibilities and achievement terms.

Designing and implementation project of the quality management system cannot ensure solving all the problems. Changing the culture of an organization takes time and patience. Project must be accomplished through a well defined series of phases, with well established terms and with objectives that can be reached.

Applying the designing and implementation schedule of quality management system involves:

- establishing a team with responsibilities defined for designing/developing implementation and continue improving of a quality management system;

- training the whole personnel regarding the quality management system;
- establishing a group of internal auditors with specific training for auditing the quality management system and achieving the planned audits;
- establishing an adequate communication with the top management as well as with the whole personnel of SME.

The designated team for designing/developing and implementation of the quality management system - either will work alone, or with technical assistance from a specialised advising firm- must be managed by "the representative of the quality management", according to the requirements of ISO 9001:2000 standard regarding he quality management system.

The representative of the quality management has to understand the management principles that ISO 9001: 2000 standard is based and their implication and has to be a member in the management team of SME and to ensure that:

- the necessary processes of the quality management system are established, implemented and maintained;
- designing/developing of the quality management system is according to strategic objectives of SME and with its evolution(new markets, new technologies and changes in the offered services);
- the quality management system designed to be implemented and improved by the whole personnel of SME;
- the way that the quality management system functions and the improving necessities are directly reported to the top management of SME.

Present tendency is to establish the responsibility of the management and to ensure the quality in the relevant areas of the processes, doubled by specific training of the involved personnel, compartment/departments that were working on the conformity control, being more and more rare.

3. Top management of SME and its role in implementation, maintaining and improving of the quality management system

After the decision regarding initiation, conceiving, implementation and continue improving of an efficient quality management system, the most important role of the top management of SME is to coordinate the entire changing process of the existing attitude in the organization regarding to quality and to create a quality culture. The changing process starts with the identification and organisation of all activities that influence and affects the satisfaction of the requirements in a sequences of inter-correlated processes that are maintained under a systematic control, so all the efforts and actions to be headed and focused on client and continue improving.

Top management of SME has to ensure such an environment that allows the implication of the entire personnel, so that it is maintained the efficacy of the quality management system. In this purpose it should be considered the following aspects:

- defining the policy and the objectives of SME in the quality field;
- promoting policy and objectives in the quality field in the entire organization;
- focusing of the entire organization on the client's requirements;
- identification of the processes and its carrying out, so that the clients' requirements and the requirements of the other interested parts be fulfilled;
- ensuring the necessary resources for achievement of the objectives;
- periodic analysis of the quality management system;
- establishing the actions of improving the quality management system.

3.1 Active implication of the management in implementation of the quality management system

Successful implementation of a quality management system is conditioned by implication of the top management of SME. ISO 9001 gives a special importance of the commitment of the top management obviously defining its role in the quality management system. It is underlined the promoting the leadership principle in practice as a base for operational the others principles of the quality management system.

The commitment and active implication of the top management are essential for developing, implementation and maintaining an efficient and efficacy quality system management, having as a final purpose ensuring an increasing clients' satisfaction.

To achieve such a desideratum, top management must consider the following actions:

- defining the visions, policies and strategic objectives of SME;
- direct participation of the management to improving projects;
- obtaining the feedback regarding efficiency and efficacy of the processes of making the products;
- developing an environment that encourages the involving of the personnel;
- ensuring the necessary resources for achieving the objectives.

Top management defines the methods of the performances of SME to determine the stage of achievement the objectives.

These methods must allow the evaluation:

- financial performances of SME;
- performances of the processes of SME;
- client's satisfaction, personnel's and other interested parts' satisfaction;
- other success factors identified by management.

Information that results from such evaluations are used as incoming elements for the analysis done by management for continue improving of the quality management system, that must ensure the base for improving the performances of SME.

In this way, top management can demonstrate its commitment through:

- understanding the necessities and present expectations and client's perspective;
- promoting policies and objectives for increasing the awareness and implication of the personnel in SME;
- adopting the principle of continue improving as a base principle for the processes of SME.
- Rigorous planning of all processes of SME and to operate the changes;
- ensuring an adequate background to satisfy the requirements of the interested parts.

Top management has to involve directly in identification the processes of fabrication the products because these are directly tied by SME's success. Also, a special attention must be paid on identification of those reliance processes that affects either the efficacy and efficiency of the processes of fabrication of the products of SME, or the necessities and expectations of the interested parts.

The management of SMEs should ensure that the processes are carried out as an efficacious and efficient net. For this it should be analyzed and got at its best the interaction of all processes. In this purpose it must consider the following aspects [1]:

- ensuring the sequence and interaction between processes are in that way designed so they allow getting the desired results;
- ensuring that incoming and outgoing elements are obvious defined and are kept under control;
- monitoring the incoming and outgoing elements to check if the processes are correlated and carried out efficacious and efficient;
- identification and administrate the risks and to turn to account the opportunities of improving performances;
- doing the analysis of the information for continuously improving of the processes;
- designating the responsible of the processes;
- ensuring that every process is managed so that it allows the achievement of the established objectives;
- defining the necessities and expectations of the interested parts.

Top management can present proves regarding its commitment for developing and implementation of the quality management system as well as for continuously improving of its efficacy through:

- communication of the importance of satisfaction of the clients' requirements in SME, as well as legal requirements;
- defining the policy and objectives regarding the quality;
- managing the analysis of the quality management system;
- ensuring the necessary resources for the achievement of the objectives.

One of the main tasks that top management has to accomplish refers to defining the policy in the quality field. There is no form of standard presentation, but the policy must be in such way formulated so it ensure:

- getting client's satisfaction as a main goal;
- clarifying the way in which it is ensured the quality of the products and services of SME;
- explicit commitment of the management regarding continue improving of the quality;
- assuming by the management the responsibility regarding the achievement of the objectives regarding quality.

Policy will be implemented through the objectives regarding the quality, that should be measurable. The more participation of the top management is more direct and more visible, the more the necessary period will be shorter for establishing and implementation of the quality system management, on one hand because of the availability of the resources and on the other hand because of a less bureaucratic approach that top management of SME has in this case.

When it is decided the implementation of a quality management system or it is approved an improving schedule of this, it is vital to exist an obvious understanding of the estimated duration and necessary resources from the management. Often, the initiatives regarding the quality management system fail because of this commitment is missing, especially from the top management.

5. Conclusions

Implementation and maintaining in function of an efficient quality management system has as result quality products, at an acceptable cost for SME and at an acceptable price for the client. For the product it is considered a widely definition given by Kotler in 1995: " *a product is any object offered on the market to captivate the interest, for buying, using or consuming and that can satisfy a need or a desire; it includes physical objects (tangible), services, persons, places, organizations or ideas.*"[2]

The quality of the products gives SME competitivness on the international market. It is normal that all SMEs to want an efficient quality management system. Because of their limited resources of SMEs, they deal with a series of problems at implementation, certification and maintaining a quality management system. But the efforts done bring a series of important benefits to SMEs , so for implementing and maintaining a quality management system, these appeal to a series of artifices, at specific solutions, that give certain particularities, that I wanted to highlight in this article.

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