

Introduction to quality

What is quality?

In its broadest sense, quality is a degree of excellence: the extent to which something is fit for its purpose.

In the narrow sense, product or service quality is defined as:

- Conformance with requirement
- Freedom from defects or contamination
- Simply a degree of customer satisfaction.

In quality management, quality is defined as all of the characteristics of a product or service that affect its ability to do its stated and implied functions. Quality is also rapidly embracing the nature or degree of impact an organisation has on its stakeholders, environment and society.

However, specifications are an imprecise means of conveying subjective aspects – not everything can be reduced to figures or measurable characteristics. For instance, the characteristics of friendliness or courtesy in a service industry are difficult to measure reliably and repeatedly. Therefore, conformance to requirements is not necessarily all there is to achieving quality.

Quality is the result of a comparison between what was required and what was provided. It is judged not by the producer but by the receiver. The judgement can be made of an intention, as is the case when selecting suppliers, or an output, as is the case when purchasing a product or service.

The only true measure of acceptable quality is customer satisfaction, which takes into account both objective and subjective interpretations of the needs and expectations of customers. If customers are satisfied with the products and services offered, the organisation has not only correctly interpreted customer needs and expectations but it is also providing products and services of acceptable quality.

Changing customer perceptions

Customer needs and expectations are constantly changing. Awareness of new technology, legislation, problems, competitor products or services creates new wants for customers. Wants turn into demands when these customers begin their next purchase. Therefore, it is vital for organisations to constantly improve quality so that satisfied customers are retained as well as created.

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Quality and value

Value is not a price tag but a measure of the benefits derived from a product or service for what is given in return. A product may well meet physical and functional requirements but be overpriced when compared to others of the same class and grade. Alternatively, the same product may be on offer at another store for 50 per cent less, indicating exceedingly good value for money. In an effort to reduce costs, some organisations have forgotten that it is the quality of the complete transaction that counts. Getting product quality right while ignoring the human relationship between customer and supplier will not lead to satisfied customers.

What quality is not

Quality is not perfection, a standard, a procedure, a measure or an adjective. No amount of inspection changes the quality of a product or service. Quality does not exist in isolation – there has to be an entity, the quality of which is being discussed. Quality is not a specific characteristic of an entity but the extent to which that characteristic meets certain needs. The value of the characteristic is unimportant – it is how its value compares with customer needs that signifies its quality.

Why should an organisation be interested in quality?

Every business exists not to make a profit, as many would have us believe, but to create and retain satisfied customers. A business would have no profits if it failed to create and retain satisfied customers. Providing products and services which meet customer needs and expectations creates satisfied customers. Anticipating future needs and expectations retains satisfied customers. Therefore, quality is vital to the survival of every enterprise.

What does quality apply to?

Every product, service, process, task, action and decision can either be acceptable or unacceptable. Hence, there is an intrinsic quality in everything that an organisation does. Everyone must pay attention to quality, from the chief executive to those working on the shop floor; across all functions in an enterprise. It is just as important for support staff to pay attention to quality as for production staff.

Who is responsible for quality?

One can only be responsible for doing something relative to quality. Hence a person can be responsible for:

- Specifying quality requirements
- Achieving quality requirements
- Determining the quality of something.

Assigning responsibility means giving a person who is responsible for a particular quality output the right to cause things to happen. Alongside this right, the authority to control the processes which deliver quality output should also be delegated.

One manager cannot be made responsible for quality within an organisation unless that manager is the CEO. All that a specialist manager, such as a quality manager, can do is to enable others to achieve quality by providing encouragement, leadership, training, tools, techniques and performance data. However, it is important for someone in the business to provide leadership and results on quality performance, and this person needs special knowledge and skills.

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How can quality be achieved?

Several methods have evolved to achieve, sustain and improve quality. They are known as quality control, quality improvement and quality assurance – collectively known as quality management. Quality management is not the preserve of one manager but of all managers. Quality is achieved through a chain of processes, each of which has to be under control and subject to continual improvement. The chain starts with top management expressing a firm commitment to quality, then:

- Establishing customer needs and expectations
- Developing and maintaining a management system that will enable achievement of customer needs and expectations – reliably, repeatedly and economically
- Designing products and services with features which reflect customer needs
- Building products and services so as to reproduce faithfully the design
- Verifying before delivery that products and services possess the features required
- Preventing the supply of products and services with features which make customers dissatisfied
- Discovering and eliminating undesirable features in products and services
- Finding less expensive solutions to customer needs
- Making operations more efficient and effective
- Discovering what will delight customers and providing it
- Most importantly, honouring commitments.

A variety of standards, philosophies, methodologies, tools, techniques and measures have been developed to help organizations meet these goals:

- Management systems – ISO 9000, ISO 14000, BS 8800, BS 7799
- Philosophies – total quality management
- Methodologies – business process management, continual improvement
- Tools and techniques – process charts, failure mode and effects analysis, statistical process control, quality function deployment
- Measures – quality awards, best value and Investors in People

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