The Top 10 Mistakes People Make with ISO 9001 ... and How to Avoid Them

1. Not knowing clearly why they want ISO 9001 certification

Why do you want ISO 9001? And what do you expect to get from achieving certification?

It’s critically important to know this. In fact, so important that the Standard highlights it in saying in the very first sentence by saying that adopting a quality management system ‘is a strategic decision by the top management of the organisation that can help to improve its overall performance’.

And no, just wanting the certificate “to hang on the wall” is definitely not an adequate reason.

By way of analogy, think of a driving licence. You don’t get one “just to keep it” in your pocket/purse. Perhaps you wanted it to drive yourself to work, visit customers, carry equipment or tools, go away at weekends, go out at night, take kids to school. Or perhaps it was for more abstract reasons, such as affording you freedom and spontaneity. But you had at least one good reason (maybe more) to get it.

Before you set off down the ISO 9001 road, you should have some idea of why you’re doing it and what you aim to achieve by getting it.

Because if you haven’t actually worked out where you want to go, or why, then how do you expect to get anywhere? You’re likely to find it difficult during your project deciding what’s important for your system, as well as knowing at the end if you succeeded in what you set out to do.

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1 Quoted from AS/NZS ISO 9001: 2015 Quality Management Systems – Requirements (0.1)
If you don't have any clear answer to the "why" question, you will have problems. Problems with your system, problems getting to – let alone achieving – certification, and problems with the efficiency and effectiveness of your system.

Without any clear understanding of what they want and need from their system, senior management usually ends up frustrated or disillusioned. You absolutely must define why your organisation wants it, and identify at least one or two specific and measurable outcomes you want from it. If you need some help, you may find it helpful to check some of the most common reasons listed on my website.

2. Not making their system work for them

Some people set up, or allow to be imposed on them, a system that doesn't actually suit them, and the way they work – the way their business runs. This still happens far too often. Please don’t be one of them.

You’ll invest effort and expense to get ISO 9001 and to maintain it, so it makes sense to use your resources effectively. Insist that your system works for you, and suits the way your company or organisation works.

Remember, it’s your company and your system, not anyone else’s.

And whatever you do, never ever do things ‘for the auditor’ or ‘because the consultant said’ (unless they explain why and you understand and agree) nor because you think it will look or sound good.

Make sure your system, with its processes, people, documents, records and practices, works for you, fits the way you operate and helps you move you in the direction you want to go in. Because when it does, it’s mostly easy to follow it and keep doing so.

3. Not keeping the system simple

An ISO 9001 system doesn’t have to be overly complex, or hard. (But it certainly can be.) I’ve seen far too many so-called ‘quality systems’ that were cumbersome, horrible to work with and/or far too bureaucratic. Including some that were just plain awful.

Don’t make your system difficult, awkward or hard to operate and maintain. Good auditors usually dislike auditing such systems almost as much as people loathe trying to work with them. Notice that I said ‘trying to work’. That’s because difficult systems by their nature don’t make it easy for people to follow them.

Which is poor systems design and really rather silly.

When developing your system, and/or working towards certification, keep it simple. Keep asking questions such as:
• Will this help us achieve the outcomes we set for our ISO 9001 system?
• Is this reasonably simple and sensible?
• How will this work in practice? Will it be relatively easy to use and to maintain?
• Does the way we plan, develop, document and operate our business processes now help us to manage and control our business?
• Does this add value – for example, help us increase profit or monitor costs? Or deliver our services (or create our products) faster and better? If not, why not? And what do we need to do or change, to get those results?

4. Not knowing what the Standard actually requires

Knowing and understanding what it really requires is critical. Only then can you apply it intelligently to your particular organisation, whether that’s a commercial business or a non-profit.

The vast majority of Standards are very prescriptive and extremely detailed in their requirements. But ISO 9001 (Quality) and 14001 (Environmental) are unique because they are generic. They say what must be done, but not how. The 9001 one is intentionally broad, so it can be applied to companies and organisations of any size, and to those that supply services as well as those that make or supply products, or to both.

I’m astonished at some of the truly awful documents, procedures or practices I still see, which people tell me have to be this way ‘because of ISO’. Not so.

Yes, they certainly think it has to be like that. It usually means that someone believed what someone else told them, often based on an old version of the Standard (such as the very obsolete 1994 one). Or that someone interpreted the Standard that way. Or even that a process, form or procedure was set up like so back in the past, and no one considered changing it to make it better or simpler.

Remember that to get certified (achieve ISO 9001) you need to meet all the requirements of ISO 9001. You will be audited against what it says in the Standard itself, nothing less. Also, nothing more.

But ISO 9001 does require some knowledge, familiarity and understanding, as well as practicality, experience and common sense to apply it well. To implement a system that meets it, you must either understand it yourself or get expert help from someone who does, whether in person or via a book/kit/colleague or consultant (but make sure it isn’t based on the long outdated 1994 version).

To learn, attend good training courses, or teach yourself by reading, learning and practicing.

If you decide on the last option, consider using my DIY ISO 9001 Kit. It includes a comprehensive guide on How to Get ISO 9001, examples, templates, support and multiple resources to help you understand what the Standard is really saying.

5. Not understanding the process approach or what a management system is

In any system, the various individual components need to fit and work together to make up the entire system.
A quality management system isn’t just a collection of isolated parts, nor is it a mere set of written procedures or policies. A management system itself is a whole: the management strategy and plans and the objectives and the processes that comprise the system and turn plans into reality and the stuff and resources that support this such as people, suppliers, tools or equipment and the documented information to say what needs doing and how, as well as demonstrate what was done and the continuous improvement and multiple sources of feedback to tell management it is all working (or not).

The best systems create a synergy, where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. A battery, a globe, a plastic case and some wires can be just a collection of bits. But assembled together correctly, you have a torch that provides light.

So it is with ISO 9001. Avoid a piecemeal approach, and don’t look at things in isolation. Don’t, for example, think that ‘everything has to be written’ and that it’s really all about documenting everything. It isn’t.

All the various elements must complement each other and work together, so that your quality management system works as a whole and for your company. A well-designed and well-implemented system is a functioning and coherent whole. It raises the bar and becomes just “the way we do things here”.

Then getting ISO 9001 is not just achievable, but becomes almost a by-product of having a good system in place, rather than as an end in itself.

Which is entirely as it should be.

6. Not following their own system

Did you know that most nonconformities raised by external auditors are against a company’s own system? (A ‘nonconformity’ by the way, is a term used when something doesn’t conform to, or meet, the requirements. For example, if a certain widget is supposed to have 5 holes in it, but something went wrong and it only has 3 holes, it doesn’t meet the requirements: nonconforming.)

So if a nonconformity is raised against your own system, that usually means you set up things and said or wrote “we do it like this” whereas in practice, you don’t. This of course is a problem when you are audited.

Remember, your documented information, whether flowcharts or procedures or IT systems or manuals or whatever, is not your whole system, but just a part of it. And if you write or buy the kind of written stuff that sits on a shelf, because it’s incomprehensible and not useful, then no one actually uses it.

And you don’t have a properly functioning system. You just have a manual on a shelf or your intranet or wherever, while what really happens in your business is something different.

An all-too-common mistake is for companies to develop their ISO 9001 system as a new concept or a new way of operating. Brand new procedures are written, and new things set up which ignore or replace existing unwritten practices or operating rules. Perhaps a so-called consultant or quality manager says ‘the Standard says we have to do it this way’ (which is not always true).
The biggest problem is now you have two systems:

a) Your real system – your familiar one, often unwritten but used for considerable time; assuming it has worked reasonably well, it produces the ‘real’ quality of your goods or services

b) The new official quality system – the ‘formal’ system. This one often has lengthy quality procedures and/or large, often very thick, manuals. It is theoretically in use and responsible for quality, but only on paper. But gee, there’s a great big expensive set of manuals!

But because your formal system isn’t the real system, you’ll have to put in a lot of effort before and during an external audit doing ‘smoke and mirrors’ to try and pretend that it’s real. Will it ‘get you ISO’? Honesty forces me to admit that occasionally this may work temporarily – but I wouldn’t care to wager on it. What it definitely will do is cost you: in extra time, effort, energy, stress, money, customers and so forth.

You see, getting a certificate is just the beginning: you have to maintain it. The Audit isn’t the end: the auditor returns at regular intervals to verify you are maintaining your system and still meeting all requirements of ISO 9001.

If you are trying to operate and maintain two systems, this takes much, much more effort. Which means more and more effort before and during each audit.

The situation will break down. Usually sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, when you’re running dual systems, it usually happens at an external audit. Meaning that either you won’t get the certificate at the time of the audit, or that you get nonconformities (at extra cost).

So, while not designing your system for your company may appear as a cheaper solution, it’s a very short-term approach. It will actually cost you in the short-term and long-term. Plus it usually has a very damaging effect, including disillusioning your people and teaching them that what you say and write that you do isn’t true. And why would you want to do that?

Your documentation should reflect your business and its operations and what you really do. Make sure it describes how things actually work, rather than the way they are ‘supposed to’. Or, even worse – the way you think your auditor thinks that they should (revisit Mistake #2).

Will you need to make some changes to your processes and practices to meet ISO requirements? Yes, almost certainly. But there’s a huge difference between improving what you do to gain better quality assurance, discipline or better control, and actually running two systems. One makes sense. The other doesn’t.

7. Documents that are too long, hard to use or too wordy.

Avoid lengthy procedures and cumbersome forms. People just can’t or won’t read or use them. After all, would you?

Remember the main audience for these documents are the people who work in your company. Other audiences may include customers or suppliers, but they’re usually a secondary audience.

Identify who needs to know what, and just tell them that. Keep your documents clear, as short as possible, and easy to read.

How many should you have? Just the bare minimum necessary to maintain quality of service or product. Just enough to cover the essentials.
And how much content do you need? Think about your people, their skills, qualifications and experience, what competencies they have and what training you provide before you decide what needs to be written. Write for real people. For example, if all that is required is a short checklist, then just use that.

And please, please, don’t write absolutely everything you know about this topic or procedure! Always start with the minimum. Add in extra only if you find that you need to.

8. **Imposing changes on people, rather than getting them involved**

People don’t usually resent change. They do resent changes that are forced on them. If you find some ways to involve your people in the certification project, they are much more likely to cooperate and contribute. Most importantly, they take ownership of the system.

Does it take a bit more time than just telling them what to do? Yes. Or at least, it seems to.

But if you actually do involve people, you’ll definitely get a better result. Because it will be ‘their system’. Plus you’ll avoid spending time and effort later trying to make people follow your system.

And believe me, that’s much harder work. I know because I’ve tried it both ways and watched the results in many companies.

9. **Not being clear about what ‘quality’ means in their context**

The most common symptom of this is that the ‘quality’ banner is waved and the ‘Quality’ word is used a lot, but it’s never defined or explained.

You know, the kind of ‘quality policy’ wordy fluff signed by the MD or CEO, which says something like “everyone is responsible for quality and is utterly committed to it”. Or ‘we make quality products’ or ‘we deliver quality services’.

My response: Uh huh. Mmmh. Really? So tell me...what is it exactly that everyone is ‘utterly committed’ to?

Quality does not mean ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ or ‘wonderful’, although it is too often used that way. If you’re using the term quality loosely – as in, “we do a quality job” or “we make quality products”, that’s not OK. Apart from anything else, it’s likely to lead to problems or misunderstandings.

Put another way, what does ‘quality’ actually mean in your company or organisation?

For example, is it a product that works 98% of the time? Or 98.5 or 99%? 100%?

Is it a repair service provided within 48 hours of lodgement? Or 24 hours, or 5 days? A week? A service delivered on time, to budget? One that meets certain specified service levels (criteria)?

What is a ‘quality’ job or product in your company? And what happens if your customer has a different definition? Or two different managers, say, or three different staff members?

Key point: does everyone in your company understand and use the same definition?

My acid test: can they explain what it means to a 12 year old of average intelligence?
If not – and I will stake money on this – **you don’t actually understand it or use it** in any meaningful way. It almost certainly means different things to different people in your company. And different people in your company may give a different message to your customers. Oh, and you’re probably not communicating what the benefits of your system are to your customers, either.

Your company needs to define what it means by ‘quality’, so that everyone in the company has the same, shared understanding. The Standard considers this so important that it insists you have a quality policy and objectives. (Remember Mistake #1? You must have some clear objectives for what you want to achieve. Without them, you can’t be audited, because you can’t tell any auditor what you are actually aiming to achieve from your system, so the auditor can’t assess you.)

You’ll need to give some thought to this, and clarify what quality means in your company, how you know when you’ve got it, and the approach you take to getting and maintaining it.

An example: here’s a typical kind of ‘fluff’ slogan from a recruiter:

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Delivering Quality Solutions
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Uh huh.

Do you know what you’d get from them? Because I don’t.

Another recruitment firm uses this slogan:

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The Right Person - First Time - Guaranteed
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If you were a potential customer, which recruiting firm do you think knows and communicates clearly what quality means to them?

And if you were shopping around for a recruiting firm, which one would you call?

**10. Not understanding that ISO 9001 certification requires a system that is auditable.**

Last time I checked, you couldn’t just turn up at a bank and announce that ‘*Mr Brown has agreed to pay me $5000.00*’ and have a teller hand over the money.

Now, the bank may know you, you can be a good customer, they may know you are a perfectly nice person, and you run a good business. But saying someone owes you money isn’t enough for them. There’s just no evidence to prove that Brown & Co *did* agree to pay that amount to you.

Whereas if you present a cheque, there’s no argument. Well, usually. Think of that cheque as being ‘objective evidence’ of the payment agreement.

Similarly, an external auditor doing an audit for a Standard such as ISO 9001 needs ‘objective evidence’. That means they must be able to see things happen, or sight some kind of evidence that it did.

Meaning they need to see data, documents or records (whether paper, electronic or physical), that can demonstrate the answer to an auditor’s most common question: “*Can you show me*?”
This need for ‘evidence’ is often a difficult thing for many people to grasp, particularly those in smaller businesses. It doesn’t mean that the auditor doesn’t trust you. Nor does it mean that you have to ‘document everything’. Heaven forbid.

But you do need things you can show. Evidence. Records. ‘Documented information’ as the Standard refers to it, in whatever format or media is suitable for you.

Auditors cannot audit your belief (“I am sure it happened that way”), nor can they audit something which someone says happened (“Mary said it was OK”) because the auditor wasn’t there. You must be able to demonstrate the workings of your system to them. (That said, it’s often not as hard as you may think. As a consultant, and in the DIY Kit, I give lots of examples.)

One final point

People who have had experience under a bad 9001 system have often been scarred by the experience. Not surprisingly – there have been some truly awful, over-documented, cumbersome, tedious-to-maintain-let-alone-work-under nightmares of systems imposed in the Name of Quality and ISO 9001, unfortunately.

So if people start telling you what a ‘nightmare’ this quality system they remember was, or how ISO 9001 is ‘awful’, it usually means they are harking back to very old and very horrible systems. And almost invariably ones that were badly done by people who didn’t really understand how to do it well. Plus the Standard has changed a lot over the last couple of decades, all for the better; not everyone has caught up with this.

Don’t be put off. You can have an ISO 9001 quality management system which is also simple, practical and flexible.

Some of the many organisations who know that this is true are on the many Testimonials page on the Mapwright website, as consulting clients or customers of the DIY ISO 9001 Kit.

Do read what they say.

And please don’t let anyone else convince you otherwise.