

MSS GLOBAL

We consider how companies can more effectively tackle the perceived ‘mountain’ of documents they feel they need to generate for certification in.... **Conformance to International Standards doesn’t necessarily mean late nights.**



In the 1956 Hollywood classic ‘*The 10 Commandments*’, Yul Brynner who plays Ramesses II can be heard commanding, “*So let it be written, so let it be done.*” Now, I’m not casting all business leaders and top management in the mould of an Egyptian pharaoh! But like any leader the role of communicating the organization’s vision, mission and values is vital. Good leaders recognise that good policies help set the parameters within which people act. Policy is a clearly articulated, unambiguous description of the leader’s intent and is a vital internal control, steering activity and the business on a course that aligns with its strategic aims.

It has never been the intent of international standards to create what for many consider to be a useless bureaucratic - and document-heavy - exercise. Moreover, no two companies are the same. Take the ubiquitous ISO 9001, now in its 5th edition (2015), a very clear note has been added to emphasise this long-standing point:

NOTE: The extent of documented information for a quality management system can differ from one organization to another due to:

- the size of organization and its type of activities, processes, products and services;
- the complexity of processes and their interactions;
- the competence of persons.

Although strengthened in the 2015 edition. This common sense approach is nothing new, we can see even as far back as 8 years ago, guidance document **ISO 9000 Introduction and Support Package: Guidance on the Documentation Requirements of ISO 9001:2008** was published in an attempt to clarify this point. I cannot help but feel the frustration behind the authors words:

It is stressed that ISO 9001 requires (and always has required) a “Documented quality management system”, and not a “system of documents”.

Now before you start up the shredder we must recognise the fundamental reason why we document anything at all..... ‘communication’. Indeed, regardless of whether we are ‘maintaining’ documented information that describes a set of actions (e.g. to define, control or support a process), or ‘retaining’ information to create a referenceable record of events (for passing to another operator in a process, our own analysis, or statutory requirement), we are in effect using the document as ‘media’ in a communication process, not as an end in itself.

It is also worth recognizing that frequently the intended recipient of the information being communicated is ‘ourselves’. Through documenting our plans and intentions we are able to externalize them, to support a consistent interpretation, make adjustments and retrieve them periodically for review to allow us to compare our progress against a desired end state.

Depending on the size of your organisation, its inherent corporate know-how, competence of personnel, and even the organization's own cultural inclination will give you an idea as to the extent that controls (policies, work instructions, SOPs, procedures etc.) need to be described in document form – so before creating a text heavy document – pose yourself a couple of questions (they may well save you time and effort!):

- “who is the intended reader?”
- “what do they already know?”
- “what is critical enough that it cannot be left to chance or rely on organizational memory alone?”
- “Could a diagram replace text!”

Policy and procedures can be considered a constraint, the opposite of just ‘winging it’, so as useful and necessary as they may be (e.g. consider the strict rules on movement in a busy warehouse where both people and forklift trucks routinely move), they should be wielded with care. As excessive enthusiasm (often by ‘consultants’ who are trying to prove their worth to you through sheer weight of attritional paperwork) in documenting detailed procedures can unnecessarily constrain. Instead, we should seek to support people in their tasks to the extent necessary to achieve reliable and consistent results.

If it is appropriate to create documented information, then it becomes essential that all those fine words, painstakingly crafted, get from the page to the right people through ‘meaningful communication’.

“So let it be written, so let it be done.”

(The think piece is merely echoes of the rambling mind of Ian Beers, Performance Director, MSS Global).

www.mssglobal.com
enquires@mssglobal.com