

## **How to Make Your Small Business More Efficient**

### **ISO 9000 for Very Small Companies**

By Jeff Spira

When people think of ISO-9000 quality systems, they usually think of huge manufacturing corporations with extensive staffs of cubicle workers keeping track of all of the bureaucratic paperwork needed to keep up their compliance. This is a complete misconception. ISO-9000 isn't so much a complex, piles-of-paperwork system as it is a way of approaching business. You could apply the principles of ISO-9000 to a business as small as a one-person operation, and actually improve your business's performance.

ISO-9000 is about saying what you do, doing what you say, and having a way of checking that what you say and what you do are the same thing. Do you have a procedure for everything you do even if you're a one-man operation? Well, yes, you do, even if it's only in your head. How tough is it to write that down. Make a list. Here's how I handle a new order. Here's how I decide how much to charge for a certain service. Here's how I prepare my product for delivery.

With the business procedures you follow already in your head, the act of writing them down forces you to think them through. It lets you look at them and ask why you do them. It pares down the steps to only the vital operations and ignores the fruitless ones. When you first do this, you're very likely to discover all sorts of wasted motion, things that can be pared from your operation that have no purpose at all. You'll actually gain time finding these procedural efficiencies.

The next characteristic of an ISO mindset is doing what you say. Do you follow your own procedures every time? If they're written down, you're far more likely to follow

them than if they're just in your head. Fewer things fall through the cracks so your productivity is improved and your customers more satisfied.

Another aspect of ISO-9000, is that it forces you to fix your mistakes and problems. Instead of simply telling yourself you'll try to remember not to make that mistake again, you actually apply corrective action technology to your own mistakes and really identify the "root cause" of the mistake so you can apply a truly effective corrective action. This may seem like a hassle, but again, it forces you to fix your problems, not just carry on in a manner that they may repeat. This, also improves your efficiency, making your limited number of hours available more productive.

A major part of ISO-9000 is continuous improvement. Each of these efficiency steps makes your product delivery (even if your product is a service) faster, easier, and more satisfying to your customers. This is not only possible for small companies, but also vital for their existence. While a huge corporation can afford to have less-than-productive employees wasting time, small companies, even one-person operations cannot afford the luxury of frittering away hours being non-productive.

Every business, no matter how small, from manufacturers to distributors, sales agencies to retail operations, even engineering consultants, can benefit from at least applying the principles of ISO-9000 to their operations. In his famous book, *The E-Myth Revisited*, the author, Michael Gerber says you need to spend at least as much time working on your small business and working in your business. Putting ISO-9000 principles in-place is a great way to work on your business to kick your efficiency, productivity and customer satisfaction to a while new level.

Jeff Spira is a mechanical engineering consultant and runs Spira Engineering at <http://www.spiraengineering.com/> specializing not only in design and engineering, but also in tooling, design, process design and quality system consulting. He has assisted a number of small companies to become ISO-9000 certified.