

ISO 9000 and Six Sigma for Sheltered Workshops

Most sheltered workshops pride themselves in the quality of the products and services they produce. For most, much of the product quality and consistency they provide their customers is “inspected in” at final inspection. This is not surprising, considering the nature of our workforces and the relatively short production runs most of us experience.

We may do better. There are two newer quality approaches that have received lots of press coverage. Several sheltered workshops are pursuing one or both of these processes.

ISO 9000

This is a family of quality management standards. Compliance for a company or agency leads to the appellation “ISO 9001 Certified.” The standards actually grew out of the WWII British high-tech defense industries; British BS 5750 became ISO 9000. Certification depends heavily on record-keeping.

- A set of procedures that cover all key processes in the business
- Monitoring of processes to ensure they are producing quality products
- Keeping detailed records
- Checking finished products for defects, with corrective action where indicated
- Regularly reviewing each process and the quality system itself for effectiveness; facilitating continuous improvement

The qualification process can be expensive and requires lots of new software and record keeping. Why would a sheltered workshop seek certification? There are two reasons. First, the workshop may see it purely as a means of improving the quality of what it produces with official certification being the icing on the cake. Second, the workshop may see it as a part of its marketing program. There are customers who require, or at least give preference to, certified vendors.

Six Sigma

This is a process system originally developed by Motorola in 1986 to eliminate defects. The name refers to six standard deviations, which in quality terms equates to 3.4 defects per one million opportunities. Although the name and the integration as a single process was developed and popularized by Motorola, the basic tools were all there, some dating back to the 1920s, developed by such industrial engineering and quality management stars as Deming, Juran, Shingo and Taguchi.

Basically, Six Sigma is a problem-solving process, incorporating the acronym DMAIC:

- Define the process improvement goals
- Measure the current process and collect relevant data for future comparisons
- Analyze to verify relationships and causality factors
- Improve the process

- Control to ensure any variances are corrected before they result in defects

As mentioned, at Motorola Six Sigma started its life as a means of improving quality. General Electric, under Jack Welch’s leadership, was an early and enthusiastic adapter. At GE, Six Sigma morphed into a quality and cost reduction process, which it is now in most companies.

How Might Sheltered Workshops Use These Tools?

ISO 9000: This is strictly a certification process. If a workshop is still basically in the subcontracting business, “ISO 9001 Certified” is a useful arrow in its marketing quiver and in some cases, may be an essential element in getting the work. If the workshop is in free-standing businesses offering products or services to many regular commercial customers certification is less important, although quality is still paramount.

Six Sigma: As above, this is basically a problem solving approach incorporating the best of industrial engineering and quality management thought as developed over the past 80-90 years. The approach is relevant to almost all business processes from assembly through order processing and fulfillment. Six Sigma concepts and approaches are central to “continuous improvement.” Six Sigma skills and knowledge should be key elements in every workshop’s management processes.

The Role of the Executive Service Corps

The Executive Service Corps is a non-profit agency with highly skilled volunteer consultants, mainly retired, whose experience is in the corporate sector. A number of our volunteers are experienced in both ISO 9000 certification and Six Sigma application. ESC volunteers also have deep experience in sheltered workshops.

We can assist with both system design and implementation. Because we are volunteers and have a low cost structure, we can help you at costs well below the costs of comparable private management consulting firms.



1010 West 39th Street
Suite 101
Kansas City, MO 64111

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on Sheltered Workshops

The bitterness of poor quality is
remembered long after
the sweetness of low price has faded
from memory.

Aldo Gucci

The Executive Service Corps of
Greater Kansas City
1010 West 39th Street, Suite 101
Kansas City, MO 64111
816-561-5372
www.esckc.org