



**STRATEGY
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PROJECT**

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**ISO 9000 - A TOOL FOR THE
U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS**

BY

**LIEUTENANT COLONEL JAMES S. WELLER
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ABSTRACT

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In order for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to remain competitive in its role as the nations engineer, it must scrub its processes, eliminate redundancies and improve its methods of producing consistent products across the organization. Quality improvement programs such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and the Army Performance Improvement Criteria (APIC) are steps in the right direction but they leave out the key first step of establishing and documenting the organizations baseline procedures. ISO 9000 is a tool that can fill this gap. This paper will review where USACE is today and how ISO 9000 can fit into the organizational structure to provide the needed baseline to ensure the delivery of quality products and satisfied customers for the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is a resource to the nation, it serves both the construction needs of the Army and the Air Force as well as civilian sector needs for a broad range of engineering functions. In order for USACE to remain competitive in its role as the nation's engineer, it must scrub its processes, eliminate redundancies and improve its methods of producing consistent products across the organization. ISO 9000 is a tool that can assist USACE in this effort. The International Organization for Standards in Europe originated ISO 9000 as a set of standards which documents and controls the production process. Originally developed to cover the manufacturing process they support the service industry as well. Certification under ISO 9000 involves compliance with procedural standards, documentation of internal processes, and verification by an outside audit agency. The real question an organization must address is whether this process will provide any benefit. Private industry must focus on the bottom line - will this improve our competitive advantage and therefore improve profits? For government agencies there is less of a focus on profits and more of an emphasis on providing quality service to the customer within

the allocated budget. ISO 9000 is improving the performance of private industry and it can do the same for USACE.

BACKGROUND

Business has traditionally been focused on finding faster and cheaper ways of producing products. Quality was often a secondary issue to quantity. Using an assembly line as a model, instead of building in quality at each step in the process the final inspection was the key to a quality product. Defective products are returned for repair or destroyed. This drives the cost of the good products up and reduces a company's profit margin. The cost to rework defective products is unnecessary and you can potentially lose your market share because of customer dissatisfaction and higher prices.¹

Over the past few years various quality improvement programs have been tried with varying degrees of success. A few years ago it was Management By Objectives (MBO). More recently Total Quality Management (TQM) and its Army variant, Total Quality Army (TQA), have become popular. Other similar programs in the Army include Army Communities of Excellence (ACOE) and Army Performance Improvement

Criteria (APIC). All of these programs have merit in improving quality and more importantly, gaining employee involvement in the entire process. Involving the employees in finding ways to do things better is a great idea, however management must be consistent. Management must avoid the temptation to jump on the latest system coming down the road. By avoiding the "system of the month" the employees have a chance to internalize the program and obtain the maximum benefit from it.

ISO 9000 is a relatively new quality management system that deserves some attention. As already mentioned ISO 9000 is a set of standards first developed in Europe by the International Organization of Standards. The term ISO stands for equal as in isobar, which is a line of the same barometric pressure on a weather map. ISO 9000 is an appropriate name because it is an effort to develop a common set of standards between and within organizations.² ISO 9000 has been widely accepted throughout Europe and is gaining momentum in the United States. Theoretically ISO 9000 ensures that the proper documentation is in place so a business can consistently do the same processes over and over. As such, it is a framework that evaluates the

internal processes, eliminates redundancy, provides baseline documentation for training employees to specific tasks and most importantly, serves as a starting point for evaluating improvements to the system. If you don't fully understand your process you cannot begin to make it better. ISO 9000 provides this important starting point. To an organization's external customers ISO 9000 certification indicates this company has undergone a rigorous internal review followed by an in-depth independent third party audit. Interestingly however ISO 9000 does not guarantee quality products will be produced, it is just an indication that the same procedures will be used to produce those products. While it is not a goal, a fully functional ISO 9000 system could produce consistently poor quality products.³

CURRENT SITUATION IN USACE

USACE like many government agencies is experiencing increasing pressure to "do more with less". Personnel strength continues to be cut and budgets are being reduced while at the same time work load has remained about the same. If USACE is to continue as the Nation's engineering

and design organization it must meet its customers expectations of quality products and excellent service. LTG Joe N. Ballard, the newly appointed Commander of USACE, is on the right track in two key areas. First, he is modifying the long standing quarterly Command Management Review (CMR) system. This had become an increasingly more detailed look at every business area across the organization. While extensive energy was devoted to providing data to the CMR, very little of real management benefit was obtained from the results. The second area LTG Ballard is reworking is the USACE strategic vision. He is making a great effort, early in his assignment, to lay out the long term focus for the organization. His emphasis on improved customer satisfaction, using the best business practices and innovative technologies are what is needed for the future. Certainly LTG Ballard is not the first commander to articulate similar goals for USACE. He is, however, following up his vision by requiring subordinate commanders to develop their plans to implement the vision. The revised CMR will focus on how well the strategic plan is being implemented.⁴ These initiatives will play a major role in

maintaining the viability of USACE as an essential member of the Army team and a resource to the Nation.

TQM or ISO 9000?

Many organizations, and this includes USACE, have already begun their quality journey with a TQM program. The problem for many organizations is that while they have implemented TQM they have no procedure in place to use as a benchmark to measure their improvements from. ISO 9000 is a tool that provides the means to document the existing internal procedures. Once these procedures are well understood, improvements to the overall process can be evaluated and adopted. A fully implemented ISO 9000 program provides the base to measure change from. Without the base to measure change from it is counter productive to work on improvements in the first place. My experience, with TQM without an adequate baseline, is that improvements are made on the margins and the big issues where real savings can be made are avoided. For example, often the first TQM initiatives tackled within government agencies are focused on employee quality of life issues, such as finding ways to improve the processing of TDY vouchers and other pay

actions. While this has some merit, it does not focus on core missions and processes and it is there that real change needs to be made.

The Baldrige Award, as well as the Army's, APIC program, both start with a gap analysis. This analysis is basically an ISO 9000 review of the process management procedures within the organization. In fact the Baldrige criteria references ISO 9000 as a baseline element.⁵

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood" is one of Stephen R. Covey's seven habits of highly effective people.⁶ This same concept applies to organizations as well as people. An organization must first understand what and how it functions before meaningful changes can be made. This again points out the need for a baseline that can be developed under ISO 9000.

The title of this section is "TQM or ISO 9000"? the reality is, as shown above, that it is not an either or situation. ISO 9000 can stand alone but it is also a critical part of whatever quality management system is being used.

BENEFITS of ISO 9000

ISO 9000 can be implemented in one of two forms. Some organizations may choose to go through the entire process including registration. Others may just choose to implement the ISO 9000 structure without taking the final step of registration. For the purposes of this paper registration and certification under ISO 9000 are considered to be the same thing. Some organizations, in particular government agencies, may not see the need to become officially registered. This is clearly a management decision. However, as will be discussed later, more and more customers are becoming aware of what ISO 9000 registration means and the incremental cost to become registered is typically minimal compared to the cost required to implement ISO 9000.

The key question for any organization considering registration under ISO 9000 is what will be gained by becoming registered? The answer depends on several factors. For some, registration may be required as a condition of continued work with that customer. For others, it may be a way of bench marking the organization against a standard. In other organizations it may be a way of motivating the

organization to a new goal. Registration will surely improve the flow of communications within the organization and with its external customers. Having gone through the process, everyone should be speaking a common language in terms of how your organization functions. The process required to become certified and subsequently maintain that certification could replace much of the need to have audits by customers and higher headquarters.⁷ The bottom line is that ultimately registration will save money (see the table on page 13).

Establishing an ISO 9000 program should improve the continuity across the organization. Often subordinate elements develop their own operational procedures without considering impacts and redundancies in other areas. The establishment of a well thought out ISO 9000 program will not be easy and it may take several reviews. The pay off will come in the form of better continuity between management levels, shifts, departments and geographically separated offices.⁸

In this age of employee empowerment some may view ISO 9000 as a way of limiting the flexibility of the work force. In reality the opposite is true. The employees need to know

and in fact want to know, what is expected of them and to what standard it is to be accomplished.⁹ ISO 9000 serves as the yard stick to measure performance by. This has the potential for improving the quality of performance counseling. Individual weaknesses can be targeted and training programs to improve performance can be developed. It also provides a means to ensure that changes to the system are identified and incorporated as appropriate.

For USACE many of these same requirements apply. Customers of USACE are becoming more and more demanding - as they should be. In some cases traditional USACE customers now have the opportunity to take their work to other organizations. USACE needs to focus on meeting customer expectations in terms of quality, cost and delivery schedule. The Air Force, as one example, is well aware of what ISO 9000 registration is.¹⁰ In years past the Air Force was required by law to use USACE as its design and construction agent. Today they have more flexibility and unless USACE can demonstrate it can deliver quality at competitive prices more Air Force work will be done outside of USACE.

Other customers, whether they are federal agencies or state and local governments, are becoming increasingly aware of ISO 9000. It could be a selling point in maintaining the Corps' competitive advantage.¹¹ Another common customer of USACE has been state and local governments. In the past, local governments used USACE as a source of federal dollars for water resources projects with very little if any of their own money being used. Today the rules have changed and most work requires a local sponsor cost share of 25% or more. This requirement gives the sponsor more control over USACE. The Sponsor(s) may decide to take their money and fully fund the work themselves unless USACE can demonstrate timely and cost effective project management.

Another benefit of ISO 9000 is the documentation it provides new employees. Part of the ISO 9000 process is to fully document everything each person does. Once prepared this resource provides a ready reference for the new employee to quickly come up to speed on the requirements of the job and how he/she fits into the needs of the organization. A secondary benefit of this is employees who feel better about themselves and consequently do a better

job.¹² Ultimately the entire organization and its customers benefit from satisfied workers.

An area of potential concern may be unionized work forces. Even across USACE unions are a way of life. ISO 9000 should be attractive to unions. The series defines and standardizes jobs which then puts the employees less at the whims of individual managers and more in control of the group decision making process when considering new procedures.¹³ ISO 9000 also fits well with the Clinton Administration's initiatives to have management form partnering arrangements with the unions.

COST of IMPLEMENTING ISO 9000

The cost of implementing ISO 9000 depends on many factors. The current state of existing procedural documentation within an organization is the major cost driver. Companies that have good management systems already in place will find it much easier to implement ISO 9000. Ideally a consultant should be hired to assist with the implementation process. The good news is that the cost of an ISO 9000 consultant has decreased as more firms are offering that service. In fact, there is no fixed cost to

hire a consultant and it is recommended that you negotiate to obtain the best possible price.¹⁴ Additionally you should select a consultant who is familiar with your particular industry.¹⁵ Despite these cost variables, general cost estimates can be made. The following table is a summary of the costs and savings documented from 620 ISO registered companies.¹⁶

Sales Volume of Companies	Avg. Annual Savings	Avg. Cost per Company*
<\$11 Million	\$25,000	\$62,300
\$11-\$25 Million	\$77,000	\$131,000
\$25-\$50 Million	\$69,900	\$149,700
\$50-\$100 Million	\$130,000	\$188,800
\$100-\$200 Million	\$195,000	\$208,700
\$200-\$500 Million	\$227,000	\$321,000

*Cost includes one time internal, external and registrar costs

Within USACE there are five districts testing ISO 9000. At this point none have completed the process and all are at various stages of implementation. The estimated costs are ranging from a low of \$120,000 to a high of \$242,000.¹⁷ The low figure is from the Savannah District which has not progressed as far as the other districts. This cost will more than likely grow as they get a "better handle" on the

effort required. While this is a relatively small sample, initial comparisons can be made. Assuming the \$100-\$200 million annual budget of these five districts equates to a similar sales volume the costs appear to be in line with the survey data. The hidden costs of implementation include the lose of efficiency during implementation, potential short-term loss of business, and the man-hours spent by the in-house work force developing the required documentation. Once certified there will be continuing costs to maintain the documentation and certification. For each district this is estimated at between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per year.¹⁸

For the Corps of Engineers the cost of registration should come down some due to the development of standardized definitions and templates by the five districts currently implementing ISO 9000. An example of a potential cost savings is the need for a document control system that meets ISO standards. All five districts have solved this by developing an electronic database for this purpose. This program could be standardized and made available to all other districts saving the development effort and cost.¹⁹

HOW to IMPLEMENT ISO 9000

When preparing to implement ISO 9000 the most important question to ask is; "how committed is management to this effort"? Successful implementation will require the full support of management.²⁰ Almost every book written on the subject of ISO 9000, as well as every consultant, says basically the same thing - "the boss has to be truly committed or it will ultimately fail".²¹ Resources in terms of time, money and people will need to be allocated. The time required will run anywhere from six months to two years depending on the amount of documentation already in place.²² There may even be a down turn in performance over the short term. Will this be acceptable? If management can see the value and is committed, the first step is complete. The next step is setting up an internal implementation team, this is critical. It is this group that will bring along the "critical mass" of the organization that will help implement the change. After management support this is the next most important area for success.²³ A consultant is a valuable resource to assist the internal team through the ISO process. The consultant can provide guidance, serve as a source of general information, and conduct preliminary

audits. A trap to avoid, however, is using the consultant to set up the process without the detailed involvement of the internal team. Only the in house team fully understands the organization's processes and knows how to dig and ask the right questions that will lead to a quality program. Most importantly there will be a greater sense of ownership in a program developed internally.²⁴

Appendix A shows the different sections of an ISO 9000 system. As you can see they are generic and easily adapted to any organization. The only hard and fast rule is that you must "say what you do and do what you say".²⁵ There may be a tendency to want to adapt an already implemented ISO system from another organization. This has only limited merit. A system developed for another organization can be used as a guide but ultimately the ISO system must reflect the organizational structure that it is written for. As mentioned above, force fitting an established ISO system into an organization will not survive over the long term and there will be no sense of ownership.

Just as a consultant should not be used to independently develop the ISO 9000 management system, the system should not be developed without the detailed

involvement of the employees. No one knows the system better than the people using it every day. Procedures not developed with significant input from employees are doomed from the start.²⁶

As the baseline is being developed, areas that need changing may become readily apparent. Avoid solving every problem that surfaces as procedures are documented. The best approach is to fix the easy ones and maintain a log of areas to go back to later in the formal change process. If a concentrated effort is not made to establish the documentation baseline the clock will continue to run and you will not have implemented your ISO 9000 system.²⁷

ISO 9000 and USACE

The previous section describes how important it is to tailor the ISO 9000 management system to the specific organization. Within USACE there are 39 engineer districts and no two of them are exactly alike. Each has a different organizational structure and missions that vary based on the needs of their geographic area and their customers. This is the major reason why it would be difficult to develop a pure USACE ISO 9000 model and force it into each district. There

are however, similarities and it is there that a general USACE template could be of value.

USACE is currently testing ISO 9000 in five districts. The ISO effort in four of these districts is being partially funded by USACE Headquarters and the fifth district is funding the entire process on its own. From this test it will be possible to develop a common set of terminology and process shells that translate the ISO 9000 elements into areas that are easily adapted to the USACE environment.²⁸ At this point in the ISO 9000 test, a decision has not been made to adopt ISO 9000 fully across the organization. One positive aspect that should be considered is that ISO 9000 would improve the standardization across the organization. However, it must be remembered that in order for ISO 9000 to succeed it needs the full support of people using it and forcing a "one size fits all" approach is likely to fail.

In discussions with each of the test districts and the USACE Logistics Management Institute (LMI) consultant, I have observed several points that reinforce many of the areas already addressed above. The first and most critical is the need to have senior level leadership support the effort to implement ISO 9000. Based on the progress of the

five test districts it is easy to identify those with the leadership support for ISO 9000. Louisville District is the closest to certification having completed its first registration audit in February of 1997. Savannah is not making much progress in implementing ISO 9000. While they have had a very heavy workload, I believe, the bottom line is less management focus and support. At another level is the Sacramento District, which was not one of the funded test districts. Despite paying all of the costs on their own, the leadership made the decision to move out with ISO 9000 and they are making very good progress. Clearly management support is needed to make ISO implementation a success.

Another factor to consider within USACE is how much change can an organization experience and still complete its mission. As an organization, USACE has been working through some challenging issues. This has been especially true over the last four years. Starting with proposed reorganizational efforts in 1992 that have been "on and off" over this period; the implementation of Corps of Engineers Financial Management Information System (CEFMIS) and Project Management Information System (PROMIS) have created new

challenges for the employees; governmental downsizing in general has impacted USACE; changing relationships with local sponsors on civil works projects; and military workloads that vary dramatically from year to year as well as location. All are contributors to organizational stress.²⁹ LTG Ballard is so concerned about too much change within USACE that he has put a stop to all internal district reorganizational efforts for twelve months.³⁰ A decision to implement ISO across USACE at this point would be yet another stressor on the organization.

A major issue for USACE will be which district elements should implement ISO 9000. The test districts are implementing ISO 9000 in the engineering and construction divisions. While this is a good start it should only be the beginning. In my opinion, the Programs and Project Management Division (PPMD) and the Planning Division (if it is separate from engineering) of each district should also be included as a minimum. A key factor to consider is that one division within a district does not work in isolation. As a consequence the ISO 9000 system will have to cut across division and branch boundaries. Without expanding the ISO 9000 system across divisional boundaries they will not have

fully developed their processes. The bottom line is that all district elements have the potential to gain from ISO 9000. PPMD works so closely with engineering and construction, in its role as the interface between the customer and engineering and construction, that I believe, if two of the three divisions are under ISO 9000 they all should be. The lines between the project managers in PPMD and the technical managers in engineering and construction are already very fuzzy and to make a further separation with ISO 9000 would cloud the lines even more.

In conducting my research within USACE on this topic, I found that there are three people responsible for various parts of continuous improvement. There are separate representatives for ISO 9000, APIC and TQM. Not surprisingly, each was only vaguely familiar with the other areas. In my opinion this needs to be corrected. These areas are so closely related and they have such a synergistic effect that they should be centrally managed. Since ISO 9000 provides the starting place for all other quality efforts it needs to be the first system implemented.³¹

Some organizations may believe they can implement an ISO 9000 without actually obtaining certification. This would mean that the organization would go through the entire process without the external certification audit. The external audit is important because it provides an opportunity for a "new set of eyes" to evaluate your system.³² You may understand it, but have you truly documented correctly and are you following the established procedures? The audit will answer this question. Additionally the audit may point out some ways to improve and break some existing paradigms. Another factor is that registration may be the goal the employees are focused on. Not obtaining registration may reduce employee commitment and desire to support the program over the long term. In looking at the test districts, those that saw actual registration as an important goal were making the best progress. An important consideration is that going through the registration process and then subsequently working to maintain that registration is a valuable experience. As Mr. Joe Keith, from the Louisville District commented, his preparation for an external audit is a lot more intense than if they were doing their own review.³³ Having the shared

goal of registration as an ISO 9000 certified organization can be a unifying experience and the incremental cost to complete this last step is minimal in comparison to the total cost of getting there.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For USACE ISO 9000 is a tool whose time has come. LTG Joe N. Ballard, the new Commander of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, in his vision statement (Appendix B) and master strategy for guiding USACE into the 21st Century has recognized the need to revolutionize the Corps.³⁴ The vision outlined by LTG Ballard is clearly the direction USACE needs to move toward. The question is how do you get there? The implementation of ISO 9000 can greatly assist this process. Its focus on improved business processes and customer satisfaction while at the same time involving the employees in continually reengineering the system has the potential to pay great dividends. With a properly documented ISO 9000 system in place it should be much easier to identify the impacts of change on the organization. Commanders will be able to quickly evaluate alternative organizational structures and select the best options.

Ultimately ISO 9000 can provide the foundation to support all other Corps systems.

CONCLUSIONS

The Army Corps of Engineers should implement ISO 9000 throughout its organization. While the effort in the test districts is still preliminary, the indications are very positive and the groundwork should be laid to begin the process in a systematic manner. As a minimum the programs and project management, engineering, construction, and planning divisions should implement ISO 9000. Other elements could be considered on a case by case basis. Due to the cross division coordination that is required it may very well be something that occurs naturally. To reduce turmoil it would be best to implement CEFMIS, PROMIS and ISO 9000 sequentially rather than simultaneously. The order will be driven by the timeline to implement CEFMIS and PROMIS more than anything else.

Fortunately for the Corps of Engineers the Logistics Management Institute has already prepared several documents which provide the basis for implementing ISO 9000 in the USACE environment. These documents are:

"Toward a World-Class Engineering Organization, Making ISO 9000 the Foundation to Quality Management", by Jeffrey Hawkins and James L. Hathaway

"Construction Management Excellence, Using ISO 9000 to Improve Quality Systems", by Jeffrey Hawkins

Using these guides and incorporating the lessons learned from the test districts should greatly ease the transition.

Following successful implementation the end result will be an organization that not only says it is committed to quality and customer satisfaction but one that can demonstrate to its customers that bona fide quality systems are in place to meet and exceed their expectations. The new Corps will be in line with the Commander's vision, consistently producing quality products, improving efficiency, and demonstrating its value to the Army and to the nation.

APPENDIX A

ISO 9000 Functional Areas

- ISO 9001 - Design / Servicing
- ISO 9002 - No Design Function - Can be applied to Construction
- ISO 9003 - Inspection & Testing Only
- ISO 9004 - Guidelines

Elements of ISO 9001

- 4.1 Management Responsibility
- 4.2 Quality System
- 4.3 Contract Review
- 4.4 Design Control
- 4.5 Document and Data Control
- 4.6 Purchasing
- 4.7 Control of Customer-Supplied Product
- 4.8 Product Identification and Traceability
- 4.9 Process Control
- 4.10 Inspection and Testing
- 4.11 Control of Inspection, Measuring, and Test Equipment
- 4.12 Inspection and Test Status
- 4.13 Control of Nonconforming Product
- 4.14 Corrective and Preventive Action
- 4.15 Handling, Storage, Packaging, Preservation, and Delivery
- 4.16 Control of Quality Records
- 4.17 Internal Quality Audits
- 4.18 Training
- 4.19 Servicing
- 4.20 Statistical Techniques

APPENDIX B

USACE Vision:

Revolutionize effectiveness: Dramatic improvement in performance and customer satisfaction will be achieved through best business practices, bold reengineering and innovative use of technology.

Seek growth opportunities: Growth will be strategically targeted to meet emerging Army and national needs, sustain and enhance core competencies, and maintain full-spectrum capabilities to the Army.

Invest in people: Enlightened leadership and a talented, productive, and diverse work force will enable the Corps to enhance its value to the Army and the Nation.

LTG Ballard has also laid out seven substrategies that build on the three main strategies. They are as follows:

Revolutionize Effectiveness

- Align for Success
- Satisfy the Customer
- Build the Team

Seek Growth Opportunities

- Serve the Army
- Enhance Capabilities

Invest in People

- Build Strategic Commitment
- Reshape Culture

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