

Quality call

Vertex Customer Management, based in the UK, has focused on providing a quality service since it was launched in 1996 and has built a successful international organisation around the principles of best practice and business excellence. Its quality management system, certified to ISO 9001:2000 by LRQA, is fundamental to the way the company operates.

About the company

Part of United Utilities, the FTSE 100 multi-utility company, Vertex is an international business process outsourcer that develops and implements a range of outsourcing solutions for many leading organisations in the commercial, financial services, utility and public sectors. It provides front office and back office services to more than 30 clients, has sites throughout the UK, Canada and India, and employs 10,000 people.

Vertex works in partnership with its clients to help them improve the service they provide to their customers; using its experience to identify and suggest options that might not have been considered, thereby looking to offer more than a 'better service at reduced cost'. In other words, they offer business transformation capabilities. In order to offer this proposition, the company's focus from the beginning has been on quality. It achieved its first certification to ISO 9001 in 1998, followed by corporate certification in 2000.

Achieving certification fulfilled the dual objectives of ensuring its processes and procedures were efficiently managed, and provided a competitive edge when tendering for new business.

Introducing ISO 9001:2000

When David Miller joined Vertex as business excellence manager in 1997, his first task was to introduce a management system that would be compliant with ISO 9001.

"At the start there were only limited management processes, and that needed to be addressed," he recalls. "We wanted external verification that the processes we created were right. There were two aspects, internal controls and client expectations. We were a new player in the marketplace, and we wanted to ensure that potential clients would have confidence in doing business with Vertex."

The decision was taken to introduce ISO 9001 throughout the organisation, and a phased approach was adopted. A network of quality practitioners was established. Each client contract had a





business excellence co-ordinator and the quality team met regularly to share experiences and good practice.

LRQA was appointed from the outset. “We were impressed that LRQA seemed to really understand the kind of business we were, from the beginning,” comments David. “They understood what we wanted was a system that was not only ISO 9001 compliant, but was also relevant to our organisation. Other certification bodies we approached had more of a checklist approach and pre-conceived ideas about what our processes should look like.

“As a service organisation, we wanted to be sure that our certification body would not simply and blindly try to implement a manufacturing ethos in a service environment, where it was not relevant.”

Developing the system

With board level support and a widespread realisation that the business needed ISO 9001, David and the business excellence co-ordinators began to look at how the business was managed.

“In many cases we found we were already doing things the way they should be done under ISO 9001:2000 – with corrective and preventive action – although we tended to use the term continuous improvement for deployment purposes. We identified that continuous improvement takes place in different ways, so we talked to LRQA and devised a system that reflected this: it was a question of making this ‘business as usual’ – a system that primarily works for the business but also meets the requirements of the standard.

“The focus has always been on what value ISO 9001 could bring to Vertex’s business. We tried to focus internal audits around understanding what the business was trying to achieve and what the key issues were. We therefore created a direct link between business imperatives and what the QMS was providing. This runs throughout the organisation. Quality has got to be business as usual. We spend a lot of time trying to make it seamless in the organisation. Essentially, it is part of people’s jobs.”

“Quality is not just putting the mechanics in place, it’s about winning the hearts and minds of the people”

Being at the sharp end of a call centre environment means customer advisors following the right processes, using the right script and accessing the right information. While many decision making processes are now software driven ‘on screen’, Vertex maintains a regime of call quality monitoring – one of its critical quality assurance tools.

“The customer experience is vital,” observes David. “It is not just the process that you go through when you call. It is how you feel afterwards. Do you feel uplifted because your problem has been resolved quickly and professionally? There are clear links between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, and the better we can make the employee experience, the better for everyone.”

To this end, one of the major changes made as a result of the quality management process was to increase the coaching role of its front line managers. Each is responsible for a team of customer advisors, and Vertex has tried to free them from red tape and bureaucracy, such as management reporting and statistics, so they can concentrate on coaching their advisors, helping them to improve

their scores in call quality monitoring. This focus on people is essential for a company in which staff costs account for the majority of its costs and good communication is essential for anything from quality to performance management.

During the introduction of ISO 9001:2000, Vertex was careful to ensure that adequate awareness training took place once the management system was in place. David explains: “That meant taking people off-line in groups, talking to them about what we are doing and why we are doing it, something that is not easy to do in a call centre environment, because cost is key. The moment you take people off-line you are paying for it yourself, but it had to be done.”

Other communications included company briefing sessions, intranet communities on business process and business excellence, and employee newsletters when required. Internal audit training was brought in and conducted in-house, using Vertex’s own training materials.