

Quality Management in Small and Medium-size Enterprises
(PYME 's for their names in Spanish)
By Silvia Aguilar

The opening process which world markets are passing through is considered an opportunity to get good quality raw materials and services at good prices. It is also an opportunity to get the promotion of new investments, the access to new markets, and other benefits. Now, the question is what is going to happen with the PYMES that are not ready to compete with the new, and probably less expensive products and services that will be offered to the customers?

We all know the important role that the PYMES play in economy. Besides contributing to the production, they are an important job source. Therefore, they contribute to reduce the poverty indices. Because of this, when we talk about commercial opening, we should not forget that many PYMES are not ready to face this kind of challenges, which imply an increase in the quality and type of international competitors.

It is necessary to develop programs in order to assure the maintenance of the PYMES through their competitiveness. These programs should be focused on necessity areas such as: access to the information and communication technology, access to credit for those who can improve their industrial technology, commercial webs, training, cost reduction, techniques to improve productivity and quality, wider production, specialization, access to new markets, etc.

PYMES' resources are limited. This is why the governments have to strengthen the support programs. In Costa Rica there are some initiatives such as those developed by the INA in regards to its effort to support the companies' competitiveness. In the projects to support the PYMES some diagnosis are done in order to identify the companies' necessities. After that, they get advisory in order to fulfill objectives such as the definition of productive processes and quality control mechanisms.

Even though the PYMES need as much support as possible, the resources to invest in this type of programs are very limited. Due to all this and to other reasons, the industrial combination has been encouraged in order to find other support options. In relation to this, it is important to enhance the efforts made by ASOMETAL in its attempt to strengthen the managerial skills of its associates, as well as the efforts made by ASOINGRAF for developing an Assistance Plan for the Graphic Industry.

One of the areas that allow companies to be more competitive is the quality management through the application of generic strategies such as ISO 9000 and Qbase, or sectoral norms such as QS 9000. A greater perception of the quality will increase the customers' satisfaction. It will also increase their participation in

the markets, all this without taking into account the positive “cultural” change towards the interior of the company.

Having a quality management system will help the PYMES to compete with bigger companies. This will happen because the PYMES will give their customers products and services with a constant quality. Moreover, the norms implicitly look for a continuous improvement. This happens with the new norm ISO 9000:2000, which explicitly asks for it. This implies a system to reach and maintain the increase of productivity, the customer's satisfaction, and other objectives established by the company.

Although the quality management systems are not only conceived for big companies, there should be a total commitment of the management if we really want these systems to succeed. Some small companies are so busy trying to “put fires out” that the improvement activities are not a priority; this will transform the initiative into a total failure. Before starting a project like this, the management questions its priority as well as the way of transmitting this commitment to the rest of the contributors. This is still true even though the company hires a consultant. The company should know that the consultant's role is only to guide the implementation process. Once this process is over, it is the company's responsibility to maintain and improve the system.

The implementation of a quality management system should not be confused with the certification of the system because having the certification is not a requirement of the norm, but it could be important for the company if the customers or the market ask for it. However, more than obtaining a certification, the PYMES should find in quality management a tool to help them to improve their businesses' performance and, in this way, be more competitive in the market.