



# **FIVE EASY PIECES: THE BASIC STEPS TO ISO 9000**



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## PIECE ONE: What are you hungry for?

**IN THE** Jack Nicholson film “Five Easy Pieces,” there’s a memorable scene that takes place in a diner. He orders toast, and the waitress answers that they don’t serve toast. His reply: “You make toasted sandwiches, don’t you? Bring me a toasted chicken sandwich. Hold the mayo, hold the tomatoes. And hold the chicken.”

That anecdote says something about keeping it simple and about the human tendency to complicate matters. Likewise, ISO 9000 can be easy, or it can be complicated. Following is a “Five Easy Pieces” approach to understanding and simplifying the process of certification.

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**“WHERE ARE YOU?”** and “Where do you want to be?” Realistic answers to those two simple questions will help put you on the right track to successful certification.

First, make a personal visit to every department, and examine the individual operations to determine exactly what each one does. Double-check the standard itself to make sure you are not missing any facet of the business.

As you do this, arrange to get copies of all existing documentation. That means everything, from every department: policies, written procedures, work orders -everything. Categorize these documents by department or function, and index them so that you can find what you need when you need it.

Now that you have the documentation in hand, identify what’s missing. What still needs to be written? What must be rewritten to ensure a consistent style? What must be changed completely in order to comply with the standard?

After it’s clear what remains to be done, you can take the first steps toward ISO 9000. One good way to move the project forward is to have a goal – an actual date by which you hope to be certified – and make a plan for reaching that goal. Set the date, and commit to it. Without an EDC (Estimated Date of Celebration), the project lacks the urgency and importance required to generate support from all levels of staff and management.

## **PIECE TWO: Hold the Mayo**

**THE BEST WAY** to handle this piece of the project is to ignore the standard (initially, anyway) and write documentation that describes the business fully and intelligibly. As for structure, the most logical one is based on company departments, but some multi-department functions or company-wide functions may have to be covered under general procedures.

For each department, write only about the management processes. The procedures should describe what happens and how it happens – not the particular products or services produced by the department or the company.

Your main concern at this stage is the documentation that describes your business – not compliance per se. As you complete the documentation, consider whether you've explicitly covered everything in the standard and whether it might be advisable to make minor changes in emphasis.

Documentation gives you a unique opportunity to take a good look at what is being done and what improvements might be made. It's a rare chance to modify procedures in a seamless fashion, which, according to many who have achieved certification, often results in unexpected improvements in business operations. Do be careful, however, about making major management shifts at this point. Changes like these can confuse the issue and undermine your staff's commitment to ISO 9000 in general.

## PIECE THREE: Briefings du Jour

**WHICH BRINGS US** to a critical issue: awareness. What you don't want is to have your staff inadvertently and possibly unconsciously sabotaging your certification efforts. You can avoid that possibility by making sure everyone – and we mean everyone – is aware of what is happening at each stage.

Many companies schedule employee meetings to explain what certification is and what it will mean to them. It's an excellent time to dispel any hearsay rumors, and insecurities that might surface. If you schedule these briefings in a pleasant setting (say, over complimentary coffee and doughnuts first thing in the morning), you'll find the staff more willing to listen, understand, and support your efforts over the months to come.

You might also consider using posters, flyers, bulletin board reminders, and your company Newsletter to conduct an ongoing public relations campaign to keep the subject fresh in the minds of employees and to maintain positive momentum.

In addition to employee awareness training, there's also a need for formal training of internal auditors. Often, the most cost-effective and non-disruptive approach is to send one person to an external training program and then have that person train your internal auditors. Just like Pieces One and Two, auditing is yet another opportunity to fine-tune your operations and you should be sure your internal auditors keep that possibility in mind. Which brings us to a critical issue: awareness. What you don't want is to have your staff inadvertently and possibly unconsciously sabotaging your certification efforts. You can avoid that possibility by making sure everyone – and we mean everyone – is aware of what is happening at each stage.

## **PIECE FOUR: Send it Back?**

**ISO 9000** will help you in many ways: by allowing you to meet customer requests for certified suppliers, to do business internationally, and to maintain a competitive edge. You may find that its greatest benefit, however, is in the way it helps you streamline company operations. To do that, it must produce procedures that work – for every department.

To make sure it does, let the people who will use the documentation evaluate it. Ask them for feedback and expect several revisions. Act as the devil’s advocate. Look for problems, and then look for efficient ways to improve the systems.

Now it’s time to send in the internal auditors – and to give them plenty of support, especially at the beginning. Suggest that they question everything. It’s likely that they’ll suggest further changes to the documentation, which is an extremely healthy process. You can also ask others (your customers, for example) to audit you. You’ll find it helpful, since they have a different agenda and fresh point of view.

After you’ve had at least two internal audits, you should schedule a dummy assessment. Use someone with plenty of experience, such as a consultant, a customer or associate who has already been through the process.

Have them verify that the documentation accurately represents your company and truly covers the ISO 9000 standard. Is it really on the mark – that is, not overly detailed, but comprehensive enough to cover all of the business in light of the standard’s requirements?

Double-check the standard section by section and note, in writing, precisely where in the documentation you’ll find each section addressed. Notes from this exercise will not only help guide the assessor on Assessment Day but also help justify your own interpretation of the standard.

## **PIECE FIVE: Dinner is Served and Compliments to the Chef**

**YOU WILL NO DOUBT** choose your Registrar carefully and can therefore expect an experienced professional who will let you know how you're doing along the way, with no last minute surprises.

Keep in mind that you may disagree with a judgment over minor non-compliance. If you do, you are free to say so. Your only real cause for concern would be a matter of major non-compliance, in which case you may be able to point out that the alleged non-compliance is merely the result of a misunderstanding. Whenever possible, negotiate majors down to minors.

Now it's time to honor your employees, who deserve the credit for your earning a distinction that belongs to only a few thousand companies in the United States: certification to ISO 9000. So schedule the party, bring on the champagne — and hold the chicken.

## **MORE QUESTIONS?**

If you've any questions about the right approach to implementing ISO 9000 or want some advice about your own program, feel free to call us at 303-480-0111, or fax your questions to us at 303-481-9000. We'll be pleased to help you determine the truth about ISO 9000 and, at your request, to provide a free evaluation visit to establish exactly where you stand on the path to ISO 9000.

