The way towards ISO certification – the experience of CRIC in Rome

What does ISO 9001:2000 certification mean for an interpreters' cooperative?

Maureen FRIEDMAN.
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Well, it means putting down black on white what we already do, which in itself is a feat. Then we must check what we do against the ISO quality management certification rules and change what does not fit into the ISO framework. It also means setting up a system whereby we can measure what we do so as to assess it all. CRIC is still working on its certification and hopes to complete the whole "experience" very soon.

For us in CRIC the exercise has meant retracing our steps to describe the entire procedure we follow from the moment a request reaches our office to the moment we send out individual "notices of payment" of the withholding tax paid to each supplier (interpreter, translator, booth provider, hostess, etc.) who has worked for CRIC during the previous year. Some procedures are easy to describe, such as what actually happens to a request for interpreters or translators or booths; others are more complex, such as the procedure we follow when choosing external suppliers (i.e. when we have to recruit interpreters who are not members of CRIC or contract a booth provider). Then we had to create the various forms needed to get feedback about our services (at the end of each job, the team leader must report back on the behaviour of all those involved - interpreters, technicians and clients - as well as on how closely the actual conditions reflected those the customer had told us there would be; customers are also asked to fill out a form giving an assessment of the service received). These forms are then used to draw up statistics devised to measure our performance over time so we can see whether we have hit our targets. Because, yes, another thing we have to learn to do is set ourselves objectives, quantifiable targets that we then have to try to live up to because if they are not met we then have to either take corrective measures so we can meet them. or else we have to adjust the targets.

As you may well imagine, all this is extremely time consuming, especially as business must go on as usual in the meantime. CRIC now has over 50 members and our part-time staff is hard-stretched already without having to help the CRIC Board define procedures, draft forms, set objectives, read feedback reports, classify all these new documents, etc. My guess is that it can take from 9 months up to 2-3 years, depending on how much time you can devote to it.

A manual has to be prepared and it must contain a description of everything we do to conform with the ISO standards. It covers:

• how CRIC is organised and who is in charge of what
• the various documents: the manual, procedures, forms, contracts, orders from customers, tax returns, targets, statistics, applicable legislation, (the laws ruling cooperatives in our case.), etc.
• a description of all the types of services we provide seen as procedures
• how we organise internal training (teaching our members what quality is - in the eyes of the client - and how to achieve it)
• how we measure and assess our services and what corrective procedure we follow
• inspections

What is the greatest difficulty we have come up against? The first hurdle we had to overcome was the jargon used in the ISO documents: it took us a while to speak the same language and feel comfortable with calling an interpreter a supplier, calling our CRIC members internal suppliers and non-members external suppliers. The other main problem is time, managing to get on with CRIC routine work, and proceeding with the preparatory work required for certification.

Finally, let's talk about the advantages. Some of these, of course, CRIC is still looking forward to because we have not completed the procedure yet. I must say, however, that even at this intermediate stage, we can already see some beneficial effects. The exercise has obliged us to revisit CRIC procedures in detail, and now we really know what is done AND NOT DONE in the office. It was quite an eye-opener!

Indeed, this was one of the reasons we decided to undertake the task. CRIC had grown from what I would call a select club to a real business, but its structure had not kept up and therefore needed revising. For our clients, this should mean that they will be dealing with a group of people who have been obliged to reflect on each detail of every act they perform and therefore know precisely what to do when and how, as well as knowing why they are doing it. After all these efforts, quality should be in the forefront of our minds always, when dealing directly with clients and when working in the booth. CRIC members and our outside providers will have been trained to realize that our aim is to satisfy the client, and this should make for a much more professional service.

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Consorzio Romano Interpreti di Conferenza (CRIC) is a Rome-based group of AIIC consultant interpreters.

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