

Where Will They Fit In?

The role of
the quality
professional
in the
organization
of the future

by
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IN TODAY'S BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT, AN organization's survival is tied to its ability to provide value to its customers. Traditionally, organizations attempted to ensure value by monitoring and controlling quality. They created departments with titles such as quality assurance, continuous quality improvement, quality control, and quality systems. Often these departments were small empires, staffed with managers, supervisors, inspectors, technicians, and engineers. Recently, there has been a shift toward departments with titles such as business performance, organizational effectiveness, and strategy management. These new departments, however, may have only a handful of staff members, and it appears that traditional quality departments are becoming smaller or disbanded. As a result, quality professionals have found themselves unemployed or grouped into the general work force. This is fueled, in part, by the perception that staff positions—such as those in quality departments—add cost rather than value.

This apparent trend away from quality extends to other arenas. For example, the 1996 version of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria states that the purpose of the award is "to recognize companies for business performance excellence and competitiveness improvement."¹ The word "quality" is not mentioned here or in the titles of the seven award categories. Even ASQC is considering a name change based on the evolving focus of its members.²

Those who once thought the quality professional had a promising career now wonder if this path leads to professional obscurity or oblivion. In order to predict the quality professional's future, it is necessary to answer two key questions:

- What is motivating these changes?
- Where will today's quality professional fit in?

The organization of the future

Management initiatives such as total quality management, self-managed teams, and business process reengineering have traditionally focused on cost reduction. As a result, many organizations

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have downsized their work force. In so doing, they have inhibited their ability to manage growth—the other side of the business equation. Although innovation and growth are critical to continued survival, managers seem to have abandoned growth initiatives for cost-cutting initiatives. Even Jan Carlzon, president and chief executive officer of Scandinavian Airlines System and author of the book *Moments of Truth*, tells of a professor at the Stockholm School of Economics who said that business growth was not an integral part of Carlzon's master's degree curriculum.³ Unfortunately, most senior executives are just realizing that they cannot hack and slash their way to profitability.

To grow, the organization of the future will need to be a customer-sensitive, knowledge-creating, agile enterprise.⁴ It must provide value to every customer (where value is the customer's perception of total lifetime benefits minus total lifetime costs). It must continually exchange information and ideas with its customers and suppliers to deliver customized products and services. The organization must quickly reconfigure its products, services, and processes, and it must integrate expertise from other organizations to remain competitive.

Consequently, it will become critical to create an environment grounded in ongoing innovation and learning—one that will benefit from external uncertainty and unpredictability. Employees will need skills and knowledge to make empowered decisions and work in a variety of roles.

Implications for today's quality department

Quality departments that provide traditional quality assurance are becoming extinct in organi-

zations that have been quick to transform into customer-sensitive, knowledge-creating, agile enterprises. In many firms, existing work groups assume some, if not all, of the quality department's responsibilities. As a result, quality professionals may be laid off or integrated into other areas of the organization. If a work group needs assistance with process redesign or measurement, there may be individuals designated to respond to these needs in addition to their regular responsibilities.

A large mining company initiated this approach several years ago. It transferred design and monitoring responsibilities to the people actually doing the work. Traditional quality control is now performed by administrative assistants, miners, and data-entry clerks. Employees whose jobs were eliminated were integrated into other areas of the company.

In other organizations, the quality department is given a new purpose, such as improving business performance, and a widely increased scope of responsibilities. Over the course of a year, a transportation services company enlarged the functional responsibilities of its quality department. Department responsibilities now include assisting in long- and short-term business planning; developing quality systems; facilitating functional and cross-functional teams; providing training, education, and ongoing organizational learning; and guiding organizationwide change. A number of these responsibilities were not previously performed within the organization.

A third approach that is gaining more attention is the consolidation and integration of strategic planning, organizational development, human resources, industrial engineering, quality systems, training, and safety. A department staffed by one or more internal consultants usually emerges. These individuals may provide the service themselves, tap into external or internal resources for specific needs, or focus on the skill and knowledge enhancement of existing leaders who can develop their employees. A small-parts manufacturer tried this approach during its recent (and successful) ISO 9001 certification effort. It combined responsibility for quality systems, training, safety, and organizational development into a single department.

Quality professionals may still be able to find quality assurance or quality systems positions in organizations that have not started defining and improving their processes. Once these enterprises see the need to change, however, they will begin to integrate quality, organizational development, and strategic planning since they are already behind in the race to be competitive.

Ensuring a role in the organization of the future

Since organizations are rethinking their approach to business, the following steps can help quality professionals ensure their role in the organization of the future.

- *Acknowledge that the quality positions of today will probably not exist in their current form in years to come.* Seek support from others within and outside the organization who have weathered similar situations. They can provide firsthand advice and counsel.
- *Keep an updated resume, whether considering a move or not.* To maintain employment it may be necessary to educate others within the organization of one's skills and achievements. In this case, a functional resume may be better than a chronological one.
- *Start developing individuals within existing work groups to take on some of the quality-related responsibilities (e.g.,*

inspection, audit, and equipment reliability). This will free up time for the next step.

- *Volunteer for projects that are critical to the organization's success, even if they are outside one's current work scope.* Individuals doing this can gain visibility with key decision makers and a greater understanding of the organization's future.
- *Become knowledgeable and skilled in strategic planning, organizational learning and development, and systems thinking.* This will help individuals align current work with future organizational direction and potentially allow them to expand their role.
- *Scope out other places in the organization that require similar knowledge, skills, and attributes.* Study the strategic plan (if it exists in writing) to identify the growth areas within the firm and network with those who may have insights into where one could add value to the organization.

Remember that the purpose for engaging in these steps is to re-create one's job, either by designing something new or reshaping an existing position to fit the organization's anticipated needs.

External consultants are not immune to these concerns either. They may, in fact, be more vulnerable to organizational changes than internal employees. Many smaller consulting firms are in the process of rethinking their company name, purpose, work scope, and future direction.

Successful organizations of the future will provide value by maintaining quality as a paradigm, not a department. There will be more jobs for quality professionals, not fewer, but they will not be in quality departments, nor will job titles contain the word "quality." These positions will be directly linked to the value chain of the organization. Quality will become a way of life—not a job or a profession. At last it will be apparent that quality professionals are adding value rather than cost.

References

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