

Continuous improvement – An overview

Maree Stuart

MAS Management Consultancy Services

Many business excellence and management systems recognition programs have a component dealing with continuous improvement. ISO 9000:2000 and the recently released ISO/IEC 17025:2005 both include significant requirements for implementation of continuous improvement in organisations.

The concept of continuous improvement relies on the premise that the quality of work can always be improved. This can be done either gradually or through breakthroughs. The concept is derived from the Japanese philosophy of *kaizen*, meaning ongoing improvement involving everyone, including both manager and workers.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of continuous improvement is starting the process. The seven-step method for continuous improvement has proven to be a successful model for systematic problem solving and quality improvement. Adherence to the method fosters in-depth analysis of problems and development of effective solutions to these problems. The seven steps are as follows.

1. Select a problem and describe it clearly.
2. Study the present system.
3. Identify possible causes.
4. Plan and implement a solution.
5. Evaluate effects.
6. Standardize any effective solutions.
7. Reflect on the process and develop future plans.

There are a number of tools that can be employed to deliver continuous improvement of processes within organisations. The type of the tool employed depends on the phase in the seven step method, the nature of the process or the problem under investigation. These tools include graphical representation of data, brainstorming, and process capability analysis.

At MAS Management Consultancy Services, we can assist you in understanding and implementing continuous improvement in your organisation. We provide training in the tools and methodology of continuous improvement to enable sustainable and repeatable results from your efforts in this area.