

CES / QSTG Research: The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector

In the last few years, there has been a significant increase in the level of interest in 'quality'. Each year more and more organisations are striving to better themselves and the services they provide to users. The publication of the Cross Cutting Review in 2002 and the development of the associated Performance Improvement Strategy have heightened awareness of the need for organisations to get involved in continuous improvement initiatives.

A study of the adoption and use of quality systems in the voluntary sector, commissioned by the Quality Standards Task Group (QSTG) and CES, was undertaken by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research (CVAR) at Aston Business School between July 2002 and January 2004. It is the largest and most comprehensive study into the impact of quality systems on the English voluntary sector.

This research has given the voluntary and community sector a real picture of its experience of using quality systems to bring about change and continuous improvement. It has also given CES evidence of the difference our publications, training and on-going support is making in the sector.

The research had two principal aims:

1. To investigate the impact of the most commonly used quality systems used in the voluntary sector, including PQASSO, Investors in People and the EFQM Excellence Model.
2. To produce practical tools that will help voluntary organisations to decide whether to use a system and if so which one; and to use a system effectively to improve services.

Key findings (Aim 1):

Take up of systems

The study considered the different models and approaches available to the sector and system selection. PQASSO was identified as the most commonly used system within the sector, with a more recent adoption, mainly since 2001. The four most commonly used quality systems were PQASSO, Investors in People, the EFQM Excellence Model and Quality Mark. In terms of other significant quality initiatives, there was a high use of user satisfaction surveys.

Drivers

A number of drivers towards the adoption of quality systems were identified:

- influenced by guidance (sometimes pressure) from statutory funders.
- Accountability - but multiple and interlocking forms of accountability revolve around funders, peers and users which can result in complexity, confusion and ambiguity.
- pre-empting mandatory requirements by introducing own system voluntarily; some organisations develop their own systems to reflect the nature of their services and clients more closely than might be available from off-the-shelf systems.
- internal drivers by an organisation are seen as a need to assure users of service quality, to demonstrate a commitment to organisational development and to improve internal consistency.

Expectations

Organisations anticipated that the benefits of using a quality system could contribute towards service improvements and improved organisational efficiency and effectiveness. There was a strong belief that quality systems would help to improve staff recruitment, development and retention. The possession and use of a quality system was expected to improve an organisation's credibility with external stakeholders.

The majority of users of both off-the-shelf systems and of other quality initiatives felt that expected benefits had been achieved and would recommend the system or initiative to other organisations. The study found that while it can be difficult to trace direct links between use of a quality system and improved services for users, quality systems can offer a valuable framework for addressing service improvements and enable some organisations to work more closely with their users.

Implementation

The research showed us that:

- The early involvement of staff and trustees has a positive effect on implementation.
- The use of internal working groups is useful to facilitate the implementation of a new quality system, as is having access to advice and support.
- Organisational 'fit' (eg culture, size and maturity of organisation) appears to be a key determinant of the success.
- The use of multiple systems can create problems.

Benefits

Three main benefits were identified:

- Quality systems act as an organisational development tool and provide a common agenda for action, for example; action planning, continuous professional development, team building.
- Major benefits of having a quality system were seen as including increased organisational legitimacy, improved reputation and credibility with external stakeholders.
- An opportunity for an organisation to reflect upon and review their working processes and ways of doing things; this included reflecting upon service delivery arrangements.

Lessons learned

The main lessons learned about quality systems were:

- Organisations that make an informed choice about which system to use and those that receive adequate support and resources have the most success with implementation.
- There was little evidence that volunteers and users had any involvement in the implementation of quality systems.
- The introduction of a quality system imposes demands upon the resources of an organisation, in terms of finance, time and effort. Often the coordination and encouragement of the introduction of a quality system is facilitated by a 'quality champion', whose role it is to steer the process.

Practical Tools (Aim 2)

QSTG has produced four publications based on the findings of the study. These are:

The adoption and use of quality systems in the voluntary sector – research report - £10

The adoption and use of quality systems in the voluntary sector – a literature review - £10

Getting ready for quality; Learning from experience – a practical approach - £15

The adoption and use of quality systems in the voluntary sector – a briefing for funders – free of charge

(All available from NCVO – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk, 0800 2798 798).