

Quality Assurance

Quality still key

Like so many things in life, quality is not a goal but a constant process of improvement. Quality assurance (QA) monitors and checks all aspects of a product or service on an ongoing basis to ensure standards of quality are met and kept – ensuring companies have a consistent, repeatable approach to producing their products and services.

By Gordon Smith

A glance at any recruitment website shows that despite the downturn, many companies are still hiring in key QA positions, emphasising how important the role has become.

'Essentially any regulated industry needs quality assurance representatives. This encompasses the pharmaceutical, medical device, food and beverage, IT and software, heavy manufacturing and environmental industries and anyone else who wishes to hold an ISO certification for an approved quality process,' says Brian Christensen, director of Lifescience.ie, a technology recruitment consultancy.

“Many, indeed most, quality assurance groups are involved right through the process, from suppliers to customers so they have an umbrella view of the whole product realisation cycle and are uniquely positioned to identify cause and effect relationships such as how a change at a supplier can impact manufacturing or can result in a customer impact after it has worked its way through the process.

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'Quality is a basic requirement for business survival,' adds Dr Eoghan Ó Faoláin, executive responsible for quality and regulatory affairs with the Irish Medical Devices Association. 'If the product cannot perform consistently and reliably, then it has no future and neither does the company that produces it. Additionally, the associated costs of not producing a product 'right first time' are increasingly

a factor in determining how competitive a company is, both externally and also internally.'

Noel Long, a quality management consultant with QMS Solutions, estimates around 60 per cent of companies tend to launch quality initiatives due to regulatory compliance, while the remaining 40 per cent do so to gain a competitive advantage.

COST CONTROL He points out that for smaller Irish companies, adhering to quality standards is frequently a requirement for doing business with a multinational. However, it is not just an imposition

an external consultant as your quality representative. Now you cannot do that - a member of the management team must take full time responsibility for it, although it can be a dual role.'

In the medical devices sector, for example, as many as 15 to 20 per cent of staff may be involved in QA roles, says Ó Faoláin. In reality, its influence should be broad: not just the responsibility of the QA organisation but instilled as a culture throughout the organisation.

At the coalface, QA roles are typically both systems and product focused, he adds. 'The system looks at how the business is structured and how the various functions knit together to assure the product or service provided as an output.'

Quality assurance inspectors should create and maintain a quality manual and standard operating procedures within the company. They may also be involved in compliance activities including inspection, auditing, product release and improvement tasks like data gathering and analysis, as well as process and product improvement.

UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

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According to Christensen, QA roles are quite varied

and require large amount of communication, organisation and teamwork skills. In the pharmaceutical sector, it involves gathering and approving the paperwork supporting a batch of pharmaceutical product that guarantees quality and safety. 'This involves dealing with manufacturing staff on the shop floor to quality control people testing the products to engineers ensuring the process is consistent,' he explains.

In medical devices, the role is more customer facing. 'A quality engineer works a lot with the complaints departments to discover what changes need to be made with the product to help functionality. They also

do a lot of work with the R&D department to help them troubleshoot potential difficulties with products being discovered and developed."

A QA inspector or manager will typically take the lead whenever regulatory or compliance issues arise.

MORE COURSES Another clue as to the growing importance of QA is the increasing number of QA and quality management courses. Institutes of Technology at Sligo, Cork and Waterford all offer qualifications in this area.

Eamonn O'Raghallaigh, managing partner with Lifescience.ie, says many courses offer paid work placements as a part of their

degrees and many students complete these as trainee QA officers. 'This gives these students in particular a huge advantage in terms of getting a foot in the door when they graduate,' he says.

'In general, the courses offered have started to become more industrially focused, gearing the course material towards current trends in the industry so the graduates are highly equipped and knowledgeable of current issues, both in QA and in the industry at large.'

Waterford IT's course is divided between mandatory modules covering quality management systems, statistics and managing change, with elective modules on specific areas such as engineering, pharma, foods or computing. 'It is not purely manufacturing-based, you can study it from a management point of view,' says Helen Hughes, course leader for WIT's postgraduate diploma/MSc in quality management.

'There are a lot of people who are working in their specific area in quality assurance with no formal qualifications in quality management. This programme allows them to get a qualification in the area they are working in.'

RESEARCH SKILLS Graduates learn research skills, which are important when a company is introducing a new quality system or fixing a problem in a batch of products. 'Research skills are problem solving skills,' says Hughes, who adds that quality assurance roles can also be a stepping stone to senior positions within a company. 'There is a career structure for people who go into quality roles and it can be a management position.' 

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