Process Standardisation and Sustainable Continuous Improvement: A closer look at the application of ISO 9000 to Logroño City Council (Spain).

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Abstract

Purpose – International standards (e.g. ISO 9000) have been adopted by some public administrations in order to certify their processes. In Spain, during the last 15 years, some local councils have also followed similar standardisation initiatives sometimes under the umbrella of global quality programmes trying to support continuous process improvement (CPI). In this paper we address three main research questions: a) How may the standardisation process contribute to the sustainability of continuous improvement? b) What risks can entail a standardisation process concerning the sustainability of continuous improvement efforts? c) When and how problems arise during this standardisation process? This article aims to shed light on some aspects of the relationship between standardisation process and sustainability of continuous improvement in public sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The Case Study approach was adopted in this research. The research conducted in the Logroño City Council was of the retrospective type. Three methods were employed to gather the primary research data: direct observation; documentary analysis; and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Findings – Process standardisation has helped, in the case studied, reducing variability in the outcomes of public service processes, and has opened opportunities for improvement. Process standardisation may constitute a first step towards a sustainable continuous improvement process. However, the standardisation process has itself risks and potential
problems, some specific to local public administrations, which should be taken into account and avoided.

**Originality/value** – A review of academic and business sources indicated that work on standardisation process and sustainability in continuous improvement in Spain public sector is almost absent. This paper makes a contribution to fill this gap based in our empirical work, which covers both perspectives, providing an integrated view to this relationship.

**Keywords** – Standardisation process, Sustainability, Continuous Process Improvement, Public Administration, Spain.

**Paper Type** – Research paper
1. Introduction

International standards (e.g. ISO 9000) have been adopted by some public administrations in order to certify their processes (Singh and Mansour-Nahra 2006). According to the Organization for Economics Cooperation and Development (OECD), efforts to improve and modernise processes and public services can be found in all its member countries (Gurria 2006). In Spain, during the last 15 years, some local councils have also followed similar standardisation initiatives sometimes under the umbrella of global quality programmes trying to support continuous process improvement (CPI) (Giner Rodriguez 1998).

In this paper we address three main research questions:

a) How may the standardisation process contribute to the sustainability of continuous improvement?

b) What risks can entail a standardisation process concerning the sustainability of continuous improvement efforts?

c) When and how problems arise during this standardisation process?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The ISO 9000 standard and its relationship with continuous improvement processes

Standardisation is defined as the degree to which work rules, policies work rules, policies, and operating procedures are formalised and followed (Jang and Lee 1998). For Masao Nemoto (1987), the concept of standardisation has two strands. The first is linked to establishing product size, weight, and quality (International Standards). The second is linked to a systematic process for regulating, normalising, and establishing work methods regarding
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key organisational variables and is expressed through processes, procedures, and work guidelines and instructions (Ungan 2006).

Developed based on British Standards (BS 5750), the ISO 9000 standards were introduced in 1987 by the International Organisation for Standardisation, based in Geneva, Switzerland (Ho 1994; Abraham et al., 2000). The ISO 9000 standard is a management control procedure (Yahya and Goh, 2001), which involves a business documenting the processes of design, production and distribution to ensure that the quality of products and services meets the needs of customers (Rago 1994; Quazi et al., 2002). In fact, since December 2000, the 176 Technical Committee responsible for the 9000 grouping, published the new version of the standard: the revised standards (ISO 9000: 2000), which went further than simply ensuring the quality of products and services. The new ISO 9000 standards, version 2000, focused on continuous improvement of the quality system (Stevenson and Barnes 2002).

Thus, concerning the application of ISO 9000 in both public and private organisations, the literature claims various benefits of implementation such as: work organisation and documentation (processes); establishment of a quality system; process performance measurement by audit tool; and the reduction of costs arising from process standardisation and control (Ingman 1991; Joubert 1998; Carpinetti et al., 2003; Terziovski and Power 2007). Other authors report that the application of the ISO standard leads to customer satisfaction and a sense of order by employees (Hartline and Ferrell 1996; Hsieh et al., 2002; McAadam et al., 2005) and some others argued that standardisation process depends on the importance of ideas such as: fault prevention; securing improvements; lateral dissemination; and consistency. They even see standardisation as a way of identifying problems and hence of areas in which improvements should be sought (Imai 1986; Biazzo and Bernardi 2003; Vonk
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2005). In others words, it may provide a consistent path to get a continuous improvement process (Corrigan 1994; Terziovski and Power 2007).

2.2 Sustainability of Continuous Process Improvement (CPI)

Some researchers have tried to understand how continuous improvement efforts may be sustained (Jones 2000; Bateman 2005). Various case studies described in the literature reported significant improvements to private and public organisations’ operational processes (Griffiths 1998; Lee and Chuah 2001; Greasley 2004). Besides, some of those case studies report also standardisation programmes (Quazi et al., 1997; Ho 1999). However, these organisations may have also discovered that it is difficult to maintain the improvement impetus (Kaye and Anderson 1999).

Various authors have begun to investigate the potential benefits of CPI, focusing in particular on problems of sustainability (Dale 1996; Dale et al., 1997; Bateman and David 2002; Zairi 2005). According to Dale (1996, p. 49), “sustainability”\(^1\) can be understood as: “Increasing the status of the improvement and thus ensuring a sustainable gain for the organisation”. In a subsequent article, he changed the wording to include: “maintain the quality improvement process” (Dale et al., 1997, p. 372). Some authors indicate that process standardisation through the ISO 9000 standard may constitute the first step towards an Excellence, Total Quality, or Continuous Improvement models (Bradley 1994; Ho and Fung 1994; Ho 1999). Nevertheless, other authors argue that no model or technique constitutes a clear route towards a Continuous Improvement model given that there are any number of possible points of departure, depending on the kind of organisation involved (Dale and Lascelles 1990).

\(^1\) In this paper, “sustainability” does not mean “sustainable development”.

Taken from The International Journal for Quality and Standards
2.3 Risks and problems in applying the ISO 9000 standard

We may find also some critical literature reporting potential risks all of which concentrate on the ISO 9000 standard (Seddon 1997; Zhang 1999; Yung 1997; Stevenson and Barnes 2001; Magd and Curry 2003). Examples of these potentials risk are:

- Adopting the norm fosters greater bureaucracy in organisations, given the onerous (and sometimes unnecessary) requirement to document work procedures.

- Instead of fostering innovation and continuous improvement, the norm only produces stagnation and excessive documentation.

- Paradoxically, the quality of an organisation’s products are not enhanced or supported, given that product defects are sometimes found after the ISO certificate has been awarded.

- Some critics claim it is too general and fail to address the unique problems and issues inherent in some companies. In that sense, formal implementation of ISO 9000 standard is not enough for an effective quality system, an organisation needs to go further if it is to attain continuous improvement of its work processes.

- Sometimes the most significant certification motive for organisations is “corporate image”. If that is the reason, then it is very difficult to sustain any improvement effort.

Concerning the public sector, there are also reports showing problems, and sometimes failure, when implementing ISO 9000 process standardisation (Chu et al., 2001; Chu and Wang 2001; Singh and Mansour-Nahra 2006). Chu et al. (2001) indicate four main problems when implementing ISO 9000 process standardisation in public administration: 1) lack of knowledge of the ISO 9000 standards by middle managers and employees sometimes due to
inappropriate training, 2) the resistance of employees (“another fad brought about by the last politician”), 3) lack of commitment of the political body and technical top managers, and 4) just short term implementation focus that ends up producing sceptical reactions and the impossibility to sustain improvement. Sing and Mansour-Nahra (2006) conclude that public institutions need to be clear about their motivation for using process standardisation with ISO 9000, for this will have an impact on the type of benefits that they drive, and the problems they face. Besides, Chu and Wang (2001) show that top managers and their staff should change their attitudes and view ISO as a mean of both adding value to the organisational process and improving quality. Furthermore, poorly managed government organisations should redesign and improve their basic organisation processes. This is intended to improve public services and add to public value (Douglas et al., 1999). Finally, the lack of an effective and efficient measurement of work process performance through the ISO 9000 standard instruments (process indicators or internal audits) may result in opportunities for improvement not being identified in time and form (Yung 1997; Terziovski and Power 2007).

3. Methodology

The Case Study (Yin 2003; Stake 2000) approach was adopted with the purpose of building theory (Eisenhardt 1989). Process theory construction is based upon the understanding of the “how?” and “why?” a local council manages to sustain process improvement under the umbrella of a process standardisation programme (Van de Ven and Poole 1995). The research conducted in the Logroño City Council was of the retrospective type (Leonard-Barton 1990).
3.1 Data gathering

Three methods were employed to gather the primary research data: direct observation; documentary analysis; and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The first method – direct observation – provided familiarisation with the Council setting (i.e. improvement group meetings, public service centres, office layout, the Quality Manager’s meetings with staff, etc.). This method also allowed us to gather data from discussions, which were recorded in a research diary. The documentary analysis was the second most important source of research data. Different kinds of Council documents were accessed, such as the Quality Manual, articles and reports regarding the quality system, minutes of meetings, e-mails providing information and clarification, books and articles from the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces [Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias – henceforth FEMP] which referred to the practices of the Council in question. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were then conducted to shed greater light on the data obtained. Each interview was held in person with public servants who had first-hand experience of applying the quality system and ISO 9000 standard in the Council. This included the Government Delegate for Quality and Head of Recruitment and Assets at the Council, the Manager or Coordinator responsible for the Quality System, the Section Head of Family and Support, and the Deputy Director General of Water, Environment and Urban Planning. The last two are middle managers who were actively involved in documentation, standardisation and improvement of processes within their respective areas. In addition, an employee from the Public Information area was also interviewed. A total of five interviews were conducted,

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2 The Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (FEMP) is an association which covers the various tiers of Spanish local government, including over 6,900 Spanish municipalities. The Federation was established under a provision in Spain’s Local Government Act 7/1985 of 2 April. It was brought into force by Order of the Council of Ministers on 26th June 1985.
which lasted between 75 and 120 minutes. Transcripts of the interviews were transcribed within two days to reduce information loss. Three two-day visits were carried out (lasting approximately four hours per day) and constant phone and email contact was maintained throughout the research.

3.2 Data analysis

During the data gathering stage, special care was taken to compare data obtained by the three primary sources to precisely zero in on the set of facts to which they all referred (Eisenhardt 1989). Databases were constructed and datum codified. Once all the data had been reviewed, analysed and codified, a first draft of the case study was written, which was then made available to the key participants from the Council. The revision of the first draft of the case study not only helped validate the data collection process, but also served to identify possible gaps or further data, patterns and reflections relevant to the research, resulting in an iterative data collection and analysis process. Main research themes were also identified during this stage.
4. Case Description

4.1 Contextual conditions and evolutionary stages of the quality management system

Logroño is the capital city of Rioja, a small region famous for its wine industry. It operates in a municipality covering 79.6 km² and with a population of 136,943. It managed a budget of €157,585,000 in 2006. The Council’s offices are almost all headquartered in a building in the centre of Logroño but it also has small branch offices throughout the city.

Political Context

The Council was governed from its inception (1979-1982) by the Unión del Centro Democrático (UCD) party and the Alianza Popular (AP) party. The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) governed from the early ‘80s to the mid-90s (1982-1995). The Partido Popular (PP) has governed from 1996 to date. The political continuity and stability provided by the PP’s decade in office helped provide the conditions required for the introduction of a Quality System. The Quality Manager noted in a paper for FEMP (Spanish federation of provinces and local councils):

“A quality management system cannot be implemented in a Council without sufficient political support. Quality as a government aim should embrace all aspects of a quality management system. The Mayor and his team must foster and lead the whole process of quality system implementation (Palacín Saénz 2000).”

Operational Context

Elected politicians (councillors, deputy mayors, etc.) are at the apex of the Council’s organisation chart and run seven major departments. Professional and technical staff come next in the hierarchy and run the various sections making up each department. Most of the Council’s operational work is borne by these sections, each of which is served by common

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3 The British convention is applied here – a city is a settlement with a cathedral. Logroño thus qualifies as a city.

4 Spain was a dictatorship under General Franco from 1939 to 1976 and the country’s democratic government and institutions were only restored under the 1979 Constitution. Both the UCD and AP parties are now defunct.
departments and services (See the organisation chart at Figure 1). The Council has some 773 staff. The hierarchy shown in Figure 1 follows the Classical fragmented political model (Ramió-Matas 1999). This model is characterised by bureaucratic-mechanistic vertical integration of a sectoral nature (Mintzberg 1979) in which general and technical departments are co-ordinated and run as part of macro-fields headed by a deputy mayor. The Mayor and his technical team thus co-ordinate all the departments, services and sections, while councillors run specific programmes and projects falling under their respective departments (e.g. Urban Development; Economic Promotion; Public Services, etc.).

Figure 1. Council organisation chart.

Evolutionary Stages of the quality management system at the City Council

5 Spanish Councils tend to have several deputy mayors, each with his own area or responsibility.

Taken from The International Journal for Quality and Standards
The evolution of the quality management system currently operating in Logroño Council went through three stages:

1. **The need to organise and standardise management (1996-1997)**
3. **Preparation stage for an Excellence Model (2002- Beyond).**

These stages are set out in Figure 2. Improvement activities that are either directly or indirectly linked to the sustainability of continuous improvement are highlighted for each stage. The following diagram sets out the process:

**Figure 2. The Evolutionary Stages.**
4.2 The standardisation process in the City Council and the sustainability of continuous improvement

By 1995 local public administrations in Spain were becoming familiar with terms such as “Total Quality”, “Quality Assurance”, “Quality Standards”, “Customer Orientation”, and “Continuous Improvement”; concepts which were then being eagerly embraced by companies. It was in pursuit of this idea of a well-run organisation that a councillor came up with the idea of incorporating these concepts in the Council’s day-to-day management. He took various private companies in the region as examples. During the mid-1990s, ISO 9000 standard was being eagerly embraced by private companies. The set of standards was then entirely focused on quality assurance (i.e. the quality procedures and standardisation needed to prevent product faults) (Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (FEMP) 1999).

The Councillor expressed his reasons for adopting this approach thus:

“If lorry drivers have to gain certification, I want the Council to be certified too (E-L-02, May 2006)”.

This political initiative led the Council to choose the ISO 9000 standard as a way of ensuring public services that met citizen-customers’ needs. One of the reasons for adopting ISO 9000 was to ensure that the processes used to provide public services were clear and homogeneous. These characteristics were prerequisites for ensuring that tasks could be reliably performed by staff over time whilst yielding the desired results. Nevertheless, the Council wanted to do

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6 In Spain, developments in the local government field during the 1980s reached their apogee with two fundamental legislative instruments: an Act covering the public service function and an Act covering job incompatibilities for civil servants. It is worth noting that the terms (Total Quality, Quality Assurance, Customer Orientation) were then almost unknown to Spanish local government and were simply seen as possible answers to Spanish central government’s modernisation needs.

7 All quotes presented in this paper were translated from Spanish. The authors tried to keep the translations as accurate as possible.

8 According to Mintzberg (1996, pp 77-78), each citizen wears one of four hats in society: (1) as client because he receives “professional” services from the State (for example, in applying for a driving license, or planning permission); (2) as consumer, because he directly or indirectly receives public services provided to society in general (e.g. museums, monetary policies, roads, etc.); (3) as a citizen entitled to all the public services provided by a Welfare State (health, justice, security, etc.); (4) as subjects, which Mintzberg (1996) considers applies to any services involuntarily “consumed” by citizens (prison, for example). As one can appreciate, the boundaries between these roles are fuzzy, however all roles may be played within the framework of citizens relationships with the State.
more than just organise and standardise work processes.\textsuperscript{9} It also wanted to better meet citizens’ needs and aspirations. The Council’s Quality Manager commented:

“The competitive setting that may have given rise to the first ISO certifications do not exist in Councils. Unlike companies, Councils do not face competition. However, our citizens do require effective, efficient administration of the public purse and hence we have to turn in a good performance. Public servants cannot be inward-looking – they need to take account of citizens’ needs and demands. However, as both the EFQM model and the 2000 version of ISO require internal needs to be met too. That is because we have to put our house in order, organise our work, and analyse, improve and standardise our processes if we are to attend to citizens needs …..(E-L-01, May-2006)”.

The Council’s experience during the first development stage may be considered as an exploration of the ISO standard. Armed with the guide provided by an external consulting firm, the Council began work on implementing its Quality Management System and learning about quality assurance’s techniques and tools. The Council’s main aim during the stage was to certify pilot processes through various improvement activities.\textsuperscript{10} The first key improvement activity was training the employees. A training action programme was crucial, because they combined theoretical knowledge of the ISO 9000 standard with practices taken from their daily work.

The second improvement activity used was teamwork. In that sense, two work groups were set up in the Urban Planning Department to ensure that what staff learnt during the training stage was put into practice in their daily work. These groups were put in charge of gathering data, and analysing, standardising, and implementing the processes covering building permits and commercial licenses. Support groups were also set up to help analyse processes in the department. The two work groups were thus responsible for carrying out the first

\textsuperscript{9} Note that the Council was the first in Spain to certify its processes in accordance with ISO 9000.

\textsuperscript{10} The Urban Planning Department provided a model of well-organised documentation which was strongly linked to the kind of work carried out (i.e. the processes were the kind one might find on a production line and had clear inputs (applications) and outputs (e.g. building licenses).
analytical and improvement work on work procedures in the urban planning field.\textsuperscript{11} In addition to the formal allocation of work groups, roles and responsibilities, a structured methodology was adapted and instituted to ensure each work group analysed and improved the selected processes (See Figure 3).\textsuperscript{12}

The first methodological step after setting up a work group was the choice of the key process requiring improvement. The work group made the choice after debating a problem and its impact on stakeholders – staff, citizens, politicians and departments – (Freeman 1984). An example of objective might be: cutting public complaints about a given service (quantified as a 90% reduction in complaints regarding the processing of commercial licenses). The group then gathered data on the process chosen for simplification/improvement (Stage 2). The third stage (process analysis) comprised the detailed description of how the chosen process was carried out without evaluating possible dysfunctions. This involved the group producing a flow diagram of the current state of affairs. This detailed the sequence of activities, the norms applicable, stage and total times taken, documents required, and the service rendered at the end of the process.

\textsuperscript{11} Apart from the work groups, other bodies and individuals involved in co-ordinating the project were: a) The Quality Committee. - A mixed body comprising technical staff and politicians, whose aim was to ensure proper monitoring and control of quality-related activities. The Committee was responsible for ensuring aims were met and for taking any corrective/preventive measures needed to improve processes. b) Council Quality Manager. - Although the job was not a formal one, the role played by the manager was key for the technical direction of quality in the Council, and the implementation and maintenance of the quality management system.

\textsuperscript{12} The process improvement methodology (The Council developed its own methodology) processes was drawn up by an external consulting company. However, both the Quality Manager and the Service Manager had to adapt this methodology to meet the Council’s specific needs. All the methodology was conducted in a workshop format.
Once the documentation step was over, the improvement group made a submission to the Quality Committee for the latter’s approval. Once granted, the next stage consisted of putting the redesigned process into effect. This stage also included staff training to implement the modified process, where the improvement group deemed necessary (Step 6). In putting improvement measure into effect, the work group also established control points...
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to monitor implementation. Each improvement group then used the resulting information to check how well the redesigned process worked in practice. Any glitches (potential or real) were then analysed and new corrective/preventive measures drawn up to solve the problems. Thus, the new flow diagram for an improved process constituted a standardised procedure (Step 7) which was submitted for ISO 9000 certification.\textsuperscript{13} The Quality Manager made the following comment on this last step:

“\text{At the end of the process, we brought together documentation and the standard, drew up a set of measures in each case, and defined the scope of the activity. In some cases, we provided definitions where users were in doubt or made multiple interpretations. The operational system was then developed using the flow chart and the table of measures. The aim was to ensure that everyone followed the procedure using this standard by which I mean the redesigned flow diagram (E-L-02, May-2006)}”.

Lastly, each redesigned process was subject to both internal and external audits. Both were required in order to achieve the certification sought during this years. With this objective in mind, the Quality Manager and his team began the \textit{Quality System Institutionalisation Stage} (See Figure 2) for Council management. Here, the aim was to extend and to sustain the quality system throughout the Council and make it part and parcel of the institution to yield the same kind of benefits obtained in the pilot project (See Figure 4). The same experience in the previous stage had produced learning by all programme participants and co-ordinators. This was a necessary element at this stage given that interpretation of the ISO standard had to be disseminated and sustained throughout the institution. It should be noted that at the time the Council had no other references to guide it (for example, other public bodies) regarding the application of Quality Systems to Public Management.

Then the Council began work on analysing, improving, documenting, standardising, and certifying the rest of its processes and services. This work was carried out by the Quality

\textsuperscript{13} During this stage, Logroño Council did not observe theoretical distinctions when it came to practical implementation of processes and procedures. For the Council, once a process had been re-engineered it became a certifiable procedure (the terminology employed by the pre-2000 ISO 9000 standard).
Committee grouping procedures as appropriate. Thus, a set of procedures were tackled each year, following the methodology used in the previous stage until certification was attained.

The following diagram shows this process:

**Figure 4. Progressive block implementation of the ISO 9000 Quality System.**

All of the Council’s departmental processes (over 200) had been certified by May 2001. The aim was therefore to maintain what had been achieved to date – a far from easy task in the public sector. Periodic assessments of the system, monitoring by work groups, and citizens’ complaints were the Quality System mechanisms employed to sustain in the time. An example of the impact on process improvement of the standardisation effort is shown by these data concerning waiting times of citizens:
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Table I. Some example of the impact on process improvement of the standardisation effort in citizen’s satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time used in the answer</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 days or less</td>
<td>2538</td>
<td>61.29</td>
<td>3682</td>
<td>65.62</td>
<td>4848</td>
<td>75.36</td>
<td>6346</td>
<td>76.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 8 and 15 days</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>16.32</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>16.11</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>11.20</td>
<td>1227</td>
<td>14.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 16 and 31 days</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 month</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>10.91</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsolved</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4141</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5611</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6433</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8244</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from an e-mail sent by the Quality System Manager of Logroño Town Council (November 2007).

Citizens’ global satisfaction indicators\(^\text{14}\) rose from 7.56 (out of 10) in 1999 to 8.02 (out of 10) in 2004.

4.3 Risks for continuous improvement sustainability under the standardisation process

Three main risks appeared associated to the standardisation process implementation. Public workers viewed ISO 9000 as a private sector tool. Besides, they encountered language problems associated with the norm.\(^\text{15}\) The standardisation effort was showing evidence of non-efficient working practices, and public workers did not like to look at this evidence. The Quality Manager noted that these kinds of quality models help replace a culture based on red tape (bureaucratic models) with one based on management and service to citizens (even though there is no competition in the public sector). He expressed this thus:

\(^{14}\) Global perception among citizens with regard to public services provided by the City Council, comprehensively, i.e. in terms of municipal management in general.

\(^{15}\) The Logroño Council worked hard on adapting the language of the ISO norm to public management. Some examples of this adaptation can be seen in changing “client” to “citizen” and “user”. Attention was focused on sections such as Purchasing, which was re-interpreted to mean a public institution’s ability to select suppliers in the light of the legislation in force rather than forging long-term relationships with suppliers (as required by the norm).

Taken from The International Journal for Quality and Standards

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“It’s a question of satisfying public demand and meeting citizens expectations. However, it goes beyond that. Both EFQM and the 2000 version of the ISO standard stress the importance of meeting internal demands. That is because we have to put our own house in order before we can attend to the public properly. This means working on documentation and improving and standardising Council processes (E-L-01, May-2006).”

As the quotation shows, emphasis was placed on an internal revamp of the Council, involving analysis, documentation, and standardisation of its daily work in terms of processes, resources, and norms. The documentation and standardisation of each employee’s job during the institutionalisation stage led to the typical staff resistance to these kinds of programmes. However, this was soon overcome. The Deputy Director of the Water and Environmental Protection Department noted the documentation and standardisation of processes in accordance with ISO 9000 yielded a wide range of benefits: elimination of unnecessary tasks and a general reduction of red tape; shorter time scales; a stronger team spirit among staff; enhanced predictability regarding task performance; and more reliable measurement of processes. He expressed the benefits as follows:

“There was an improvement in work performance. Staff put the same amount of effort in as before but the difference is that they now worked in a much more co-ordinated, consistent manner. Before, employees used to work in different ways even though they were pursuing the same goals. This led to them using a wide range of criteria in doing their jobs. We tried to address the problem and make sure everyone was doing things the same way. That’s important when it comes to carrying out maintenance work at the sewage treatment plant. …[…]… Each worker is now required to check any faults in the automatic water quality detection system. They need to realise that frequent checks need to be made …[…]… I believe it was the right thing to involve them in the process from the outset in the work groups. That allowed them to talk things over and form part of the team instead of being sidelined” (E-L-04, May-2006).”

Another example pointed out by The Head of the Family and Home Help Department:

“Well, in the beginning we didn’t draw up documents but we had to write a lot on each file. That meant we ended up doing the same work several times over. We drew up a procedure to ensure that all the professional staff were doing the same thing. The idea was to make sure all the social workers followed the same procedure. As a result citizens’ applications went through identical steps and the time to shift cases was more or less the same. The work became much more systematic as a result – it means we can focus on what is really important and cut out the rest. That represents a big improvement (E-L-03, May-2006).”

The second risk that the Council faced during the institutionalisation stage (i.e. during the dissemination and application of procedures to other Council departments following
certification of the pilot study) was excessive documentation. Some departments, such as public information, the tax service, personal services, and others standardised processes in accordance with traditional bureaucratic practices and based upon a misunderstanding of “the spirit of the ISO 9000 norm”. In other words, these departments began to draw up huge manuals on processes that were either superfluous or self-evident. This made procedures even more unwieldy, turning the manuals into a hindrance rather than a help in rendering better services to citizens.  

Departments’ zest for writing exhaustive and aesthetically pleasing documents revealed an existing work culture based on a love of “order”, strict regulation, and compliance with requirements (inputs). The Quality Manager put it like this:  

“It’s true that at the outset, standardisation was becoming part of the institution’s bureaucratic culture. We started creating more paperwork than was needed to document processes and draw up the Quality Manual. But as we went along, we began to learn from our mistakes, realising that applying the norm was not an end in itself but rather a means to serving citizens and internal clients better. All our efforts were therefore focused on the latter approach. (E-L-01, May 2006)”.

Finally, the third risk detected concerns unions. After the certification of the Urban Planning Department’s activities, the trade unions in the Council began to worry about the “re-engineering” of work processes. They feared that a reduction in tasks and the time it took to do them threatened jobs. This union viewpoint coincided with one of the criticisms of Process Re-engineering; linked sometimes with downsizing. As a result, management and trade unions began negotiations, which ended finally in agreement for both sides.

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16 Over-documentation of the standardisation process through the ISO 9000 norm at the outset led the Logroño Council to create unwieldy manuals, which were the product of bureaucratic inertia in the public sector. The manuals covered a host of complex documents, processes and procedures, internal norms and auditing documents, as well as simpler items (requests, reports, remedial steps, and a huge volume of records).
4.4 Problems in the implementation of the standardisation process

Despite these benefits, each work group had to face various hurdles during the implementation process of standardisation. The main problems are:

- **Process analysis, improvement and standardisation:**
  1. *Conflict with legal considerations:* Some members of the work groups argued against improvements on legal grounds. This created differences in the criteria employed for documenting and standardising processes.
  2. *Diversion of human resources because of improvement workshops and internal audits.* Improvement workshops for redesigning processes, as well as post-implementation monitoring audits made significant demands on staff time. Staff complained that their usual work piled up as a result.
  3. *Lack of co-ordination and information flow between departments and sections:* Some of the Council’s certified processes cut across various sections and departments. There was a lack of co-ordination and information flow between certain departments and sections. For example, the improvement proposals made by work groups were not notified quickly enough to the sections affected. This led to lack of co-ordination, sometimes friction, and in some cases delays in service provision and process’s performance measurement.
• **Staff and the implementation process:**

1. **Scepticism regarding the quality initiative:** Staff scepticism reigned during the implementation stage. Typical comments were: “How does all this help us in our jobs?”; “This kind of stuff doesn’t work in the public sector”; “Another piece of trendy training nonsense”. However, this negative reaction gradually subsided as the potential benefits of documenting processes and standardising work became apparent.

2. **Auditing civil servants:** The Council’s civil servants were not used to being audited. Their only experience of audits was limited to the internal variety. The notion of an external audit put many staff on the defensive, with comments like: What do they know about our work? And “Have you any idea how long it took the work group to reach this conclusion? Feelings ran high when the audits were carried out by external personnel. The civil servants proved very prickly when outsiders observed them performing their jobs. Implementation therefore proved tricky.

5. **Discussion**

The empirical results described in the earlier case study stages reveal how process standardisation based on the ISO 9000 standard was applied over time by the Logroño Council. The findings suggest that the improvement process was a quest to make work changes and improvements sustainable rather than a “formal” application of ISO 9000.
5.1 Process standardisation as a key factor for the sustainability of continuous improvement

The 10-year standardisation process of the Logroño City Council has brought about higher consistency and better results in some of the public services provided by the council. ISO 9000 has been the main engine behind this process centred on achieving continuous improvement. In that sense, we can position this initiative far away from others reported as simply “temporary fads” (Chu et al., 2001). A key factor has been the support and commitment of politicians during the whole process, confirming the findings of Chu et al. (2001) and Palacin-Saenz (2000) in their respective studies.

Four important elements arise concerning the process:

1) Process standardisation with specific, by-the-book rules helps to eliminate variation in process that are performed constantly by different employees, and the stricter the standard established, the more motivated employees are to perform processes in an effective and homogenous way. The findings support Nemoto’s (1987), Rago (1994) and Ungan (2006) suggestion in the private and public sector.

2) A high degree of process standardisation leads to explicit rules, policies, and procedures governed the work process. Logroño’s Council employees can easily follow standard to accomplish designated process and public service requirements. Therefore, not only can standardisation process clarify work content and context, reduce role ambiguity, and decrease role conflict (Hsieh et al., 2002), but it also guided employees to achieve process improvement goals (Imai 1986; Ho 1999). Besides, the recognition forms create satisfaction amongst the public workers, as they see that their work is not ignored, and thus leads to greater commitment. In other words, all this employee satisfaction, which turn leads to improvement in the way the
processes are executed and service rendered (Hsieh et al., 2002; Chu and Wang 2001). This finding is also highlighted by Hsieh et al. (2002) in a sense of standardisation and improvement process assures the employee’s needs and expectations.

3) Understanding an organisation by its processes, and not only through its functional hierarchy – Classical fragmented political model – (Ramió-Matas 1999), is a very important concept in production and operations management (Carpinetti et al., 2003); such standardisation process leads to the development of homogeneous job’s criteria when supplying services and setting the standards (guidelines) for Logroño’s Council employee’s performance (Joubert 1998). This standardisation process has made it possible to render faster service (see table I) by eliminating unnecessary steps, and thus to improve the image of the Logroño’s Council amongst the citizens. In this way, both service quality and citizen’s satisfaction are improved, and even employee involvement may increase; this is due to fact that Logroño’s employees know what they have to do in certain situations which, due to service or process itself, may create anxiety and tension. The evidence shows that the means chosen by the City Council for gaining insight into processes was the sustained application of process redesign’s methodology (See figure 3). This finding confirmed the results of studies by Vonk (1995) and Hartline and Ferrell (1996), which indicate that the systematic improvement of processes increases staff involvement and satisfaction, leading to a greater perception of quality by citizens/clients.

4) The findings in this case study reveal that standardisation process may constitute a first step towards achieving Continuous Improvement, providing the processes concerned are analysed, measured, and improved in a sustained fashion before and
after each standardisation and certification. This is the path the Council took. The process of understanding, documenting, analysing, improving, standardising, and certifying each process over time is an important one, corroborating the findings in other research (Corrigan 1994; Bradley 1994; Ho 1999). Standardised, certified processes were then the best way for the Council to carry out its tasks and hence standardisation constituted the launching pad for process improvement. Nevertheless, as the case study shows, one should bear in mind that this approach may lead to hurdles that may render improvement efforts unsustainable.

5.2 Risks for continuous improvement sustainability under the standardisation process

The literature suggests potential risks when standardising processes using the ISO 9000 norm (Seddon 1997; Yung 1997; Zhang 1999; Stevenson and Barnes 2001; Magd and Curry 2003). The risks exhibited in the Logroño Council case were:

1) Standardisation under the aegis of the ISO 9000 standard may provoke resistance by public sector staff (here, one should recall the norm was designed for the private sector). It may even lead to fear of redundancies – a point made by the trade union in this Spanish council. However, this risk can be avoided by getting strong commitments from politicians and technical managers (Chu et al., 2001), as this case proves.

2) Logroño Council also exhibited another risk identified in the literature, namely the danger that the ISO 9000 standard will lead to a gradual but inexorable growth in red tape (Seddon 1987; Stevenson and Barnes 2001). This risk was realised in the production of the unwieldy Process Manuals mentioned earlier. The lesson to be learnt here is that standardisation of processes is not an end in itself but rather a
means by which public services and processes can be improved. Thus, continuous improvement should not be confused with exhaustive documentation of work processes. Rather, it should be thought of as a pro-active approach to standardise processes leading to significant organisational improvements (Terziovski and Power 2007).

5.3 Problems in the implementation of the standardisation process

As the first two stages of the case reveal (See Figure 2), there were different hurdles to achieving good results from standardisation. These hurdles included legal conflicts, staff complaints about the way workshops and audits were distracting them from their work, scepticism and resistance by civil servants whose activities were being audited. Some of these problems are covered in the literature (Chu et al., 2001; Chu and Wang 2001), however others appeared to be specific to our particular case (i.e. resistance by civil servants and complaints regarding distraction from daily work). Staff resistance may be explained by the fact that the Council pioneered the standardisation of processes in Spanish local government. This meant the institution lacked experience of the kind of hurdles and organisational problems it was likely to encounter in implementing the ISO 9000 standard (more than specific technical problems of the norm).

Our results confirm Imai’s (1986) findings, which indicate that it is difficult to improve processes if these have not been previously standardised. Accordingly, such improvements need to be based on standardisation if they are to prove sustainable in the long run. Standardisation provides a sound basis for analysing and solving the organisational problems that crop up during the implementation, monitoring, and auditing stages (See Figure 3). In keeping with our results, Ingman (1991) indicates that monitoring and auditing mechanisms
must be the means for overcoming any hurdles to sustainable continuous improvement. In addition, these mechanisms used to measure the performance of Council work processes (indicators or internal audits), sometimes have a slow data collection and analysis rate. According to the evidence found, this result seems to be affected by the information flow governed by the Council’s own organisational structure: a classical and politically fragmented model (Ramió-Matas 1999). This finding is a problem that should be dealt with by the Council, given that, according to the literature, process performance measurement is a necessary element for tackling sustained Continuous Improvement (Yung 1997; Bateman 2005; Terziovski and Power 2007).

6. Conclusions

Based on the case study of the Logroño City Council set out in this paper, we conclude that standardisation is a key element in sustaining the drive for continuous improvement over several years. The ten-year effort in standardising processes has taught the Council valuable lessons and fostered efforts to strive for continuous improvement in its day-to-day work. The case indicates that standardisation is a sound platform for ensuring consistency, homogeneity, and control over public service work processes. The impact of standardisation and improvement of processes fosters stakeholder satisfaction (staff, politicians, and citizens). However, risks associated to standardisation and the problems arising during implementation need to be considered by all public administrations embarking on such an initiative. This paper has not attempted to over-generalize, although an analytic generalization could be presented on the basis of the evidence found. In this sense, this contribution could be suitably complemented by future research work in two directions:
Process Standardisation and Sustainable Continuous Improvement

comparing these ideas with other case studies or carrying out a quantitative study or test these ideas.
7. References


Process Standardisation and Sustainable Continuous Improvement


