

Education: An Important Checkpoint on the Road to Excellence



Milton Krivokuca
MSQA Program Coordinator
California State University, Dominguez Hills

For those of us engaged in various aspects of the quality profession, a common theme that underlies most all quality programs and improvement processes is *Organizational Excellence*.

These two critical words have been included as part of the body of knowledge for the ASQ Certified Quality Manager and its current designation, Certified Quality Manager / Organizational Excellence. The ASQ has also used Organizational Excellence as the basis for its "good to great" corporate theme, which establishes the organization's conferences and educational programs.

Education is critical for organizations and individuals seeking to elevate performance levels to those of recognized world-class status. But how do individuals and companies identify the education that will provide the most benefit? The long established norm of career employees who retire with a gold watch after 30 years or more of service is quickly vanishing. The rise of global competition and decline of the world market has presented very complex challenges to organizations striving to remain world-class competitors. Organizational success can not be accomplished by technology alone. A team of skilled employees must be in place and utilized both effectively and efficiently.

This situation presents a challenge to organizations. Can the organization survive while it invests in developing this skilled talent through internally supported programs, if the talent they develop continues to churn? Although the tightened job market should reduce this turnover rate, the advances in technology and product diversification will continue to stimulate individuals to seek more rewarding employment opportunities.

For these reasons, both organizations and professionals, especially quality professionals, must make informed decisions before engaging in educational endeavors. Education can be expensive, but most importantly, it is time consuming. The time spent in learning cannot be recovered, so the decision, both for an organization and for an individual must be an informed one.

There are numerous options available in formats that can range from the very basic, to highly specific and complex customized to an individual product or service.

The following summary provides a brief overview of the most common educational offerings available today:

Masters Degree - This high level of accomplishment generally encompasses the numerous elements of quality and organizational systems. The concepts studied in a masters program provide a general understanding of the concepts from a managerial and decision-making perspective. Most masters programs are designed for working professionals in a two-year completion format.

Masters Certificate - This program is designed for those quality professionals who want to improve their skills in a particular area of quality such as management, auditing, or engineering. Three masters level



classes are required with a culminating capstone experience course. Generally, the certification exam preparation courses are developed using the ASQ CQE, CQA, and CMQ/OE body of knowledge. Certificates can be completed in less than a year and the professional will gain advanced specialized skills.

Bachelors Degree - This program follows the traditional college format for persons who desire to enter the quality profession and do not have a college degree or are recent high-school graduates. The bachelors program provides a combination of theory and practical application of the skills and concepts necessary to perform any of the numerous quality related functions found in any manufacturing or service organization. Please note that service industries now utilize quality improvement methodologies that were once considered unique to manufacturing. A full time student generally completes this program in about four years.

ASQ Certification - For professionals with existing experience in various areas of quality such as auditing, management, engineering, customer service, software, Six Sigma, and reliability, the ASQ has established a body of knowledge specific to these areas. By taking and passing the exam, the professional demonstrates an advanced level of skill that receives international recognition for accomplishment. For each of the certifications, ASQ requires a defined amount of education and experience to qualify for the particular certification.

Seminars - Many one day to one week seminars are presented each year that provide education. These include everything from refresher courses of basic quality skills to the latest developments of improvement processes. Seminars provide the advantage of learning new concepts that have not been through the publishing process to be included in textbooks or business best-seller lists. These seminars can also be customized to fit a specific company or industry need to keep employees current with their skills and knowledge.

This brief list is by no means meant to be all-inclusive, but a general sampling of the educational offerings available to individuals and organizations today.

So how do you select the right program for the organization or for yourself?

This is a difficult question and should be given careful thought and analysis. Whether selecting a personal or organizational training program, a personal or organizational self-assessment should take place. Existing skills and knowledge should be examined, as well as industry or competitive best practices to determine where gaps might exist. Once these gaps have been identified, then the short and long term goals for both individuals and organizations need to be studied in detail.

With this information, a basic starting point has been established. Before enrolling in an individual program or contracting for an organizational education program, one additional consideration should be determined: Is the organizational or individual ready to move forward? For example, a manager might be ready to take the next step in career advancement to a masters program, but not have attended college for several years. The initial 'culture shock' of returning to school could be too overwhelming. In this case maybe taking a less demanding ASQ certification or masters certificate, then entering the masters program would ease the transition back to the educational process.

One final checkpoint to perform before enrolling in any of these educational programs is to contact a program administrator or advisor and discuss your personal or organizational needs to determine the best fit to your specific needs. By doing this up front research, the educational experience and results will be much positive and beneficial.