



Strategic research directions

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Strategic research directions

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Zagralli and Akbaba (2015) presented the attractiveness level of local food for tourists visiting İzmir Peninsula and determined that the local food did not play a determinant role in tourists' destination choice of the region, although respondents enjoyed the local food and there was a lack of promotion and advertising

The Bulgarian tourism industry should place emphasis on the food experience in tourism and food-based regional development.

CONCLUSION

This study evaluates the main motives of foreign tourists visiting the three largest and preferred destinations in Bulgaria - Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna to consume traditional foods. The results show that vacation is the most desirable reason to visit Bulgaria. Local governments can analyze the image destinations and do some planning in terms of make popular traditional foods.

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QUALITY CERTIFICATION IN THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION OF ISO 9001

Abstract. *After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, the global business environment was subject to some changes related to the process of globalization, the dynamic development of markets, and the free movement of people within the community. These changes required that Bulgarian tourism enterprises seek new opportunities for gaining a competitive advantage based on the quality of their products and tourist services.*

This issue requires an investigation into the economic implications considering the single EU market and the associated challenges to the competitiveness of Bulgarian tourism enterprises. In order to obtain certificates for globally or nationally recognized quality marks and signs, tourism enterprises have to reorganize their activities in such a way as to meet the requirements for obtaining such certificates and the associated registered marks, which requires investment of time and money, as well as certain managerial skills. An alternative to this type of quality assurance of the tourist services is the development, implementation and certification of a Quality Management System (QMS) in accordance with the provisions of the ISO 9001 standard. This standard allows tourist enterprises to build quality management systems that are consistent with the specifics of their business and service technologies and processes.

The aim of this article is to define the benefits for a tourism enterprise from the implementation of a QMS and certification under ISO 9001 to ensure the quality of their tourist services. To this end, the article reviews the available studies related to the quality assurance in the tourism sector in Bulgaria and the degree of its compliance with the ISO 9001 standard. The study demonstrates the author's thesis that the use of the most widely used international standard gives the tourist business the opportunity to demonstrate its ability to manage quality, irrespective of the category of the tourist site and the developed tourism activity, using a clearly identifiable and globally recognised quality sign.

Keywords: *tourism, Quality Management System, certification, ISO 9001*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism quality has been the subject of many a scientific research studies. Provision of high-quality tourist products and services is sought not only by tourism enterprises, but also by non-governmental organizations, local administrations and central governments. The implementation of comprehensive standards that would cover all major tourism activities is an unattainable objective for the Bulgarian government, which has developed and financed a number of research projects in this field intended to find a solution to this problem.

1. Quality as a national priority in the field of tourism

A decisive factor for the development of national tourism is the availability of sustainable and competitive tourism enterprises operating in line with current world trends. Over the past ten years, quality-based competitiveness is a national priority for tourism development in Bulgaria. Promoting the introduction and certification of quality management systems are part of the measures that the government envisages in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism 2014-2030.

In 2007, the Varna Restaurants and Hotels Association implemented a project entitled "Increasing the Competitiveness of Companies from the Tourism Industry in the NIPR through Training and Consultation Programs of Key Management Staff", in which M. Neshkov sought solutions for quality management and certification in the field of tourism regarding tour operators, tour agencies, transportation and other small and medium-sized enterprises in this sector (Neshkov, 2007). This paper explores the principal ways to ensure and control the quality of tourist services on the level of a separate tourist enterprise.

The project "Enhancing the quality and sustainable development of tourism enterprises" implemented by the Ministry of Economy, Energy, and Water in 2008 sought opportunities for increasing the competitiveness of the Bulgarian tourist product and improving its market positions and the effectiveness of the national and regional marketing by creating conditions for increasing its quality and compliance with the principles for sustainable development (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). The survey investigated the attitudes of tourism businesses towards the implementation of voluntary quality certification and sustainable development systems and the conditions for implementation of a voluntary quality certification and sustainable development system in the sector of tourism. The results were included in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria (NSSDTB) 2014-2030. (Marinov, S. et al, 2014) and the Action Plan for the period 2017-2020 to the updated National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria 2014-2030. According to these documents, by the end of 2018 the responsible

institutions (CPC, SAMTS, BFSAs, etc.) should have developed the system for quality control of tourist products and defined the control powers and the mechanisms for inter-institutional coordination. By the end of 2019, a National Quality Certification System (or National Quality Label) in tourism is to be implemented and a voluntary "quality label" to be awarded to hotels and establishments that exceed the statutory requirements. Thus, it aims to stimulate the owners who make additional efforts to improve the quality and aid consumers in their search for quality tourist products.

In 2011, a team of academics from the Department of Tourism at the Tourism College and the University of Economics in Varna developed a scientific research project entitled "Measuring the quality of family-owned hotel businesses in the municipality of Varna". The aim of the project was to determine the readiness of family-owned hotels to implement common quality standards and to develop a methodology for measuring the quality of their services as well as to provide the owners and managers of family-owned hotels in Varna Municipality with recommendations and guidelines for quality improvement and practical implementation of the developed methodology for certification and awarding of a local quality mark (Dabeva, T., Rafailova, G., Stefanov, S., Kadieva, S., 2013).

The need for specific measures for sustainable quality management of both individual businesses and the tourism sector on a national level has proved that the existing international quality standards should be systematized and compiled into a comprehensive quality management system for all tourist enterprises in order to improve the quality of Bulgaria's regional and national tourist products.

All studies regarding the implementation of common standards recommend the international standards of the ISO 9000 series, taking into account the effectiveness of the established methodology for development, implementation, certification and control of such quality management systems. In my opinion, the updated provisions of ISO 9001: 2015 could be used by the tourism businesses for implementation and certification of their quality management systems and use its quality label.

2. Major standards, markings, and labels in the tourism sector

The establishment of a single market within the EU and the related challenges to the competitiveness of Bulgarian tourism enterprises require that they should seek opportunities to ensure and promote the quality of their services. Their certification for globally or nationally recognized quality labels and signs requires reorganization of their activities in order to meet the requirements of these certification and marking systems, which entails investments in terms of time and resources, as well as in the knowledge and skills of their management teams.

The quality of tourist services is proved by means of quality signs and certification, which show that the tourist enterprise has met the criteria of the certification body.

In terms of the scope of the certification bodies, tourism-specific standards and markings are categorized into international, European and national.

Some of the most popular international signs and labels are:

- Green Key is an international eco-label established by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) and awarded worldwide to accommodations and

hospitality facilities such as hotels, hostels, conference and vacation centres, campsites, guesthouses, and recreation facilities.

- Green Globe is based on Agenda 21 principles. Green Globe International (GGI) is a public American company, which is a member of the Tourism Sustainability Council (TSC) and runs the Green Globe programme. The label is promoted as a standard for sustainability in the tourism industry.

Some of the most popular European markings and labels include:

- ECEAT Quality Label is a sustainable quality accommodation standard that certifies the environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability of rural accommodation (farms, hotels, hostels, etc.) services in Europe. It was established by the European Centre of Eco Agro Tourism – a network of 1300 small-size accommodation and tourism facilities throughout Europe.

- Travelife is an initiative dedicated to promoting sustainable practices within the travel and tourism industry developed during the EU supported LIFE project and is based on sustainability management concepts in the tour-operator sector in Germany, Belgium, the UK, and the Netherlands.

- the PAN Parks Certification scheme was established by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Dutch travel company Molecaten with the aim of creating a network of high quality tourism facilities in the vicinity of European wilderness areas.

- EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) is an initiative promoting sustainable tourism development models across Europe.

- BIO-Hotels is the label of the German association of eco-friendly hotels. Founded in 2001, the BIO-Hotels Association aims to promote environmental sustainability and green tourism. Its members must adhere to stringent rules and standards regarding food, beverages and accommodation. The label is popular mainly in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and France.

- the Green Tourism Award has been conferred to more than thirty hotels and tourist attractions in London for their environmental achievements and compliance to the Green Tourism criteria of the Development Agency in London.

- the Ecodynamique enterprise label is awarded by Brussels environment-IBGE in Brussels (Belgium) to companies from all sectors.

Some of the most popular national markings and labels include:

- Green House – a certificate that is awarded to guest houses and family hotels that have successfully passed an assessment of their compliance with the European criteria for quality accommodation with minimized negative effect on the environment.

- the Eco hotel system focuses on the hotel industry and sets criteria for protection of the environment regarding hotel services and related activities.

The specialized standards and markings presented above enable tour operators to distinguish themselves from their competitors by fulfilling the criteria specified by the certifying authorities.

However, the dynamic market conditions often make the existing certification schemes economically unfeasible because they require certain specialization of the tourist services and have specific requirements regarding the facilities and the services.

3. Popularity of ISO 9001 among tourism enterprises

An alternative to the quality certification schemes described above is the development, implementation and ISO 9001 certification of a quality management system. The standard enables the tourism enterprise to develop a quality management system tailored to its activity and the specific technology of its services.

The ISO 9000 family covers various quality management aspects and includes some of the most popular standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). These standards provide guidelines and tools to companies and organizations that are willing to guarantee that their products and services are sustainable in meeting the requirements of their customers and that their quality is continually improved.

The ISO 9000 quality management system is a set of international standards on quality management and quality assurance developed to help companies effectively document the quality system elements to be implemented to maintain an efficient quality system. The standards are applicable to all products and services regardless of their specific characteristics: ISO 9000:2015 Quality Management Systems. Main Principles and Definitions; ISO 9001:2015 – Quality Management Systems - Requirements; ISO 9004:2009 – Managing for the sustained success of an organization - A quality management approach; ISO 10013:2005 – Guidelines for Developing a Quality Manual; ISO 19011:2011 – Guidelines for Auditing Management Systems.

ISO 9001:2015 specifies requirements for a quality management system (QMS) and is the only standard in the set that is used for organizational certification. It can be adopted by any organization regardless of its size and type of economic activity. Each year, ISO publishes a report of its certified organizations, based on the reports submitted by accredited certification bodies. There are presently more than 1 million ISO 9001 certified organizations in more than 170 countries. (International Organization for Standardization, 2018) (Table 1).

Table 1

Number of ISO certificates issued in 2016 and 2017 worldwide

	Number of certificates in 2016	Number of certificates in 2017	Change	Change in %
ISO 9001	1 105 937	1 058 504	-47 433	-4
ISO 14001	346 147	362 610	16 463	5
ISO 50001	20 216	22 870	2 654	13
ISO 27001	33 290	39 501	6 211	19
ISO 22000	32 139	32 722	583	2
ISO 13485	29 585	31 520	1 935	7
ISO 22301	3 853	4 281	428	11
ISO 20000-1	4 537	5 005	468	10
ISO 28000	356	494	138	39
ISO 39001	478	620	142	30
TOTAL	1 576 538	1 558 127	-18 411	-1

Source: ISO Survey 2017, <https://www.iso.org/the-iso-survey.html>

As can be seen from Table 1 above, the ISO 9001 certificates account for 70% in 2016 and 68% in 2017 of all certificates issued to organizations worldwide. The decrease of its relative share (2%) is less than the reported decline in standard certification, which shows the relative stability and recognizability of the standard worldwide and its leading position among businesses that seek recognition of their quality.

The certification process is monitored by the ISO, which publishes surveys showing the number of valid certificates by region. Figure 1 shows that the largest numbers of certificates were issued in Europe and East Asia and Pacific.

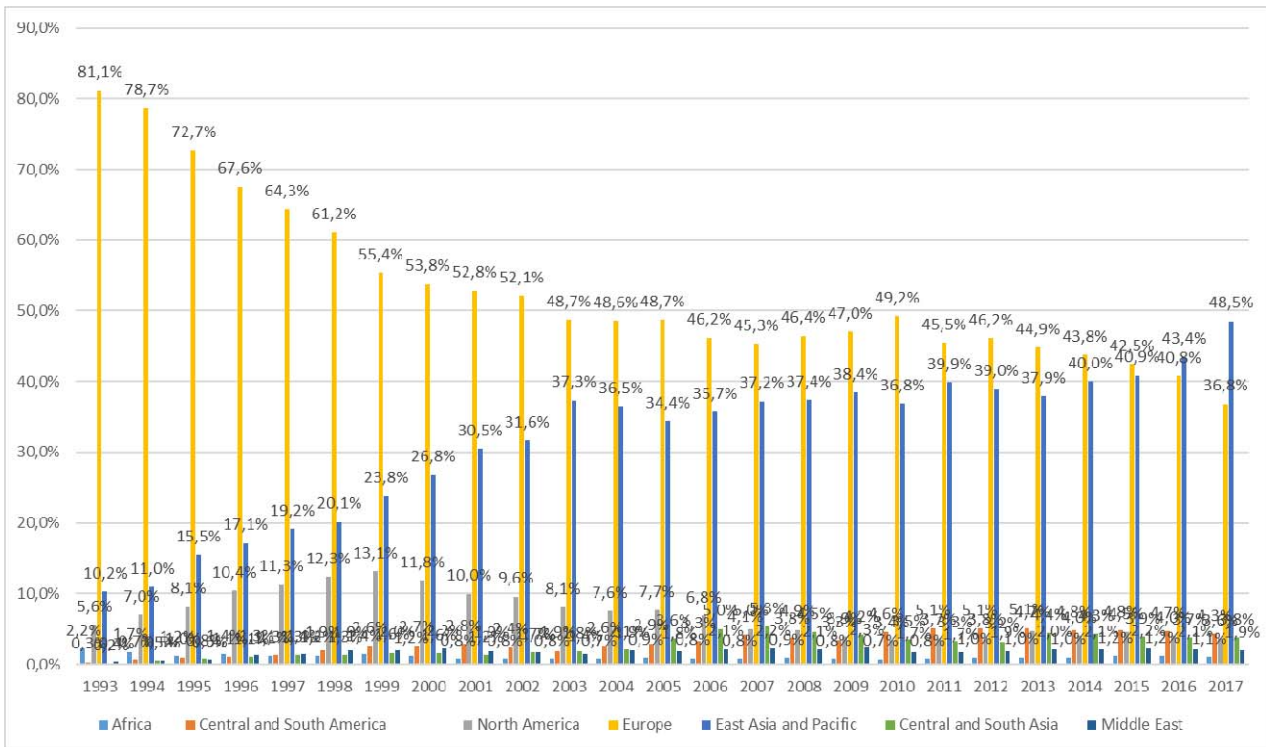


Figure 1. Percentage of ISO 9001 certificates issued between 1993 and 2017, by region

Source: ISO Survey 2017, <https://www.iso.org/the-iso-survey.html>

According to Figure 1 above, the standard is most popular in Europe, with the number of certificates varying between 81.1% and 36.8%. During the last two years its relative share is decreasing as the number of certificates issued in this regions was 451 415 in 2016 and 389 485 in 2017 (of total of 1 105 937 certificates issued in 2016 and 1 058 504 in 2017), or 40.8% in 2016 and 36.8% in 2017.

The East Asia and Pacific region ranks second in terms of ISO 9001 certification with 480 445 certificates issued in 2016 and 513 742 in 2017, or 43.4% in 2016 and 48.5% in 2017. The dynamics in the top positions is due to the emerging economies in these regions and the efforts of the businesses in these economies to penetrate in international markets where the standard is commonly accepted and recognizable.

The recognition of the standard in Europe – our main target market – as a guarantee for quality is an important factor for choosing it for certification in the field of tourism.

Tourism enterprises operate in the following sectors of the economy: “I-Hotels and restaurants”, which include accommodation services, “N-Administrative and other services“, which include tour-operator and agency services, “H- Transport, storage and warehouses”, including tourist transportation, and “R-Culture, sports, and entertainment”, including all activities related to preservation and maintenance of cultural and historical monuments and sites as well as sport and other activities related to entertainment and recreation (Classification of Economic Activities (NACE 2008), 2008).

The sectors listed in the ISO statistics are slightly different from those of the National Classification of Economic Activities but there are certain similarities. According to data published by ISO (International Organization for Standardization, 2018) for 2017, the sector with the largest number of issued certificates is “Basic metal & fabricated metal products” with 13% of the total number of issued certificates, followed by “Electrical and optical equipment” with 10%, “Hotels and restaurants” with 0.48% (3536 certificates), “Transport, storage and communication“ with 3.21 % (23 948 certificates) and “Other services” with 5.38% (40 122 certificates). The total number of certificates issued in Bulgaria in 2017 is 3 702. Figure 2 shows their distribution by sector.

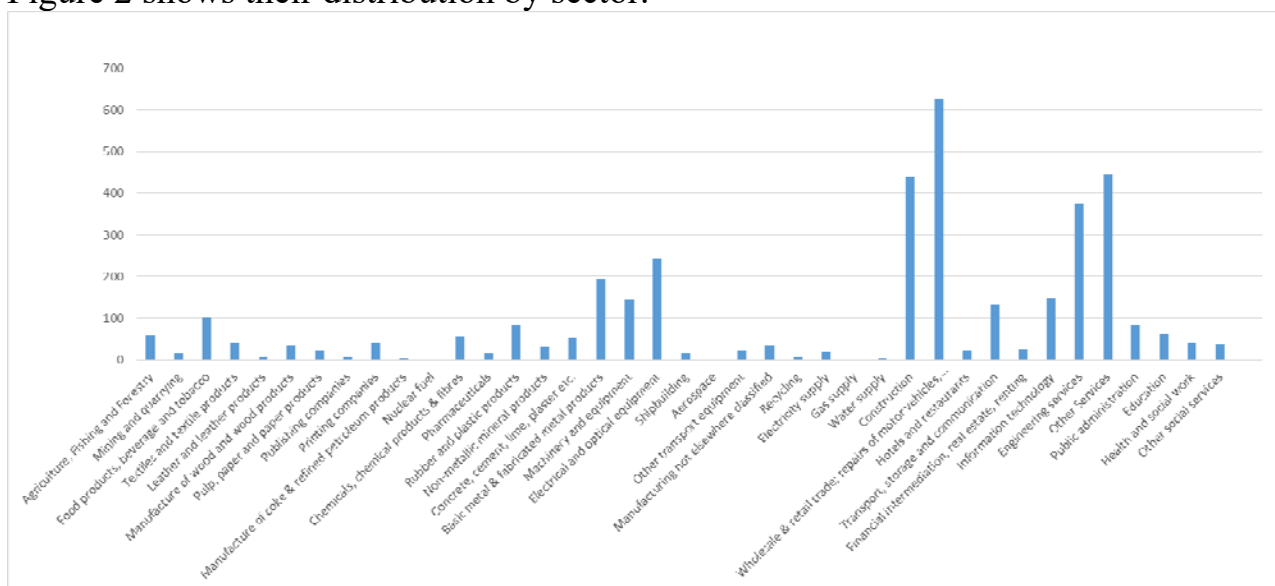


Figure 2. Number of ISO 9001 certificates issued in 2017 in Bulgaria, by sector

Source: ISO Survey 2017, <https://www.iso.org/the-iso-survey.html>

The largest number of certificates was reported for the sector of “Wholesale & retail trade, repairs of motor vehicles, motorcycles & personal & household goods“ – 16.94% (627 certificates), “Other services” – 12.02% (445 certificates) and “Construction” – 11.91% (441 certificates). Only 23 ISO 9001 certificates were issued in the sector of “Hotels and restaurants” (0.62%) and 133 - in the sector of “Transport, storage and communication“ (3.59%).

Since “Hotels and restaurants” is the most specialized sectors of all the sectors discussed above, the small number of certificates issued in this sector is logical. The relative share of certified organizations in this sector in our country is 0.62% and worldwide it is 0.48%, which means that certification in the hotel and restaurant industry is less common than it is globally.

The small number of certified organizations in the field tourism is due to the imposed systems for categorization of accommodation facilities and the requirements for licensing of tour operator and agency services, which are mandatory statutory requirements for provision of tourist services. The compliance to these requirements is considered sufficient to guarantee the quality of the provided tourist services. For certification apply only the companies that participate in public procurement bids in order to meet the eligibility criteria.

However, the fact that the need to distinguish high-quality from standard services in the field of tourism has been subject to public debates, proves that the existing regulatory provisions regarding tourism activities are not sufficient. Therefore, tourism enterprises have to look for an alternative way to guarantee the quality of their tourist products and services in terms of implementation and certification of their own QMS.

4. ISO 9001 principles and benefits of its implementation in Bulgarian tourism enterprises

A quality management system enables the organization to manage and control the activities that contribute (directly or indirectly) to the achievement of its goals. Generally, it follows the structure of the organization in terms of its planning, processes, resources, and information records and aims the achievement of its quality objectives (e.g. to meet the requirements of customers and other stakeholders, to improve its quality management process or its products and services).

Figure 3 shows the fundamental principles defined in the latest edition of the standard (Biswas, 2018):

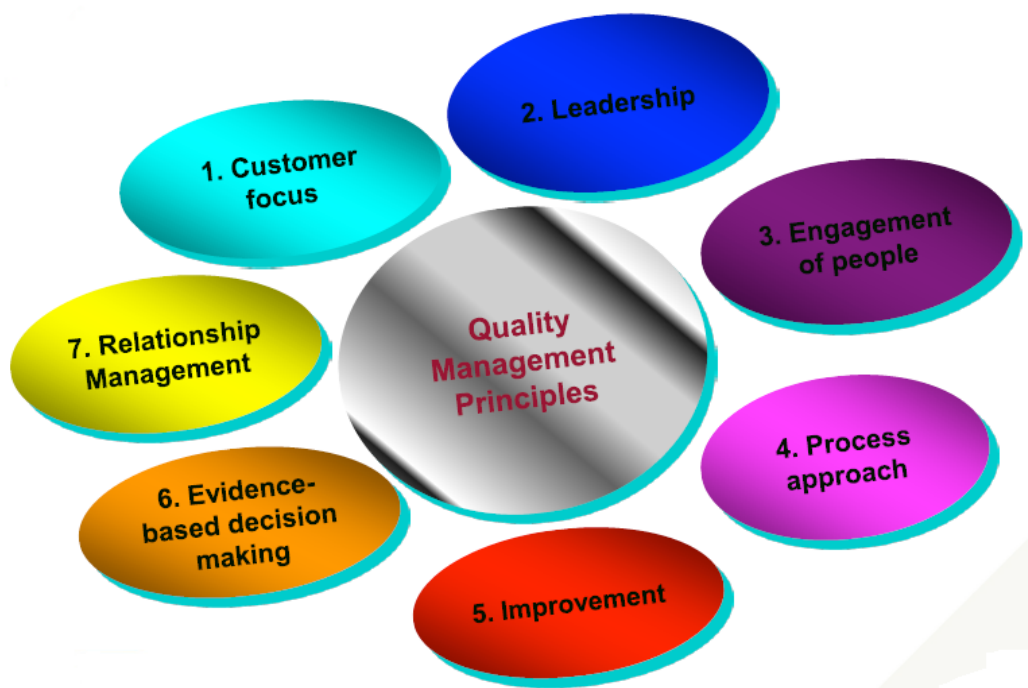


Figure 3. Fundamental principles of ISO 9001:2015

Source: <http://isoconsultantpune.com/apb-consultant-iso-90012015-quality-management-system/apb-consultant-seven-principles-quality-management-per-iso-90012015/>

1 – Customer Focus: The primary focus of quality management is to meet customer requirements and to strive to exceed customer expectations. Sustained success is achieved when an organization attracts and retains the confidence of customers and other interested parties on whom it depends. Every aspect of customer interaction provides an opportunity to create more value for the customer.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- There is an increase in customer value;
- There is an increase in customer satisfaction;
- There is an improvement in customer loyalty to products and services as well as brands in general;
- It enhances in repeat business;
- It enhances in reputation of the organization;
- There is an expansion of customer base;
- There is increase in revenue and market share.

2 – Leadership: Leaders at all levels establish unity of purpose and direction and create conditions in which people are engaged in achieving the quality objectives of the organization. Creation of unity of purpose, direction and engagement enable an organization to align its strategies, policies, processes and resources to achieve its objectives.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- It increases the effectiveness and efficiency in meeting the organization's quality objectives;
- There is a better coordination of the organization's processes;
- There is improvement in communication between levels and functions of the organization;
- It develops and improves the capability of the organization and its people to deliver desired results.

3 – Engagement of People: It is essential for the organization that all people are competent, empowered and engaged in delivering value. Competent, empowered and engaged people throughout the organization enhance its capability to create value. To manage an organization effectively and efficiently, it is important to involve all people at all levels and to respect them as individuals. Recognition, empowerment and enhancement of skills and knowledge facilitate the engagement of people in achieving the objectives of the organization.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- It improves understanding of the organization's quality objectives by people in the organization and increased motivation to achieve them;
- It enhances involvement of people in improvement activities;
- It enhances personal development, initiatives and creativity;
- It enhances people satisfaction;
- It enhances trust and collaboration throughout the organization;
- It increases attention to shared values and culture throughout the organization.

4 – Process Approach: Consistent and predictable results are achieved more effectively and efficiently when activities are understood and managed as interrelated processes that function as a coherent system. The quality management system is composed of interrelated processes. Understanding how results are produced by this

system, including all its processes, resources, controls and interactions, allows the organization to optimize its performance.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- It enhances ability to focus effort on key processes and opportunities for improvement;
- There are consistent and predictable outcomes through a system of aligned processes;
- It can optimize performance through effective process management, efficient use of resources and reduced cross-functional barriers;
- It enables the organization to provide confidence to interested parties related to its consistency, effectiveness and efficiency.

5 – Improvement: Successful organizations have an ongoing focus on improvement. Improvement is essential for an organization to maintain current levels of performance, to react to changes in its internal and external conditions and to create new opportunities.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- There is improved process performance, organizational capability and customer satisfaction;
- There is enhanced focus on root cause investigation and determination, followed by prevention and corrective actions;
- There is enhanced ability to anticipate and react to internal and external risks and opportunities;
- There is enhanced consideration of both incremental and breakthrough improvement;
- There is improved use of learning for improvement;
- There is enhanced drive for innovation.

6 – Evidence-based Decision Making: Decisions based on the analysis and evaluation of data and information are more likely to produce desired results. Decision-making can be a complex process, and it always involves some uncertainty. It often involves multiple types and sources of inputs, as well as their interpretation, which can be subjective. It is important to understand cause and effect relationships and potential unintended consequences. Facts, evidence and data analysis lead to greater objectivity and confidence in decisions made.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- There is an improvement in decision making processes;
- There is an improvement in assessment of process performance and ability to achieve objectives;
- There is an improvement in operational effectiveness and efficiency;
- There is an increased ability to review, challenge and change opinions and decisions;
- There is an increased ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of past decisions.

7 – Relationship Management: For sustained success, organizations manage their relationships with interested parties, such as suppliers, customers, the general public, etc. Interested parties influence the performance of an organization and to achieve sustained success it has to manage relationships with its interested parties to

optimize their impact on its performance. Relationship management with its supplier and partner network is often of particular importance for marketing success.

Its key benefits (as per ISO 9000:2015) are:

- There is an enhanced performance of the organization and its relevant interested parties through responding to the opportunities and constraints related to each interested party;
- There is a common understanding of objectives and values among interested parties;
- There is an increased capability to create value for interested parties by sharing resources and competence and managing quality related risks;
- There is a well-managed supply chain that provides a stable flow of products and services.

In pursuit of continuous improvement, successful organizations "overachieve" the criteria required by ISO 9001 and set much higher goals in a pursuit of new approaches and opportunities to improve their performance by using another type of standards designed to help them improve their management systems, processes, or activities. These standards do not provide certification but can be adhered to.

Quality management system standards should not be associated with the standards regarding the quality of tourist products and services (accommodation, transportation, protection of the environment, etc.) Although such standards provide for stringent requirements that must be met by the products and services, the quality management system standards (and in particular ISO 9001) provide requirements for good management practices to achieve quality without reference to a particular type of product or service.

The simultaneous adherence to product and service standards, quality management system standards, and quality improvement approaches aims to improve customer satisfaction and the competitive advantage of the organization (two goals that are not mutually exclusive).

The implementation and certification of a QMS has the following benefits for the tourist enterprise:

- competitive advantage – it will be more clearly identifiable by its business partners and customers as a provider of high-quality services that are more attractive to both tour operators and tourists;
- establishment of long-lasting customer relations – the “customer focus” principle of ISO 9001:2015 includes a primary focus on interested parties, which means their understanding and establishment of long-lasting and partnership in the process of negotiation and provision of tourist services;
- resource optimization – the identification of the necessary resources for provision of high-quality services and their efficient management entails cost reduction, process optimization, diversification of the available sources to finance innovations, and increase of the profitability of the tourist enterprise;
- sustainability – quality management ensures the sustainable development of the tourist enterprise, which means job security, better living standard for the local community and active management of the tourist destinations.

In public discussions on quality assurance issues, it is recognized that business aims to distinguish quality from standard service. The choice of part of the business

to move towards ISO 9001 certification proves that the existing regulations and the categorization obtained are not sufficient to guarantee the quality of their services. The search for opportunities to provide quality service and quality tourism product, determines the necessity of construction and certification of QMS in tourist enterprises.

My **conclusion** is that the drawbacks of the narrow specialization of product-oriented standards developed for accommodation facilities, tourist destinations, environment-friendly tourist activities, tourist transportation services, etc. can be avoided if tourism enterprises adhere to an internationally recognized standard such as ISO 9001, which is clearly recognizable and associated with the provision of quality goods and services in all sectors of the economy. With its benefits for the tourism enterprises and its general requirements, ISO 9001 is versatile and effective in the long run without the need for additional investments and process reorganization.

The government policies related to quality management in tourism should take into account the fact that there is a standard that is universally applicable to any organization regardless of its type and size or the products and services it provides, and thus is a feasible alternative to guarantee the quality in the sector of tourism. Therefore, promoting the standard would render better results than establishing a new system of quality certification and marking in the tourism sector.

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