

Writing Your Own Quality Manual

Considering hiring a consultant to help write it? Think again.

By Roberta L. Marsteller, P.E. and Dan Kaufman

Even with 125 questions answered on Quality Management Company's new web site, www.qmconline.com, there is one question we don't have a good answer for: "I'm interested in hiring a consultant to help us write our quality manual. Can you recommend someone?"

This question comes up almost daily as many AISC Certified Building Fabricators are looking for assistive resources while converting from the checklist to the *Certification Standard for Steel Building Structures* (the *Building Standard*).

Our hesitation in answering the question relates to other calls we receive from angry fabricators that have sought the help of a consultant and been dissatisfied. Here are a few recent horror stories:

- A fabricator spent \$18,000 on a quality manual and received eight corrective actions during the on-site audit.
- One fabricator discovered (too late) that what they paid for had been blatantly plagiarized from the *Quality Manual Guidelines* published by QMC.
- Still another one never received an electronic copy. After many unsuccessful attempts to contact the consultant, he ended up retyping all of the files that required changes.

Does this mean there are no good consultants out there? No, but it means you need to proceed with caution if that is the path you choose.

What can you do?

Can you make the change without the help of a consultant? Of course you can. If you are like most manufacturers producing good work to ensure repeat business and fighting off the competition, you are doing 90% of the right things, right now. So what is making you look for outside help? Do you think you need special skills in making the

words just right? The *Building Standard* is written so that specific wording is not really required. If you can write a procedure that people can follow, you can write well enough to satisfy an auditor. There are no penalties for misspellings or bad grammar!

Are you trying to avoid rewriting your manual? You can avoid some of that. If you are currently working to a procedure that works just fine for your business, you probably don't need to rewrite it. A documented procedure calls for a purpose, responsibility for completion, responsibility for review of the procedure, identifying records resulting from the procedure and, of course, the steps to carry out the function. The *Building Standard* doesn't say how detailed any of this needs to be.

Not convinced?

Here's an example: You probably already say that the "unloader will look for obvious damage to the load and note it on the PO." There you have the responsibility for the steps (the unloader), a step (look for obvious damage), and the record (on the PO). As for the documentation required by QMC, you can simply write in your quality manual, "Refer to Procedure X, located in the lunchroom on the west wall." Assuming other employees can find it, it's a good bet the auditor can, too. The purpose and the responsibility for review can be shown somewhere else, maybe in an index of your procedures. Look at some of your job descriptions, too. They might be detailed enough to get the job done, and they should be tied to a job anyway.

Are you afraid of "corrective actions"? No point system exists that says if you get a corrective action, you have to pay a fine—and certainly not a fine as big as a five-figure consultant fee. If you miss your target with a procedure, a corrective action will show where the target is, and give you time to fix it. If you receive a large number of corrective actions you may have your work cut out for you. Making an effort to do it right will likely keep you out of trouble. Remember: It's always better to have QMC find the inefficiencies in your system than to have your customers find them.

Let QMC help!

QMC has many valuable resources available to assist AISC Certified companies or companies who are pursuing certification. At www.qmconline.com you'll find samples of the following, and more:

- vendor evaluation
- internal audit documentation
- equipment list
- facility plan
- cross reference matrix

Submitting your manual to QMC early can help you get a "free" review. If any problems are found during the review of your materials, you will be notified what the problems are and allowed to fix them prior to the on-site audit. However, submitting a manual at the last minute takes all the flexibility out of QMC's review process and could leave you starting the on-site audit at a disadvantage. →

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If you want to discuss your options or still aren't sure where to turn for assistance, the friendly QMC staff is ready to help. Call them at 312.670.7520 or send an e-mail to certinfo@qmconline.com.

Still think a consultant is the answer?

If you do decide to hire a consultant after all, here are some tips, advice, and a few words of caution:

- **Ask for references.**
- **Ask to see samples of their work.** You don't need to know which client it was for, so they can simply delete any reference to the company for which it was prepared. You will want to evaluate it for clear, simple, and concise language and logical formatting. Be sure to take note of how long it takes you to understand what you are looking at.
- **Ask if their work has been scrutinized as part of an AISC audit.**
- **Beware of anyone who claims to know "exactly what QMC wants."**
- **No one can guarantee you will pass your on-site audit with no corrective actions.** Remember documentation is

only one part of the audit process—you still need to demonstrate that you do what you say you do.

- **Don't expect to find an expert that knows your business—you** are the best expert on your own business!

The best consultant stories we've heard center around fabricators that have hired a technical writer with experience in writing quality documentation. Technical writers don't have to be experienced in the steel industry. They simply listen to you describe your business and your quality system and subsequently prepare a written account that reflects what you have described.

Terry Logan, Lead Auditor for QMC, warns, "Hiring a consultant can be a double-edged sword. One side can cut your resource development time by having the consultant assist with the documentation. But beware the other side of the sword: Without proper precautions, a consultant can cut deeply into your bank account, leaving little to show for it." ★

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