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Making the grade: International standards critical for Canuck firms

That 'ISO 9000' label can have profound effects on a company's business

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AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE dealing with product and business standards is in town this week and one local firm that recognizes the importance of being certified under a globally recognized standard is Brytech Inc. The manufacturer of devices for the blind and visually impaired has been ISO 9000 certified for the last six years and is seeking additional ISO certification in the medical arena.

"Where we benefited (from ISO certification) is internally. We developed a better structure and framework in every aspect from accounting, sales, development, employee contact," says John Davey, the company's engineering manager.

"It definitely helps in creating awareness in different parts of a company."

The International Organization for Standardization sets product and management standards for business, government and NGOs that are recognized by countries around the world. Two prominent ISO standards are the ISO 9000 series of business management standards, which focus on setting quality standards for products and business management processes, and the ISO 14000 series on environmental quality management which focuses on ways an organization can minimize its impact on the environment. Once a product is certified to the ISO 9000 standards, it can be sold worldwide and consumers have assurance of its quality, says Peter Oark, executive director of Standards Council of Canada (SCC). SCC serves as Canada's national standards body and the country's representative to the ISO. ISO members are comprised of national standards bodies from countries with developed, developing and transitional economies. Companies are strongly encouraged to meet ISO requirements for quality business management and products, especially in healthcare, says Mr. Oark, but high tech, agriculture and forestry are also gaining ground.

"It's a requirement by Health Canada, for example, to ensure that any medical device that's imported into Canada has been certified," he says.

"They must meet ISO 9000." In order to achieve this certification an organization must embody eight business management principles: to maintain a customer focus, clear leadership, involvement of people at all levels, a process approach, a systems approach to management, a focus on continual improvement, a factual approach to decision making, and a mutually beneficial relationship with suppliers. Once a business has implemented the ISO principles, it must seek a certification body accredited by the SCC, which will make an on-site visit to assess the organization's compliance. If the processes are fully implemented, certification is granted. Audits are subsequently done once a year by the accredited body," says Pat Paladino, SCC director of conformity assessment.

"A paper trail (electronic record) is required for the whole operation; initial product requirements, making sure the requirements meet the customer's need, making sure that those requirements are reflected in the design of the products," Brytech's Mr. Davey explains.

"In that, there is a lot of testing and test records to demonstrate that we have met the standards that we are saying the product conforms to."

"A paper trail gives clients assurance for an organization's product and policy. It also provides the organization with a detailed and holistic view of the business activities at all levels, which can highlight opportunities to improve efficiency," says Mr. Paladino.

About 12,000 Canadian companies are certified to ISO 9000, while 1,650 companies are certified to ISO 14000. Worldwide, 775,000 companies have the ISO 9000 certification. Even if a company is not interested in selling their products on an international level, ISO certification can be beneficial for business.

"Suppose (a company) doesn't want to go international, suppose they want to sell to say, Terry Matthews. ...He may want all of his suppliers to be 9000 certified so he knows the base quality of components that go in to whatever he is doing is consistent. Nortel is another one that wants everybody in their supplier chain to be certified," Mr. Oark said.

Delegates from over 100 countries have come together at the Chateau Laurier to discuss standards at the ISO's 29th general assembly taking place this week from Sept. 10 to 16. To register to attend the session, visit the event website www.isocanada2006.ca