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THE QUALITY IN THE DOMAIN OF SERVICES

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A. The concept of quality in services

The quality means different things for different persons depending on their experience and their position in an organization, thus, even though the preoccupations for quality appeared from the very beginning of humankind, only in the 20th century a spectacular evolution of the actions and the concepts regarding quality was brought forth.

The modern concept of quality is based on four fundamental rules : the defining of quality, the prevention, zero defects and the measurement.

The definitions given to this concept take into consideration the two distinct aspects : the objective aspect of quality that represents the conformity degree of a process or of its results with a predetermined set of criteria considered essential for the final value that this one furnishes; the subjective aspect of quality represents the level of the perceived value reported to the person that benefits of the process or its result.

The ISO 8402 standard defines quality as representing “the set of characteristics of an entity, that confers itself the aptitude to satisfy the expressed and implicit needs”.

According to this definition :

- the quality is not expressed through a single characteristic, but through a set of characteristics;
- the quality is not standing-alone, it exists only in relation with the clients' needs;
- the quality is a continuous and not discrete variable;
- through quality not only the expressed needs, but also the implicit ones must be satisfied.

The quality of a product/service is judged according to the promises and the results.

The quality in services is a problem of equilibrium, being composed of three components :

- the level of the service offered, corresponding to the strategies offered by the firm;
- the expectations of the client;
- the real service offered, as it is picked up by the beneficiary.

The quality can be studied under purely theoretical aspects also, on some hypothetical bases that can be very important in its estimation. Thus we can say about the quality of some merchandise that is an inherent aspect of the merchandise in itself, no matter if we can measure it or not.

The quality of services differentiates itself from the quality of the products because of the following elements:

- the indicators through which the quality of services is measured are not as exact as the ones of the products, this meaning that the appreciation of the services is not always clear;
- the service is characterized through a big degree of variability;
- the clients' revolt is way bigger in the case when the service's quality is low, reported to the one of the products.

The services' quality is appreciated through its essential characteristics perceived by the client. From the researches on the quality of the services, the following characteristics have been identified : trust, sensibility, competence, politeness, communication, credibility, security, knowledge and understanding of the clients.

Referring to the quality of the services, Panasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry identified the following five potential gaps between :

1. the expectations of the consumers and the perception of the leadership;
2. the expectations of the consumers perceived by the leadership and the characteristics of the quality of the service;
3. the characteristics of the quality and the delivery of the services;
4. the delivery of the service and what the consumer is told about this service;
5. the expectations of the consumers and their perceptions about the actual quality of the service.

The services represent correspondents of some needs at least as numerous as the needs of material goods, but with a more complex and more heterogeneous character. Knowing the essence and the structure of these needs is a priority when it comes to define the quality.

The offer of services has its peculiarities conferred to a great extent by the immaterial character of many of them. The problematic of the environment has numerous incidence zones with the zone of services, and defining quality can only be done by taking it into account.

The clients are and will be more and more exigent. In order to be able to satisfy their expectations, more or less fluctuant, the achievement of performance in the most strict sense possible is imposed.

The services are distinguished through four characteristics :

a. Their immaterial form or *intangibility*. Through their nature the services are immaterial (invisible) and consequently intangible. As compared to the physical products, they can not be seen, tasted, palpated or heard before their consumption. An example in this respect are the touristical services, especially when they are purchased in advance from an agency of tourism, the purchaser having the possibility of enjoying the respective services only when he arrives at destination.

In order to diminish the sentiment of incertitude when confronted with the alternatives of purchase, the clients orient themselves towards the evidence of the services' quality through symbols, marks, brands, photographs, price/tariff, or other means of communication.

The services tenderer's duty is to monitor this evidence of the quality, to make tangible the intangible through abstract ideas, cultivating the image of the service.

The mentioned tangibility can be realized through a series of helpful physical elements that are put at the firms' disposition :

- The premises where the service is commercialized and carried out;
- The personnel who has to offer an image of operative activity;
- The equipment used in the carrying out of the services must offer an image of solidity, to contribute to the increase of the trust concerning the quality of the service carried out;
- The instruments of communication must be carefully selected in order to suggest the efficiency and the attention paid to the processes of performing the services;
- The symbols : the carriers out choose their symbols because they want to differentiate from other firms, creating themselves in time, from the respective symbols an image, a guarantee in what concerns the quality and the consistency of the services;
- The price or the tariff perceived for different services must constitute a form of communication with the services' solicitants, exposed in visible places and presented in a sober but suggestive form in order to permit a rapid consultation from the interested customers.

b. The coincidence in time and space or *the inseparability* : currently the services are carried out and consumed concomitantly as compared to the physical goods that traverse the processes of fabrication, of transportation, of depositing, of control of the quality having to be sold later. If the service is carried out for a person (personalized service) the respective person becomes participant of the service. Through the presence of the client in the carrying out of

the service the interaction carrier out – client gains a special role, explicable through the fact that the satisfaction of the consumer is favorably influenced by both participants.

c. Eclecticism or variability. Because most of the services are performed by persons, the quality of services tends to vary considerably from one transaction to another. The services are really different from the point of view of the duration and of the quality of the carrying out depending on who, when and where are carried out.

In order to reduce this variability the services' carrying out firms should deal with the specialization of the personnel and with the standardization of the services' components.

d. The unstoring or the outage. The services can not be deposited (stored) in order to be used later on. Any unutilization of the services in a period of reference constitutes a loss that can not be recovered.

In the strict sense of the quality's characteristics some specialists identified the following characteristics of the services' quality : reliability, response capacity, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding/knowing the client, tangibility.

The signification of these characteristics can vary considerably, depending on the nature of the services and of their users, so that, in the assessment of the quality of the services, the weight accorded to the different characteristics depends on the concrete spatial and temporal coordinates of every service.

The ISO 9004-2 standard recommends the clear defining of the requirements regarding services, in the terms of some characteristics observable for the client and susceptible to be assessed by this one.

At the same time the defining of the service's corresponding processes through the agency of some characteristics that are not always observable for the client, but which directly influences the performance of the services is necessary.

In this respect the standard proposes taking into consideration the following characteristics of the services :

- Facilities (installations and equipments), capacity, personnel, materials;
- The waiting time, the duration of the carrying out of the service, the duration of the processes;
- The hygiene, the security, the reliability;
- The capacity of reaction, accessibility, courtesy, comfort, the aesthetic of the environment, the competence, the safety in functioning, precision, technical level, credibility, efficacious communication.

The control of the quality is an integrant part of the implementation of the services' carrying out process. This one includes :

- the measurement and the verification of the key activities of the process, in order to avoid the appearance of some undesired tendencies and of the revolt of the client;
- the auto-control carried out by the personnel instructed to carry out the service considered an integrant part of the measurement of the process;
- the final assessment of the interface with the client, carried out by the carrier out, in order to obtain its own image of the quality of the service provided.

The assessment carried out by the client constitutes the absolute and final measure of the quality of the service. The client's reaction can be immediate or delayed and retroactive. The assessment of the service by the client often reduces itself to a subjective assessment only. The clients rarely communicate, spontaneously, the services' organization their appreciations regarding the quality of the service.

Usually, the unsatisfied clients stop using or purchasing the respective service, in the absence of the announcement of some adequate corrective measures. The limitation to the clients' reclamations, in order to measure their satisfaction, can lead to wrong conclusions.

The client's satisfaction must be compatible with the standards and the professional ethic specific to the organization of services.

The organization of services must establish a mode of permanent assessment and measurement of the clients' satisfaction. As part of these assessments, not only the positive and negative reactions, but also their probable incidence on the future activities of the organization must be identified.

The assessment of the client's satisfaction must identify, principally, the degree of adequacy of the specifications and of the carrying out process of the service as compared to the requests of the client. Frequently the organization of services considers that these ones are of good quality even if the clients have a contrary opinion. This disagreement indicates the inadequacy of the specifications of the processes or of the measurements.

2. The total quality in services

In a recently published work, Sureschchandar identified 12 critical dimensions for the total quality in services from the point of view of the managerial process.

Visionary leadership, the implication and the engagement of top management in the designing and the implementation of a TQM system

The concept of visionary leadership refers to the formulation of a long term vision for the development of the organization, the propagation of this vision inside the organization, the realization and the development of a plan of actions and in the end the stimulation of the entire organization in order to fulfill these actions in accordance with the respective vision.

In order to have success in the implementation of TQM, the organization must have dynamic leaders convinced by the values and of the necessity of their application, that praise their employees, that have a clear vision of quality, prepared to do away with the causes of the problems not only to fight against the symptoms.

The management of the human resource. The human resource is the one that would make all the other resources (capital, technology, information) productive.

This fact is true especially in the organizations that provide services because the interaction between the services' provider and the consumer is so big that eventually determines the perception of quality and the level of the clients' satisfaction.

In this respect the first steps that should be taken are the selection and the recruitment of the suitable persons for every job, capable to put their qualities in the service of the carrying out of the objectives of the organization and their motivation to achieve this through rewarding, delegation of authority etc.

The technical system. The projection of the system of quality management presupposes a correct and trustful project of the service in order to face up or exceed clients needs and expectations, leading to increasing performance in the end.

The specialists proposed two strategies of the quality that must be adopted from the very projection phase.

- The prevention, that is the insurance through projection, that the quality problems can be exceeded from the very phase of providing of the service;
- The "zero defects" strategy that means that if the projection is good, the only thing left is for the employees to respect the procedures and to provide a quality service.

A good projection has as its result an excellent quality of the service with characteristics that positively influence the perceptions on the services quality.

The management of the processes from the services refer especially to the procedures, systems and the technologies that are necessary for providing the service, that is it delimitates the non-human elements (the human elements being comprised under the name of “the culture of the service”). The projection processes of the services must be standardized, simplified both from the point of view of the achievement by the employee and from the point of view of its reception by the client.

The informational system and the information’s analysis. Every initiative related to quality in an organization will be destined to failure if an adequate and efficacious dissemination of the general information is not assured. The organizations that want to institute TQM must collect, integrate and communicate the critical information for its implementation.

Another important aspect is concerned with the communication between clients and the contact persons in the organization, between these ones and the organization’s management. Both from this communication and from other sources will result important information which correspondingly processed and analyzed will constitute the basis of the prevention measures of the appearance of unconformities.

Benchmarking. Being inspired by the aspects approached in benchmarking for products, analyses that will highlight the position towards the principal competitors in what concerns some characteristics of the services, processes, costs, strategies can be realized. Furthermore, besides the fixation on the service provided and on the processes that this thing presupposes, the organization must concentrate on the comparison of the client’s satisfaction relative to the services received, to the satisfaction of the employees, even on the training programs, on the aesthetic of the environment in which the service is provided.

Through benchmarking the organization tries to answer the following questions :

- How good are we situated when compared to others?
- How good do we want to be?
- Who is the best on the market?
- Through what means succeeded the market leader to become leader?
- How can we adapt what the leader does to our institution?
- How can we exceed our performances?

The continuous improvement. Deming evidenced the importance of continuous improvement saying that “it constantly and permanently improves the system of production or services, in order to improve the quality and the productivity and thus constantly decrease the costs”. The management doesn’t need to become preoccupied with the organization’s quality but when the activity becomes unprofitable, when the clients’ requirements change, when a new technology appears. Quality must be a continuous preoccupation of the organization’s leaders.

The focus on client and on his satisfaction is an important component of the TQM movement because the organizations can exceed their competitors efficaciously addressing the clients’ needs and requests, anticipating and answering their continuously evolving interests and wishes.

The services’ providers don’t have to try to guess the wishes and the expectations of the clients, but they have to try to determine them as correct as possible by directly consulting the consumer (about his perception on quality, satisfaction, his values) through surveys. The next step is to harmonize these data referring to quality with the managerial team’s perceptions in order to improve the services’ quality.

From the client’s point of view, the quality of a service can be defined as being the amplitude of the discrepancy between his expectations and the perceptions regarding that service.

The factors that influence the client’s expectations in the case of services are :

- the communication between the client and the persons with who he enters in contact when he benefits of a certain service;
- the personal needs of the client;
- the anterior experiences regarding the same type of services;
- the external communication (from the organization towards the client and the other way around);
- the price.

The managers interested in quality must regularly control the clients' perception relative to the quality of the services offered, to identify the causes that produce deficiencies in the quality of the services and to take positive measures in order to improve the quality of the services.

The most important discrepancies between the level of the perception's quality by the clients and by the managers come from the following discrepancies :

- between the clients' expectations and the managers' perception on these expectations;
- between the perception of the top management regarding the clients' expectations and the quality standards offers;
- between the quality specifications of the service and the service offered;
- between the service provided and what is communicated in the exterior of organization (especially towards the clients).

The satisfaction of the employees. People focus their energies, their competences and talent towards those rewards that they consider valuable. Consequently, the management must assure that the rewards it offers consolidates these behaviors (the orientation towards the client, the innovation, the spirit of social responsibility). These rewards should include both the recognition of the merits and supplementary benefits given by the organization (cars, offices, the selection for the training programs), not only financial rewards and promotions.

Only when the employees are satisfied of their work place they would be able to offer clients all the attention and the consideration necessary to the satisfaction of their expectations.

The intervention of the trade-unions. It was observed that the members of the trade-unions believe that the TQM initiatives represent a danger for the functioning and the influence of the trade-unions of the employees itself and because of this they are vehemently opposing the initiatives regarding quality.

Even though it is possible and desirable for the trade-unions and the managerial teams to realize that their functions are complimentary and not contradictory, getting thus to work in accord for the development of some compatible relations with the TQM purposes.

A modality of realizing this thing would be to give the trade-unionists the chance to take part at the establishment of the organization's politics and strategies. In this way they will assume and sustain them. Once the members of the trade-unions will understand the importance and the advantages of the politics and of the recruitment, selection and development of carriers' programs they will sustain them.

The social responsibility. Every organization has a big responsibility towards the society where it operates. Without doubt the economic organizations of any type exist to realize a profit, but not with any price. They must develop and construct themselves a good image, that is to fulfill their social obligations and the ones due to community. This thing refers to the ethical behavior of the organizations, the treatment without preferences of the clients, the providing of quality services at reasonable prices.

Servicescapes. The physical environment influences the behaviors and creates a big deal of the image perceived by the client about the organization and its employees, because in general the services are produced and consumed at the same time.

At the same extent the tangible facets of the services' providing (the space where the organization puts at client's disposition its services, the ambient conditions, the technologies used, the way in which the employees dress up) affects the clients too.

The organizations must have in view that the place where the client receives the service is a pleasant one, comfortable both for the client and the employees.

The organization's culture. This culture offers the possibility of supporting a commune vision of the organization and its purposes and ties the different functions of the organization towards these commune general objectives, through these assuring a proper and durable connection of the processes that contribute to the offering of a superior service.

The organization's culture reflects the degree in which the employees from all levels become conscious that "the purpose of their existence is to serve and to be at the disposition of the consumer", the extent to which the employees believe that TQM has a vital role in the strengthening of the organization's capacity to successfully face up the competition, the employees' resistance to change. At the same time, the trust, the opening and the good relations between the employees, the team spirit are the signs of a healthy organizational culture.

Another important aspect regarding the organization's culture is the degree in which the organization succeeds to promptly answer the clients' requests relying on a structure that has the essentials of life like bureaucracy and hierarchical levels.

A strong organizational culture is expected to lead to a better employees-clients interaction, that is to an improvement of the quality of the services offered and from now on to a more advanced level of the quality as perceived by clients.

3. The assessment of the services' quality

In what concerns the clients' assessment of the services' quality, the impressions, as well as the surroundings in which the services are provided have a great importance.

The surroundings in which the services are provided and the frequency with which those are used led to the elaboration of *three models for the assessment of the services' quality* :

- A. The clients assess the quality depending on a characteristic way important than the others;
- B. The clients assess the quality depending on an important characteristic, but having into account a certain level of quality for the others too;
- C. The clients assess the quality depending on the moderate mean of the different characteristics.

In the context when the clients don't have a choice the first model is valid. In the case in which the clients have more possibilities to choose from, other characteristics of secondary importance can be taken into consideration too.

In what concerns the control of the services' quality, even at present time the dominant idea is "quality is produced, not controlled", the control methods refer at the two types of standards presented above :

- From the producer's point of view, there is a set of criteria that define the service's quality, many of them referring to some invisible aspects for the client.
- Regarding the measurement and the control of the services' quality, as it is perceived by the clients, is important from the point of view of the deficiencies' notices (and *the trial of some compensation measures of the unsatisfied clients*) as well as of the seeking of some improvement ways of the service providing.

In this respect, the method mostly used is the one of the questionnaire addressed to clients that should mark exactly where the service failed to reach the standards of the producer and/or the clients' expectations.

A tentative worth mentioning for the analysis and the measurement of the services' quality permitted the identification of more distances : The producers' ideas, Clients' needs, The services' characteristics, The services' providing, The communications with the customers

It is evident that a high quality level presupposes that these distances to be reduced, respectively : the producers are acquainted with the clients' needs and correctly translate these needs in characteristics; the carrying out corresponds to these characteristics; the clients are very well informed in what concerns the services.

The quality control doesn't have to become an objective in itself, but a means for the improvement of the services' quality and, thus, of the enterprise's competitiveness. There is, thus, a circle of the quality, in the sense that a high level of the quality attracts clients, and the clients claim an increased quality.

The activities that contain quantifiable elements can be measured from the point of view of those, but the respective elements can be of major importance or can only represent collateral aspects of the service in cause, some not even being necessary to be taken into consideration. In the material production, the measured quantifiable factors are, the great majority of them, characteristic, inclusively for the quality of the output. The different physical or chemical features are essential in this case.

In the case of the services though, the immaterial character makes that in the quality aspects physical and quantifiable indicators to be rarely found. In the developed economies intense researches for the measurement of the services' quality were made, but this one stays mostly subjective or at the client's latitude. Consequently, every manager must pick up some criteria for the determination of the principles through which it appreciates its quality and, lastly, the practice in the conditions of the market concurrence is the one that gives credibility or not. On a long term, those criteria, that is the quality of the service and its adequacy to a segment of customers. In this respect questionnaire-inquiry are frequently used in order to measure the clients' expectations and pretences from a qualitative point of view and of their perceptions.

The approach of the businesses with services in a modern, evolved conception, in which a central place is granted to quality, will permit a corresponding functioning, chances of stability, of persistence of the firm, eventually of increase.

The quality can be analyzed under the form of some balances, in the sense of the comparison of the quality's costs with the negative effects of non-quality. In order to attain a certain qualitative level expenses that have to be put in balance with the benefic effects that they have in the satisfaction of the customers, that is in the functioning of the services' firm are necessary.

A supra-dimensioning of these expenses can prove to be inefficient, in the sense that the plus of quality realized is not sufficiently big to justify the continuous increase of the costs.

The analyses of the quality - non-quality costs can offer a systematic vision and new methods of control of the functioning of the firms and its chances of persistence and stability, eventually increase.

In the services' enterprise, the quality constitutes the key factor for the position on the market in rapport with the concurrent firms. If in other branches price politics and other concurrently politics can be used, in services the quality remains primordial for the preservation of the priority in front of other firms, maintained – effectively and as image – through all methods : quality, advertising, publicity, everything in the framework of the respect of a enterprise culture that proved to be benefic.

The control of the budgetary administration can not have, in time, as an objective, only the as big as it can get immediate profit, this not being a purpose in itself, but only a means to make or to keep the enterprise competitive on a long term. The budgetary achievements rather constitute a indicator-barometer of the attraction towards the firm's performances and of the customers' attachment.

The orientation towards the quality of the service is insignificant if it's not correspondingly put in practice. The adequate quality level and the afferent form of this quality can only be achieved if all the activity is insistenty centered on the client's satisfaction, subordinated to this purpose.

The international standard ISO 9000-2 offers a model of intern assurance of the quality, adapted to the specific needs of the service carrying out organizations.

This standard can be used for all types of services (banking, of tourism, public alimentation etc.), inclusively in the case of the services associated to the fabrication or the delivery of a product.

The ISO 9000-2 standard can be applied by any type of organization that provides services, in the following principal purposes :

- The implementation of a system quality for an existing service;
- The development of a system of quality for a new or modified service.

This standard can not serve as a reference standard for the certification of the system of quality, in this respect the standards that define the models of extern insurance being applicable.

According to the ISO 9000-2 standard, the satisfaction of the clients requests is only possible through the harmonization of the interactions between :

- the responsibility of the leadership;
- the human resources and the other resources of the organization;
- the structure of the system of quality.

The assessment of the possibilities of implementing an assurance system of quality at the level of a service providing organization can represent a complex intercession that necessitates the covering of the following steps :

1. The first step consists in ***identifying the opportunity of the implementation of a SAQ*** and the organization of the process' application as follows :

- in the first place it will proceed to a market study that will prove the real need for a qualitative system;
- depending on the result of the market research the organization of some preparation studies for the firm's employees is imposed or not and, if it proves to be necessary, consultancy will be granted to the firms that have in view the certification, in what concerns the practice of an adequate management system of quality;
- thenceforth, the implementation of SAQ can be organized on a plan structured as it follows :
 - ❖ the definition of the firms' objectives in what concerns quality;
 - ❖ the determination of the strategic objectives;
 - ❖ the identification of the basic activities and their classification according to the main function;
 - ❖ the combination of these functions in a packet of responsibilities and competences;
 - ❖ the structuring of this packet in one or more organizational components, corresponding to the firm's specific requests;
 - ❖ the settlement of the ties with other organizational components involved in the achievement of the objectives.

The organization of the whole process is a constitutive part of the quality's scheduling and presupposes the determination of some duties specific on employees and groups of employees.

The basic principles of the organization must be :

- the determination of the authority relations;
- the increase of the efficiency and of the quality of work through synergy;
- the improvement of the communication;
- becoming conscious of the human resources;
- the motivation.

Having in view to assure the same level of quality for all the consumers, the standards could be created for every type of service in part.

2. The second step will consist in ***the pursuit and the analysis of the level of application of the total quality management and the pursuit of the efficiency of the implemented system*** on the basis of the organization plan previously prevented and of the standards.

Once the system is created, the level of quality will be monthly checked out with the help of the complex indicator quality and economical efficiency (ICQ), all through the assessment period of the SAQ implementation.

The seeking of the client's satisfaction must be however extended after the effectuation of the service too. The feedback will be used to improve the strategy of assurance of quality, having in view the fact that the inputs towards the clients can be used to define their precise needs.

The assessment of the experimental application of the system could assure the basis of the firm's option to be certified as an approved organism. In this respect "the quality's transaction" can be used as a modern leading method of quality through costs.

In order to maintain constant for all its clients the quality level, every organization must compose and then to communicate to all employees directions regarding every work duty concerning quality. In this respect an instruction book of the quality of services, in which all standards that regard the quality of the respective services would be described should be elaborated.

The communication of the quality standards for every procedure can be realized through formation activities (training), through meetings, personnel recruitment, video etc.

The key objectives of the assurance of the services' quality should include :

Y the strengthening of the importance of assuring total quality, focused on effective operations of production and service included in a system of services, inclusively the support systems;

Y the highlighting of the fact that the activities should aim at the quality on three levels : the organizational level, the processual level and the performance level, every level assuring an information basis that should have the clients' satisfaction as an effect;

Y the differentiation of the production organizations from the ones carrying out services and the highlighting of the differences inside the carrying out ones in order to delineate and implement an adequate system of assuring quality;

Y the demonstration of the fact that the assurance of quality in production and respectively services should be differentially approached in what concerns the employees' responsibilities, the type and the use of the technology;

Y the realization of the tie between the concepts of quality and productivity and the demonstration of the fact that the general improvement of the level of quality is based on the increase of the productivity;

Y the introduction of the term of total management of quality and the explanation of the mode of application in practice of this one.

The modern methods of quality assurance represent at this moment a condition for the development of a competitive business, especially in the domain of service carrying out. The harmonization of the national, regional and international quality standards represents a strategic objective of the European integration politics.

In Romania, inside the carrying out firms of all types, the application of the quality assurance systems in the ISO 9000 vision is still restraint. The introduction and the application of the quality modern management principles and the SAQ certification represents, because of that, an essential factor in the increase of the service carrying out competitiveness.

From the services' characteristics and the quality's component in the framework of those result the main action directions too, the pries used by the manager for the assurance of the level of quality and the attraction of customers. It's about the factors that generate, moulds and influences the quality and that can be synthesized on the basis of the ones presented. The action on them determines the concrete quality.

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