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How Alternative has used certification to multiple international standards to increase business efficiency and demonstrate excellence

"Having five ISOs gives us a massive competitive edge. Certification also enables us to monitor, manage and analyze performance across many areas of our group more thoroughly, allowing us to address issues that we may not have previously picked up on"

Nada Moussa
Quality & Compliance Manager, Alternative

Customer objectives

- Demonstrate commitment to providing outstanding service

- Gain competitive advantage

- Establish common management systems following business acquisitions

- Increase business resilience

- Improve environmental performance

- Maximize quality of service provision and customer satisfaction

Customer benefits

- Winning new business

- A simplified tender process

- Improved customer satisfaction, with targets exceeded

- Increased internal efficiency

- Zero waste to landfill

- Multiple awards from business partners

- Minimized potential impact of business disruption

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Customer background

Business IT and communications provider Alternative has grown rapidly since it was established in 1994. The company has a complete communications and technology portfolio, including: cloud computing; virtualization; managed hosting; fixed-line voice; mobile; systems; IP networks and complex billing software solutions. Alternative employs over 600 people across six sites, with a turnover of £114m.

Why certification?

Alternative is among an elite group of only 5% of businesses globally to have achieved certification to five international management system standards (ISOs) with BSI. The company sees certification as central to its business strategy, currently holding ISO 9001 (Quality Management), ISO/IEC 27001 (Information Security), ISO 14001 (Environmental Management), ISO 22301 (Business Continuity) and ISO/IEC 20000-1 (IT Service Management). As well as being directly relevant to its clients' needs, Alternative's CEO Edward Spurrier says the standards are "a critical element of our commitment to providing an outstanding and professional service".

Certification to the individual standards was driven by various motivations. ISO 9001 was the first to be adopted, and the company sees it as a business basic. "You set up your management system, and this is the building block that other ISOs can be built upon," explains Nada Moussa, Quality & Compliance Manager. This and ISO 14001 were already held by Scalable, a company acquired by Alternative in 2008, and the board decided to extend the standards across the entire group.

The focus has been primarily on the standards relevant to Alternative's industry sector, with certification helping to formalize its service provision. "ISO/IEC 27001 demonstrates to clients that we have secure data and robust systems. Once we had gained that, it was a logical next step to gain ISO 22301. ISO/IEC 27001 includes business continuity procedures as part of its requirements, and so we built on that and extended our existing systems to address the additional requirements of ISO 22301.", says Hugo Holland-Bosworth Group Operations Director at Alternative.

Multiple standards

The company most recently turned its attention to IT service management and ISO/IEC 20000: "This is increasingly sought by clients as ITIL [Information Technology Infrastructure Library] becomes more popular in the IT industry, and is essential for bid applications and tender proposals," says Brian Smith, Head of Enterprise Sales at Alternative.

Benefits

Certification in general has increased business efficiency, enabling Alternative to monitor, manage and analyse performance across many areas more thoroughly. "We can address issues, with the potential for improvement, that before having ISO management systems in place we may not have identified," says Nada.

Holding multiple standards is a powerful sales tool for Alternative. ""ISOs are always discussed in initial sales meetings, and our bid management team use them daily when completing requests for tenders. In particular, our 'blue-light' clients, which include East Midlands and London Ambulance services, need to know that we have robust systems in place," explains Brian.

With business continuity solutions part of Alternative's portfolio, **ISO 22301** demonstrates its excellence in this area. It also makes business sense. "As well as lessening disruption to our own business and staff, it also reassures clients that in the event of a disruption, we can continue to operate with minimal or no impact to their business," says Hugo.

The **ISO/IEC 27001** systems enables the company to analyse trends more effectively. If a particular security incident happens a few times, this can be quickly identified and addressed. The way that incidents are categorized under **ISO/IEC 20000-1** allows for similar analysis. "In our sector, ISO/IEC 20000-1 sends a powerful message that we have the processes to cover the design, transition, delivery and improvement of services that fulfil our clients' requirements. And with only a small number of companies holding certification, it helps us stand out."

The adoption of **ISO 9001** has led to greater analysis of, and a rise in, customer satisfaction levels. Nada cites an example: "Our targets include completing 95% of orders by the promised date. We are now consistently achieving over and above this, averaging 98% over the past year."

Alternative has improved its environmental efficiency and credentials since implementing **ISO 14001**. Greater analysis of its energy consumption and recycling levels helps identify peaks and troughs. Hugo continues saying, "We have a 100% 'no waste to landfill' policy. General waste is incinerated responsibly and the energy generated is turned into electricity that is put back into a local community scheme."

Implementation

"As long as you have a clear understanding of the requirements common to all ISO management systems you can slot in the other standard specific requirements. The key is to identify the main stakeholders and get them on board from the beginning," advises Nada.

The main challenges were those associated with group integration, and involved joining up management systems, and extending across the whole organization the standards which some, but not all, parts of the business held. "It was a long process, but it has had a positive impact on the systems that are being used by everyone," says Nada.

BSI's role

Achieving certification has not been without its challenges for Alternative, and BSI has been a trusted partner. "We have made a number of strategic acquisition and these presented some issues which BSI helped us address," Nada explained. "For instance, one of the companies we acquired, Scalable, already had ISO 9001 and 14001, and we had to extend these across the business. We wanted a single certificate, but Scalable was still a separate legal entity. BSI advised us on how the certificate should look."

In particular, Nada and Alternative have built a longstanding, strong working relationship with their BSI auditor on information security and business continuity. "Our BSI auditor really understands our business and is able to make useful observations, which we can use to improve our processes. It's a great learning opportunity," summarizes Nada.

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