



Seal of approval

Billy MacInnes explains how IT support company Comms-care has used ISO certification to help move the business forward rather than just tick a few boxes

Just how valuable are ISO accreditations? The answer, according to Ewan Conlon, head of service delivery at Comms-care, depends on who you're talking to. "You can see painter and decorator vans with ISO 9000 written on them," he points out, "but that means buggler-all in the grand scheme of things." For Comms-care, however, there is no doubt that ISO accreditations are important given the stress and strain the company has gone through to achieve them.

Set up in 2002, Comms-care consciously adopted a channel-only model. It now caters for over 400 channel partners, from small start-ups to multinational system integrators, providing support to more than 7,000 customers. It has Microsoft and

Cisco Gold partner status and provides IT support services across the UK, Ireland and Europe.

Areas covered include maintenance, installation, managed services, service desk, Cisco support and Microsoft services. The company's advanced technology services include voice and unified communications, security, wireless, enterprise server, server and desktop, routing and switching.

Broader business

The company started out as a break/fix maintenance organisation and that is still the core business, but its focus on communications has broadened out to a 50:50 split between communications and servers and desktops.

Comms-care makes a virtue of its channel-only approach, to which it credits its "continual rapid growth". The strategy has struck a chord with potential partners, according to marketing manager Richard Eglon. "People have used channel-only providers in the past that have ended up going direct [but] they are confident we won't go out and go direct," he says. He adds that, with the downturn, resellers have been cutting back on their engineering resources and looking to a company like Comms-care to plug the gap. "More and more people are coming to us – this year has been our most profitable to date."

So why has the company put itself through so much stress over the last 18 months to get not just one, but three ISO accreditations? Conlon says

the move originated in a strategy initiated by Comms-care in 2006 to create a centre of excellence which in turn led to the development of a centre of service and business excellence.

"We set about the implementation of the foundations of ISO certification," Conlon says. "It wasn't a case of getting a tick in the box, but how do we move the business forward. We decided that we needed to raise our flag higher than the competition to get recognition." In for a penny, in for a pound: the company then decided to implement ISO certification across the entire business and Conlon set an 18-month timescale. "I should have taken the common sense approach," he remarks, adding there were times when he regretted it.

Comms-care had decided to go for

ISO 20000 (service delivery management) and ISO 27001 (security management) as well as ISO 9000 certification. Conlon says the business made a point of implementing ISO across the entire operation because so many other companies have done it only in parts.

"You can have ISO applicable to the business as a whole, to part of the business or even to a specific contract," he reveals. "A lot of the competition hides behind that. But we achieved everything, the whole set, from cradle to grave," Conlon says.

"A lot of service companies say they've got ISO 27001, but it's only in niche areas," adds Eglon. "Multiple disciplines fit under that umbrella but we have ISO 27001 across the whole business. It's a huge selling point from our perspective. Resellers can say they are in partnership with a service provider with ISO 27000 and 27001 and that can open doors for them."

ISO 27001 provides reassurance around information security management at a time when people are particularly anxious about it. "Without well-defined policies and procedures for managing the security and integrity of your essential business information, both your business and your customers are wide open to unacceptable risks," Conlon points out.

Triple whammy

The combination of all three ISO certifications is a "real differentiator" for the company, putting it in "a very select and niche group of IT service companies", says Conlon.

He adds that ISO certification demonstrates quality management, that Comms-care is using the best practices in a way that's flexible enough to adapt to meet customers' changing requirements.

"Large system integrators say 'you can have this service in this colour – if you don't like it, go somewhere else,'" Conlon says. "We go about it from the other end. You need to incorporate business change otherwise the contract just stands still. You need to be able to incorporate legislative changes and business-driven change. Sometimes, that might involve a charge on the customer, sometimes it won't."

For customers, ISO certifications can be an important area of reassurance and comfort. As Eglon points out, vendor accreditations are significant but there are an awful lot of them. But many people within customer organisations also have the ISO certifications and are familiar with the process. "They know we have the processes in place to deal with escalation," Eglon says.

"The customer end is where the

link becomes a lot stronger," Conlon agrees. "You're talking to procurement teams that are familiar with this process, so you can have a transparent mechanism to deliver service continuity. Customers see the benefits of having processes in place. There's a transparency between the organisations and you can provide a transparent platform for transition that is low risk and with much reduced cost." Using ISO processes, Comms-care can build in strategies and key performance indicators that can improve the contract and the quality of service and can be easily demonstrated.

Bidding leverage

The trend for ISO certification has been driven by the public sector but customers in the private sector are beginning to see it as a guarantee of service excellence. Channel partners have picked up on this and are looking at how to deliver it. While some see it as a tick in the box when bidding for specific work, others view it as a value well worth having. That division is apparent across small and large organisations, but there is undoubtedly demand on transition management and bid teams for ISO certifications.

Eglon observes that people are beginning to realise they need ISO certification but don't necessarily understand why. But the point is that if they partner with a provider that has ISO 20000 and 27001, those are key areas that bid managers are looking at. He believes that in larger bid scenarios with multiple technologies and platforms and different sensitivities about different networks, it is a big advantage to understand ISO processes and have ISO-accredited staff. He cites the example of a relatively small reseller that is talking to a large broadcasting house because Comms-care's ISO accreditation enabled it to get in the door. In essence, the certifications provide channel partners with a competitive advantage and an influential unique selling point in the bid process.

If customer engagement is required, Comms-care is happy to go along and promote or educate the reseller and provide a level of training. The company has marketing campaigns, dedicated service delivery contacts and account management teams to support its channel partners and they are all educated in ISO processes. "I spend a lot of time with account managers and the service delivery team," Conlon says. "They are all service experts and experts in their field. Our account managers have access to unlimited support material internally and we have regular

ISO definitions

ISO 9000 covers the fundamentals of quality management systems and is designed to help organisations meet the needs of customers and stakeholders. Over a million organisations worldwide are certified ISO 9001.

ISO 20000 is the first international standard for IT service management and consists of two parts. ISO 20000-1 "promotes the adoption of an integrated process approach to effectively deliver managed services to meet the business and customer requirements". ISO 20000-2 describes the best practices for service management within the scope of ISO 20000-1.

ISO 27001 is a formal specification that sets out specific requirements for a management system to bring information security under management control. IT support companies such as Comms-care can use it to assure customers their information security management procedures are of the highest standard.

training and development workshops because education is key."

According to Eglon, a lot of resellers just don't have the resources or infrastructure to go after ISO themselves. That's hardly surprising when you consider how much investment Comms-care has made in ISO certification, for which it is starting to "reap the rewards, slowly".

Conlon agrees it has been "a slow start, not a sprint off the blocks" but says the company can now demonstrate it is "very focused on quality and the scope is applicable to the entire business from end to end, which is making us a success".

ISO certification has also helped to raise the delivery of service and awareness of the processes involved at Comms-care. For sales-led

organisations, this can be a complicated area and one that may be an afterthought; for Comms-care, "it's level pegging".

Conlon believes that ISO certification is a significant benefit at a time when customers want more bang for their buck. "For too long, suppliers have dictated to customers what they can have," he says. "Now, the customer has more control. I think that's brilliant. ISO processes enable us to tailor services that actually fit the customer requirement."

"If you're going to do it, there's no point in doing it in one or two areas, you've got to apply it across the whole business," concludes Eglon. "It's what users are asking for and it's unique, especially for a company the size of Comms-care." ■

The standards

ISO 27001

According to the BSI website, the certification is designed to show customers that a company knows how to handle and protect valuable data.

"ISO/IEC 27001 is the only auditable international standard which defines the requirements for an Information Security Management System (ISMS). The standard is designed to ensure the selection of adequate and proportionate security controls.

This helps you to protect your information assets and give confidence to any interested parties, especially your customers. The standard adopts a process approach for establishing, implementing, operating, monitoring, reviewing, maintaining and improving your ISMS," stated the BSI.

ISO 20000

This standard concerns service management and is made up of ten sections with requirements as well as a code of practice.

The standard was originally produced to show the certified company knew best practice around information technology infrastructure library (ITIL) frameworks but it has been extended to cover other IT service management frameworks.

ISO 9000

This standard relates to quality management systems and can relate to the work a company can do for customers as much as the way it has organised itself. As a result many that have gone for the standard have done so as part of a concerted marketing effort to promote the value and quality a company can offer.