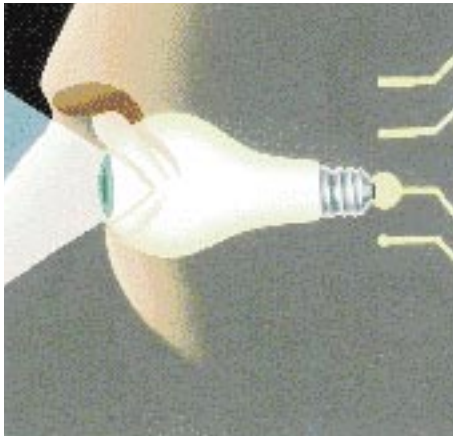


# Standards & Technology

A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES



Consumer worries about complexity and inconsistency in services are fueling a new standards debate.

## Standards for Services: The Coming Thing?

**T**he continuing quest for standardization has spawned an entirely new arena of activity. This arena has little to do with computers—and everything to do with information technology. The topic is the standardization of services.

This sounds rather benign, doesn't it? The *ISO Bulletin* reported on it at length in its September edition. While it makes fascinating reading, this report comes from the same people who brought you the ISO 9000 quality management standards and quality registration schemes, as well as the emerging ISO 14000 environmental management standards. Even ISO 14000 pales by comparison to the potential for standards in the service arenas.

Why service standards? Essentially, international standards developers are quick to spot an emerging market. Because the service sector of the economy is expanding more rapidly than the manufacturing sector, and because the hard goods arena in Europe has been largely standardized, the logical arena for new involvement is in the expanding (hence lucrative) services market. However, the question is, How does one justify involvement in the services arena?

Fortunately, the ISO Council Committee on Consumer Policy (Copolco) came up with a novel idea. It has proven that consumers are often afraid of the complexities of services. Says the *ISO Bulletin*, "The relationship [between provider and consumer] was complex: the latter was wary because it was difficult to assess for quality and for performance prior to service, and he or she was often not even sure what the service entailed or what he or she would get." It turns out, according to Copolco, that consumers wanted to know what it was they were buying, and they wanted to be sure of the quality and reliability of the service.

Now *service* is an extremely broad term; it can mean your relationship with your bank, your dentist, your psycholo-

gist, your travel agent, your advertising agency, and your telephone company, as well as anyone in the retail or hospitality business. And, we may casually mention, the software business.

## Helping the Consumer

Also of interest was the statement that service standards are "needed and could be developed before the technology actually even exists." As an example, the Stiftung Warentest (Consumers Testing Organization) of Germany tested mobile phones and found that the phones themselves were generally acceptable but that their quality of service was radically different. Speech quality needed to be improved: Some phones sounded muffled, and many weren't loud enough for use in a car. Further, features such as dialing and using memory could have been designed to be "far more practical." This begs the question, Practical to whom?

The German labs also found that the different prices, the different features, and the different conditions of the service made it difficult for the consumer to know which one to choose. It was obvious to Copolco—and to the general European readership of the bulletin—that service standards were the answer to this confusing morass presented by either high technology or the need to make trade-offs and decisions.

Imagine what this means to the typical software developer. Fundamentally, the developer will have to design software that satisfies a specific need of which users themselves are often unaware.

The requirements raised by such standards boggle the imagination. But this was not what Copolco was considering. Its concern was to help the consumer faced with inconsistency. To illustrate its point, Copolco cites a study showing that French moving companies that became certified increased their business. As part of the proof, the new service and the standard were shown to work together. The companies had to describe the requested service; quote a price that covered the service requested; answer the phone quickly and smartly; meet and

keep schedules; and observe safety precautions. One wonders what the French did before this standard emerged. Did French businesspersons randomly call someone with a truck to move something to a new office somewhere sometime? Did they really not check on price, schedule, quality, and the rest?

Copolco came up with the idea of horizontal standards; that is, standards that cut across all service industries. As an example, it cited the need for a common complaint resolution standard—a common method of guaranteeing users the right to be heard and to have essential needs satisfied. (As everyone knows, the complaints that one makes to a dentist or a bank and complaints about software have a lot in common.) Copolco also identified the concept of a family of standards; that is, banking satisfaction depends on telecommunications, and telecommunications depends on software. Therefore, families of standards with complex interconnections might be necessary.

### They're Not Kidding

Before you dismiss the idea of standards for services as the pipe dream of a standards weenie (a technical term), consider that U.S. industry considered ISO 9000 to be a fantasy when it was first proposed by the British in the early 1980s. Today, few major firms are unaware of it and are not registered or considering being registered. Even Microsoft has ISO 9002-registered locations. Massive implementation of an onerous 9000-based software quality scheme was stopped at the last minute by the efforts of Hewlett-Packard and other IT companies.

Today, the ISO 9000 series of standards is the largest-selling standard in the history of ISO, and a billion dollar industry has grown up around ISO 9000 registration and certification. (When the *San Jose Mercury News* has advertisements for ISO 9000 courses in it, you know that the standard has succeeded.)

ISO 14000—the environmental management specifications—was written in less than two years. This is ISO 9000

with teeth; the likelihood is high that European governments will make these specifications into law. They are due out by the end of 1996 and will have an impact on the way that work is done in Europe and probably in the United States as well (even if the U.S. does not embrace them), because products that are exported to Europe will probably have to comply with these standards.

I wish that there were a happy ending to this column. However, I am at a loss to prescribe a course of action. I do not believe that service standards can be stopped within the standardization arena;

the proponents are well-versed in the protocol and activities of ISO. To try to stop them outside the standardization arena would require the activities of a Department of Commerce trade representative, but the DOC is probably going away, which leaves precious few options.

I guess that the only advice I can offer is to hold on and watch out, because if service standards are written, the standardization arena could really get interesting.

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