

From Little q to Big Q— And Back Again

I continue to meet many quality and operational excellence (OpEx) experts around the world, and I've noticed a pattern.

Many lean Six Sigma (LSS) or OpEx experts feel very positive about their careers, while traditional quality engineers, quality assurance managers or quality experts feel very negative about theirs. I have messages for all of them.

- OpEx experts: Don't become complacent while all seems fine. Things will change.
- Quality experts: Don't give up. There's hope.



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Regardless of what type of expert you are, however, you'll need to upgrade your respective skill sets eventually, or you'll be out of work and unhappy.

The future for OpEx experts will stay positive if they learn the quality management tool set (control, compliance and standards). For quality experts to be happy again, they must learn the OpEx tool set (lean and Six Sigma).

Each type of expert must understand that the tool set they know may not be the same as the one they don't know. Rest assured: The tool sets are not the same.

Every organization must constantly focus on improving performance to remain competitive. In addition, all organizations must be thrifty with money. I see more organizations combining similar functions into one lean machine.

Many will not be able to afford multiple departments, which could possibly suboptimize their systems. Organizations are eager to simplify and form one-stop shops, complete with multiskilled staff to manage the quality of product and services, while instead of and continuously improving organization excellence.

The future of the quality office

The quality office of the future is here today. It may be called enterprise assurance, quality excellence or OpEx in your organization. These new offices must carry out a dual role to avoid suboptimization of resources or moving things too slowly.

It will be too costly to have multiple departments deploy the necessary tasks.

Enterprise functions will need to align with the quality system to ensure goods and services meet requirements to avoid product and service failures and to reduce risk. It must be able to work seamlessly with the OpEx journey within the organization. A different type of expert will be needed to ensure the right skills, competencies and capabilities are available throughout an organization for it to achieve quality and OpEx.

Doing so requires a full-time resource that can deliver results. It will be filled with multi-skilled experts, as some already have begun to do. This new office will require the dual skills of quality and OpEx.

Get ready for change

In the 1980s and 1990s, Joseph M. Juran encouraged leaders to adopt a Big Q focus by taking the little q tools beyond the quality control of products and moving them across the enterprise to design, control and improve all processes. Total quality management (TQM) was the first effort to create enterprisewide focus. But it didn't catch on for long, or it lacked leadership support.

Thirty years later, global enterprises have leaders who grew up with the quality revolution of the past and are well trained in quality. They are leading the way and creating new positions to meet the needs of their changing industries

and organizations. Today, we see titles such as vice president of performance excellence, director of OpEx and LSS BB. All are growing in numbers, while the traditional quality positions are drying up.

OpEx across an enterprise also requires a team of talented experts with the right skills and capabilities to be successful. This talent must include not only understanding LSS, but also understanding quality management, which includes knowing how to develop systems to control quality and ensure reliability to reduce business risk.

The OpEx skill set includes *hoshin* planning, lean, Six Sigma and design for Six Sigma. The reality today is that many Belts have not worked in the traditional quality function, and many quality experts have not worked in an LSS role. Many quality experts feel they don't have the skills to be an OpEx expert.

Tomorrow's quality officers will be required to understand both OpEx and quality management methods to succeed. They must be business focused (strategic policy deployment) and tactical (quality engineering) to succeed.

Tomorrow's quality office must be an enabler—allowing the organization to drive quality of products and services to increase the customer experience, while working with leaders to drive OpEx and reduce cost and waste.

What would you do if you were assigned an OpEx office in your organization? As the OpEx director or vice president, would you think about merging quality and OpEx to save costs? If you were faced with the challenge of organizing and driving quality and OpEx in your business unit, you may ask:

- Am I capable?
- Do I have the needed skill

sets, competencies and capabilities?

- How do I develop into or hire capable experts to drive quality and OpEx?

Start your future now. Learn about quality and OpEx body of knowledge (BoK) at two levels: tactical and strategic.

Tactical skill set

At the tactical level, the quality office should play a role in enabling others in the organization to carry out quality management and OpEx, either independently or with other functions. An expert in the tactical methods requires skills in:

- Conducting independent evaluation of product and service quality.
- Knowing how to deploy quality control, quality or product assurance, inspection, testing and audits.
- Monitoring customer dissatisfaction.
- Managing the corrective action process.
- Coaching the organization to use the lean and Six Sigma tools.
- Participate in *kaizen* or rapid improvement events.
- Use data-driven methods—such as statistical process control—to monitor performance.

Strategic skill set

The traditional quality management BoK is often viewed as having only a tactical role.

Enlightened organizations recognize the strategic tasks that must be carried out and consider the function as a strategic asset with a key role in shaping, planning and enabling the deployment of the organization's strategies, goals

and business plans.

An expert in the strategic methods requires skill in:

- Working with leaders to create improvement plans and roadmaps aligned to business strategies and needs.
- Aligning improvement projects, such as lean and Six Sigma projects, to business goals
- Integrating OpEx with environment, health and safety programs.
- Developing skilled and competent experts that can consult with all functions.

Education and certification

All experts should make themselves experts in ASQ's BoK or, depending on where you work in the world, a similar quality organization's BoK. In particular, ASQ offers an extensive BoK and provides certification:

- In the quality management tool set for quality technicians, auditors, engineers and managers.
- In the OpEx tool set for OpEx deployment leaders, improvement specialists, Green Belts and BBs well versed in lean and Six Sigma.

For additional education, there are several degree programs available at local universities that include lean, Six Sigma and OpEx. You can even earn an advanced degree from a dedicated school for quality.

For example, the National Graduate School of Quality, which has undergone an extensive transformation in recent years, offers bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctorates in quality management. This and other schools can prepare all future leaders with the skills they need to succeed.

TOMORROW'S QUALITY OFFICERS WILL BE REQUIRED TO UNDERSTAND BOTH OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT METHODS TO SUCCEED.

Start by thinking about these three steps to help you avoid extinction, which can sometimes happen when change occurs:

1. Learn and understand the BoK required to be well versed in multiple disciplines.
2. Conduct a self-assessment against the BoK.
3. Create a plan to close any gaps through continuing education and professional certification.

The traditional quality office

must be enterprise focused. If indeed it is, the office will play an important role at strategic and tactical levels. The office will enable organizations to strive for quality and OpEx—if and only if members of the office are well skilled.

Your key to success—and even survival—requires that you not be happy because you are a well-paid OpEx expert or unhappy as a quality expert because you feel your job is becoming extinct.

The greatest lesson I learned in my short life is that organizations move in a full circle over time.

We started with little q and moved to Big Q—now we need to move back to little q plus Big Q. This is a formula for long-term success. 

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