

GURU

Quality campaign hots up

John Seddon's one-man crusade against quality standard ISO 9000 has taken a disturbing turn for the worse. The self-styled "psychologist and well-known critic of ISO 9000" has accused a British Standards Institute manager of launching a "pathetic" defence against his smear campaign.

Seddon, who runs his own management consultancy from Buckingham, has launched a personal attack on the manager for claiming in a *Sunday Tribune* article that ISO 9000 hitches occur only when employers implement the standard badly.

According to Seddon, the Government is forcing small firms to adopt a standard that is little more than a poor method for controlling output.

"The DTI now claim that ISO 9000 is not compulsory," says Seddon's press release. "But tell that to suppliers of government organisations... the problems - which are terrible - are common."

Firms which have embraced ISO 9000 such as Ford and Chrysler are becoming less competitive as a result, says Seddon, who faces fresh attacks from the BSI over his claims that the German CBI hates the beleaguered standard too. Seddon maintains that the CDH, a joint employer-union body, has had a nasty scrape with ISO 9000.

Ringin endorsement

Forget road rage. Phone rage is all the rage now, at least according to a survey of 536 organisations conducted by Reed Employment Services.

It shows that an insincere tone of voice is most likely to infuriate people. Being kept waiting is the second most annoying thing, while being passed on to someone else or a voice mail gets people's goat too. And it is all down to inadequate telephone skills.

So what can the personnel department do about this, I hear you say. You could stay calm and think about how to improve your staff's telephone technique through various training initiatives.

Alternatively, you could scream at your receptionists/telesales/customer service staff that they need to buck up their ideas. It may not work but you will probably feel better for it.

It's all Welsh to me

Employers operating in Wales are trying to get their heads around a new de-sexed version of the Welsh language.

Employers are required by law to use Welsh in public communications. But this can cause problems - not because of difficulties fitting words such as *llyngngynethffylwynthgyg* into a job advert - but because certain words are often gender-specific which can lead to accusations of sex bias.

However, a Welsh academic has developed a cunning means of avoiding these pitfalls - use the plural. Why it took an academic valuable time to work this out is unclear.



"So that means no genderist songs after our 20 pints?"

Give students wider range of experience

For employers to follow Dearing's recommendation of offering more work experience to students, they - as well as academics - must look beyond the traditional placement, argues **Professor Lee Harvey**

The Dearing committee recommendation that employers be encouraged to offer more work experience opportunities for students is very welcome. But before we get carried away, we need to define work experience, the logistics and barriers to expanding provision and the quality of the student experience.

The classical model of work experience is the placement integrated into the course. Ideally, this involves a learning contract, continuous monitoring, close liaison between the higher education institution and employer and reflection on what the student has learned.

Even if industry could be encouraged to provide more placement opportunities, it is hard to imagine that changing courses to a sandwich mode will be accomplished rapidly. There is the normal quinquennial cycle of approval and review to negotiate. There is also a significant problem of funding extended sandwich courses as well as the unresolved issue of whether students will have to pay fees to cover a year on placement.

And academics are reticent about getting involved in sandwich courses because arranging placements is a time-consuming and low-status job.

None of this augurs well for the rapid expansion of placement provision. Nor is there likely to be a significant expansion in the number of placement opportunities that employers will offer, not least because most expansion will need to come from small and medium-sized enterprises, who complain about finding it difficult to set up links with universities.

One answer is to invest in other forms of work experience, and the Dearing committee has singled out the Shell Step initiative. This subsidised programme has about 1,500 people working on eight-week projects with SMEs.

Step is described as a high-quality but expensive pro-



Asda is developing a work experience course for students

gramme. Nonetheless, the quality principles could be assimilated by universities into semester or half-semester, "real-world", project-linked exercises embedded in the course. This would need a lot of work, however, and the political will to do it on a large scale.

Another way to involve large numbers of students is to build on what they already do. More than 50 per cent of undergraduates work part-time during term. If you add to this traditional vacation work, then most students do some paid work while at university.

These term-time and vacation jobs vary enormously but all of them involve "real" experience of the world of work. Many academics disapprove of the term-time working but the pragmatics of the situation overrule the disapproval.

It would be better if staff were aware of the extent of term-time part-time work and helped students to reflect on it to get the most out of the experience. It would be more useful all round

if students, staff and employers used these economically-motivated experiences as part of the wider learning experience. Although there are some early attempts to accredit such work, there is considerable opposition to it because the work is seen as inherently "low quality".

Leeds Metropolitan University for instance is launching a three-year degree this autumn under which students are accredited for term-time and holiday jobs at retailer Asda.

A more positive approach to a wider range of work experience is the only way the Dearing recommendation can be fulfilled. But it must be linked to quality criteria, specifying what is being learned together with ongoing evaluation of the work experience - whether it is a year-long placement, a work-linked project or term-time, part-time work.

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