An empirical study on the ceremonial adoption of ISO 9000 in Basque organizations

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Abstract

This paper tries to shed light on the ceremonial adoption of ISO 9000, one of the most prominent tools used within the Quality Management paradigm and one which has been linked to innovations of an organizational type in academic literature. For that purpose, extensive fieldwork based on both in-depth interviews of general managers, middle managers and employees, as well as on participant observation, was carried out in eight Basque organizations that have adopted the standard for a long period of time. The results show that companies tend to adopt ISO 9000 ceremonially influenced more by a number of internal organizational contingencies, than by pressures from the institutional environment.

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende obtener evidencias sobre la adopción ceremonial de ISO 9000, uno de los modelos de gestión más importantes utilizados dentro del paradigma de la Gestión de la Calidad, y que en la literatura académica se ha relacionado con las innovaciones de tipo organizativo. A tal efecto, se llevó a cabo un extenso trabajo de campo cualitativo basado en entrevistas en profundidad a directores generales, directores intermedios y empleados, así como en observación participativa realizada en ocho empresas vascas que contaban con cierta experiencia en la adopción del estándar ISO 9000. Los resultados obtenidos muestran que las empresas analizadas tienden a adoptar ISO 9000 de forma ceremonial influidas más por diversas contingencias organizativas internas, que por presiones del entorno institucional.

Laburpena

Lan honek ISO 9000aren ezarpen zeremoniatsuari buruzko informazioa eskaini nahi du, Kalitatearen Kudeaketaren paradigmaren barruan erabilitako tresna garrantzitsuenetako bat baita, literatura akademikoan antolakuntza-berrikuntzei lotuta datorrena. Landa lan estentsiboa egin da: eredua urte luzez ezarrita eduki duten zortzi enpresatako zuzendari nagusiekin, bitarteko zuzendariekin eta langileekin elkarrizketa sakonak eta behaketa partehartzailea egin dira. Emaitzek erakusten digute enpresek ISO 9000 modu zeremoniatsuan hartzeko joera dutela, erakunde barneko gertakariek eraginda, eta ez, horrenbeste, kanpoko erakunde-presioak eraginda.

1. Introduction

In recent years the Quality Management paradigm has had a major influence on the field of management. Within this paradigm, ISO 9000 is, at least from a quantitative perspective, the most influential contribution that there has been to date.

By late 2008, over 980,000 ISO 9000 certificates had been authorized in a total of 175 countries all over the world (ISO, 2009; See Figure 1). China is the country with the largest number of certificates in the world (having a total of 224,616 by the end of 2008), followed by Italy (with 118,309), Spain (68,730) and Japan (62,746). The spread of ISO 9000 seems to be strongly determined by the institutional and cultural contexts in which organizations find themselves (Braun 2005; Guler *et al.,* 2002; Boiral, 2003; Beck and Walgenbach 2005; Mendel 2006).

Figure 1. Worldwide ISO 9000 certification
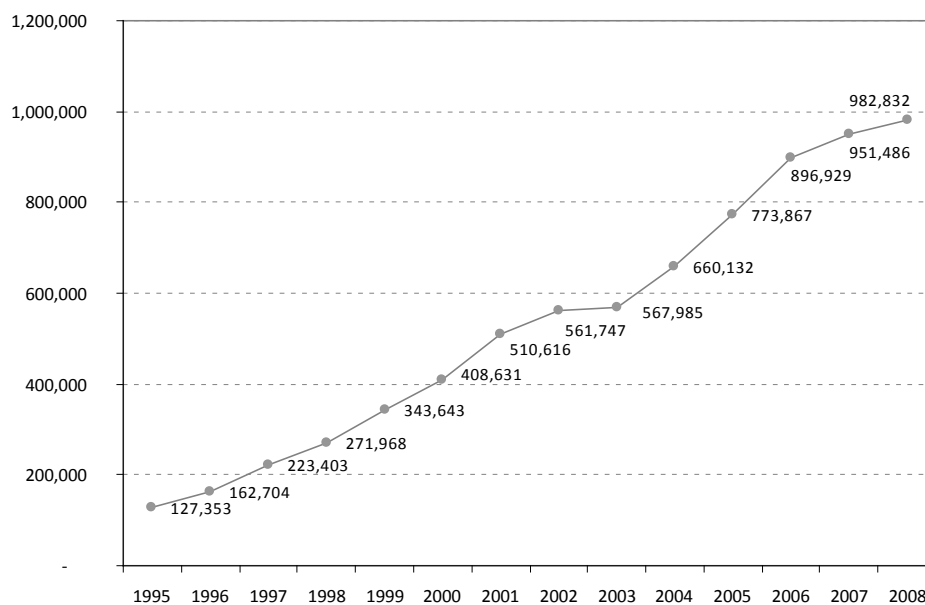
Source: Own preparation on the basis of the various executive reports on the global statistics for ISO 9000 published by ISO. Note: Up to the year 2000 the certificates are of ISO 9001, ISO 9002 and ISO 9003; from 2001 onwards the certificate are of ISO 9001.

In the academic literature ISO 9000 standard has been related to both organizational (Radosevic, 2005; Casper and Hancke, 1999; Mangiarotti and Riillo, 2010) or Intra-organizational innovations (Armbrustera *et al.,* 2008). This link has also been suggested in *grey literature* on the subject (e.g. Wengel and Gunter, 2000; Colecchia, 2008). Furthermore, some authors have introduced certification in accordance with ISO 9000 as a component within regional innovation indicators (e.g. Plaza, 2000). However, the relationship between ISO 9000 and innovation would not appear to be that clear, and has been much debated both in theoretical and in empirical literature (see, for instance, Prajogo and Sohal, 2001).

Moreover, despite the majority of studies into the adoption of ISO 9000 assume homogeneous adoption —they concentrate on the question of whether or not a company has third-party certification as the sole criterion to demonstrate that adoption has been completed—, a set of studies are now beginning to emphasize the real incidence of superficial, symbolic or ceremonial cases of adoption of ISO 9000 (see section 2). This is an interesting and fertile line of study which, as Nair and Prajogo (2009) point out, can contribute much towards clarifying

the differences that have been pinpointed in previous studies on the impact of ISO 9000 on business performance (see Sampaio *et al.,* 2009 for a recent review). Indeed, as Briscoe *et al.* (2005) pointed out, if the practices associated with ISO 9001 are not internalized despite implementation and formal certification, it will prove difficult for them to have an effect on company performance. This line of study is a very thought-provoking one, owing both to its profound academic and professional implications for the different interest groups involved and the management of those companies that have been certified, certification and accreditation bodies and, in particular, for public decision-makers themselves.

Within the aforementioned research line, this working paper aims to present the results of an empirical work developed in order to find out what the contingential factors are that encourage ceremonial adoption of ISO 9000. For such purpose, the remainder of this paper is arranged as follows. Following this introduction, the paper goes on to present the theoretical framework and research question. The following section describes briefly the institutional context within which the research was carried out, followed by a fourth section in which the methodology of the research used is analyzed. The results of the extensive field work carried out are then summarized, and the paper concludes with a summary of contributions and implications for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

When analyzing the complex process involving the adoption of management standards such as ISO 9000, as pointed by Brunsson *et al. (*2009) for any other standard, the supply side of standardization (i. e. the production and distribution of ISO 9000), and the "demand side" (i.e., the adoption or consumption of ISO 9000) could be analyzed.

As far as the supply side of ISO 9000 is concerned, there are different types of agent and actor who participate in its production, among whom special mention should be made – in terms expressed by Tammhallstrôm (1996) – of "industrialists" who have a specific interest in its production (e.g. standardization bodies, accreditation and certification bodies, consulting firms) and a large share of "supporting actors", rationalizing agents being experts in management as an abstraction (e.g. academics, media). Since, as stressed by Brunsson and Jacobsson (2000) and Guler *et al. (*2002), the standardizers lack the resources, authority or power necessary to achieve any actual changes in the behaviour of others by their own direct efforts, consequently they need intermediaries, some more powerful agent.

In the case of ISO 9000, the role played by the large mutlinationals has been highlighted, their having given less attention to the major coercive role played by the state (Heras, 2006). However, many governments of both industrialized countries and those in the throes of industrialization (i.e. the new member countries of the EU) have decided that ISO 9000 registration is a positive step for their country's industry since, in their view, having their export-oriented companies become registered will improve their image in the eyes of the world's customers and further their country's reputation as a good place to invest (Cole, 1999). Other national and regional governments (e.g. in Spain and Italy) have promoted the adoption of ISO 9000 in different ways, such as via grants and/or specific requirements in public tenders, in an attempt to improve their own legitimacy as public leaders (Heras *et al.,* 2008). It is thus often a matter of coercive isomorphism as purchasers and government bodies increasingly put pressure on sellers to receive ISO 9000 certification or lose their preferred business status or the very business itself (Cole, 1999; Braun, 2005).

As far as the demand side of ISO 9000 is concerned, those organizations which adopt the standard are of very different sizes and sectors (Heras, 2006). Although the standard initially focused on the manufacturing sector, over time it has become increasingly adopted within the services industry (see Figure 2). The ISO 9000 series has succeeded far beyond its original "home market" of suppliers of physical products to large buyers (Larsen and Häversjö, 2001).

Nowadays, organizations where no direct customers require it, such as schools, universities, hospitals or care homes, have adopted the standard. As stressed by Mendel (2006) and Tammhallstrôm (1996), one of the factors that has most influenced ISO 9000's popularity is its breadth and generic character, which have become even more evident from the year 2000 version of the standard.

As stressed by Mendel (2006) and Tammhallstrôm (1996), one of the factors that has most influenced ISO 9000's popularity is its breadth and generic character, which have become even more evident/apparent from the year 2000 version of the standard.

Figure 2. Sectorial distribution of ISO 9000 certificates in the EU-27, USA and Japan
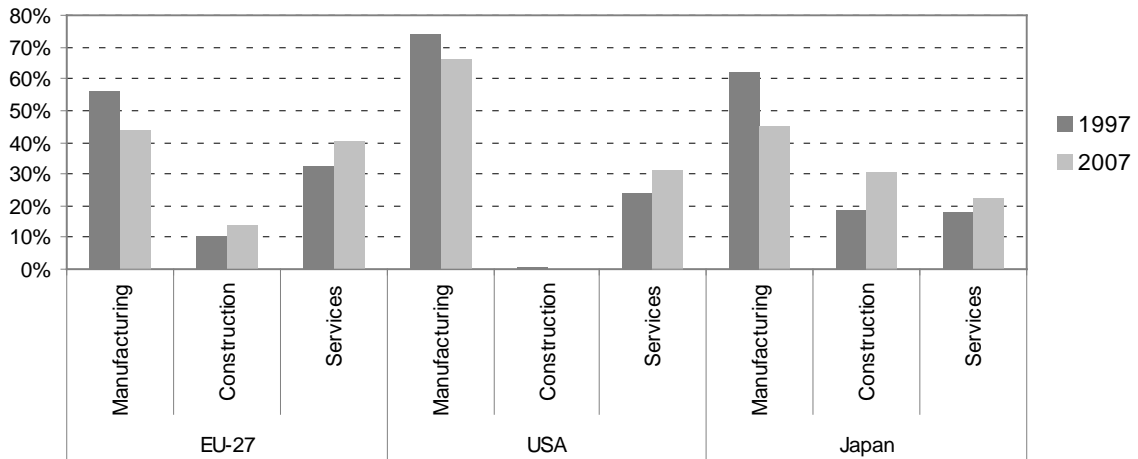
Source: put together by the author, based on data from ISO (ISO 1998 and 2008).

In literature which endeavours to explain the processes of adoption and dissemination of ISO 9000 from a rigorous academic perspective, the American institutional organization theory tends to be referred to. This explains how pressure originating from the state or from powerful companies constitutes the most direct mechanism for institutional dissemination, in order to ensure their long-term survival (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott and Meyer, 1994). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the isomorphic effect can arise due to three factors: coercive, mimetic and normative: ''Coercive pressure came from formal and external pressures exerted upon organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent, and the cultural expectations in the society within which the organisations function'' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150).

Moreover, despite the pressure in terms of homogeneity stemming from political influence and the need to achieve legitimacy within a specific context, as Brunsson (2000) points out, we can speak of a limited uniformity. Even when organizations adopt these types of standard in view of isomorphic pressure, they tend not to be passive, and they adopt them in a very different way due to the fact that companies interpret them in accordance with their own internal standards, their resources and their needs. This leads to heterogeneous organizational behavior regarding adoption. The adoption processes for new management models are social processes (Collins, 1998) that feature active processes involving the adaptation and reformulation of new ideas as these become received in different institutional and cultural environments.

Theoretical (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002) and empirical studies (Morris and Lancaster, 2007) show that recipient organizations play a more active role in the idea of adoption. For instance, Morris and Lancaster (2007) point out that American institutionalists have not drawn a clear distinction between adoption and

entrenchment; nor have they considered whether institutional pressures apply differentially to the two.

Furthermore, the analysis of the demand side of ISO 9000 can be enriched by alluding to the consumption perspective of management knowledge by some authors. E.g. Álvarez and Mazza (2002), develop replacing the hitherto predominant view of production and dissemination of management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996). These authors stress that acquiring management knowledge is not the passive act of receiving, since it implies organizational and personal evaluations on the "stimuli", and it implies unstability across space and time (Álvarez and Mazza, 2002).

Additionally, from the institutional approach itself, some authors already stress the fact that isomorphic pressure does not necessarily bring about profound changes. Meyer and Rowan (1977) note the frequent "decoupling" between the adopted methods and the real practices or needs of organizations result in "myths" and "ceremonies" intended to meet external environment requirements superficially.

Brunsson (1989), going beyond the seminal concepts of American institutionalists, refers to "organized hypocrisy", where talk and decisions are inconsistent with actions. Because they are decoupled, inconsistent structures and processes do not interfere with each other. When this takes the form of inconsistent rhetoric and behavior, it constitutes organized hypocrisy (Brunsson 1989). In this sense, several studies, either conducted from an institutional perspective or focusing on behavioral analysis within organizations, have shown the loose coupling and inconsistencies that exist between structures adopted to guarantee organizational legitimacy and the measures that are really implemented (Brunsson, 1989; Scheid-Cook, 1992; De Cock, 1998).

In short and as Storz (2003, p. 15) stresses in her empirical study of ISO 9000 adoption by Japanese and German organizations: *"one standard is definitely not one standard".* A complete convergence of process, product and work organizations due to ISO 9000 can hardly be expected. As stressed by Braun (2005), in order to make it effective, receivers have to interpret it and this interpretation can differ considerably from organization to organization, as new standards always have to be integrated into existing structures (Braun, 2005).

However, this has not been a subject that has been greatly analyzed in the case of adoption of ISO 9000. Only three studies have been detected which have analyzed the question both directly and in-depth, although there are other studies that have been carried out "from the inside", which have analyzed this question indirectly and/or in a more deterministic way (e.g. Arauz y Suzuki (2004), Naveh y Marcus, 2004; Briscoe *et al. (*2005); Boiral and Roy, 2007; Jang and Lin, 2008; Nair and Prajogo, 2009).

Firstly, in their two in-depth case studies in the French computer industry, Vasconcelos and Vasconcelos (2003) evidenced the fact that there were two ways to adopt ISO 9000 standards: an in-depth procedure (concerned with organizational effectiveness and with external legitimacy) and an instrumental one (only concerned with external legitimacy). These authors found that resistance to change was a common phenomenon in ISO 9000 implementation programs, having a major impact on organizational power games and informal structures (Vasconcelos and Vasconcelos, 2003).

Secondly, in a more complex study carried out in Canadian organizations based on interviews with managers, quality management specialists and employees conducted outside of the workplace, Boiral (2003) evidenced highly contrasting attitudes that were frequently critical of the ISO 9000, which was often given only superficial support. A qualitative analysis of the data allowed this author to identify three types of respondents (Boiral, 2003): "ceremonial integrators", "quality enthusiasts" and "dissidents". The proposed typology cast doubt on the mechanistic, consensual and monolithic view of the standard. The same author also

subsequently carried out a study into the adoption of ISO 14000 (Boiral, 2007), an environmental management standard that has a clear similarity with ISO 9000 in terms of its structure and its implementation process, although not so in terms of its objectives and scope.

Thirdly, in a qualitative study carried out with the participation of 172 Chinese firms holding the ISO 9000 certificate, Christmann and Taylor (2006) found that the companies select their level of compliance (symbolic or substantive implementation) depending on customer preferences, customer monitoring, expected sanctions by customers and firm capabilities. However, this evidence was detected based on the opinion of managers from these companies involved in the adoption process itself, whereby the results may have significant bias.

From the studies analyzed, it is without doubt those by Boiral (2003, 2007) which are founded on the most important background to this research. However, there are clear initial differences regarding this work which need to be made explicit. On the one hand, and as Boiral points out in the limitations of his work about ISO 9000 (Boiral, 2003), conducting a study outside of the workplace limits access to information regarding the process of adoption of ISO 9000, and his study should be further explored using an approach of participant observation in order to analyze how and when different types of attitudes about ISO 9000 take form. Likewise, the author did not examine the external institutional factors that led to the adoption of the standard. Another factor that should also be taken into account is that our analysis is carried out on firms that have a proven track record in the use of ISO 9000 and within a very special cultural and institutional context regarding ISO 9000 (see the following section). Lastly, we have analyzed the adoption of a different version of the standard (the ISO 9001:2000 standard) - according to its mentors, simpler, more user-friendly and more geared towards all sectors (not only to industry) about which, beyond the scope of discussions about its real differences with regard to previous versions (Heras, 2006), it can be stated that it is viewed as being distinguished by those agents and actors consulted in the course of the field work.

With these shortcomings detected in the empirical literature existing on the subject and by focusing on cases of hypocritical or ceremonial adoption of ISO 9000 (Boiral, 2003), façade (Beck and Walgenbach, 2005), instrumental (Vasconcelos and Vasconcelos, 2003) or symbolic (Christmann and Taylor, 2006), the objective and the research question raised by this paper need to be clearly defined. This means analyzing the "why" and "how" of these types of ISO 9000 adoption —ceremonial or hypocritical versus substantive or non-hypocritically (in other words, without inconsistency, simulation or acting)— based on empirical evidence. Likewise, this means analyzing how they take form and what are the factors that foster this type of adoption. Thus, the research question is enounced shortly as follows: *"What fosters the ceremonial or hypocritical adoption of ISO 9000?"*

3. Research Context

Spanish companies have not remained far away from the ISO 9000 phenomenon – in fact, quite the opposite. According to the most recent data regarding ISO 9000 worldwide – data as at the end of the financial year 2008 (ISO, 2009) – Spain, with 68,730 certificates, was the third most ISO 9001:2000 and ISO 9001:2008-certified country in the world, only ranked behind Italy in second place and China in first place.

The Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) is one of the regions in Spain and in the whole of the European Union that has experienced the greatest intensity in terms of ISO 9000 certification (Heras *et al.,* 2008). Similarly, the BAC has accumulated many international prizes from the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM): 19 of the 27 Excellence Awards that this foundation had awarded to Spanish organizations were given to Basque ones, where participation of the BAC in the total Spanish GDP only amounts to 6% (Heras *et al.,* 2008).

Public administrative bodies in the BAC have taken on a major commitment to the "movement", with very strong promotional work being carried out. This is not an isolated event, as in many developed countries such as Japan and Britain, government authorities have mounted national promotional campaigns in favor of ISO 9000 (Braun, 2005).

The national campaign among the different public administrative bodies pursued in a hyper-institutionalized region such as the BAC to promote the adoption of ISO 9000 has comprised diverse components, and to a certain extent resembles that pursued in other countries such as Turkey where, among other factors, an identity component in such campaigns is alluded to (Özen and Berkman, 2007).

In the case of the BAC, among other measures of differing scope that have been taken, reference should be made to the following (Heras *et al.,* 2008): the use of an industrial *tractorization* policy for the adoption of quality management models via large firms and associations and clusters; the establishment of major subsidies to fund the costs of implementation and certification; the direct and indirect inclusion of certification as a complementary or replacement mechanism for public inspection in certain sectors (e.g. care homes); the explicit or tacit establishment of certification as a prerequisite for the coordination of services with Public Administration in certain sectors (e.g. education); the establishment of training programs; and the creation of legitimizing agencies and endogenous certification models, publications and quality prizes.

4. Empirical method and field work

With a view to responding to the questions raised, an empirical study was designed of a qualitative nature based on a case study. This methodology was selected owing to its suitability when analyzing the complex process involving ISO 9000 adoption, in which – as has already been stated – diverse agents and actors interact. Research of a descriptive nature was planned, albeit mainly exploratory, which facilitates greater penetration in and understanding of the subject being studied so as to try and detect propositions which are liable to be generalized in terms of the practices observed (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003).

Figure 1 shows a summary of the research process that has been defined. As far as prior theoretical development is concerned, the work carried out previously by the research team proved to be of special interest (particularly Heras, 2001 and Heras *et al.,* 2008).

Figure 2. Research process carried out
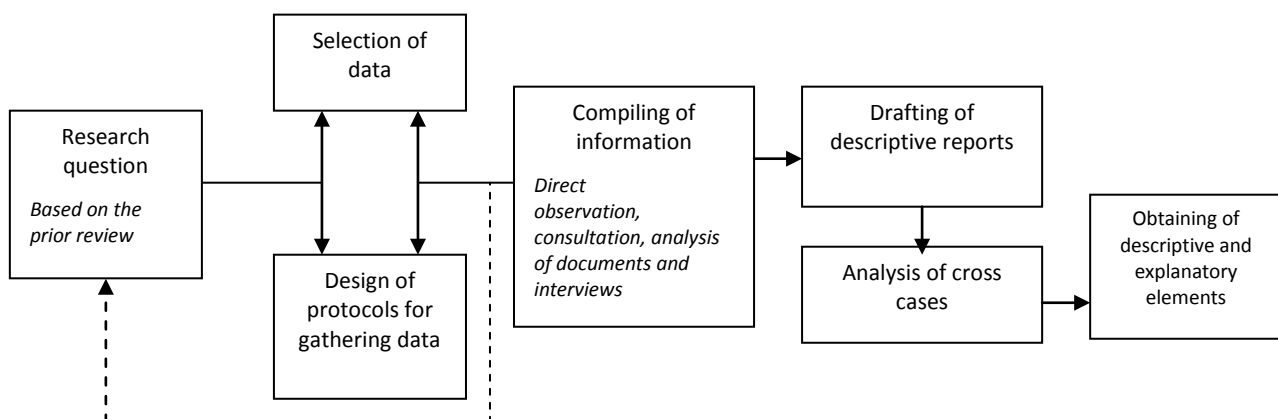
Source: put together by the author, based on Yin (2003).

The field work was developed over time between September 2006 and January 2010, and had four components. Firstly, a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with managers, middle managers and employees from the organization which revolved around a

semi-structured script (see Appendix). This nonetheless proved to be sufficiently open to the extent that it was consistent with the inductive method for analyzing information chosen and which, as a result, did not distort the evidence obtained. In this respect, the aim of the interviews and consultation involved obtaining narratives from the interlocutors, rather than obtaining specific responses (Yin, 2003). Alongside this, intense participant observation work was carried out via a continued series of visits to the organizations being studied, in the course of which a very important set of evidence was gathered from both the analysis of documentation related to the quality management system available in the different areas of work of the companies concerned and in non-structured consultation with personnel accessible in them that followed no specific pattern. Thirdly, the organizations analyzed made a very broad-ranging set of documentation available for research related to the quality management system (quality management manuals, operative procedures, job instructions, records, and internal and external auditor's reports, etc.) for their in-depth analysis (see Appendix). Fourthly and lastly, close to 40 in-depth interviews with different agents and supporting actors (Tammhallstrôm, 1996) involved in the dissemination of ISO 9000 were conducted: members of quality promotion agencies, representatives of business associations, cluster representatives, consultancy firms, certifying bodies, government representatives, representatives of the main trade unions in the region and academics (the results of these interviews are not subject to in-depth study in this paper, which is why they are only alluded to in an attempt to define some aspects of the institutional context of the cases subject to study with greater accuracy).

As recommended in specialist literature on the subject (Yin, 2003; Maxwell, 1996), the validity of factors was guaranteed in the course of the research via the use of diverse sources of information (direct observation, consultation, interviews, documentary databases regarding ISO 9000 from the organizations and other internal and external documentary information). Internal validity was guaranteed via the search for common patterns that help to explain the phenomena subject to study, while reliability was ensured via the use of semi-structured interviews of the same type and with the same number of questions and with an assessment protocol of cases against each factor. To try to prevent any distortion in the course of the inductive research, an attempt was made to avoid using discourse that was deemed too "academic" or "specialized" in interviews and consultation, in particular in those conducted with employees. To prevent "organizational silence" (Morrison and Milliken, 2000), absolute confidentiality of the research was assured in writing, and the researchers collaborating in the work were meticulously trained – young people with an informal appearance and with a proven track record. As far as possible and to try to attain even closer proximity between the interviewer and interlocutor, different minority local dialects of the Basque language were used, the special importance of which on the establishment of relationships based on trust has been stressed by both socio-linguists and historians (e.g. Otazu and Díaz de Durana, 2008).

Eight case studies were carried out in total in companies with at least seven years' experience in the implementation and certification of ISO 9000. In four of the cases we returned to previously studied organizations in Heras (2001). The work was confined to these eight case studies because, although the number could have been increased, it became clear as the field work was being carried out that increasingly fewer ideas were being gathered, thus giving rise to theoretical saturation phenomena. For this reason, it was considered that sufficient information and data had been gathered in order to be able to achieve the objectives set out by the research work. For reasons of confidentiality agreed upon with the companies that took part in the study, all names are fictitious (the cases are renamed in accordance with an old numbering system in Basque). Neither was more specific data pertaining to the sector in which they operate facilitated so as to maintain anonymity.

The first introductory interviews with the general management of the organizations consulted were of an average two hours' duration. This interview was repeated at the end of the research with an average duration of one hour. Personal interviews with middle managers were of an average one and a half's duration, while those conducted with employees lasted one hour.

Table 1. Summary of the field work carried out in the organizations

		Cases								
		Baga	Biga	Higa	Laga	Boga	Sega	Zai	Zoi	Total
Interviews	General managers	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	4	20
	Middle managers	1	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	17
	Employees	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	28
Consultation	General managers	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	14
	Middle managers	1	1	1	3	2	2	3	3	16
	Employees	14	12	11	16	16	14	11	15	109
Analysis of documents	Internal	21	24	22	29	32	27	23	28	206
	External	2	3	3	5	6	4	5	6	34

Source: put together by the author.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with general managers, seventeen semi-structured interviews with middle managers and twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with employees. Visits to organizations helped to find out first hand about the reality of the situation in which work is carried out, with over a hundred documented consultations being made with personnel of an average duration of 10-15 minutes – both with management and with those without assigned managerial duties. Furthermore, 147 documents were analyzed in total, most of these being of an internal nature. The specific distribution of the courses of action taken in the field work is shown in Table 1 for each of the companies subject to study.

Over a hundred hours of interviews and consultations were recorded in total. In those cases in which no interviews or consultations were recorded – always due to the fact that the interlocutors or company management preferred it that way – notes were taken by two researchers that were subsequently cross-contrasted, as recommended in the literature on the subject (Yin, 2003). The recordings were transcribed and later encoded under the supervision of at least two researchers and with the help of QSR NVivo software (version 2.0), in order to facilitate the structuring of information and the codification process.

5. Brief description of cases

Baga case

Baga is a *SME* (around thirty employees) that markets industrial products. It became certified in accordance with ISO 9000 for the first time ten years before carrying out the field work. The company owns a large industrial warehouse containing thousands of references, and this was the initial target for the quality management system, although the latter was extended two years later to the whole company.

According to the company's management, they decided to adopt ISO 9000 for reasons of an internal nature, without any specific external pressure:

> "With the improvement that this would entail in the organization of the company, thus seeking to work better with better quality and, above all, with greater control over the tasks being carried out" (Managing director at Baga).

As this was not a requirement demanded by customers, the management did not establish

immediate certification as a goal, in so far as they were *"doing things well, without seeking certification as soon as possible" (Person in charge of quality management at Baga)*. Nonetheless, the company management points out that *"it is aware of the importance that certification entails in terms of competence and the good image that goes with this (Managing director at Baga)"*, to the extent that they have advertised this at all times.

Practically all employees have received training at their workplace in ISO 9000, either from the person in charge of quality management at Baga or from the consultancy firm that helped the company to implement it.

The quality management system today is very internalized in the company and practically without dissidence, The attitude taken by employees can be described as one of "quality enthusiasts" (Boiral, 2003). Except for a few workers with limited experience in the company, personnel who have no managerial duties at the company have internalized both the language and functioning that the system entails:

> *"The job instructions give you a kind of security that we didn't have before. It's much better defined now (…), there's no more improvisation" (Employee 1 at Baga).*

> *"It's much better now, more controlled and orderly – and that's essential for this work" (Employee 2 at Baga).*

> *"Discussions ended with ISO. The whys and wherefores are now clear" (Employee 3 at Baga).*

For instance, unplanned consultations regarding operative quality management procedures and job instructions on the part of employees from the company resulting from some doubt concerning such procedures were witnessed on different occasions. Likewise, employees turned on several occasions to the documentation pertaining to the system in order to deal with small conflicts or internal disputes.

It is interesting to point out that a computer package was established alongside adoption of ISO 9000 – this aspect also being widely commented on and highly rated by those persons interviewed and consulted in the course of the visits.

Biga case

This is a SME involved in the machining and assembly of parts for machine tools. It became certified for the first time in 1998. The company has a very concentrated clientele belonging to the main cooperative group in the BAC. It is, at first glance, characterized by chaos and a clear lack of tidiness.

According to the management, they decided to adopt ISO 9000 owing to two factors - on the one hand, due to pressure from the competition and, on the other, to the pressure or demands from one of the most important customers of the above-mentioned cooperative group once that company had also obtained ISO 9000 certification.

The company implemented the standard with the help of a self-employed consultant. In the opinion of the company manager, the work carried out by this consultant was very noteworthy:

> *"Their intervention meant a major change in our way of thinking, as the planning of things on a plant level changed quite a lot. Procedures, job instructions and order forms, etc., were defined. Order was introduced" (Manager at Biga).*

However, attention should be drawn in this matter to the fact that the opinion of the person in charge of the area of production at the company and that of the operators interviewed and consulted was quite different, given that these people did not rate such work so positively:

> "[The consultant] *devoted his time above all to checking whether the chapters in the* [quality] *manual and the procedures he had brought to us had been properly adapted* [by the production manager]. *(…) Even though some processes were corrected, we didn't change that much in the warehouse - the day-to-day rate of orders didn't allow us to"* (Production manager at Biga).

> "[The consultant] *never asked us anything about our duties. He just devoted himself to doing paperwork"* (Employee 2 at Biga).

> "He [the consultant] *went it alone"* (Employee 2 at Biga).

In short, regarding this point and many others from among the aspects analyzed, a clear decoupling was detected in top management discourse with an apparent "rhetoric of success" (Zbaracki 1998), and, in the standpoint of the other people interviewed, an organizational disassociation indicator with limited internalization of the model.

On the other hand, it is interesting to point out that from the direct observation made in the company it could be ascertained that most of the workers there (both those from the plant and from administration) were in possession of documentation regarding the quality management system (procedures, instructions and formats, all of them in very conventional formats without any type of presentation or special protection for the plant) at their workplaces. However, the employees were not at all familiarized with this documentation or with the ISO 9000 standard, or with what it entails (periodic reviews, audits, assessment of suppliers, control of documentation, etc.). This is something that was stressed by the production manager at Biga himself, who appeared very critical of it:

> "ISO *is my job; (…) it means extra work. When we have an audit* [external], *people get scared because of the pressure, but otherwise* [the operators] *see it as a little job I've given them"* (Production manager at Biga).

The main profile of middle managers and workers can be considered to be that of "ceremonial integrators", whereas the existence of a significant number of "quality dissidents" (Boiral, 2003) could also be ascertained:, people feel that the standard had had rather negative effects on management practices and had created an iron cage that restricts their maneuverability:

> "They have no idea what ISO is about. Nor do they concern themselves with it (…) There are people who have assimilated something from the system who then help you more when preparing the audit [external], because they see it's important for the company, although there are also people who directly ignore it" (Production manager at Biga).

> "People tend to get extremely agitated the week before the audit (…). I help out as much as I can. Failing the audit would be a disaster for us" (Employee 4 at Biga).

> "I don't fill out forms any more [on a day-to-day basis]. When there is an audit, I'm brought a fistful of different biros…and I spend an hour signing autographs" (Employee 2 at Biga).

Personnel didn't receive specific training in ISO 9000, nor did the majority of them take part in internal audits. This is at least what employees and the production manager maintained emphatically without any decoupling.

Higa case

Higa is a SME involved in industrial cleaning. Among the activities it carries out, special mention should be made of its cleaning work of buildings and public and private sites and premises, port facilities, streets, drains and green spaces.

With a view to implementing the standard (certified for the first time in 1999), the company turned for advice to a small consultancy firm from the area, the cost of which was financed

almost in its entirety by public grants.

According to its general manager, the main aim of the company in adopting ISO 9000 consisted of *"increasing competitiveness on the market."* With implementation of the system, it can also be stated that an attempt was being made to improve *"the quality of services offered by the company."* Likewise, he pointed out that the aim was to provide a response via certification to the *"suggestion"* made by one of their main customers and that, on the other hand, they were aware of the fact that they were becoming one of the first companies in their sector of activity to be awarded the certificate. This, in the opinion of the general manager, would mean a *"clear advantage over the competition."*

According to the people interviewed and consulted in the course of the visits made, the management was actively committed from the outset to the ISO 9000 implementation process, and this major involvement in the process on the part of management would serve as an example for the entire organization.

According to the people interviewed, adoption of the standard did not entail a major change for the company, although some processes *would* be markedly improved. Opinions are consistent in this respect:

> *"With ISO we have gained in terms of systematics, in order, in a reduction in improvisation"* (Managing director at Higa).

> *"At the beginning it's seen merely as paperwork, but as one gets used to things, one starts to miss the papers that clarify many of the responsibilities of each person, the planning, etc."* (Area manager at Higa).

> *"Things changed… for the better; for instance, the matter of planning, there were sometimes faults before when re-planning shifts and personnel were not well informed of this. All that improved"* (Employee 1 at Higa).

In the course of direct observation, it was noted that operative procedures regarding quality management, job instructions, the parts and forms are made available to employees from the company. It was also noted in the specific analysis that this documentation is very well-adapted to company needs; for instance, some very simple photographic instructions are made available to users to help clarify points, and they are well-accustomed to using them. On many occasions, for example, they refer to them according to the document traceability code. Likewise, there were several cases where an improvement in the procedures carried out was requested by employees themselves.

The profile of workers, management and the consultant could clearly considered to be that of "quality enthusiasts" (Boiral, 2003), and this is what seemed to predominate in the organization. The existence of only two "quality dissidents" was detected:

> *"All this stuff about procedures and quality is a load of nonsense (…), a way of being more closely controlled"* (Employee 4 at Higa).

> *"We're already up to our eyeballs with work without them coming to us with procedures. I don't pay any attention to them. Let X fill them out* [name of the area manager at Higa omitted]. *My job is cleaning"* (Employee 9 at Higa).

By way of a complement to the implementation of ISO 9000, an implementation program of a workplace organization methodology (5S) was also set in motion in the general warehouse, which counted on the support of an independent body for the purpose of fostering this type of initiative. The program proved very successful – at least that is how it is defined by the people interviewed who, in many cases, refer in general terms to *"improvements in quality"* *(Employee 7 at Higa),* when referring to the adoption of such initiatives.*.*

Laga case

Laga is a cooperative company that manufactures machinery. It was one of the first to be certified in accordance with this standard (in 1996). The initial motivation behind certification was, according to the company's general coordinator, "to facilitate the path towards certification [CE declaration] *of our products*", given that, in accordance with a European directive, any company from the Laga sector that is certified in accordance with ISO 9000 and undergoes an analysis of risks is allowed to self-certify its end products. Logically, this is a fundamental issue for the company as, otherwise, it would be compelled to certify each of the products it manufactures.

The company was assisted in the initial phase of adoption of the standard by an external consultancy service which was mainly financed by public grants. Once this first phase had come to an end, it was the technicians from the company itself who would then be responsible for maintaining the system.

From the direct observation carried out in the company, it could be ascertained that most of its workers had the documentation related to the quality management system made available to them in their respective workplaces. The procedures, job instructions and formats are characterized by their "user-friendly" design. The company has specific panels where all these documents are on display, and these are continually used by employees (to contrast measures, review tasks, take preventive action, etc.), together with other informative elements geared to improvement such as indicator panels, control graphs and cause-effect diagrams. This would seem to be a very highly regarded issue, for instance, by a recently-hired employee:

> *"Things work better like this. Everything's clear, more controlled with indicators, procedures to prevent mistakes. Everything was a disaster in the company where I worked before – you'd spend half an hour looking for the drill or arguing about the machining of a part" (Employee 2 at Laga).*

All the personnel have received some type of specific training in quality management and ISO 9000. Likewise, partial and general internal audits are carried out in which employees take part. Attention should be drawn to the involvement of middle managers in implementing the system. Periodic meetings of improvement groups are held at the plant in which, on many occasions, modifications to the system's documentation are proposed which subsequently materialize. Parallel to the adoption of ISO 9000, the company also set in motion an intense management improvement program at the manufacturing plant.

In the course of interviews, consultation and the direct observation carried out, it could be ascertained that the profile of management, middle managers and workers was, generally speaking, that of "quality enthusiasts", with the presence of "ceremonial integrators" also being noted, albeit to a lesser extent:

> *"ISO 9000 is a further tool for improvement" (Area coordinator at Laga).*

> *"All of us improve with this system" (Employee 2 at Laga).*

> *"ISO is a market requirement. Procedures must be complied with, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to sell. You have to lend a hand wherever you can" (Employee 4 at Laga).*

However, the presence of "ceremonial integrators" was also noted as being greater among non-partner employees of the company (who account for 25% of the total number of employees) – workers who, generally speaking, feel closer allegiance to the objectives set out by the cooperative.

Boga case

This is a centre of higher education with around 50 employees. The school adopted the standard in 1999 - according to management, due to the personal leadership exercised by the former director. In his own words:

> "After ten years of management, I started to note that new trends in educational management in the most advanced countries were inspired by quality management. Henceforth, following a period involving gathering information and training in existing models, we opted for the ISO model" ISO"(Director 1 at Boga).

Director 1 at Boga leaves out in these declarations the fact that the adoption of quality models such as ISO 9000 has been promoted in schools in the BAC since the mid-nineties, especially in middle school education and technical colleges (Heras *et al.,* 2008). In fact, due to varying forces, among which special mention should be made of the mimetic effect, the great dissemination and legitimization of the standard in the industrial sector and pressure exerted by consultancy firms adapted to the sector created a suitable breeding ground for ISO 9000 so as to also start to adopt it in the higher education sector.

There have been diverse changes in management at the school in recent years, and these have also had a bearing on the adoption of the standard. The motivation of the new management team behind continuing with the model was twofold:

> "The model had just been acquired and it didn't seem consistent to abandon it without giving the thing a chance – it was a new thing for several members of the team, all procedures ran smoothly, it provided a great deal of help and it was important to have something in writing about what was being done" (Director 2 at Boga).

In terms of support for adopting ISO 9000, it should be pointed out that a decision was made to contract the services of a consultancy firm with a proven track record in consultancy for vocational training centres. Furthermore and according to the management of the school that promoted the setting in motion of the standard, specific training action was required aimed at personnel from the management team involved, both with regard to the requirements set out by the standard and the internal auditing process.

From the interviews, consultation and visits made to the school, it could be ascertained that the great majority of personnel from the organization had not received any training in ISO 9000. Indeed, a large number of Boga personnel (both teaching and admin staff) who were consulted about the objectives, content and effects of 9000 in their daily work were unable to offer any response owing to their absolute lack of knowledge about the standard:

> "They mention it from time to time, but the truth of the matter is that I couldn't explain what it [ISO 9000] consists of, what its objectives are… It's a matter involving improvement…it affects me to the extent that I receive certain specific forms regarding vocational training" (Admin employee 1 at Boga).

> "It's something emanating from the school management. (…) I imagine it's done for reasons of image, but I don't really have much idea about it. (…) But watch out! Nowadays these things can prove to be very important for the external recognition of the school." (Teacher 2 at Boga)

Clear decoupling can be made out between the narration and the rhetoric of the management, middle managers and employees. In the interviews, consultation and direct observation carried out, it could be ascertained that the profile of management and middle managers was that of "quality enthusiasts", whereas "ceremonial integrators" predominated among admin staff and, in contrast, "quality dissidents" among teaching staff:

> *"ISO means an increase in unjustified red tape (especially with the old version)* [prior to ISO 9001:2000], *although it's important to have it to project an external image"* (Admin employee 1 at Boga).

> *"All this stuff about ISO is a just a matter of image – pure marketing, which is all very well in our leaflets, on the website, and on the diploma in the management office"* (Teacher 3 at Boga).

> *"It's also image for the school management. It would seem that this entire certification ritual gives them a label of professionalism and seriousness"* (Teacher 5 at Boga).

In this case, it could be ascertained that a fundamental issue in analyzing substantive adoption of the standard is related to the definition of the scope of ISO 9000. The standard states that it can be extended either to the entire organization or just to certain activities. In the case of Boga, the scope of the system and, consequently, of certification, is confined to the area of management, admin and services, which contributes towards *"better planning and management of the different processes that are carried out within the school"* (Director 1 at Boga).

However, since the time of its initial certification, a decision has not been made to extend the scope of the quality management system to all activities within the school (including the teaching process), despite the fact that such an extension was put forward by the school's decision-making governing body. This was due - as it has justified – to the difficulty that applying the standard to the field of teaching would entail, although it is interesting to point out that another university centre belonging to the same institution has extended the system.

Sega case

Sega is a SME that manufactures anchors and building hardware. The company adopted ISO 9000 in 1995 with the help of an independent consultant. A young management engineer also started to work on an internship when the standard was first implemented. This engineer is currently the quality manager at Sega.

The company decided to implement the standard for two reasons:

> *"To put ourselves on the same level as the competition and to meet the requirements set out by our main customers when they became certified"* (Managing director at Sega).

As the quality manager at Sega points out, the implementation of ISO 9000 entailed a major change for the company:

> *It's difficult to say whether it was because of ISO or because everything needed to be completely changed, and we took advantage of ISO. The fact of the matter is, however, that we changed the company from top to bottom. (…) A great deal was achieved in planning, organization and control, and also in improvements in productivity. (…) For instance, processing times were not measured systematically before implementing ISO – everything is now systematized"* (Quality manager at Sega).

> *"We didn't invent the roles. We do what we say, and we say what we do (…). We have to implement ISO one way or another, but we don't do so any old way. We make sure that we implement it properly"* (Quality manager at Sega).

The personnel interviewed and consulted at Sega stressed the major involvement of the company's general management and, in particular, that of the quality manager, in successfully adopting ISO 9000:

> *"X* [name of the quality manager at Sega omitted] *brought us ISO and the change came*

From the direct observation carried out in the company, it could be ascertained that the workers used "user-friendly" design documentation for their daily activities at their workplaces. All personnel have received some type of specific training in ISO 9000 and other quality management tools. Partial and general internal audits are carried out every six months in which employees take part.

Despite the fact that the general profile among employees could be considered to be that of "quality enthusiasts", the presence was also ascertained of "ceremonial integrators", although dissidence was practically non-existent.

Zai case

Zai is a small old people's home (around 25 places). It accommodates clientele with a high degree of dependence and, as a result, has high ratios of carers per user. The manager at Zai in the first interview points out that the decision was made to adopt ISO 9000 (implemented in 1999) for internal reasons:

> *"The decision was made to implement ISO in order to improve the quality of the service we provide to users. (…) ISO was a prestigious reference point in other sectors and had started to be used in ours. (…) We decided to implement ISO by making a clear commitment to quality" (Manager 1 at Zai).*

In this case and as occurred with the Boga case, the manager also leaves out a major factor regarding its institutional milieu that is interesting to comment on briefly. Since the end of the 90s, some local governments in the BAC have promoted the adoption of ISO 9000 within the specific area of old people's homes, either via specific grants to the sector to fund consultancy costs and certification or by taking into consideration the obtaining of the certificate when arranging services with the aforementioned local governments.

It is the same manager at Zai who, in a second interview conducted around a year later (following considerable formal and informal contact maintained both inside and outside the home) came clean by stating the following:

> *"In fact, we decided to implement this ISO because X asked us to do so* [name of the public body that agrees on places with Zai], *and because it reinforces our image of quality. (…) I should make it clear that if we hadn't been awarded the certificate, we wouldn't have got involved in all this hassle" (Manager 1 at Zai).*

The standard was implemented by a consultancy firm that is also responsible for reviewing it. From the direct observation carried out at the company it could be ascertained that most of its workers had no documents regarding the quality management system available at their respective workplaces. The only document referring to ISO 9000 that was clearly visible in the home was the ISO 9000 certificate which, framed and beside the Catholic cross, was to be found on view in the Zai lounge area.

Once the documents available about the system had been analyzed, it was noted that the procedures, job instructions and formats were characterized by their conventional design –

which many consultants and auditors associate with the "bureaucratic" version of the standard existing prior to ISO 9001:2000 (Heras 2001).

In addition, most of the middle managers and Zai employees interviewed and consulted had the clear profile of "quality dissidents", with very critical views on ISO 9000:

> *"This* [ISO 9000] *is an image campaign, (…) and it's quite an incoherent matter since, bearing in mind that there already existed a public inspection service with which to gauge the level of quality we provide, what's the point of all this ISO? (…) It may be that ISO helps to improve things if you make screws, but it doesn't contribute much to what we do. We don't take care of things either better or worse by having ISO" (Area manager 1 at Zai).*

> *"Have you noticed the ISO chart* [on the certificate] *in the lounge area? Well, that's what ISO is to me – just one more chart to remove the dust from" (Employee 3 at Zai).*

> *"Don't let them start with all that ISO nonsense. That's all we need. (…) We don't have time to deal with everyone already, without with even more papers and other nonsense getting in the way" (Employee 5 at Zai).*

To try and understand such a critical view of the kind expressed above, we need to refer to the major social conflict existing in the sector of care homes for the elderly in the BAC, where a dual system of labour relations co-exist, involving workers with public contracts and those with private contracts. Likewise, it should also be pointed out that both in the social services sector and the health care sector, the advertising campaign mounted by the different levels of government has been particularly intensive – which has also had negative side effects, given existing media saturation.

Zoi case

Laga is a SME that machines parts for tier 2 suppliers from the car industry. As with most suppliers with these features in the BAC, the company implemented ISO 9000 in the mid-nineties (specifically, in 1995) in order to this meet the needs of its customers:

> *"You either implement ISO 9000 or you vanish. It's that simple. And so all of us do so" (General manager at Zoi).*

The general manager at Zoi was neither interested in nor concerned about the implications of ISO 9000 for his company:

> *"ISO 9000 doesn't count for anything in our sector. We all have it and that's all there is to it. What really counts is how you adjust costs and manage to survive in a sector in which the raw materials have risen by 10% and customers have lowered the purchasing price by a further 10% with threats of relocation. That's what we are facing, being caught in the middle" (General manager at Zoi).*

The company implemented ISO 9000 within the whole group together with other companies from the sector, receiving external consultancy services provided by a sectorial organization. An area manager (a mechanical engineer) is currently in charge of maintaining the system.

In the course of the direct observation carried out, it could be ascertained that the quality management manual, procedures and job instructions were very general – in other words, they didn't appear to be sufficiently well-adapted to the specific case of the company. The existence of a huge number of formats was also ascertained that were not being used on a day-to-day basis, although these did not appear in the records from other financial years. Both the area manager and different employees maintained that these documents were filled in on an *ad hoc* basis for external audits.

Both the quality manager at Zoi and most employees had a clear profile that could be considered to be that of "ceremonial integrators":

> *"We have quite enough on our plate trying to deal with the orders on time. That's the real challenge facing us, dealing with our orders. (…) ISO 9000 means extra work, meaning we have to deal with external audits" (Person in charge of the area of quality management at Zoi).*

> *"When it's time for the audit, I'm asked about some processes. I tell them how it's going and then get the papers ready" (Employee 1 at Zoi).*

> *"The first time we had an ISO audit, I was given time off. I was told it was better that way, that there were problems dealing with the audit. (…) The truth of the matter is that audits are pretty stressful. But well, once they're over, everything calms down again" (Employee 2 at Zoi).*

The existence of some older employees with the profile of "quality dissidents" was also ascertained.

6. Summary of evidence from the cross-case analysis

The cases analyzed clearly illustrate the fact that very heterogeneous situations exist in the adoption of ISO 9000. In the cases of the companies Baga, Higa, Laga and Sega, adoption of ISO 9000 may be considered to be both deep-rooted and substantive, given that its adoption affects the day-to-day running of organizations, whereas in the case of Biga, Boga, Zai and Zoi adoption is of a more ceremonial, superficial or instrumental nature with a much more limited influence.

Furthermore, in analyzing the interviews conducted, in the course of direct observation and in contrasting the internal and external documentation available in the Baga Biga, Boga, Zai and Zoi cases, the existence of hypocritical behavior and inconsistencies between talk and action were noted. In the cases this hypocritical or ceremonial behavior can't be explained in terms of their institutional pressures, since organizations with very similar pressures (such as Biga, Sega and Zoi) adopted the standard hypocritically (Biga and Zoi) and non-hypocritically (Sega).

One of the most important factors regarding the hypocritical adoption of ISO 9000 evidenced in the cases was related to the leadership on the part of the managers. The general managers in all cases (with the exception of the one from Zoi) shared a common rhetoric or talk on ISO 9000, but none of them had been directly involved in the adoption of the standard in their organizations. This was an objective of the middle managers. In this case, hypocritical or ceremonial adoption was fostered by a low level of real involvement of those middle managers (in the cases of Biga and Zoi) in internalization or by insufficient coercive power on the part of those managers (in the case of Boga and Zai) in their organizations, in order to ensure their decisions materialized into actions (that lack of power was due to internal conflicts and contradictions which are very diverse in nature). Moreover, the major presence of conventional external consultancy services during the process involving adoption of the standard (such as the one evidenced in Biga, Zai and Zoi) also seemed to play a prominent role in fostering hypocritical cases of adoption.

Similarly and with regard to an issue that has a strong relationship with the above-mentioned, hypocritical or ceremonial adoption was fostered by a low level of involvement on the part of employees. As stressed by Boiral (2007) in his empirical work on the adoption of ISO 9000 14001, in the cases of Biga, Boga, Zai and Zoi, adoption of the standard seemed to follow a Taylorian path characterized by a fairly clear gap between the middle managers or the consultants who drafted the documentation for the quality control system, and the employees who were supposed to apply them. In those cases, nearly all employees pointed out to us frankly that they did not use the procedures set out by ISO 9000 in their daily work, and that

the records of documentation were completed *ex profeso* for the external audit. From an analysis of the internal documentation, it was ascertained that in the case of these organizations, this involved very general documents which in many cases had not been adapted to the internal contingencies and realities of the organization. From the observative participation carried out, the conclusion was also drawn that the work behavior of middle managers and employees often deviated from the prescriptions of the documents. In the Laga case, the fact that it is a cooperative – with all the middle managers and most of the employees being cooperative members - may have also had a bearing on a more participative adoption of the standard.

Among the hypocritical adopters, employee utilization of the documentation and prescriptions related to ISO 9000 were very low. But even in the cases of substantive adopters in the form of Baga, Higa and Sega, the notion employees seemed to have of ISO 9000 was very limited, with a really unclear understanding of the ISO 9000 model. Their knowledge was merely confined to the extent to which ISO 9000 affected them in the course of their daily activity – in other words, what systematized and formalized their tasks.

For those employees belonging to the hypocritical adopter category, ISO 9000 was viewed as an administrative activity that was considered to be the managers' responsibility, as in many other cases. *"ISO 9000 is my job",* the middle manager at Biga pointed out to us (originally in a negative tone). For these employees, ISO 9000 meant making a limited effort, albeit intense and absurd when preparing internal or external audits – an intense effort aimed at keeping up appearances.

As noted by Boiral (2007) in his research, to explain the lack of employee involvement, managers generally answered in a tone of the "rhetoric of success" (Zbaracki, 1998) that involvement depended on each person's awareness and dedication to their work: "*As usual, some people follow the rules and others don't",* one middle manager told us (from Zai).

In contrast, among a large number of employees from organizations that adopted the standard hypocritically, a critical discourse was noted in terms of what ISO 9000 adoption has entailed – a discourse that assumed part of the ISO 9000 ideology and its rhetoric aimed at making things uniform, as more than in a "rhetoric of failure," it was characterized by being a "rhetoric of disappointment". Thus, these employees referred to the adoption of ISO 9000 as *"a missed opportunity for continuous improvement"* (Zai employee) or via other statements in a similar vein:

> *"We've lost the opportunity to plan things better, in a customer-centred way (…) there's no doubt that the way* [ISO 9000] *it's implemented, it's got nothing to do with continuous improvement."(Employee 2 at Boga).*

> *"Disappointing, because we could have used ISO to improve our quality."* *(Employee 2 at Zai).*

On the other hand, organizational and technical reforms coinciding with ISO 9000 adoption would appear to have promoted non-hypocritical adoption of the standard. In the case of Sega, for instance, it is noted that the company underwent major reorganization with the excuse of ISO 9000 adoption, justified to a large extent by the incorporation of a middle manager with suitable training and with strong motivation towards setting the project in motion. This manager was able to motivate personnel and make them see that ISO 9000 was not an extra administrative activity that was solely under his responsibility, but rather, the work of all members of the organization. In the case of Baga and Laga – two organizations with very different institutional and technical environments – a great number of employees were unable to distinguish between what ISO 9000 adoption means and an element dissociated from the adoption of other practices introduced alongside it, such as computerization (Baga) or the adoption of other quality management tools (Laga).

The features of production technology in organizations themselves also seemed to have a bearing on ceremonial or hypocritical adoption, In the cases of Boga and Zai, belonging to the education and care-home for elderly people sectors respectively, it had become internalized on the part of middle managers and employees alike – and even partly by top management – that the ISO 9000 standard had not been properly adapted to their objectives and principles and to their day-to-day work. The standard was viewed as being inappropriate to the technical requirements of organizational tasks. In those cases, ISO 9000 was deemed unsuited to local conditions and available resources by the majority of the members of the organizations (except by the general managers that fall under the "rhetoric of success" or, perhaps, under a "hypocritical rhetoric"). In the case of Higa, although the company adopted the standard in-depth or non-hypocritically, some evidence was nonetheless gathered from this discourse, above all when the impact of the standard on the improvement in operative performance was being analyzed, as it was maintained that the scope of ISO 9000 in improving performance was subject to major limitations in their respective sectors.

In contrast, this discourse was not apparent in any case in those organizations that operated in a similar environment to that of the ISO 9000 "home market" (i.e. in the cases of Biga, Laga, Sega and Zoi), and which had adopted the standard hypocritically or non-hypocritically. In short, it would seem that the less important the need to systematize processes towards an improvement in the performance of an organization, the greater the propensity to hypocritical adoption.

Lastly, another organizational contingency which proves interesting when analyzing ISO 9000 adoption is the extent of prior development of the bureaucratic structure in the company. Many manufacturing organizations within the milieu such as Biga, Sega and Zoi evidence a very primitive level of development in terms of their internal formalization, which means it is very costly for them to make any attempt to adopt a system such as ISO 9000 in their organizations, both when it is adopted hypocritically (Biga and Zoi) and non-hypocritically (Sega and Zoi). Conversely, in a bureaucratized organization such as that of Boga, hypocritical adoption is less costly due to the fact that in this case there already existed a prior division between the talking organization and the producing organization

7. Discussion and conclusions

From the evidence obtained in the case studies carried out, it could be ascertained that if the ISO 9000 adoption process is analyzed from a standpoint that takes into consideration the opinion of some internal interest groups in the relevant companies (management, middle managers and employees), the purpose of the study is shaped into a complex process which makes it difficult to rely on homogeneous guidelines for adoption. It is clear that the recipient organizations play an active role in idea adoption.

In our analysis based on in-depth interviews and on participative observation, it was ascertained that adaptation to similar institutional pressure of ISO 9000 certified organizations is very heterogeneous, with cases in which hypocritically adoption occurs and cases in which ISO 9000 is non-hypocritically adopted. In any case, it would appear that ISO 9000 tends to be adopted in organizations in such a way as to be adapted to the various needs and internal contingencies of the organizations. In the cases analyzed, it was ascertained that in situations with similar institutional pressure, very different adoption of the standard takes place according to the needs, resources and future expectations of the internal actors involved, who completely reproduce what adopting ISO 9000 entails.

When the ISO 9000 standard is used outside its "home market", this would appear to increase the possibility that it will be adopted hypocritically, albeit not in a clear way. The most influential factor in a reduction in hypocritical adoption - in other words, in lowering the inconsistency of talk, decision, and action (Brunsson, 1989), is adherence and leadership on

the part of middle managers and the adherence of employees to the ISO 9000 adoption project led by those middle managers.

However, it would appear to be uncertain as to whether those organizations that adopt ISO 9000 hypocritically have the option of complete non-observance, while day-to-day operations can go on undisturbed, due to the fact that there are always new operations to be carried out because there is always a cost involved in keeping up appearances. As we were able to ascertain in many cases, even in the case of hypocritical ISO 9000 adoption, such adoption seemed to have a marked influence on the intensity of work carried out by employees, in the burn-out of many of them and in the loss of energy and enthusiasm on the part of both middle managers and employees.

Although producers of ISO 9000 and the supporting industry repeat the fact time and time again that the standard fits in any sector (i.e. one-size-fits all management tools), and that results will depend on how the tool is used, it would seem that ISO 9000 is not suitable for all sectors due to matters of technical and social efficiency. In short, ISO 9000, like any management tool, is not an apolitical artefact.

According to what has been observed in the case studies, it would appear that rhetoric and talk may have greater weight than concrete actions in ISO 9000 adoption. This even occurs in organizations in which the standard is adopted in-depth and substantively. As Brunsson (2000) points out, this standard has more effect on what actors say they do than on what they actually do – in other words, organizational decoupling or hypocrisy is apparent.

The conclusion is also drawn that the way in which external forces affect ceremonial adoption is a complex issue, and appear to be obstructed by other internal forces such as the leadership and legitimacy of middle managers (quality managers and coordinators) and adherence on the part of workers to the project. ISO 9000 adoption comes from outside, but the standard is then adopted in very different ways. The institutional isomorphic processes do not imply that organizations are necessarily passive actors in the adoption of standards (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996); rather, organizations adopt ISO 9000 in a similar way to what Sevón (1996) proposed, "translating it into something that fits their own context and materializing it into action" (Sevón, 1996, p. 51). Furthermore, in the cases we have analysed, homogeneity or uniformity are mainly found in different forms of talk (i.e. rhetoric, concepts, documents) rather than in action or practice.

Looking to the future and in order to advance in this line of work, it is in our opinion important to take into consideration the complexity of the ISO 9000 adoption process. This line of study is a very thought-provoking one, owing both to its profound academic and professional implications for the different interest groups involved and the management of those companies that have been certified, certification and accreditation bodies and, in particular, for public decision-makers themselves.

Indeed, taking a more normative standpoint of study into consideration, one should perhaps consider different questions that might perhaps be deemed to be somewhat disagreeable. For instance, should the adoption of a management tool such as ISO 9000 be promoted when it would seem that a large number of cases of adoption might be deemed to be ceremonial or hypocritical and/or with no real effect on performance?

At the beginning of the great wave of *isomania* in Europe, Jacques McMillan, an executive of the European Commission on Normalization, declared the following (Avery, 1994, p.23):

> *"[The European Commission] it is not interested in supporting the existence of an artificial quality and certification market that only serves the purpose of its providers. The ISO 9000 standard led many customers and users to ask their suppliers to have quality assurance certificates, even when they are totally unnecessary for the purposes*

(…). This misunderstanding has led to a situation in which companies go for the certificate before going for quality. This approach leads to an artificial, costly and at best inefficient and shortlived quality system that does not help economic operators face up to global competitive conditions."

However, as the "rhetoric of success" regarding this standard progressed (Zbaracki, 1998), a distinct lack of this type of critical discourse on the part of public decision-makers in countries such as Italy and Spain that lead the ranking in European and global certification became apparent.

In this respect, the major non-critical support provided by public bodies proves very interesting to analyze. Perhaps these agents or actors should be included in the category of "industrialists" as referred to by Tammhallstrôm (1996), as their specific interests in the reproduction/distribution of ISO 9000 have been plain to see. However, one could ask as to what extent in this active policy involving the promotion of ISO 9000 certification there has been hypocritical decisions taken in a public policy which appears more concerned with global results and symbolic performance than any substantial capacity for decision-making. In other words, it could be ascertained once again that, just as Brunsson and Jacobsson (2000) maintained a decade ago, the production and adoption of standards in various areas is by no means a matter of indifference.

On the other hand, it would be interesting to explain at least some of the aspects prophesized by McMillan regarding the artificial ISO 9000-based quality management systems. For instance, when ceremonial or hypocritical adoption is presumed to be of an *inefficient* nature, the fact is not taken into account that not only purely economic or technical variables have been taken into consideration in determining such a term.

As Meyer and Rowan (1991) pointed out, decoupled systems may be stable solutions even if, to some extent, such structures produce ineffectiveness, since they may maximize long-run effectiveness. On the other hand, as Brunsson (1989, p. 206-207) suggests, hypocrisy is *effective*, since *"makes it easier to maintain the legitimacy of organizations, even when they are subjected to conflicting demands (…) An organization that could not deal in hypocrisy would have a more difficult time working in a world of conflict than will one that can."* (Brunsson, 1989, p. 206-207).

In short, it proves feasible to hazard that many organizations, like the majority of the organizations analyzed in this paper, adopted and maintain ISO 9000 because it is *effective* for their purposes, and it will continue to be so until such point as the social rules of play change regarding this standard.

As should be clear, the conclusions drawn from this paper are preliminary ones, due to the obviously exploratory and explanatory nature of their objectives and the use of a qualitative study methodology. The limitations existing in making the generalizations provided by these conclusions are inherently related to the methodology selected, the aim of which is to try and make complex phenomena such as that we are dealing with more comprehensible (Maxwell 1996). Furthermore, the fact that the cases selected are concentrated within a very specific geographic area also gives rise to a further limitation. In this paper, the adoption of the standard is analyzed in a very specific institutional environment: a region of Spain that has been recognized as being top of the ranking in the intensive and extensive dissemination of ISO 9000 among all the countries of the European Union (Heras *et al.,* 2008).

Although it can be argued that the influence of *institutionalized standards* does not differ much from one region to another, since the organizational field in which the ISO 9000 standards have been disseminated is a global one and the influence of cultural or institutional political factors is limited, specific conditions within other countries and regions may alter the findings (Guler *et al.,* 2002; Beck and Walgenbach, 2005).

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APPENDIX

Synthetic script of the semi-structured interviews

Section 1: Context of the sector and the company

- Main agents/actors and their power of negotiation
- Main changes in the past (forces, objectives, etc.)
- Future trends (reasons, objectives, etc.)

Section 2: Motivation and adoption process

- External and internal motivation behind adoption
- Training received
- External and internal help with adoption (consultants, auditors, coordinators etc.).
- Main obstacles to and benefits of adoption
- Influence of adoption on operative performance (costs, productivity, etc.).

Section 2: Daily work and ISO 9000

- Prevention of problems
- Improvement of processes
- Use of system documents
- Changes in the way of doing things and behavior
- Preparation of audits

Section 3: Other personal experience with ISO 9000

- Non-structured narration of the experience

Summary of aspects consulted and the type of document analyzed in situ

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Most common aspects consulted in situ

- Influence of the system on the task carried out by the interlocutor on the day of consultation
- Changes in the way of doing things
- Doubts about the job instructions associated with a specific task
- Doubts about the completing of forms and records
- Examples of actions aimed at preparing internal and external audits

Types of document analyzed

- System documents on display at the place of work
- Forms on display at the place of work
- Scoreboards.

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