



Basic Concepts

- Overview
- Library
- Training & Certification
- Membership
- Links & Other Resources

Search Site

 Find

Knowledge Center

- Learn About Quality
- Hot Topics In Quality
- Tools & Resources

Areas of Use

- Education (K-16)
- Government
- Healthcare
- Manufacturing
- Service

You Need...

- Membership
- Training & Certification
- Publications
- Standards Central
- Networking & Events
- ASQ Store
- Careers in Quality

About ASQ

- Media Room

Select another topic: History of Quality

The History of Quality - Total Quality

- Overview
- Guilds of Medieval Europe
- The Industrial Revolution
- The Early 20th Century
- World War II
- Total Quality
- Beyond Total Quality

The birth of total quality in the United States was in direct response to a quality revolution in Japan following World War II, as major Japanese manufacturers converted from producing military goods for internal use to producing civilian goods for trade.

At first, Japan had a widely held reputation for shoddy exports, and their goods were shunned by international markets. This led Japanese organizations to explore new ways of thinking about quality.

Deming, Juran and Japan

The Japanese welcomed input from foreign companies and lecturers, including two American quality experts:

- W. Edwards Deming, who had become frustrated with American managers when most programs for statistical quality control were terminated once the war and government contracts came to an end.
- Joseph M. Juran, who predicted the quality of Japanese goods would overtake the quality of good produced in the United States by the mid-1970s because of Japan's revolutionary rate of quality improvement.

Japan's strategies represented the new "total quality" approach. Rather than relying purely on product inspection, Japanese manufacturers focused on improving all organizational processes through the people who used them. As a result, Japan was able to produce higher-quality exports at lower prices, benefiting consumers throughout the world.

American managers were generally unaware of this trend, assuming any competition from the Japanese would ultimately come in the form of price, not quality. In the meantime, Japanese manufacturers began increasing their share in American markets, causing widespread economic effects in the United States: Manufacturers began losing market share, organizations began shipping jobs overseas, and the economy suffered unfavorable trade balances. Overall, the impact on American business jolted the United States into action.

The American Response

At first U.S. manufacturers held onto to their assumption that Japanese success was price-related, and thus responded to Japanese competition with strategies aimed at reducing domestic production costs and restricting imports. This, of course, did nothing to improve American competitiveness in quality.

As years passed, price competition declined while quality competition continued to increase. By the end of the 1970s, the American quality crisis reached major proportions, attracting attention from national legislators, administrators and the media. A 1980 NBC-TV News special report, "If Japan Can... Why Can't We?" highlighted how Japan had captured the world auto and electronics markets. Finally, U.S. organizations began to listen.

The chief executive officers of major U.S. corporations stepped forward to provide personal leadership in the

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- Overview
- Books
- Training & Certification
- Articles

quality movement. The U.S. response, emphasizing not only statistics but approaches that embraced the entire organization, became known as Total Quality Management (TQM).

Several other quality initiatives followed. The ISO 9000 series of quality-management standards, for example, were published in 1987. The Baldrige National Quality Program and Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award were established by the U.S. Congress the same year. American companies were at first slow to adopt the standards but eventually came on board.

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