



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 - World War II

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

After entering World War II in December 1941, the United States enacted legislation to help gear the civilian economy to military production. At that time, military contracts were typically awarded to the manufacturer that submitted the lowest bid. Products were inspected on delivery to ensure conformance to requirements.

During this period, quality became an important safety issue. Unsafe military equipment was clearly unacceptable, and the U.S. armed forces inspected virtually every unit produced to ensure that it was safe for operation. This practice required huge inspection forces and caused problems in recruiting and retaining competent inspection personnel.

To ease the problems without compromising product safety, the armed forces began to use sampling inspection to replace unit-by-unit inspection. With the aid of industry consultants, particularly from Bell Laboratories, they adapted sampling tables and published them in a military standard, known as Mil-Std-105. These tables were incorporated into the military contracts so suppliers clearly understood what they were expected to produce.

The armed forces also helped suppliers improve quality by sponsoring training courses in Walter Shewhart's statistical quality control (SQC) techniques.

But while the training led to some quality improvement in some organizations, most companies had little motivation to truly integrate the techniques. As long as government contracts paid the bills, organizations' top priority remained meeting production deadlines. What's more, most SQC programs were terminated once the government contracts came to an end.

Topic Resources

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