AMI opts for ISO certification

The preparatory process was relatively short and painless: the compilation of a rather dull but satisfactorily exhaustive quality manual; a few discussions over the wording of procedures, and a seminar conducted by our quality consultant on the system itself bringing together nearly all the members of our group. Then in July 2005 AMI received UNI EN ISO 9001:2000 certification.

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Certification appeared to be - indeed was - the thing to do, particularly since we have (if we may call it such) a tradition of participating in tenders for services for government agencies, for which being certified is a requirement, or at least a boost to one's score.

But there is no denying that we had misgivings about the process that awaited us. Was it going to be too much extra work, an unwanted aggravation of our already stressful routines? And if so, who would carry the burden? Was it going to impose changes on our style of work that we were not inclined to embrace? And finally, being a lofty bunch of AIIC interpreters, did we really need another label? Indeed, did we really want our quality to be up for discussion?

We accepted the challenge and all went well in the end. We were lucky enough to have the right key in hand, a quality consultant who in no time was attuned to the hectic practices of an interpretation bureau. There was no attempt to press the mould of some other type of business on the way we worked, no additional bureaucratic routines doomed to be disregarded when office life shifts into high gear, no funny questionnaire for our clients to fill out - or to ignore and toss in the wastebasket.

We remained our old selves in all respects - same accounts and books and messaging systems and interactions - but with a clearer view of the many facets of our job that need to be consistently monitored. Our approach acquired a more formal and visible shape, and specific deadlines for checking performance were set. Our Code of Ethics and Professional Standards are no longer just within our hearts: they are filed and posted in the members' area of our website, beside the UNI EN ISO standards and the Privacy Law, as founding norms for anybody's reference.

Quality management certification, we came to see, is about constant improvement, which has to be somehow planned, monitored and documented. It is something to live up to and is a safeguard against falling prey to passivity or conservatism. "Let me see your indicators," the quality auditor can - and will - say. This is not a judgement on her part; just a reminder for us.

Time went by and we adapted to this new regime. Our first annual inspection came and we passed, with welcome compliments from the certification body. And now we have come to enjoy that the quality of our services is in fact up for discussion - and recognised.

Associazione Milano Interpreti (AMI) is a Milan-based group of AIIC consultant interpreters.