

The Bleak Reality of a World without Standards

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Abstract

Many countries in the world are prospering today because standards have been implemented, making the world a much safer place. The ramifications of a world without standards are evident simply by studying the trials and tribulations of those living in countries where standards are not enforced. Examining the manufacturing, healthcare, and education sectors sheds light on the broad spectrum of standards across varying sectors, and why standards in each play a pivotal role in today's thriving society. In the manufacturing food industry there are hundreds of standards in place to help ensure food is safe for consumers. Without labeling standards, for example, consumers could become ill or die from mislabeled packaging. In the healthcare sector, hospitals consistently strive to ensure a sterile and safe patient-friendly environment. Without safety standards in place, illness and infection would run rampant in hospitals. The education sector is just beginning to implement national standards. Some institutions have applied the Baldrige Criteria to help achieve excellence, but not nearly enough schools are seeking out standard excellence, as graduation numbers continue to decrease. Without the effective standards in place today, the world could be a bleak and risky reality.

The Bleak Reality of a World without Standards

Standards are critical to the success of businesses and very important in daily living, yet many are oblivious to all of the standards in place protecting society in everyday life. Nearly all industries have various standards in place to ensure that products, processes, and services are fit for their purpose. Put simply, a standard is an agreed upon way of protecting the best interests of the end-user utilizing performance metrics to track success. A few recognized standards include those from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Baldrige Criteria, Total Quality Management, and many other industry-specific documents that define quality requirements for various technologies and sectors. Standards drive innovation, promote safety and reliability, and give consumers choices. Without standards there would be inconsistency, incompatibility, and errors that would disrupt business and put society at risk. Studying the manufacturing, healthcare, and education sectors gives insight as to how standards are being applied in different industries, and helps illustrate a bleak reality if standards were not in place.

Manufacturing

Standards are crucial to the success of manufacturing, and particularly important in the food industry. The goal of food manufacturers is to produce food that is safe for consumers to eat. Among the most important standards pertaining to consumer food safety are the ISO 31000 international standards for risk management and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) national food standards. ISO 31000 focuses on encouraging proactive management, improving mandatory and voluntary reporting, enhancing health and safety performance, and most importantly, improving confidence and trust (ISO 31000, 2015). The FDA's standards for identity, quality, and fill-of-container requirements are a trusted barrier against substandard and fraudulently packaged food (FDA, 2007). Unfortunately, even with these standards, there are

instances of errors in manufacturing practices. In the United States, the most recent and severe occurrence was the packaged salad recall due to presence of listeria. The outbreak caused 15 people to be hospitalized, and each case was linked to the consumption of contaminated lettuce packaged at a Dole processing facility (FDA, 2016). Even though people suffered from the listeria contamination, the standards in place, mandatory recalls, and quick response from the manufacturer lessened the severity of the outbreak.

The U.S. is considered regimented in its food safety standards; however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses annually among the country's 290 million residents, as well as 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths (DeWaal, 2005). In a country rich in food manufacturing standards, there are still safety concerns regarding the health and well-being of its citizens. Rare outbreaks, as well as the changing needs of consumers, force the industry to continuously update its standards. And each region throughout the world has its own standards to uphold. The past offers many examples to learn from when standards were lax or non-existent. In Spain in 1981-1982, contaminated rapeseed oil killed more than 2,000 people and disabled another 20,000, many permanently. In China in 2002, more than 200 schoolchildren were sickened and 38 died when a competitor was able to intentionally contaminate another producer's bakery products with rat poison (DeWaal, 2005). Sad instances force new standards to be implemented to insure mistakes are not repeated; however, some countries will continue to fall behind.

Many of the food contamination issues seen in other areas of the world are due to lack of physical and financial resources to enforce food safety programs. Standards in the food manufacturing industry bring peace of mind to consumers by ensuring food is safe to eat. Currently, standards in the U.S. and most developed countries compel manufacturing facilities to

adhere to proper cleaning and sanitation practices. The standards for food manufacturing help lower the likelihood of frequent foodborne outbreaks. Without standards, manufacturers could cover up errors to avoid any negative publicity and bottom-line losses, more people would be sick from contamination outbreaks or from mislabeled products, and the number of lives lost would be excessive. Not knowing if food being eaten will cause illness or death would result in consumers full of uncertainty.

Healthcare

Standards have taken a front row seat in the healthcare field in recent years. There are many levels to the healthcare system in the United States, each with its own set of standards for quality and safety. The hospital setting level has the greatest impact on the public. Some hospitals provide the highest quality life-saving measures, while others provide less than optimal care. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services works to define level-of-care standards in close partnership with accreditation bodies such as The Joint Commission (TJC) and DNV Healthcare. Accreditation bodies drive safety, quality, and performance excellence by ensuring specific standards are being effectively implemented by hospitals. Approximately 5,000 hospitals and more than 10,000 other institutions throughout the United States are accredited as meeting TJC standards (Lazarus & Chapman, 2013). These standards focus on important patient care and organizational functions essential to providing safe, high-quality care. DNV Healthcare standards offer a strong focus on performance excellence. The DNV Healthcare approach has an ISO component and is closely linked with the Baldrige Excellence Framework for organizational performance as established by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). The high level of healthcare Americans experience today only exists because stakeholders worked in a coordinated fashion to add value to improve healthcare.

Standards ensure hospitals use best practices across all aspects of care. If standards did not exist in today's healthcare market, it would be impossible to know where to seek quality care. Many of the current conditions found in developing countries could resemble what the world would look like if healthcare standards were lax or not in place. A lack of standards results in less-stringent credentialing for physicians, nurses, and technologists, which can lead to more errors, misdiagnoses, and an overall potentially dangerous environment for patients. Hospital-acquired infections transmitted when visiting a healthcare institution could jump. In developed countries, about 5-10% of patients admitted to acute care hospitals acquire an infection, while the rate for developing countries can exceed 25% (Whitelaw, 2013). Without standards, more people would be getting sick, resulting in many unnecessary deaths.

Without standards, organizations could also sacrifice quality and safety for greater financial gains. There could be different levels of care based on an individual's ability to pay for services. The best healthcare would go to the wealthy, while the poor would get unsafe and potentially harmful care. In India, for example, substandard healthcare runs rampant. The poor will travel for days and wait for days to be treated at India's largest public teaching hospital, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, in New Delhi. Meanwhile, just a few miles away in the lobby of one of city's swanky corporate hospitals, wealthy patients from around the world sip lattes waiting only a few minutes to be seen (Kaiman et al., 2014). Standards in healthcare drive society to be its best and healthiest, promote fiscally responsible providers, and most of all guarantee that each person is able to get healthcare that is exceptional and safe. Healthcare has made great strides in applying quality standards to keep patients safe.

Education

Another sector that is attempting to adopt a better set of standards is America's education system. Schools have been struggling to establish and maintain effective measurement standards regarding graduation numbers. An accurate graduate count is important because it determines a school district's success. Recently, fifty states incorporated similar measurement tools to compare graduation rates. Since the standards were implemented, high school graduation rates have been shown to be slowly declining, due to the changes in how the rates are now being calculated (Martin, 2012). Standardizing dropout rates help school districts better understand why students do not finish school. For example, districts of "ethnic minorities have a graduation rate of 20% less, and 60% of students in urban districts graduate high school as compared to 75% in suburban district" (High School Graduation Rates, 2006). Identifying specific trends helps the government, the National Education Association, and school districts fight against gaps and improve graduation rates across America.

Without a standard method for determining graduation rates, a school district could be misled in thinking it is providing an acceptable level of education when it is actually not. Prior to the new standards being adopted, graduation rates were misleading. For example, after the new standard was put in place, Utah's measured graduation rate dropped from 90% in 2010 to 75% in 2011 (Martin, 2012). Inaccurate graduation rates can give educators the false impression they are doing an effective job, when in reality more students are falling behind. Administrators must continue to push teachers to strive for a high level of excellence, and teachers must continue to push students to reach their full potential. An education system without standards could be detrimental to the future of society as undereducated students enter the workforce.

Many developed countries around the world are competing to be recognized as leaders in education, while developing countries continue to fall way behind. Developing countries are more concerned with the level of grade attainment rather than the number of graduates. In developed countries, adults have an average of 12 years of school, compared with 6.5 years of school for those in developing countries. This gap is not projected to close any time soon. If today's pace of change continues, it will take at least 65 years for the average adult in a developing country to reach 12 years of school, and that stretches to 85 years for adults living in low-income countries (Winthrop, 2015). Without standards to measure students' success, schools go unaware of the level of learning acquired. A prosperous economic future relies on a highly educated and sought-after workforce.

Conclusion

All industry sectors adhere to standards to improve quality and efficiency of products and processes and safeguard society, including food manufacturers, healthcare facilities, and schools. Standards protect workers and consumers, establish fair competition, provide value, and add to an organization's bottom line. Without standards, the world would be an uncertain place filled with inconsistencies and hidden dangers. Food would be questionable to consume, hospitals would become breeding grounds for further infections, and a quality education would be questionable. Implementing standards provides peace of mind by ensuring systems are being followed and are in the best interest of society. When an organization implements standards, performance levels improve dramatically. Standards provide organizations with accountability, comparative data, benchmarks, cost savings, improved retention, quality products, and good business practices. Standards keep society safe and are necessary in producing safe products for consumption, controlled and sanitary healthcare, and the development of the minds of future

generations. From sanitation standards to the amount of schooling a student receives, the world today would be very different if standards were not put in place. Society should take notice and better understand that standards help create a fair, safe, and reliable world.

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