

## **The Benefits of Accreditation.**

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Bahrain Metrology Conference- June 2006.  
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### **Abstract**

Many companies debate the merits of applying for accreditation. In this paper, we will investigate what accreditation means along with some of the advantages and international trade requirements. We will also briefly review the interaction of the International Standards and the Organisations that are involved in the processes

### **Introduction**

Most things in life involve risk. Most of the time, as humans, we have choices and can generally decide how much risk we are prepared to take. It is however, amazing how often we ignore the advice and lessons that others have learnt and only really apply the lesson when we have been affected in some way or other, personally. Why do I say personally, well it is that way most of the time. How many children really learn life's lessons from the experiences of their parents and how many Company leaders remember or even reflect on the errors made by their predecessors?

The world of national and international standards and accreditation is not new. It has been clearly recorded for thousands of years such as in the case of the building of the great pyramids in Egypt. The ancient artisans and traders had their rules of trade and evaluation of each other's goods and methods.

So why is it that today, with all of that history, we still make the same mistakes that our ancestors did? Why do we still distrust each other and why do we need a referee or mediator.

Fortunately, the problem is not always one of trust or malicious purpose, but often a result of misconception and misunderstanding. Different ways of doing things and sometimes a simple difference in definition cause the problem. Take for example the word "gallon". In the USA, they are talking of a measure of  $\pm 3.7$  litres while in the UK they are talking about  $\pm 4.5$  litres. So who is right? In their own minds, both are right. This is where pride and stubbornness get in the way and why we need a common reference point or procedure and sometimes a referee!

## **Why Accreditation**

As children, we often said, “Who says.....”. As adults, we generally don’t say it but think it. We should say it and question why?

For example, who says that the one kilogram of sugar you buy is actually one kilogram. The water you drink is safe and medication you have been prescribed is the correct one at the right dosage?

We are sometimes led by historical circumstance, a known person or brand name and even just gut feel. These are not necessarily wrong but are difficult to justify to someone else. We also need to ensure that we are all talking about the same thing and particularly, the method of obtaining the result and expressing the result. Once again, we come back to definition (s).

Some of the basics related to this subject are:-

- **Conformity Assessment**  
Any activity concerned with determining directly or indirectly that relevant requirements are fulfilled.
- **Accreditation:**  
Procedure by which an authoritative body gives formal recognition that a body or person is competent to carry out specific tasks.
- **Certification:**  
Procedure by which a 3rd party gives written assurance that a product, process or service conforms to specified requirements.

## **Conformance vs. Competence**

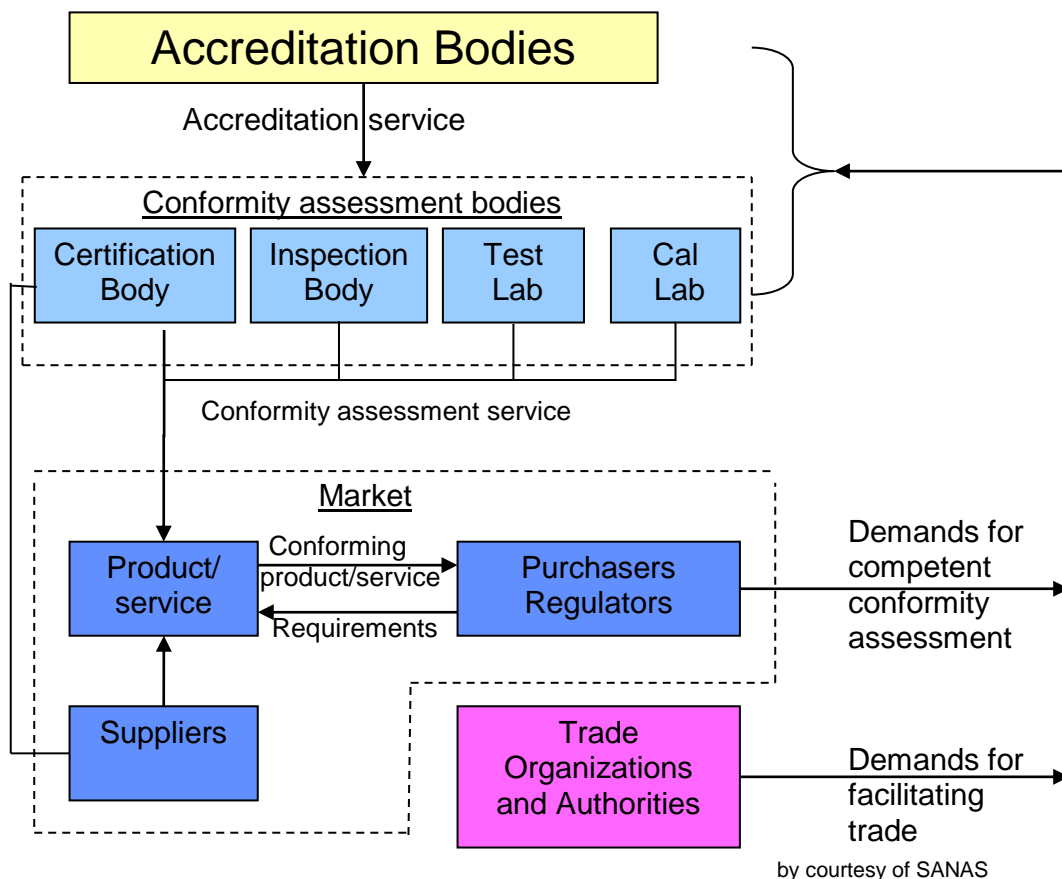
At first, these look obvious and simple but still there is great confusion especially between the meaning of Conformance and Competence. These two words are often erroneously mixed up and thought to mean the same thing. They are however very different and when understood clearly explain the difference between Accreditation and Certification.

If we look at ISO9001 vs. ISO17025, we see the application of Conformance vs. Competence. Certification is to show compliance (conformance) to a specification and Accreditation is to show competence to perform a function against an accreditation schedule.

Seen in the metrology laboratory context, a Calibration Laboratory that is accredited has to demonstrate competence to issue calibration certificates that show an instrument’s compliance or conformity to a specification.

## Supervision in the Market

So who gets to make the rules? The bottom line is we all do! It is only where the full process is not followed or the standards or specifications are biased in favour of one party or the other, that things go wrong.



The above diagram shows how it is necessary for all parties to work together to obtain a harmonised system. Everyone has a role to play and the more the various parties are involved in the process the fewer problems there are with interpretation of the requirements or results.

## World Trade Organisation – Globalisation

The World Trade Organisation is a body that was established to facilitate trade between all economies of the world. Again, this body is tasked with creating uniformity of processes and regulations. To summarise the applicable tasks of the WTO to our industry the following points apply:-

- The seven main instruments of formal trade policy are tariffs, subsidies, import quotas, voluntary export restraints, local content requirements, antidumping policies, and administrative policies.
- Tariffs are the oldest and simplest instrument of trade policy
- They are also the instruments that GATT (General Agreement on Trade Tariffs ) and WTO (World Trade Organization) have been most successful in limiting
- But a fall in tariff barriers in recent decades has been accompanied by a rise of non-tariff barriers such as subsidies, quotas, voluntary export restraints, and anti-dumping policies
- The WTO encourages members to use tariffs (fees paid at the border) to manage market access rather than non-tariff measures. Tariffs are transparent and can be lowered as the market opens. Lower tariffs are exposing other access restrictions, such as technical requirements
- Technical Barriers To Trade (TBT) is the WTO's acronym for those potential barriers to international trade that occur once tariff barriers are removed between trading partners.
- The WTO has a TBT agreement that has been signed by all members.
- The Agreement on TBT seeks to ensure that technical regulations, standards and procedures for assessment of conformity (with technical regulations and standards), as may be used in international trade, do not create unnecessary obstacles to such trade.
- This is a laudable objective but pre-supposes that a very technically sophisticated infrastructure is available to local manufacturers / service providers to enable them to objectively demonstrate the compliance of their products and/or manufacturing / service delivery processes to relevant ISO/IEC and other appropriate regional and international standards.
- Technical Barriers to Trade can obviously have very different consequences for exporters. If, due to requirements of regulators in the target market, the exporting company requires proof of compliance to an international standard and again does not have a

sufficiently developed national conformity assessment infrastructure, retesting may be required with the inherent delays and associated costs. For the exporter of electrical cable this is frustrating, for an exporter of fresh produce this could lead to bankruptcy.

So why reference the WTO and TBT. It is essential for National Accreditation and Standards bodies, NMIs and Industry to work together with the appropriate government departments that are involved in the activities of the WTO and to ensure that the “politicians” understand the role of accreditation systems, laboratories and the way that Technical Barriers are subtly introduced.

In addition to this, the users of the services also need to get involved in the development of new specifications. There are many vehicles available to do this and generally the “officials” are crying out for people to be involved in the process so that a balanced and effective standard, that can be enforced, is written and released. All too often, the effort that is put into criticizing a standard, would have been far more productive if it was reviewed in the document development process.

If International trade is the prime objective, then ensuring that not only is an economy accountable unto itself, it has to be recognized by the International Forums such as ISO, ILAC etc. This means extra work but it is certainly worth it. The task becomes even easier if within a Region and definitely a Country, the main players such as the National Measurement Institute, The Accreditation Body and The Standards Body, work together to create a useful working (fit for purpose) system for their Country and expand it to work together in the Region.

### **Conclusion**

As the world grows smaller the competition from foreign sources becomes greater. With it, there are more pressures on productivity and efficiency to reduce costs. The TBTs are used to try to protect one economy from another and needs to be addressed. Similarly, within an economy, each Company has to improve its own production, quality and acceptability of its products or services, for the local and especially the Global markets.

In all of these roles, Accreditation by a reputable and internationally acceptable Body can assist in the process. It will not solve all of the issues but if properly implemented at all levels with all the parties working together, it will ultimately make the job easier and make product or service rejection more difficult for those who are hiding behind unreasonable TBTs.

As a Country it is important to also involve all the government departments and regulators in the process and for each of these bodies to deal with their appropriate counterparts in the appropriate forums, Nationally, Regionally and Internationally. This will reduce the skepticism and mistrust and enable people to talk to each other, to learn from each other's mistakes and long learning cycles. The information and friendship offer is on the table, it must be taken up responsibly and adapted to suit each Country and Region accordingly. Only by being part of the process will your voice be heard by those who are already in the system. You may have good ideas or face difficulties that have never been seen before so you need to be able to present them in such a way that they are understood by the community at large.

As with most things in life, we get out what we constructively put in. Accreditation is welcomed by those who want to continually improve themselves. They do not view it as punishment but as a requested process to help make things better for themselves.

### **References**

I thank SANAS, ILAC, IAF, ISO and many other such organizations for the privilege of working with them and having access to their documents, over the years and for the experiences that have been gained in the process.

1<sup>st</sup> June 2006.