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Richard Broome



quality management as I do now. Although this helped get things off the ground to begin with, I found my involvement with quality standards gradually informed a broader view of these factors.”

The team has now begun to explore how it can go beyond ISO 9001 and has introduced new project setup, management, resourcing and client satisfaction policies. Melanie remarks: “It’s really influenced the collective mindset here – promoting a culture of excellence and continual improvement. It’s not easy, and it takes time and work from everybody each month, but it’s definitely worth it.”

The practice continues to go from strength to strength, picking up three industry awards in 2015 for its Lime Wharf, Mayfield School and Greenwich Square projects and another in 2017 for Ark Isaac Newton Academy. It has also recently achieved Investors in People (IIP) silver accreditation, and most of its business now comes from direct referrals.

A framework for professionalism, confidence and growth

Richard concludes: “Although standards have helped in several practical ways – accelerating contract bid processes and driving internal cost efficiencies for example – it’s the intangible benefits that are most powerful. The professional attitude and belief that comes with a standards-based culture is present across everything we do.

“I’ve learnt that, as a small business, you can view quality standards in one of two ways. Either you do just enough to earn and then maintain accreditation, so you appear a certain way to those looking in – regardless of how it actually influences your staff and procedures.

“The alternative is to approach standards as a framework for growth. An ongoing opportunity develop your business’ potential. Fully embedding them in your strategy and decision-making takes commitment and effort from everybody in the company, but over time it develops a mindset and culture which can take you to the next level.” ●

“Introducing flow charts was a particularly useful exercise to highlight how our processes could be optimized. Detailing them in a clear graphical format meant we could share and discuss ideas with colleagues easily. This enabled active reflection over what we thought was best practice and it encouraged us to look at where efficiencies could be made.”

Today, Outerspace has successfully embedded quality management and ISO 9001 into every process and procedure. Richard explains: “It’s certainly true that we’ve gone on a long journey when it comes to how we use standards within the business. From no relationship at all, to introducing them as a tick box exercise, to fully embedding them into the fabric of our business. Our standards have become a strategic foundation for Outerspace, inspiring confidence and professionalism across the team.”

This strategic, standards-based culture has moved beyond Outerspace’s client work to influence every corner of the business. The practice’s approach to human resources, staff wellbeing and career development have also evolved.

Richard continues: “It’s also fair to say that many aspects of my own approach and viewpoint have evolved as a result of this journey. I’m an optimist and especially in the early days I would usually trust that ‘things would work out’ and didn’t have as rounded a view of risk or

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Standards and the SME: CASE STUDY

How landscape architecture consultants Outerspace developed a standards-based culture.

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Standards and the SME: Moving from a tick-box exercise to a strategic foundation

How landscape architecture consultants Outerspace developed a standards-based culture.

Outerspace is an award-winning landscape architecture and urban design practice, based in a converted boathouse on the banks of the River Thames at Teddington. The company was founded in 2002 by Richard Broome and has since grown into a successful 12-strong practice. Outerspace's design and planning portfolio ranges from the public realm to residential, educational, industrial, healthcare and beyond.

In the early days Richard worked alone from his dining room table. Surviving the first year of trading and winning new clients was understandably his main focus.

That first year came and went, and the small practice began to find its footing - winning a Mayor's Award for Planning Excellence in 2004, for its work on Walthamstow Square and Gardens. By now, Richard had taken on a handful of staff and had left his dining room behind - sharing an office with a graphic design firm.

The start of a standards journey

At this point, most of the new civic projects the practice tendered for required prequalification questionnaires (PPQs), demanding significant time to complete.

Richard picks up the story: "We quickly learned from completing numerous PPQs that having quality standards in place would reduce the amount of material and evidence we'd have to include. It became clear we could accelerate our response time for larger civic tenders by achieving the relevant certifications - particularly ISO 9001."

The team engaged a consultancy firm to assess Outerspace's existing processes and advise on what would be required to achieve and maintain ISO 9001 certification. A central element of which was producing a quality manual detailing all relevant quality processes and procedures.

After a few months Outerspace achieved the ISO 9001 standard. Richard explains: "Getting to the point of certification and keeping our processes up to date for annual assessment was very much a tick-box exercise back then. It was something to get us on the right supplier lists. We didn't think about the strategic benefits to our growing business, we simply made sure we kept our certification each year."

Even though Richard and the team were just getting by with the minimum needed to keep ISO 9001 certification, it was sometimes hard to find the time required to maintain compliance, especially when they were pushing for lots of new contracts during the economic downturn of the late 2000s. "At the time, we just saw it as extra admin," admits Richard.

outerspace



Steps towards strategic standards use

Time passed and the Outerspace team continued to win national accolades for its projects. The practice received three awards in 2011 for its work on the iCon building in Daventry, recognising design and sustainability excellence.

The business has continued to grow organically and reached the point where it would benefit from a practice manager to manage team resourcing and processes. The role also included responsibility for ISO 9001 certification maintenance and the associated quality manual. Richard appointed experienced manager Melanie Winter to the position in 2013.

Once on board, Melanie began to familiarise herself with the quality manual. She spent time with the original consultant to determine exactly how the manual should be used, as well as how it could be updated and improved, explaining: "It became clear pretty quickly that we'd need to adjust the manual to bring it in line with the work we did every day as a landscape architecture practice."

In addition, they discussed how ISO 9001's requirements could be further integrated into the practices' processes, and how the team should best conduct internal audits and checks to help ongoing quality management.

Soon after this, the Outerspace management team began work to update and rewrite the quality manual together. ISO had also recently announced the 2015 revision of 9001, so they were able to satisfy its new requirements in the document. Melanie explains: "Our updated quality manual was now properly aligned with the business and the nature of our work. The next step was to make sure it didn't just sit up on the shelf - it had to be used across the whole practice, by all our landscape architects, every day."

“It's really important to maintain consistent quality management records - to help keep us accountable to our own quality requirements, as well as for annual compliance audits.”



Melanie Winter

Getting buy-in across the team was important to truly entrench the standard into the Outerspace team workflow. Existing staff needed coaching and support to help them adjust. Melanie continues: "As well as working with our established landscape architects to align their working practices with the quality manual, we also recognised the need to introduce our standards-based culture to new staff from day one."

ISO 9001 requires businesses to conduct monthly management audits to ensure that quality processes are maintained. Melanie championed this process within the team - scheduling regular meetings and information gathering sessions with staff: "It's really important to maintain consistent quality management records - to help keep us accountable to our own quality requirements, as well as for annual compliance audits," she explains.

"Naturally, to do this meaningfully requires regular and focused time from every team member - which can be hard to find during busy client projects. A flexible approach is crucial - it's not uncommon for planned audit meetings to be rescheduled around client and project deadline pressures. Perseverance and teamwork are really important."

Emerging structure and strategic alignment

With full support from the senior management team, a new structure began to emerge. Staff engagement with the initiative gradually deepened as they became more familiar with the regular auditing process, and its strategic intentions.

Matt Ellins, a Senior Landscape Architect at Outerspace, comments: "Adjusting to the ISO process required us to think in detail about our practices and processes. Although it seemed initially to be time consuming, it became clear quite quickly it was time well invested to help improve our quality procedures and through them our output."

