

Quality, cost, time

Quality, cost, time – these are three things that affect almost everything we do:

- how well we do it
- how much it will cost to do
- how long it will take to do

Is this important? Yes, absolutely it is - because everything we do will affect our reputation in some way! Whether it's in our professional lives or our personal lives, the things we do contribute to how others (managers, co-workers, colleagues, contacts and connections) come to regard us.

Now, if we are having some work done for us, *quality*, *cost*, and *time* will almost certainly be three key elements behind our selection of who will do the work. When I am having something done (professionally or personally), I am looking to get the best possible result, for the best possible price, in the best possible time. However, '*highest quality*' at '*lowest cost*' in '*shortest time*', is not realistic.

Quality – what is it?

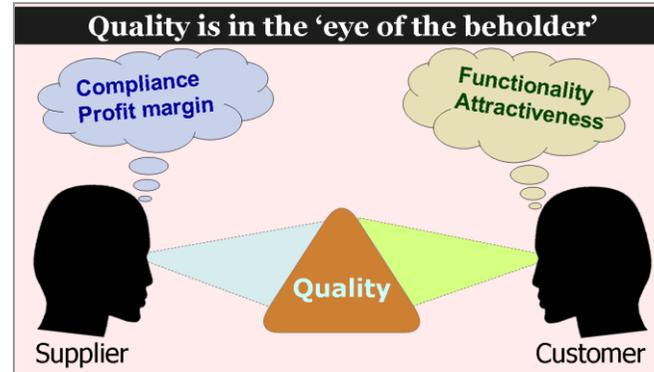
Most of us know that whatever the piece of work is, a good *quality* job is likely to require more *time*, which inevitably means an increase in *cost*. So, whether it is for a professional purpose or a personal need, if we really (Really!) want a *quality* result, are we prepared to (1) wait for it, and (2) pay for it? Often, the driving factor in our selection is *cost*, i.e. we have a set budget. Or it might be that we have a specific 'required by' date, which will make *time* the driving factor.

Note:

For some pieces of work, the only *cost* will be for labour/*time*.

Both *cost* and *time* are easily defined and are therefore unlikely to be misunderstood. However, that is not the case for *quality* – which (like beauty)

is invariably “in the eye of the beholder”. That said, quality means something should be suitable for its intended purpose, and it should perform satisfactorily when in use. While a commonly used definition of quality is “fitness for purpose”, our assessment of quality is likely to be somewhat subjective, and is often about perception.



Our assessment of quality is likely to be subjective and is often about our perceptions. To the 'Supplier', quality may mean the work complies with specifications and offers a margin for profit; to the 'Customer', it may mean that the result is both functional and also attractive to the user.

Quality – a quick case study

Two people (e.g. a 'supplier' and a 'customer') could look at exactly the same piece of work and each 'see' a different level of *quality*. For example, a building contractor has replaced your front doorway with a new door and frame. Your focus is probably towards something that is both functional and also is pleasing to look at. The builder's focus is more than likely towards something that meets a building code standard and also offers a margin for profit. So, how do you react when you notice the following 'defects':

- the door itself is slightly twisted; the bottom seals into the doorframe but the top has a 50mm gap

- the doorframe has been freshly painted, but there are brush marks of paint on the external brick work
- there are also several drops of dried paint on the doorstep, presumably from the doorframe paint
- the paint on both sides of the door shows a myriad of tiny holes, like little bubbles that had burst
- there is absolutely no paint at all on the bottom or top edges of the door – it is just bare wood
- the weather strip on the outside of the door has been damaged, so it does not make a proper seal

This is not a hypothetical scenario – it is exactly what happened to a door in my new house – and the builder saw nothing wrong with any of it! As for me, I was NOT happy - clearly each of us had different perceptions of what *quality* means!

Getting a balance

As a Performance Consultant, I have spent many years 'balancing' the elements of *quality*, *cost*, and *time* as I have offered solutions to customers and potential customers. Usually we start off by establishing the intended scope of the work that is needed. Next comes the required completion date, and then the cost-estimate.

If this causes a budgeting issue, the scope can be reduced, which may change the intended *quality* of the work. Another option can be for me to absorb some of the *cost*, possibly leaving the scope and *quality* unchanged. The secret is: “make sure you know what is expected in terms of *quality*, *cost*, and *time* before you start the work!” Once these three have been settled, should any one of them change, the other two will also need to change.

A project management perspective

In the world of project management, *quality*, *cost*, and *time* are considered as three of the key constraints that shape any project. Sometimes these

are referred to as the “triple constraint”, or the “iron triangle”. These three apply whether the project is about IT/ICT, construction, manufacturing, mining, etc. The conventional teaching is that a project can have the best of any two, but not of all three (Note: most methodologies also include other constraints, e.g. risk, resources, customer satisfaction).

Project management ‘purists’ are likely to teach that *quality* should be the first constraint to be considered, however it is apparent that practitioners are more likely to give priority to *cost* and/or *time*. This is evidenced by a noticeable lack of *quality* across a range of major projects from all around the globe over recent years:

- NASA once had a reputation for “zero defects”, however this was shattered by the Challenger (1986) and Columbia (2003) disasters - and has not been helped by the recent (Oct 2014) [Antares rocket failure](#)
- software companies such as Microsoft have been shipping ‘buggy’ products to consumers for so long (+20 years) that we have all become quite accepting of this practice – the reason: “people buy features, not *quality*”
- Toyota, founder of the Toyota Production System (to ensure maximum quality), has been forced over the past 10 years to recall millions of vehicles worldwide because of manufacturing defects, some of which have proved fatal

Quality comes ~~first second~~ third

These are just three examples illustrating a worldwide trend over the past 25 or so years away from producing good *quality* results in favour of managing *costs*. So then, what lies behind this? In a world where competitors are always ready to offer a better deal, completion/delivery ‘on time and on budget’ (or better) is essential for businesses to survive. And, while ‘features’ may be desirable, real *quality* has become a luxury.

Today, in industries all around the globe, the project manager’s focus is inevitably towards either managing *costs* or delivering the result on *time*. From the local level to the global level, there can be little doubt that *quality* is not seen as an essential element of a piece of work by many suppliers of goods and services. But are customers and consumers of a similar mind?

Quality and You and Me

When I am on the receiving end of a piece of work that is not of good *quality*, my emotions can range from disappointment to anger (depending on my expectation). I am also less likely to engage in repeat business without (at least) becoming very specific about my requirements, and also insisting on a thorough check of the work before acceptance.

If you or I deliver a poor *quality* piece of work to our manager or to a customer, how will they receive it? What impact will that have on our reputation? It is certainly unlikely to be a career-enhancing or customer-satisfying event – unless (of course) their priority is not *quality*, but rather *cost* or *time*. The secret here is to know which of the three elements (*quality*, *cost*, *time*) is most important before you begin the piece of work.

It’s about managing expectations

For every piece of work, whether it is large or small, there will be a customer (who is receiving the work), and a supplier (who is delivering the work). There will also be some form of ‘brief’, detailing what is needed by the customer – this may be a formal document, or it may be given in verbal form. Before any work is begun, it is important that both parties have a clear understanding of:

- what is required
- the date for delivery
- the agreed budget/*cost*
- the required *quality* standard
- the intended acceptance criteria

- the acceptance/handover process

While the first three points above (*what*, *time*, *cost*) are usually quite clear to both customer and supplier, often that is not the case for other three (*quality*, acceptance criteria, and handover).

Whether we are in a customer or a supplier role, we can avoid possible disappointment (or worse) during acceptance by ensuring that both parties **do** have a clear understanding of the required *quality* standard, the intended acceptance criteria, and the handover process. In essence, this is about ‘*managing expectations*’. If we get this right, our reputation will be enhanced – if we get it wrong, the consequences may not be so pleasant!

Footnote

There will be times when *quality* is not a priority, but rather “on time” and/or “on budget” are. However we may feel about this, by identifying the required *quality* standard, the intended acceptance criteria, and the handover process before any work is started, we will be in a good position to deal with customers’ expectations.

Worth a look

Our free nuggets for this Post are:

[Time, quality and cost](#) from the UK Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment website archive (Jan 2011) – this short article is about achieving a balance between quality, time, and cost (approx 4-min read)

[Why Consumers Shouldn't Equate Cost with Quality](#) from the Business News Daily (Oct 2014) – this short post offers some insights into a consumer’s view of quality and cost (approx 3 min read)

Coming next: Seven personal skills that employers want most

<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=1121>