

Best foot forward

The managing director of Excellence Finland, explains how her organisation is helping others on their journey to excellence and the European reaction to the 2010 revision of the Model

How did you get involved in business excellence?

Before I joined Excellence Finland in 2006, I worked for companies that place great emphasis on the importance of quality and excellence. Finland is a small country of only five million people, so the quality of our products and services need to be very competitive.

During my career I have worked for companies such as Nokia, the world's largest mobile phone manufacturer, Vaisala, the international market leader in meteorological instrumentation, and Suunto, a well-known manufacturer of sports instruments.

I worked predominantly in the field of international sales, mainly with French-speaking and Spanish-speaking countries and so gained first-hand experience that the principles of business excellence are truly international.

Tell us about Excellence Finland. How do you help organisations along their excellence journey?

Excellence Finland promotes sustainable excellence and competitiveness in Finland in a similar way to the BQF in the UK. We provide training on quality tools such as six sigma for quality managers. We also hold networking seminars and conferences, publish our magazine Laatu (which means quality in Finnish) and offer various courses and training programmes as well as consultancy services. We also have a weekly blog on the website of Kauppalehti, Finland's top daily business magazine, where we spread the word about business excellence.

Practically all the major Finnish companies and public organisations are members of Excellence Finland. We have three categories of membership. The first is for individuals who want to promote excellence in their work and personal lives, of which I'm proud to say that we have 1,300 members. The other two categories of membership are for organisations – the sustaining membership level and the key corporate membership level. When I started in 2006 we had 84 key corporate member organisations, now we have 180 and the number is growing all the time.

We plan a series of events each year focused on supporting our members' journey to excellence. Our networking events are especially popular, where people from different organisations learn from each other across a range of topics such as process management, innovation management, customer service management and people management.

We also hold a World Quality Day conference each year, where our members can come and listen to internationally renowned speakers. In 2010 our keynote speaker was US-based innovation expert Peter Merrill, who shared his ideas on how to promote innovation through quality management systems.

Do you have an awards process similar to the UK Excellence awards?

Yes, we do. We hold our Excellence Award Gala on the second Thursday of November each year. In addition to our national excellence awards, we give awards to quality innovation winners in five categories. There are three categories for companies of different sizes and a fourth category for public service organisations. The fifth category, which we launched in 2010, is for potential innovations. We also presented the Estonian Quality Innovation Awards for the first time in 2010, demonstrating how we are now widening our work to neighbouring countries.

What are the most important things an organisation needs to focus on when using the Excellence Model?

I think that the most important realisation for organisations to make is that excellence needs to be a part of everyone's work. It is not just the quality manager or the person responsible for business excellence who is in charge of ensuring that an organisation is performing well.

Most importantly, excellence must be on the top management's agenda. Without this level of commitment nothing will change in the rest of the organisation. Staff will not buy into the principles behind the Model or continual improvement projects if they can see that their leaders do not.

What advice do you have for organisations beginning their excellence journey?

When businesses first start using the Model, they must plan the journey in such a way that they can ensure some quick wins. Excellence is about dedication in the long term, but you also need to be able to show some results quickly, otherwise people will lose faith and become distracted by other ideas. It could be that you initiate a project to eliminate waste that will show tangible cost or man-hour savings quickly, or work to find new ways of doing things with greatly reduced resources.



Do you have any tips for organisations wanting to revitalise their use of the Excellence Model?

Be creative. You don't have to always use the Model the same way. For one project you could focus on how your organisation is performing against the enabling criteria, but a year later it could be that your results are more important. And then there are the eight fundamental concepts – why not focus on one and ask how your organisation is taking responsibility for a sustainable future or nurturing creativity?

Most importantly, organisations working with the Model must not lose sight of the fact that it is not a bible. Sometimes you will need to take a look at excellence from a people management point of view and at other times from an innovation point of view.

Finally, you must put the right people in charge of promoting the Model. If the person heading up your use of the Model can get the whole organisation excited about where the company is going, then you will be on the right track.

What has been the reaction in Finland to the 2010 update of the Model?

The feedback from the service industry and from the public sector in Finland has been very positive. The updated version of the Model answers questions that the previous version left open. The fact that the 2010 Model pinpoints the connection between strategy and results, including non-financial results, has been another major improvement. What has been particularly popular with the service industry in Finland is the fact that the new Model takes into account the flexibility of strategies in an ever-changing world.

What does 2011 hold for Excellence Finland?

Towards the end of 2010 we launched a new programme that enables organisations to perform their self-assessments against the Model via the internet and we are excited to start helping the first organisations through this process.

In May we will be hosting our first innovation seminar on a luxury cruise ship in the Caribbean. The ship, the *Oasis of the Seas*, won the Finnish Quality Innovation Award in 2009 and is the largest luxury liner ever built. It is something we've never done before and we are really excited to be stepping out of the traditional excellence box! ■

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