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Reasons for Decertification of ISO 9001. An Empirical Study*

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ABSTRACT: In the past few years, and in a number of countries, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of organizations withdrawing from the Quality Management System standard ISO 9001. Hence the need to analyze this phenomenon of decertification and to explain not only the extent to which it is taking place but also why companies are taking such decision. This study analyzes the reasons for withdrawing from ISO 9001 using data obtained from quality managers at 130 Polish organizations which opted out of certification in 2012 and 2013. The data shows that the most important reasons for withdrawal were related to internal factors, such as financial problems within the organizations, a perceived lack of added value from certification, and organizational changes (such as internal restructuring). There were also external factors: customer-driven reasons for the decision to withdraw were also given. Using this data we provide a classification of the reasons for decertification, which can shed light on the effectiveness of activities related to QMS implementation, certification and cancellation. We believe this will be of interest to managers of organizations and certification bodies, as well as researchers. The paper provides the potential basis for a quality management strategy directed towards identifying and dealing with the costs and problems that ISO 9001 can generate for companies.

KEYWORDS: ISO 9001, decertification, quality management systems, internal motivations, external motivations.

Introducción

There has been a huge growth in the implementation of management systems and the corresponding certification of standards in the management arena in the past few decades. Management System Standards (MSSs) such as, among others, ISO 9001 for quality management, or ISO 14001 for environmental management, have become very popular. Although implementing such standards is voluntary, in some sectors it has become a *de facto* mandatory measure required by customers seeking assurance as to the quality of the products or services offered by an organization (Braun, 2005; Bernardo & Simon, 2014).

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RAZONES PARA LA DESCERTIFICACIÓN DE LA NORMA ISO 9001. UN ESTUDIO EMPÍRICO

RESUMEN: en los últimos años, y en varios países, se ha evidenciado un aumento considerable en el número de organizaciones que decide retirarse del estándar de gestión de la calidad ISO 9001. De ahí la necesidad de analizar este fenómeno de descertificación y explicar no solo en qué medida se está llevando a cabo, sino también por qué las organizaciones han optado por tomar esta decisión. Por lo anterior, este trabajo analiza las razones que llevan a algunas organizaciones a retirarse del estándar ISO 9001, mediante el análisis de datos obtenidos de los gerentes de calidad de 130 organizaciones polacas que optaron por la certificación en el 2012 y el 2013. La información recopilada muestra que las razones más importantes para retirarse se encuentran relacionadas con factores internos tales como problemas financieros, una baja percepción del valor agregado otorgado por la certificación y algunos cambios organizacionales (como una reestructuración interna). Así mismo, se evidencia la influencia de factores externos relacionados mayormente con decisiones impulsadas por los clientes. Con estos datos proporcionamos una clasificación de los motivos para la descertificación de la norma ISO 9001 que puede dar cuenta de la efectividad de aquellas actividades relacionadas con la implementación, la certificación y la cancelación de los sistemas de gestión de la calidad. Consideramos que esta información puede ser de interés para los gerentes de las organizaciones y los organismos de certificación, así como para los investigadores en el área. El documento proporciona además la base para definir una estrategia de gestión de la calidad dirigida a identificar y abordar los costos y los desafíos que la ISO 9001 supone para las organizaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ISO 9001, descertificación, sistemas de gestión de la calidad, motivaciones internas, motivaciones externas.

RAZÕES PARA A DESCERTIFICAÇÃO DA NORMA ISO 9001. UM ESTUDO EMPÍRICO

RESUMO: nos últimos anos e em vários países, tem-se evidenciado um aumento considerável no número de organizações que decidem se retirar do padrão de gestão da qualidade ISO 9001. A partir disso, a necessidade de analisar esse fenômeno de descertificação e explicar não somente em que medida está sendo realizado, mas também por que as organizações têm optado por tomar essa decisão. Por isso, este trabalho analisa as razões que levam algumas organizações a se retirarem do padrão ISO 9001 mediante a análise de dados obtidos dos gerentes de qualidade de 130 organizações polacas que optaram pela certificação em 2012 e 2013. A informação recopilada mostra que os motivos mais importantes para a retirada se encontram relacionadas com fatores internos, tais como problemas financeiros, baixa percepção do valor agregado outorgado pela certificação e algumas mudanças organizacionais (como a restruturação interna). Além disso, evidencia-se a influência de fatores externos relacionados, em grande parte, com decisões impulsionadas pelos clientes. Com esses dados, proporcionamos uma classificação dos motivos para a descertificação da norma ISO 9001 que pode mostrar a efetividade daquelas atividades associadas com a implantação, com a certificação e com o cancelamento dos sistemas de gestão de qualidade. Consideramos que essa informação pode ser de interesse para os gerentes das organizações e para os organismos de certificação, bem como para os pesquisadores na área. Este documento oferece, ainda, a base para definir uma estratégia de gestão da qualidade dirigida a identificar e abordar os custos e os desafios que a ISO 9001 supõe para as organizações.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: descertificação, ISO 9001, motivações externas, motivações internas, sistemas de gestão da qualidade.

LES RAISONS DE LA DÉCERTIFICATION DE LA NORME ISO 9001. UNE ÉTUDE EMPIRIQUE

RÉSUMÉ: Ces dernières années, et dans plusieurs pays, le nombre d'organisations qui ont décidé de se retirer de la norme de gestion de la qualité ISO 9001 a considérablement augmenté, d'où la nécessité d'analyser ce phénomène de décertification et d'expliquer non seulement quelle est sa dimension réelle, mais aussi pourquoi les organisations ont choisi de prendre cette décision. Ce document analyse donc les raisons qui ont amené certaines organisations à se retirer de la norme ISO 9001 en analysant les données obtenues auprès des responsables qualité de 130 organisations polonaises ayant opté pour la certification en 2012 et 2013. Les informations recueillies montrent que les raisons les plus importantes de retrait sont liées à des facteurs internes tels que des problèmes financiers, une perception faible de la valeur ajoutée accordée par la certification et certains changements organisationnels (tels que la restructuration interne). De même, on démontre l'influence de facteurs externes liés principalement aux décisions prises par les clients. Avec ces données, nous fournissons une classification des raisons de la décertification de la norme ISO 9001 qui peut rendre compte de l'efficacité des activités liées à la mise en œuvre, à la certification et à l'annulation des systèmes de gestion de la qualité. Nous pensons que ces informations peuvent intéresser les responsables d'organisations et d'organismes de certification, ainsi que les chercheurs du secteur. Le document fournit également la base pour définir une stratégie de gestion de la qualité visant à identifier et à résoudre les coûts et les défis que pose ISO 9001 pour les organisations.

MOTS-CLÉ: ISO 9001, décertification, systèmes de gestion de la qualité, motivations internes, motivations externes.

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In particular, ISO 9001 for quality management has become the most recognized and most popular management standard worldwide with more than 1.1 million organizations certified in 2014, according to an ISO survey. The number of ISO 9001 certificates issued has increased exponentially since its inception, although there has been a leveling off during the last few years (ISO, 2014). The 2015 revision of this standard incorporated modern business management practices and quality principles, and can provide companies with significant added value if they choose its implementation (Croft, Fonseca & Domingues, 2016; Domingues *et al.*, 2016).

Research has also examined whether organizations that implement ISO 9001 standard and obtain the certification show any improvements in their financial performance (Manders, De Vries & Blind, 2013; Psomas & Kafetzopoulos, 2014; Sitki-Ilkay & Aslan, 2012). Some studies have found a positive financial effect, primarily through increased sales –stemming from improved customer satisfaction (Chiarini, 2016) and the positive impact of certification in terms of image–, but also due to better operational efficiency (Chatzoglou, Chatzoudes & Kipraios, 2015; Mokhtar & Muda, 2012; Psomas & Pantouvakis, 2015). On the other hand, different authors indicate this link cannot be proven, given the fact that better-performing companies self-select to implement these MSSs and achieve certification (Dick, Heras & Casadesus, 2008; Lo, Yeung & Chen, 2011).

A number of authors (e.g. Aba, Badar & Hayden, 2016; Heras-Saizarbitoria & Boiral, 2013; Tarí & Pereira-Molíner, 2012) have described ISO 9001 as a voluntary standard used to accomplish the organizational goals of systematizing and formalizing business processes, translating these to procedures and documenting the systems. Nevertheless, it is agreed it does not "measure" the quality of a company's products or services, but rather sets out certain conditions required to improve quality. In this context, the majority of studies into ISO 9001 have analyzed the benefits that may be obtained from certification and implementation, as well as the challenges and costs companies may face in seeking certification (Heras, Casadesus & Marimon, 2011; Simon, Karapetrovic & Casadesus, 2012). In contrast, very few studies have raised the question of what happens when the costs of ISO 9001 outweigh the benefits and companies decide to withdraw from the standard. Hence the objective of this paper: to examine the reasons that have led a number of companies to decide to decertify from ISO 9001 and show a lack of motivation in seeking certification again.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on the benefits and costs of ISO 9001, as well as the few studies available on decertification. Then, we explain the methodology used to analyze the motives behind decertification among a number of Polish companies and compare these results with the decertification phenomenon in other countries. Next, we present a discussion section where we evaluate each of the reasons these companies gave for decertification and develop some propositions for future research. The final section includes some concluding remarks, describes the limitations of this research and proposes other issues for further study.

Literature Review

Benefits versus Costs of ISO 9001 Certification

The implementation of a Quality Management System (QMS) and its certification to ISO 9001 standard has been shown to provide many benefits for companies. The benefits that researchers bestow to this certification include: increased competitiveness through improved efficiency and productivity (Cândido, Peixinho & Coelho, 2016; Islam *et al.*, 2016); lower costs of quality (Bernardo *et al.*, 2015; Casadesus & Karapetrovic, 2005) or enhanced customer satisfaction and improved image for stakeholders (Casadesus & Karapetrovic, 2005; Petnji-Yaya, Marimon & Casadesus, 2011; Petnji-Yaya, Marimon & Casadesus, 2014; Heras-Saizarbitoria, Boiral & Arana, 2015). Finally, although certification is not obligatory and organizations can implement ISO 9001 standard without certification, there is a perception that independent confirmation of conformity adds value (Alič, 2014).

In contrast, other studies have found that the implementation of ISO 9001 does not necessarily lead to more competitiveness (Grolleau, Mzoughi & Pekovic, 2013). Besides, organizations that certify the system must bear the costs of certification (Kafel & Nowicki, 2014), which include the financial costs, the difficult alignment of these new management practices to the firm's culture and the changes to the organizational structure, and a commitment in human resources (Boys & Wilcock, 2014; Casadesus & Karapetrovic, 2005; Heras-Saizarbitoria & Boiral, 2013; Ismyrlis & Moschidis, 2015; Psomas & Antony, 2015; Psomas, Fotopoulos & Kafetzopoulos, 2011; Sampaio, Saraiva & Guimarães-Rodrigues, 2009). Moreover, studies have not encountered a clear relationship between ISO 9001 and positive financial results. Therefore, unless certification is not confidently associated with corporate financial performance, it may be considered as just another management trend (Santos, Costa & Leal, 2012; Sharma, 2005).

Two Recent Phenomena: Saturation versus Decertification

Despite the exponential growth of ISO 9001 certificates during the past few decades, an opposite trend seems to be emerging recently (ISO, 2014). Several studies suggest

that the impact of ISO 9001 certification has diminished, and although the number of certifications has continued to grow globally, it is no longer growing at the same pace; in fact, in some countries it has even declined. This slowdown is suggested in a number of studies in this field (Bernardo & Simon, 2014; Casadesus & Karapetrovic, 2005; Gianni & Gotzamani, 2015; Heras-Saizarbitoria, Boiral & Arana, 2016; Llach, Marimon & Bernardo, 2011; Marimon, Heras & Casadesus, 2009; Nowicki *et al*., 2014; Sampaio *et al*., 2009; Sampaio, Saraiva & Ribeiro, 2014). This phenomenon of saturation is accompanied by another trend: an increase in decertification rates.

In addition, more and more companies, although not decertified, are uncertain about the prospects of certification and maintain the certificate primarily for external reasons such as company image and reputation, or supplier and customer requirements. It appears that losing the certificate can negatively impact the organization's reputation (Bernardo & Simon, 2014).

However, until now, very few studies have empirically analyzed the phenomena of saturation and decertification. With regard to saturation, some studies have focused on analyzing the trends in certification in different countries and sectors using logistic curves in order to predict the behavior of certification. Such studies look at the intensity of certification and the trends by country, region, industrial sector and other classifications, showing a clear stagnation in the number of certifications (Castka & Corbett, 2013; Llach *et al.*, 2011; Marimon *et al.*, 2009).

A study by Alic (2014) examined the relationship between decertification and financial performance in Slovenia. Nevertheless, given the initial investment in terms of effort, time and resources that companies need to make in order to obtain an international standard such as ISO 9001, the question of why these companies decide to decertify naturally arises. However, very little research has been carried out to answer this question. Among the few studies that explore the reasons for decertification we find diverse results pointing in different directions, such as the failure of audits (Marimon *et al*., 2009) or the lack of government support (Simon *et al*., 2012). As far as we know, there are only three empirical studies that have analyzed in detail the reasons for decertification. The first is a study by Alcalà (2013), who offers an exploratory approximation of

this issue with a case study analysis of companies in the paper sector. This author finds that the main reason for abandoning the certificates is the cost of implementation and renovation, which determines the renewal of ISO 9001 to a large extent. A second paper, by Kafel and Nowicki (2014), empirically explores the reasons of decertification with regard to ISO 9001 and ISO 14001. Through a case study analysis of seven Polish organizations, these authors find that the main determinants for withdrawing from the standards are the high cost of certification and the lack of positive externalities related to it. Finally, Alic (2014) studied the financial performance of a number of Slovenian organizations that withdrew from QMS certification, finding that cancelation of ISO 9001 certificates was related to a decline in their business performance. Such decline was also related to the amount of time that had passed after cancellation of their ISO 9001 certificate. In other words, there was a correlation between underperforming businesses and decertification, and these decertified business tended to continue to underperform. The survey did not investigate the reasons behind withdrawing from ISO 9001, but strongly suggested that financial problems are one of the important motives for doing so.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore the motives behind organizational decisions to withdraw from ISO 9001 certification and, given the increase in withdrawals, to contribute to the understanding of the new trends emerging in this field. This is, as far as we know, the first quantitative study to assess the reasons why companies (130 in our sample) opt to decertify from ISO 9001. We therefore take an exploratory approach towards this objective and propose a number of possible relationships between various internal and external factors, as well as the reasons for decertification.

The data used in this study was gathered from the customer retention department of one of the largest Polish certification bodies, which had previously obtained the reasons that companies specified for wanting to withdraw from certification. Data was gathered in a two-year period (2012 and 2013), during which 168 companies that withdrew from ISO 9001 certification were asked to give their reasons for doing so. Specifically, an employee from the certification body asked these companies the following question: "*What is the reason for withdrawing from certification?*" Out of these, 38 companies had decided not to withdraw but rather to maintain ISO 9001 with a different certification body. For this reason, they cannot therefore be considered as decertifying companies. We also discounted from our research sample any company whose certificate had been revoked by the certification body, which may have made such a decision as a result of, for example, major nonconformities. Hence, we will focus on the answers of 130 companies and their motives for voluntarily abandoning the standard.

The following section presents and discusses the results of the study. First, we will briefly describe the trend in the number of certificates and the annual growth of ISO 9001 worldwide, in Europe and in Poland. Next, we list the reasons for decertification given by our sample of Polish firms and then suggest a classification of internal and external factors behind the decision to withdraw. Finally, using this proposed classification, we will analyze each group of motivations and put forward some propositions for each group of reasons.

Results

The Evolution of ISO 9001 Worldwide, in Europe and in Poland

ISO annually publishes a database with the number of certificates by countries and industrial sectors of its main standards, including the results for ISO 9001. The last survey available (ISO, 2014) shows the importance of this standard worldwide, since it continues to be the most applied standard to provide assurance of a company's ability to satisfy quality requirements and enhance customer satisfaction in supplier-customer relationships. Looking at the evolution of ISO 9001 worldwide (graphs 1 and 2), the trend from 2004 to 2010 was one of continued growth. The 2010 total represents an increase of 54,759 certificates (up 5%) compared to 2009, when the total exceeded one million certificates for the first time, reaching a total of 1,063,751. In 2011, and for the first time in its history, there was a decrease in the number of certificates issued (- 39,282), with a 4% less than in 2010, while in the following three years there was a slight recovery with annual growths in 2011, 2012 and 2013 of 2, 3 and 1%, respectively. The number of certificates reached a total of 1,138,155 in 2014.

More specifically in Europe (graphs 1 and 2), the total number of certificates increased slightly from 500,286 in 2009 to 530,039 in 2010, and 459,367 in 2011, which represents an increase of 10% between 2008-2009 and 5.9% for 2010. However, in 2011 there was a decrease of 13.3%. Following the global trend, the upward trend in the number of ISO 9001 certificates in Europe returned in 2012, 2013 and 2014, although growth rates were lower compared to previous years, with rates of 2.3, 2.7 and 0.2%, respectively, reaching a point close to stagnation.

The fall of communism in Poland in 1989, and the process of adjustment to a market economy during that time, enabled Polish organizations to implement quality management systems. In 1994, the Act of Parliament of 3 April

1993 on Research and Certification was published. On the basis of this law a Polish Centre for Testing and Certification responsible for accreditation of certification bodies was established in the country. The first accreditation for a quality management systems certification body was granted on December 19th 1994. At the end of 2013, there were 33 certification bodies (CB) with official Polish accreditation operating in the market for quality management systems certification (Nowicki & Sikora, 2014).

The need for the Polish economy to adapt to the requirements of European and international markets, spurred the former Ministry of Industry to carry out a wide-scale campaign of information, education and promotion regarding the requirements for quality assurance designed to meet the ISO 9000 and EN 45000 standards. This was one of the reasons for the popularity of ISO 9001 certification. In fact, there was a rapid growth in ISO 9001 implementation and certification in Poland until 2004 (graphs 1 and 2), which was the year of Poland's accession to the European Union. Since then, the trend in Poland has been similar to global trends: high growth rates continued until 2009, followed by decreases in 2010, 2011 and 2012 (-4, -11 and -9%, respectively), a 4% increase in 2013, and another decrease (-10%) in 2014, when a total of 9,608 certificates of the ISO 9001 standard were approved.

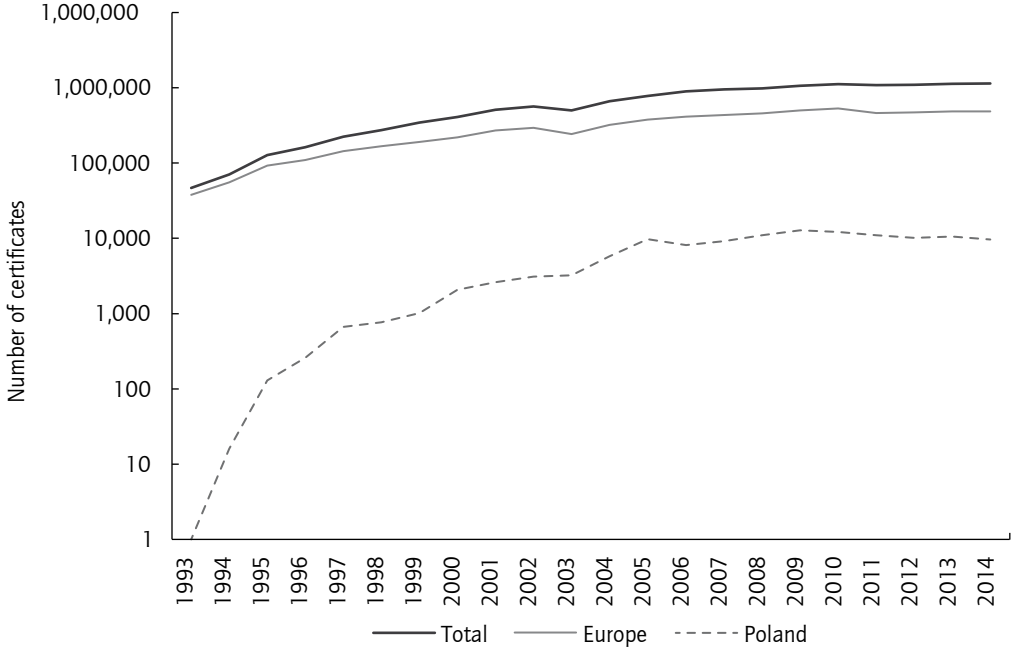
Hence, the trend in ISO 9001 certification worldwide, in Europe and in Poland seems to indicate that global growth rate will continue to be positive but less intense than in previous years and may even reach a point of stagnation in some countries. This is the case of Poland, where the overall number of certificates has been decreasing in recent years, giving rise to the decertification phenomenon: fewer firms are seeking certificates as a saturation point is reached, while others are withdrawing (voluntarily or otherwise) from the scheme. In fact, ISO has published the number of withdrawals by country with data available up to 2011. In Poland, the number of withdrawn certificates grew steadily from 2006 to 2008 (table 1), followed by very dramatic increases in 2009 and 2010. The number of withdrawals decreased in 2011 but remained higher than it had been in 2008.

Table 1.
Number of withdrawn ISO 9001 certificates in Poland.

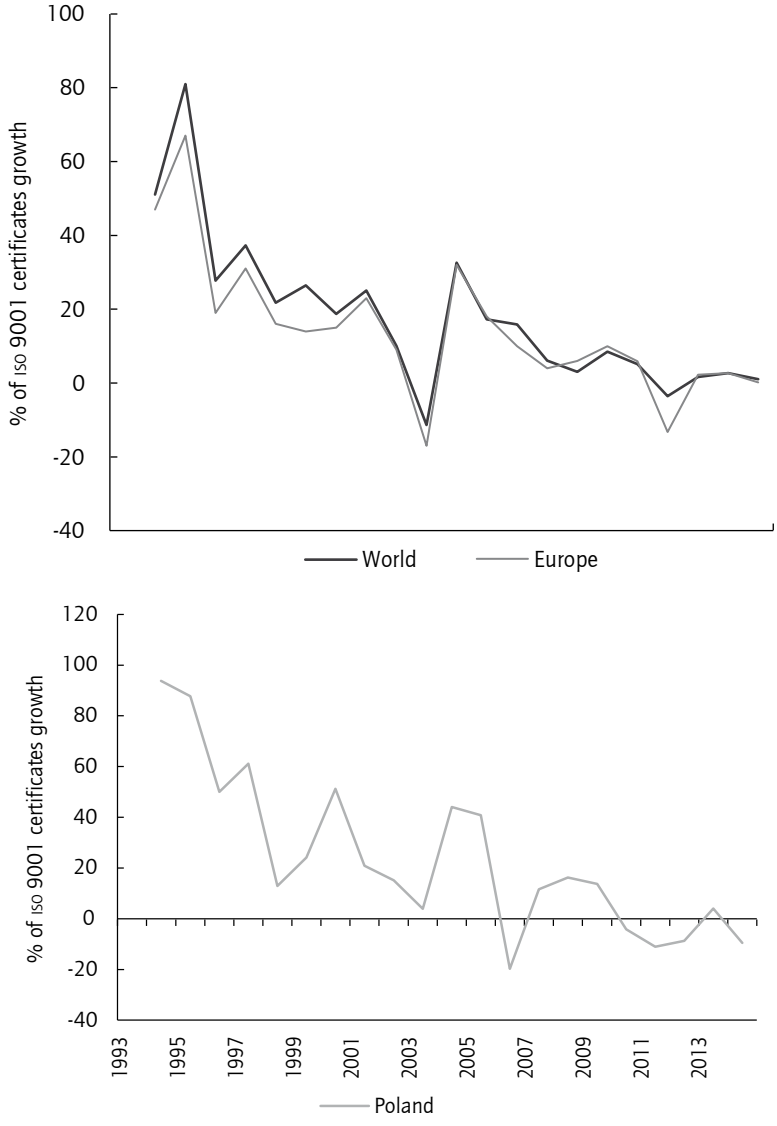
Year	Number
2006	270
2007	295
2008	387
2009	1,782
2010	1,268
2011	495

Source: ISO (2014).

Looking at both trends, certification and decertification, there is an obvious inflection point between 2010 and 2011. Before then ISO 9001 growth was clearly positive. It then turned negative in 2010 and 2011, and since then has returned to positive, but much reduced, growth and even stagnation. This seems to indicate that the financial crisis that hit Europe and Poland had a significant impact



Graph 1. Number of ISO 9001 certificates issued annually. Source: own elaboration based on ISO survey data (2014).



Graph 2. Annual growth in ISO 9001 certification (world, Europe and Poland). Source: own elaboration based on ISO survey data (2014).

on ISO 9001 certification. Another explanation for the phenomenon is that some countries have reached market saturation for ISO 9001 certified organizations (Alič, 2014; Sampaio *et al.*, 2009). There may also be a higher level of maturity and experience in terms of standardization and quality management, with activities being focused on specific tools, techniques and core values rather than on certification itself (Dahlgaard-Park *et al.*, 2013).

Why do Companies Decide to Withdraw from ISO 9001?

In table 2 below, we present the results of the survey in which 130 Polish organizations –all previously certified in ISO 9001 standard– were asked for the reasons that motivated their decision to withdraw from the certification process.

From the table above it can be seen that the most cited reason (36.92%) by Polish firms for leaving ISO 9001 is that of financial problems at the company. Other reasons commonly cited are that the standard does not add value to the operations of the firm (8.46%), the high cost of the certification (6.92%), internal organizational restructuring (5.38%), and not requiring the standard anymore to satisfy specific customers (5.38%). All other motives were each given by only a small minority of respondents.

The various motives given by these companies for abandoning the certificate can be classified into different categories. First of all, there are motives relating to internal factors in the organization, such as a consideration that it

Table 2.
Reasons for ISO 9001 decertification among Polish companies.

Reason		No. of firms	(%)
1	Financial problems at the company	48	36.92
2	Lack of added value	11	8.46
3	Cost of certification too high	9	6.92
4	The certificate had been required by a customer with whom the company no longer does business	7	5.38
5	Organizational changes (internal restructuring)	7	5.38
6	Change to another standard (withdrawal from ISO 9001 and seeking ISO 14001 or OHSAS 18001 certification)	2	1.54
7	Company liquidation (business closure)	2	1.54
8	Plan to close down the business	2	1.54
9	Abandonment of the QMS	2	1.54
10	Insufficient time available to maintain QMS	2	1.54
11	Change of terms of the certification offer	1	0.77
12	Change in the strategic criteria of the company's higher management	1	0.77
13	Changing to an internal certification	1	0.77
14	Changes in the structure of the corporate group	1	0.77
15	Change in customers' criteria	1	0.77
16	Changes in the company's activity and processes	1	0.77
17	Withdrawal from other standards (ISO 14001 or OHSAS 18001)	1	0.77
18	Improvement of the internal management system	1	0.77
19	Lack of marketing benefits	1	0.77
20	Change of product profile	1	0.77
21	Owner's decision	1	0.77
22	Acquisition/takeover of the company (international)	1	0.77
23	Other reasons	26	20
Total		**130**	**100**

Source: own elaboration.

is not bringing any additional value to the company processes or that it is too costly to maintain. These internal motives can then subsequently be divided into other subcategories such as: *i)* motives related to financial aspects or high costs of maintaining the standard; *ii)* process restructuring to increase the company's efficiency; *iii)* changes in the management systems and in the certificates; and *iv)* executive management decisions and/or business closure.

On the other hand, there are reasons for seeking decertification related to external events, such as the importance of changes in customer requirements, corporate decisions, and changes in the certification bodies. Thus, we have grouped the various reasons for withdrawing from ISO 9001 into four internal and three external categories, as shown in table 3 below. The percentage of firms in each category is shown in graph.

Discussion

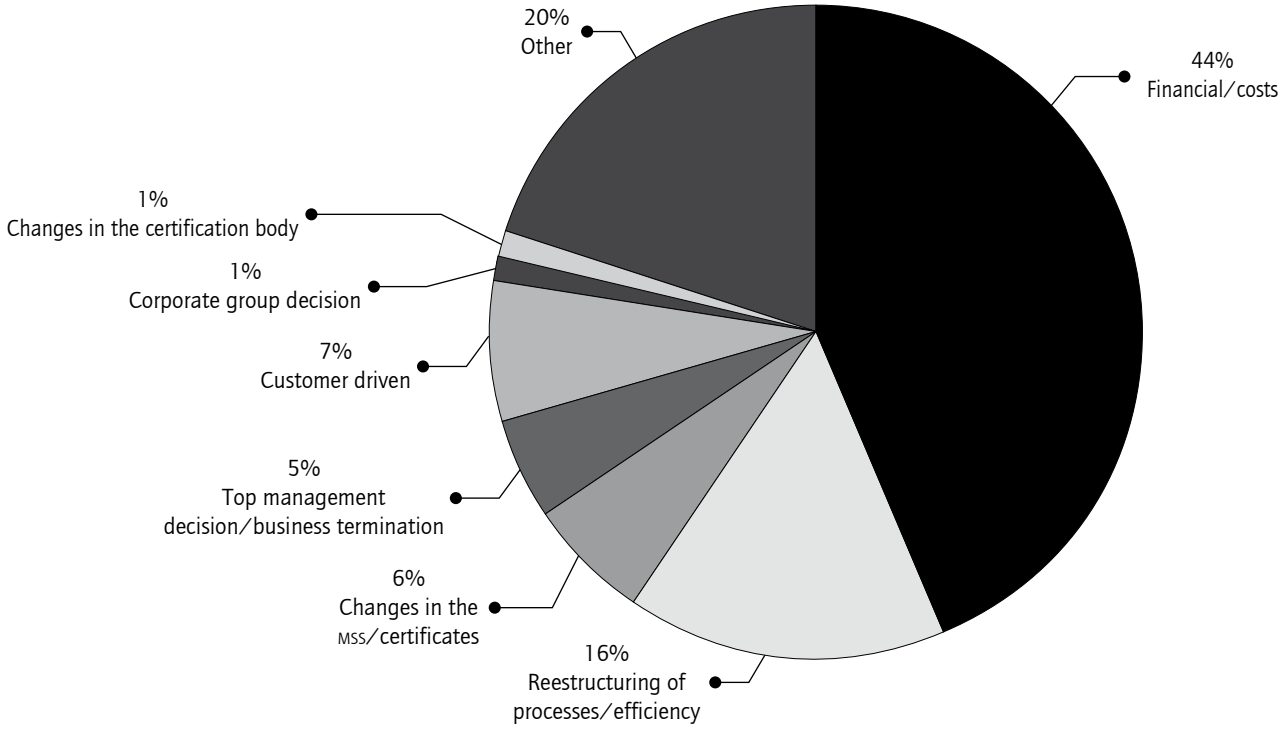
Internal and External Drivers for Seeking Decertification

According to Tarí *et al*. (2012) the reasons for seeking MSS certification, such as ISO 9001, can also be classified as being internally and externally driven. Thus, it seems reasonable to say that if such reasons for obtaining certification cease to exist, the company would want to abandon the standards required for that certification (Alcalà, 2013).

Table 3.
Classification of reasons for ISO 9001 decertification.

Classification of reasons	Reason No. from table 2	No. of firms
Internal		
Financial/costs	1, 3	57
Restructuring of processes/efficiency	2, 5, 16, 18, 20	21
Changes in the MMS/certificates	6, 9, 10, 13, 17	8
Higher management decisions/business closure	7, 8, 12, 21	6
External		
Customer driven	4, 15, 19	9
Corporate group decision	14, 22	2
Changes in the certification body	11	1
Other	15, 23	26
Total	-	**130**

Source: own elaboration.



Graph 3. Reasons for ISO 9001 decertification as a percentage of all reasons. Source: own elaboration.

The reasons for decertification analyzed share some common traits, and we have classified the main drivers of decertification into internal and external motives. We will now present them in turn and use them in order to explain a set of theoretical propositions.

One of the main difficulties when implementing a MSS such as ISO 9001 is the high cost of the certification (Karapetrovic *et al.*, 2006). The cost of implementation or renewal, which may not have been recuperated, combined with a difficult financial situation the company may be going through, can lead to a decision against its renewal. Moreover, if companies do not perceive that having the certificate will bring them a competitive advantage and added value to their operations, so that they can achieve the final goal of improving financial performance, they may opt for a decertification strategy (Alcalà, 2013). These represent the most

common internal motives given by 57 (44%) of the surveyed organizations, thus, our first proposition is:

P1: *Financial problems related to ISO 9001 certification will lead to the abandonment of the standard.*

Process restructuring and efficiency issues are the second group of internal drivers for decertification, with 21 firms (16%) citing them as the main motive for decertification. Some authors suggest that the improvement in internal processes and management occurs at the beginning of the certification period. Therefore, the perceived benefits of being certified decrease with time. In addition, the internal efficiency paybacks arising from implementing ISO 9001 are perceived as less important some years after the first certification, as the company has already restructured their processes (Heras-Saizarbitoria & Boiral, 2013).

Consequently, our second proposition is:

P2: *Over time, the internal efficiency benefits of ISO 9001 certification will dissipate and companies will no longer need the standard.*

Changes in the MMS certificates is another of the reasons given for withdrawal, in this case by 8 companies (6%) in our sample, as they decide to abandon the certificate because they are also withdrawing from other complementary standards such as ISO 14001 for environmental management, or because they prefer to adopt a different standard or their own internal certification. ISO 9001 certification confirms the maturity of a QMS at an average level according to, for example, the EFQM Award model. Some companies decide to choose more demanding standards dedicated to their own specific sector. It is popular in Poland, for example, to implement ISO 9001 and then obtain specific industrial standards, such as ISO/TS 16949, ISO 13485, and ISO 22000 (Kafel & Casadesus, 2015). Hence, our third proposition is:

P3: *Companies abandon ISO 9001 because they decide to abandon complementary standards or change to other standards.*

The last group of internal motives, cited by six organizations, regards higher management decisions to withdraw from the standard mostly due to business closure. As it is not possible to maintain the certificate if the firm has been liquidated, we do not derive any proposition related to such motives.

Companies may also seek certification to ISO 9001 because customers demand it as proof of a good product or service, exerting pressure on companies so that they obtain certification, which can act as a guarantee of quality (Heras *et al.*, 2011; Tarí *et al.*, 2012). Looking at the external reasons given by the firms in our sample, nine of them (7%) involve the certificate's importance to customers in the decision to decertify. In fact, customer demand is the most important external driver cited for decertification, and relates to the firms' customers no longer requiring the company to have ISO 9001 certification and the perception that the standard in no longer producing marketing benefits. Accordingly, our fourth and last proposition is:

P4: *When customers no longer demand ISO 9001, the likelihood of companies abandoning the standard increases.*

With regard to the two other external reasons for decertification, only 3 firms (2%) cite corporate group decisions or changes in the certification body as their motive. Therefore, we have not derived propositions for them. Further study on these two motives as well as those classified under the group "other" (20%) does, however, need to be undertaken.

Conclusions

In this paper we have carried out an exploratory study of the reasons companies argue for withdrawing from ISO 9001 certification. The most important reasons for decertification were internal, such as financial problems at the organizations (36.9%), lack of added value (8.5%), and organizational changes, including internal restructuring (5.4%). There were also external reasons for the decision, the most frequent (5.4%) being that the certificate had been required by a customer with whom the organizations no longer does business. Therefore, there was no further need for the ISO 9001 certificate.

In conclusion, although ISO 9001 is the most widespread quality management system standard worldwide, there seems to be an increase in withdrawals from the scheme for a variety of reasons. In this paper, we have presented four theoretical propositions that explain the cancellation of ISO 9001 certification. These propositions can help guide future research on the impact of decertification on company performance, taking into account variables such as the size of the organization and the specific industry in which it takes part. For future research, it would also be interesting to analyze whether there is a correlation between the evolution in the number of withdrawals and a country's position in the economic cycle. Another question of interest is whether the revision of the standard in 2015 has provided added value to companies, as suggested by Croft *et al.* (2016), as well as whether this revision can facilitate integration with other similar standards such as ISO 14001 (Domingues *et al.*, 2016) and how this affects the decertification phenomenon.

This study has some limitations that should be indicated. First of all, our results are generated with data from only one country, thus they are not generalizable to the other European countries. However, they do provide relevant insight into the main reasons that some companies have cited to withdraw from ISO 9001. Another problem is that data, which was obtained from only one of several Polish certification bodies, does not correspond to all the Polish organizations that decertified during the period of study. Moreover, the period of study covers only a two-year period, during which many Polish organizations were struggling with the effects of a financial crisis that could have affected the companies studied and the decisions they made.

Implications for Quality Managers

This paper provides some insights as to why some companies decide to withdraw from the ISO 9001 standard for quality management. Quality managers can learn from these reasons for such decisions in order to deal with their own QMS and standards in two ways: *i)* to understand how external factors driven by customer requirements, corporate strategies and certification bodies can impact their quality strategy; and *ii)* to be able to develop a quality management strategy directed towards identifying and dealing with the internal factors that could potentially lead to withdrawal from ISO 9001. This includes understanding and analyzing aspects such as the financial investment in ISO 9001 certification implantation and its subsequent audits, the structure of the internal processes of the organization, and the extent to which it aligns with the structure of the standard itself. By carrying out a detailed analysis of these aspects, quality managers will be able to find ways to avoid some of the costs and difficulties related to ISO 9001 certification. Additionally, as a recommendation for these companies, the authors suggest that quality managers should familiarize themselves with the new concepts introduced by ISO 9001:2015 (Fonseca & Domingues, 2017; ISO, 2015), considering this revised edition brings new concepts to this International Standard, such as a consideration of the context of the organization and the needs and expectations of relevant stakeholders, risk-based principles, a greater emphasis on process management and less documentation, among others. Thus, managers may perceive that the new version of the standard brings more benefits to their company, which might have a positive impact on the decision of whether or not to renew the certificate.

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