Service Quality Standards for the Public Sector

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Service Quality Standards for the Public Sector

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PREFACE

The P-Insights, short for "Productivity Insights," is an extension of the Productivity Talk (P-Talk) series, which is a flagship program under the APO Secretariat's digital information initiative. Born out of both necessity and creativity under the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, the interactive, livestreamed P-Talks bring practitioners, experts, policymakers, and ordinary citizens from all walks of life with a passion for productivity to share their experience, views, and practical tips on productivity improvement.

With speakers from every corner of the world, the P-Talks effectively convey productivity information to APO member economies and beyond. However, it was recognized that many of the P-Talk speakers had much more to offer beyond the 60-minute presentations and Q&A sessions that are the hallmarks of the series. To take full advantage of their broad knowledge and expertise, some were invited to elaborate on their P-Talks, resulting in this publication. It is hoped that the P-Insights will give readers a deeper understanding of the practices and applications of productivity as they are evolving during the pandemic and being adapted to meet different needs in the anticipated new normal.

INTRODUCTION

Delivering high-quality public services is a fundamental responsibility of government agencies. Citizens and businesses expect government services to be accessible, reliable, and responsive to their needs. To ensure consistent service delivery, objective and standardized quality measures are essential. Without such measures, government agencies lack the necessary feedback to assess performance, improve operations, ensure effective management, achieve public oversight, and ultimately strengthen public trust. Service quality standards define clear expectations for efficient and effective government performance while ensuring the optimal use of limited fiscal resources. To facilitate fair evaluation and resource allocation, these standards must be uniform and objective across all agencies, allowing for a comparative assessment of their value and impact.

Despite the recognized need for service quality standards[1], governments have struggled to implement effective frameworks. Several challenges have historically hindered progress, including:

- **Difficulty in Measuring Outcomes:** Many standards focus on broad policy results that cannot be directly attributed to the performance of specific agencies or delivery units. As a result, it becomes difficult to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of such delivery units.
- **Lack of Defined and Measurable Outputs:** A clear identification of specific, measurable outputs for each office and agency is often lacking, making it difficult to establish a direct link between outputs and their intended purpose. This absence hinders the ability to track costs effectively against tangible results, limiting transparency and informed decision-making.
- **High Cost and Complexity of Implementation:** Some quality models require significant resources for development and maintenance, limiting their long-term viability and adoption.

1 The ASQ/ANSI G1:2021 standard was developed by the author in collaboration with the American Society for Quality (ASQ) Government Division and was officially recognized by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) as a professional standard in 2021. It offers a structured approach for documenting the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations and service delivery. While alternative standards for government organizations exist, such as ISO 9001 and related series as well as national quality awards like the Deming Prize, each has notable limitations. This article highlights those distinctions and demonstrates how ANSI G1 is uniquely positioned to address specific needs in the public sector.

Governments have experimented with various quality measurement approaches, including customer satisfaction surveys, agency performance metrics, ISO 9001 Quality Management standards, national quality awards (e.g., the Deming Quality Award), and best practice models. However, these methods have often fallen short of ensuring sustained service quality improvement due to their inability to provide actionable, agency-specific insights.

This article introduces the ASQ/ANSI G1:2021 standard (ANSI G1) as an innovative solution for defining and sustaining service quality standards in the public sector. Unlike previous models, ANSI G1 establishes a structured, uniform, and objective framework applicable across all levels of government, including federal, state, and local. It is the first model designed to allow objective scoring of all agencies, departments, offices, and even the smallest functional units to evaluate service quality through measurable criteria while also assessing the span of control and managerial effectiveness. Importantly, it integrates seamlessly into existing management structures, reinforcing best practices without adding unnecessary administrative burdens.

Additionally, ANSI G1 provides a practical road map for continuous improvement through self-training and self-assessment. Its structured yet flexible approach helps government agencies enhance accountability, improve service efficiency, and build public confidence in governance. By adopting the ANSI G1 model, public sector organizations can move toward a more transparent, citizen-centered service delivery system that is efficient, effective, and aligned with public expectations.

WHY APPLY QUALITY STANDARDS TO GOVERNMENT

Government is an important part of the economic engine of every country, and, like every other economic enterprise, it must demonstrate benefits that clearly justify its expenditure. The idea of positive results at a reasonable cost underlies the international interest in service quality standards for government and should provide a basis for holding government accountable. Service quality standards should therefore have two primary goals: firstly, they should help agency management with the oversight of its many offices and units, so managers can recognize high performers and intervene where performance is below expectations. Secondly, they should make the purpose and performance of every agency transparent to legislators and to the public as a basis for appropriate oversight and resource allocation.

Despite these high hopes, however, professional standards for government have historically failed to provide a basis for this kind of accountability for many reasons (De Lancer Julnes & Holzer, 2001). One predominant reason is that standards try to measure outcomes that cannot be attributed to specific delivery units and that fail to show the efficiency and effectiveness of those delivery units. Secondly, there is no clear listing of specific measurable outputs of each office and agency, with its outputs matched to its purpose, so that costs can be tracked against tangible production. Finally, it is often found that the resource cost of developing and maintaining standards models becomes burdensome and that their practical use is limited. This article will present the ASQ/ANSI G1:2021 standard as a new model for showing accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. It will also describe the characteristics of this standard that make it uniquely suited to serve this purpose.

In trying to get the greatest amount of service from the government at the most reasonable cost, we must first recognize that the process of budgeting for government is generally done on a department-by-department basis, with all the services provided in each department offered as a bundled package. A broad overall purpose for the department or lists of its objectives often substitutes for a

look at the many specific tangible outputs it creates and the efficiency of producing each output. A broad high-level look at each department makes it impossible to look deep within the departments. In other words, the single most important reason why broad-scale improvement rarely takes place is that it is impossible to see.

The application of the ANSI G1 standard changes this dynamic by making it possible to self-reveal and self-report objective performance measurements in every government agency, department, division, and office. This self-reveal requires documentation of the specific outputs of each government unit along with its key performance measures and an efficiency and effectiveness score that can readily be matched to its cost.

The results of an ANSI G1 review provide the information necessary to "unbundle" the services in each department and to create a comprehensive report card on government that is uniform and comprehensive. This will also provide a comprehensive and complete scorecard on the use of the best management practices in every department throughout adopting governments.

In comparison, the more widely known ISO 9001 standard only asks for each agency or department to demonstrate the quality processes and measures that are necessary to deliver specified value creation objectives by passing through many areas of the entire organization. ISO 9001 is limited to giving "pass" or "fail" review grades to those who use it, and it only provides a single assessment of each applicant agency. The ISO 9001 assessment focuses only on whether the applicant agency is meeting its requirements in terms of a top-down deployment, and it is limited to assessing quality within its defined scope. In summary, it does not give helpful information to those who manage budgets, to its specific individual managers, or to those who are responsible for agency oversight of its many structural units.

Also important to consider regarding ISO 9001 is that its top-down application and requirement-descriptive approach[2] impose a heavy burden on leadership to

2 The ISO 9001 standard comprises 10 main clauses outlining best practices for quality management. Of these, seven clauses require full compliance with all associated subclauses and detailed requirements. Collectively, these seven clauses contain 66 subclauses, each encompassing between one and 10 specific requirements or descriptive elements. In total, organizations seeking ISO 9001 conformity must address over 200 individual items specified in the standard.

understand and define its use. Compliance with the standard requires associated staff to write and document practices that can be outside the span of control of most managers. In contrast, ANSI G1 focuses on unit-by-unit deployment and the application of common-sense management practices. It therefore allows evaluation of each component office and guides its alignment, culminating in an evaluation of the aligned organization at the highest level.

This article will therefore focus on the aspects of government quality standards (and ANSI G1) that allow this kind of evaluation and can provide equal value to those outside of government as well as those inside. Such a standard will allow a holistic evaluation of each component part of an agency while also including its specific outcomes and outputs as a demonstration of its value. By contrasting information about specific outputs with annual expenditures, it can also accurately identify the cost of the production of every component of government service.

Internally, the objective scoring of all the systems and processes within the span of control of every manager and supervisor provides senior executives with clear visibility regarding which areas are generating top performance as well as those that need improvement. Such a system provides real-time feedback to maintain top performance in all areas.

How it works

The new ANSI G1 standard is based on maturity scoring of the work that every manager and supervisor is responsible for in their organization. It is unique in applying quality standards to single spans of control, so there is no argument about who is responsible. Since all work units must define a pattern of work that they repeat and learn from, its common components can (and should) be standardized. We expect each manager to learn by repetition of their standardized practices and incorporate that learning into the defined and documented standardized practice. We call this standardized practice a *workflow*. There are two types of workflows, which are called *systems* and *processes* as we will later explain. Regardless of their differences, we can evaluate either through uniform scoring matrices that describe their progressive use of best management practices in objective terms.

The maturity model standards of ANSI G1 are also applied to the span of control of senior executives, who are held accountable for their assigned objectives, and to specific analysis or events (outputs) that are necessary to achieve their goals. These must be aligned to the systems and processes of subordinate managers and units to accomplish the larger organizational goals. All workflows are then expected to be evaluated by objective examiners[3] who score them using the scoring matrices and by applying scores of zero to five (0–5) in each criteria area[4]. The scoring system is set up to evaluate whether managers have developed a best practice management plan for their unit and to what extent this plan has been implemented with a documented approach and a feedback system that assures its quality deployment. The matrices evaluate the extent of use of the following management practices:

- Documentation and deployment of the best practice structure for unit operation, which is focused on defined outcomes and outputs that can be measured.
- Using the collective knowledge of unit personnel to validate and streamline the system and process (or workflow) plans.
- Establishment and validation of objective requirements for key system and process outputs as well as key steps necessary for their production.
- Documentation of the best practice structure to show how tasks and actions are linked to jobs, personnel, and work groups.
- Establishment and validation of requirements for the supply and inputs to the process as well as the use of that information to influence a positive supply.
- Ongoing tracking and review of workflow and task measures as a basis for structured feedback and quality assurance.
- Development and maintenance of leading and lagging system and process measures as a part of a feedback system, including giving early warning on its sustained operational performance.
- Maintenance of system and process feedback that is current and visible to the workforce and the next higher management level.
- Evaluation and periodic updating of risks to workflow outputs and its key steps.

3 The ASQ Center for Quality Standards in Government (CQSG) offers a certification for "Designated Examiner of Quality in Government" through online training.

4 ANSI G1 has three defined criteria for process evaluation and four for system evaluation.

- Using management practices to avoid the realization of risks.
- Regular and recurring evaluation and improvement of workflows using structured performance feedback.
- Maintaining visible evidence of improvement over time.

As can be noted from the above, none of these criteria should be foreign to a good manager or represent extra work to them. All the criteria are structured to be a part of excellent management practice, and any omissions represent areas for improvement. While not all managers use all of them, the level of use is the basis of the uniform and objective maturity score as well as a challenge to its future improvement. In addition, documenting and measuring objectives and outputs of each program creates a specific benefit statement for each office.

The Challenge

The use of this kind of service quality framework is believed to be a tipping point for quality implementation in all technical areas because of its several innovations:

- It provides a specific standardized structure, called *structured system management*, for documenting and analyzing systems.
- It provides a graded maturity matrix for all systems and processes within each span of control and thus a visible scorecard that covers an entire organization.
- The quality scoring system can be a direct match to recognized good management principles (noted above) so that quality management doesn't represent extra work.
- System mapping (and scoring) can be implemented first in an organization's frontline units and then aligned at higher management and executive levels to define operations fully within any existing International Organization for Standardization or similar QMS.
- When combined with a visible scorecard, it creates a first pull system for quality management in which frontline managers are incentivized to ask for help implementing quality practice rather than being pushed into continuous quality improvement experiences by an executive or quality director.

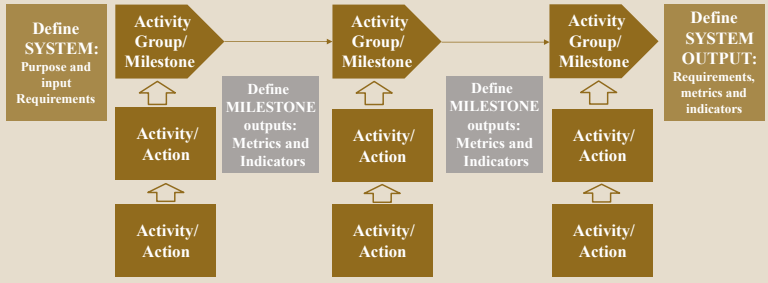
Processes and systems

One starting point for the ANSI G1 structure is to define processes and systems differently while defining a specific analytic structure for systems (Mallory, 2018 and Mallory, 2019). The essential foundation for a system or process map is to structure the tasks, actions, and activities that are necessary to produce the outcome, to standardize the delivery of each with objective success requirements (commonly called *requirements*), and to establish a means of measurement for some or most of the requirements. This then gives workers performing the work the greatest chance of successfully completing it, and it gives management a means of assuring that the work is completed correctly in each component. The latter function is achieved through measurement and reporting.

A system is most simply defined as the learned, repetitive, and cyclical practice of a work group that produces value-added results. According to the standard, "Each system is standardized by documentation that includes procedures, steps, and milestones for achieving that result." Mature systems generally exhibit a defined and specific approach directed at measured requirements, including evidence of their deployment and results. Two structures for system mapping are shown below.

FIGURE 1

System Map Diagram



Source: Mallory, R. (2019).

FIGURE 2

System Structured in a Table Format

SYSTEM NAME:			
Mission Statement/ Business Purpose:			
Principal Activity Groups	Describe the desired outcome and avoid labels. We are looking for fully descriptive terms related to outcomes and including an action word if possible (i.e., *achieving*). This *should* be the name used.	Description of characteristics of positive achievement "Effects" we are trying to achieve or of its failure mode. Measures (expressed as metrics and indicators) are the things we can observe, verify, and measure.	Tasks and Actions that will drive success and avoid failure (Intervening Variables or "Causes")
{name}		Effects: Measures:	
{name}		Effects: Measures:	

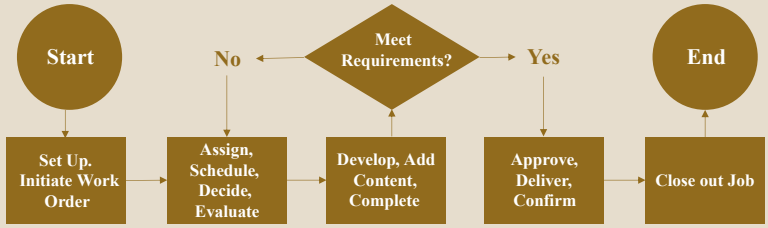
Source: Mallory, R. (2019).

It is important to note that any operational plan developed for systems requires further development of the tasks and actions necessary to accomplish each principal activity group (called *milestones*) and that the development of specific tasks and actions is done through positive cause and effect diagrams. Specifically, managers must ask which key tasks and activities are necessary to drive successful accomplishment of the outcomes and outputs required for each principal activity group. These tasks and actions then become the framework of the operational plan and must be assigned to its work units.

A process, on the other hand, follows the traditional definition and is defined as "a repeatable sequence of connected events that lead to a predictable, value-added outcome. A process is characterized by its ongoing and repetitive nature, performed in a standardized way with predictable resource requirements."

FIGURE 3

Traditional Process Map Structure



Source: Mallory, R. (2018).

The recognition that systems and processes require different quality structures makes a profound difference and conforms to the two methods by which managers assign work. In one case, managers give specific instructions that must be completed just as described, which ANSI G1 defines as *tasks*. Task work largely conforms to processes. In the case of systems, though, much of the work is delegated. Workers with delegated responsibilities must define their own path forward and use good professional judgment to complete them. ANSI G1 calls these *actions and activities*. Both are forms of standard work, however, because work in organizations follows patterns or cycles from which we can learn and improve. This is like the lesson-learned meetings often used at the conclusion of project cycles.

The units in which the work is performed also vary, from being structured and focused on a single kind of workflow (a process) to units in which employees do a variety of tasks in a day (systems). Again, ANSI G1 allows for the two different workflows to be structured, analyzed, and measured differently.

Regardless of whether a manager is responsible for a system or process (or both), ANSI G1 requirements state that managers must define a best practice operational plan for their span of control: "The standard promotes the achievement of overall organizational objectives through the definition of all important organizational workflows as well as the documentation of the best-known management practices for each key workflow through system and process modeling."

As noted, system operations documentation uses a specific structure that requires progressive definition and documentation of the incremental procedures, steps, milestones, and positive causes (or actions and activities) that workers are expected to follow in each work cycle.

Outputs, Outcomes, Tasks, and Actions

An essential difference between ANSI G1 and other standards is its move away from compliance terms that are conceptual and abstract to those that are specific and objective. So, while ISO 9001 may ask how leadership ensures "the integration of quality management system requirements into the organization's business practices (5.1.1c)," the ANSI G1 requirements ask specific unit managers which customer and process requirements have been established and whether they have been validated.

The move to verifying specific management practices allows a refocus from *how* to *what* and *whether*. So, while the ISO auditor must evaluate whether an organization's description of practices sufficiently matches the descriptive criteria, the ANSI G1 auditor just observes whether documented requirements are met and which of its specific and objective requirements are met using its 0–5 scale. Simplified versions of these maturity scales are presented in Figures 4 and 5 below.

Figure 4

Simplified Process Maturity Matrix

Level	Standard Process	Measures/ Feedback	Engagement/ Improvement
Level 0: Not using quality	Not standardized	Not documented	No employee-based improvement
Level 1: Initiating	Some documentation/ awareness	Subjective requirements	Worker quality awareness
Level 2: Standardizing	Flowchart current/ complete	One or two objectives requirements	Team validating/ streamlining
Level 3: Streamlining	Process integrated into jobs/ used	Output and multiple leading requirements	Improvement teams/ analysis of problems
Level 4: Capable	Documented/ aligned/ reporting	Good results – current and visible/ supplier measures	Cycles of problem solving/ learning
Level 5: Excellent	Managed process. Risks at task level.	Stable and within control limits	Three annual improvement cycles

Source: American Society for Quality (2021).

Figure 5

Simplified System Maturity Matrix

Level	Structure and Purpose (Aim)	Measures/ Feedback	Risk	Engagement/ Improvement
Level 0: Not using quality	General purpose – no structure	No defined outcome requirements	—	—
Level 1: Initiating	Some guides and documentation	Subjective requirements	Some variables known response	Awareness of system map
Level 2: Standardizing	All workflow milestones defined	One or two objectives requirements	Internal risk identification	Staff know role in workflow activity
Level 3: Streamlining	Defined approach and deployment	Multiple requirements - validated	Annual risk identification and scoring	Improvement based on analysis of results
Level 4: Capable	Documented/ aligned/ used	Good results – current and visible/ supplier measures	Root causes of risks and risk plan	Annual analysis and improvement
Level 5: Excellent	Managed workflow includes suppliers	Positive levels and trends overall	Ongoing risk management and results	Systematic ongoing improvement

Source: American Society for Quality (2021).

Uniform and objective process and system maturity scoring is another innovation of the standard, which is broadly based on the seminal work of Harrington (1991). The book includes a chapter on process qualification that outlines a method for evaluating process capability, repeatability, and reliability. This is done by certifying an individual activity, operation, person, or piece of equipment to ensure it meets the next activities' requirements. It also anticipates the qualification of the complete process in the same way.

The necessary transition to objective measures is founded on migration from terms that are generic labels to terms that are specific and verifiable. In order to help, this author has developed the *VOCDM* acronym to highlight the attributes of beneficial performance measures. Specifically, we are looking to migrate customers and process requirements from terms that are generic to those that are:

- Verifiable
- Observable
- Confirmable
- Documentable
- Measurable

So, in terms of requirements and measures used in system and process control, those that can be most easily verified by auditors are the most useful.

Operations scoring

ANSI G1 provides a structured maturity scoring methodology applicable to all organizational levels, including individual work units, multi-unit systems, and executive leadership. Its application facilitates objective assessments of institutional quality and operational maturity.

The ASQ Center for Quality Standards in Government (CQSG) functions as the Independent Registrar for organizations seeking formal verification of their ANSI G1 maturity level. Organizations interested in such an assessment should initiate contact through CQSG's official communication channel (CQSG, n.d.). The standard is commercially available through the ASQ and may be procured for institutional or training purposes (ASQ Quality Press, n.d.).

In addition to external assessment, organizations may designate and train internal examiners to conduct standardized evaluations of their systems and processes. These assessments support internal performance scorecards focusing on operational efficiency and effectiveness. CQSG offers a certified online training program (ASQ Government Division, n.d.) on the application of the ANSI G1 framework. Successful participants receive formal designation as Government Quality Examiners.

Despite being governed by an American certification authority, ANSI G1 is designed for international applicability. CQSG actively encourages participation from organizations and individuals outside the United States. To date, over 50 individuals have completed the certification program, including several international candidates. Establishment of accredited third-party registrars in other countries is welcomed and encouraged to enhance global deployment.

Adopted in 2021, ANSI G1 is scheduled for systematic review and revision within the next two years in accordance with ANSI procedures. Due to its cross-disciplinary relevance, the ASQ Government Division and CQSG invite professionals from the broader quality management community to contribute expertise during the revision process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The establishment and use of quality standards for government is a requirement for the best use of public resources. Without such standards and an objective and consistent method of measurement based on them, both government managers and the public at large are blind to governmental performance. Without such a system, legislatures are negligent in their duty to provide oversight.

A performance management system that motivates all public sector managers to create a best practice operational plan focused on validated output requirements and a feedback system will also create a natural interest in efficiency and effective government. The same system is available to the public and legislature so independent analysis and prioritization of resources can easily be performed.

The use of unit quality measures and in-process performance measures is most likely to build quality assurance into organizations and avoids the liability of organizations that can only detect lapses in performance in organization-wide output and outcome measures.

The application of quality maturity matrices that are based on the progressive use of recognized good management practices is an obvious benefit to all. It should be an easy decision for anyone considering how to obtain the highest possible quality in government services.

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LIST OF FIGURES

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