



‘Service excellence has been introduced in more and more organizations, not only in Germany but also in many other parts of the world.’

Interview¹ of the Japanese Standards Association (JSA) with ISO/TC 312 chairperson

Service excellence is an initiative to enhance the “capabilities of an organization to consistently deliver excellent services.”² The responsible technical committee is ISO/TC 312, working on the international standardization of service excellence. In this interview, we [JSA] spoke to Prof. Matthias Gouthier from Germany, who chairs ISO/TC 312, about the case studies in Germany and the future direction of international standardization work.

JSA: In 2023, the first face-to-face meeting in almost three years took place. How do you feel and think about it?

Prof. Gouthier: Since the Corona pandemic, the majority of managers and employees around the world have gained much experience with virtual meetings and I think it has worked efficiently. It reduces the costs of meetings, such as travel costs, and it eliminates the need to spend time travelling for business.

However, this is only my personal opinion, I feel now, while attending this international conference here in Cyprus, that face-to-face meetings are more effective, if not more efficient, than virtual meetings.

By meeting face to face, we can look the delegates and members of the participating countries in the eye and have better discussions. Besides, it is also possible to discuss potentially

¹ A revised version of an article published in SQ Magazine, a journal of the Japanese Standards Association (JSA). The original interview can be found at: <https://webdesk.jsa.or.jp/common/W10K0620/?id=952> and <https://webdesk.jsa.or.jp/common/W10K0620/?id=953>

² Excellent service refers to the “output of an organization with a high level of service provision performed between the organization and the customer to achieve outstanding customer experiences that lead to customer delight.” (ISO 23592, p. 1)

problematic issues in private between the official meetings to reach solutions. In addition to meetings, social events are also important. Learning about other cultures is very important for changing perspectives.

We believe it creates positive empathy, better solutions and standards for our international standardization work.



10th meeting of ISO/TC 312 in Larnaca, Cyprus

JSA: ISO's technical committee, ISO/TC 312, has been working on the international standardization of service excellence since the TC was established. What progress has been made so far?

Prof. Gouthier: Since our first meeting in Berlin in March 2018, we have been working on developing international standards, and our most important success has been the publication of the basic standard ISO 23592 ("Service excellence - Principles and model"). After the publication of this standard, we received much positive feedback from national and international companies in Germany. They increasingly take up the term and concept of service excellence and deal with its ideas in Germany and worldwide.

Interestingly, service excellence teams have recently been established in companies, "Head of" and "Vice Presidents" are directly responsible for service excellence, and job postings now include the heading "Service Excellence Manager Wanted."

To give an example, Brenntag SE, a global market leader in distributing chemicals and ingredients with its headquarter in Germany and 17,000 employees worldwide, established a Service Excellence program some time ago and has managers, global managers and regional managers, responsible for service excellence. They realized how important it is to focus not only on basic quality but also on the emotional aspects as the next level to aim for, and they use the standard in their internal training to explain it to their employees. They use a slight modification from the ISO standard definition.

We believe that the great success of this ISO/TC 312 is that it has provided a basic model that can be used by various organizations worldwide. Furthermore, we have also published a second successful ISO standard on designing excellent service – ISO/TS 24082. This standard helps companies to learn how to design excellent services.

Third, an ISO standard for measuring service excellence performance is ISO/TS 23686. This standard is essential not only from a scientific point of view but also from a practitioner's perspective. The standard explains in detail what methodology and indicators can be used to measure service excellence performance.

JSA: How do German companies implement service excellence? Can you give us some more detailed examples?

Prof. Gouthier: As mentioned earlier, Brenntag SE uses ISO 23592 to implement service excellence. They have based their understanding of customer delight³ on this standard and developed its own service excellence program. They implemented this program partly through much training but also through much effort to improve the qualifications of their employees and their management team.

A prerequisite for the successful implementation of service excellence is that top management and the board of directors are convinced to implement service excellence. For an organization to become the best service provider in the future, it is very effective to define a clear vision, which requires a competent and motivated management team.

In addition, all employees must also have a fundamental understanding of this concept and rethink their daily work and behavior. In other words, instead of being satisfied with average customer service and complaint handling, there should be constant team discussions on creating even better customer service and complaint handling in the organization.

Another example is the company oneservice, which I helped found in 2017. This global and vendor-independent service company offers complete managed service solutions and consulting services for life science, diagnostics, and medical devices. The company is distinguished by its emphasis on the people who deliver the service. They are at the heart of the company, and if the customer is satisfied to delighted with their work, this leads to a follow-up order.

To do this, oneservice had to understand customer delight and why it is necessary. We trained our employees, especially our service technicians, efficiently and straightforwardly. What we did was to use eLearnings, i.e., digital content up to three minutes long, to teach them “what is service excellence,” “what is the difference between customer satisfaction and customer delight,” “what kind of customers exist,” and “how to serve them in the best possible way.”

They were also motivated to take the training by quizzes and prizes at the end of the learning. However, these are only the starting point for a clear understanding of the thinking behind service excellence during the one-hour training.

The examples of service excellence initiatives are often those of large international companies, but this is an excellent example of how small and medium-sized companies can also achieve service excellence and how to motivate employees to do so at the same time.

³ “Positive emotions experienced by the customer derived from either an intense feeling of being highly valued or by expectations being exceeded, or both.” (ISO 23592, p. 2)



Screenshot from a digital training module of oneservice related to Service Excellence

Then, as another example, WISAG is one of Germany's largest facility management companies. A few years ago, I discussed with their Board of Directors at the time what they should do to realize the vision, which calls for WISAG to delight its customers and employees and win their hearts. They have now been conducting an annual customer survey since 2013. Among other things, this asks about the degree and causes of customer delight. WISAG uses it to discover how it can make customers happy as a facility management company. In this way, WISAG could determine what competencies and behaviors employees should have and thus improve their behavior each year. This initiative gives an idea of how a company can delight customers.

The last example comes from Team Bank. As a financial institution, it focuses on modern liquidity management and is part of the Volksbanken Raiffeisenbanken Cooperative Financial Network. TeamBank dedicated itself to service excellence at a very early stage and introduced it at a strategic level, among other things. With the mission to inspire its customers, it has created various instruments and ways to implement them. For example, it has introduced the "100+1" campaign. This recommends that average or standard performance is insufficient and that one should never forget to give an extra percentage point to delight and surprise customers. To achieve this, a culture of service excellence must be created in the organization.

Creating such a culture is one of the most critical elements in implementing service excellence. As I have found in several consulting projects with German and international companies, the greatest challenge for them is creating a customer-centric culture, i.e., service excellence culture. I firmly believe a suitable answer can be found in the international standard ISO 23592.

JSA: What are the prospects for this committee?

Prof. Gouthier: We plan to publish ISO/TR 7179 to share various cases, such as the ones I mentioned. We are working on this document under your Japanese lead, and as you know, we have collected diverse cases from five countries, Barbados, China, Cyprus, Germany, and Japan. It is because, as one of our experts said, companies are looking for concrete ideas - how to do it, build it, and implement it - best practices. This TR gives them some hints on how to do that. Rather than simply telling organizations they need to involve their employees, specifics on how to involve them are more compelling. Therefore, I believe that ISO/TR 7179 will be an essential tool to help companies establish service excellence in the long term.

In addition, we are also developing a standard for public services based on the core standard ISO 23592. The focus on the specifics of public services is also an inspiring approach, as public services are fundamentally different from usual consumptive and industrial services.

More recently, two new projects have also been proposed. These are the “Service Excellence Maturity Model” and the “Service Excellence Implementation Approach.”

If a company wants to become more customer-centric, the company and the employees want to know where the organization is. For example, “Are we currently customer-centric?”, “Should we improve our performance further?”, “Are we below or above the average level?” etc. In other words, the maturity of the implementation of service excellence needs to be assessed. Based on this assessment, organizations can be supported in their transformation through change management and transformation management. We are currently starting to work on international standards to support these issues.

Other possible future topics include internal service excellence, i.e., improving the customer centricity of internal specialist departments, and the question of how digital technologies such as AI can support the establishment of service excellence based on design standards. We will also have to discuss a revision of ISO 23592 in the future. Currently, sustainability aspects are not yet included in this standard, and we believe this is a necessary perspective for the future.

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His research interests include customer experience management, digitalization of services, customer and employee emotions, and service excellence.

