

Anecdote Concerning the Death of Enterprise by Quality Assurance

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To BW, on whose experience this story is based

In a harbour town on the southern coast of an African country a man dressed in a shabby blue overall is making final adjustments to the tooling he has just installed in the production machine. A man dressed in a crisp, well-starched white coat and carrying a clipboard is just approaching the man working on the machine. As he stops he pulls out from the plastic holder in the pocket in his jacket, a pen, one of three in different colours. He presses down on the barrel of the pen and releases it with a click. Once more, click, and since the man in the overall has still not lifted his head, for a third time, click.

The artisan in the overall, his eyes unseeing because of his deep concentration, draws an Allen key out of his toolbox and turns back to the machine. The quality assurance wallah, for that is what the crisp white jacket and clipboard and three pens in different colours signify, clears his throat. But to no avail. Once more he clicks his pen and clears his throat and this time, reluctantly, the artisan brings his eyes into focus and, at last, perceives the QAW (and since quality assurance wallahs seem to prefer to deal with the world in the form of acronyms it is fitting that we, too, should define them in this way).

"Morning," says the QAW, drawing himself up fractionally inside his white coat. "Machines printing money for you today?"

The artisan shakes his head.

"Well, didn't come to discuss your financial situation. Our computer system indicates that your product, Code 802434, has breached the AX1 limit of non-conformance."

The artisan looks a bit puzzled until the QAW hands him a small plastic packet, the type used by bank tellers use to store coins, containing three small parts.

"Oh, these," says the artisan. "Your people came to me last year. Desperate they were. Wanted the job done in a big hurry. Didn't have anyone local to make them. Said I didn't have to go through the usual pre-acceptance phase. Wasn't a functionally critical item. Just a cover for screw heads. Just as long as I got the first parts to them within 12 hours."

"Well," says the QAW, "we detected three non-conformances in the last 96 hours and that triggers an AX1 alert."

"So what does that mean?" asks the artisan.

"You'll have to complete this AX1-0157 Non-Conformance Analysis Request!" and pulls a sheaf of papers from his clipboard and hands it over to the artisan.

The artisan puts the bag of rejects down on the edge of the machine he has been working on, sits down on a nearby stool and flicks through the pages. "But, this is ridiculous. It's going to take me a day to get all this information together. Why do you need to know what my qualifications are?"

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"Well, those are the quality assurance procedures which ensure that as a competitor in the global market we maintain quality in all aspects of our business."

"But I sell these covers to you for 3 and a half cents each. Now you're asking me to take time from other work to put together all this information for 11 cents of product. I can't afford that – let me replace them - I'll even put in a few extra so if it happens again you can just replace them with the good ones."

"Sorry, my man, no can do," says the QAW, pinching his lips and narrowing his eyes.

"Look you're asking me to give up a couple of thousand to fill in your 'request'. It just doesn't make business sense. Here's 15 cents." says the artisan. But the QAW just sniffs. The artisan turns back to the 'analysis request' and looks at the last two pages. He leaps up. "You also want me to do mass spectrometry and thermal analysis tests. No one here has such I lab. I'll have to send them away. That's going to cost twenty thousand – that's more than the tooling for the job cost me. All my profit would be gone - and I still have to pay off the tooling."

"That's the price of quality, sir!" says the QAW.

The artisan takes a closer look at the three rejects in the bag. "But you can see that these have been stood on. You can still see the dust. They didn't leave here that way, it must have happened in your factory."

"The tests should tell us if your theory is correct. Until you complete the N-CAR we can't accept any products from you." The QAW is getting tired of the conversation; he turns to go.

"And now you want me to make the next batch of products under surveillance. I've manufactured the whole order already. It's too costly to set up the production line just to make the handful you want each day to suit your just-in-time programme. What am I supposed to do with the rest?"

"I really don't know, sir! I suggest you complete the N-CAR," the QAW says as he starts to go.

"So what happens if I don't fill in this request of yours?" asks the artisan, slowly sitting down again on the stool.

"Well, sir, your company is taken off the list of 'preferred suppliers'. For a further 10 days you'll be on the list of 'untrustworthy suppliers' and we are allowed to use products from you if we have no alternative supply, provided each consignment is thoroughly checked. And then..." With each phrase in this litany he turns another degree until he is back facing the artisan.

"And then?" asks the artisan.

"Well, we can't accept any product from your factory. You go onto our list of 'non-compliant suppliers'."

"So let me get this right," says the artisan, "If I don't fill in this report you can't use the parts I made, even if I am the only supplier."

"That's right, sir" the QAW says with a trace of condescension. "I'm sure you'll see that your only option is to comply with our Non-Conformance Analysis Request."

"Come with me," calls the artisan as he leaps up, grabs a gas welding rig and strides off through the production machines to the tool room. He walks along the tool racks until he

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comes to the tooling, labelled 802434. He undoes the straps and deftly wiggles the two halves apart. He turns them so the QAW can see the shiny moulding surfaces. "This is the one we're talking about, is it?" asks the artisan. The QAW nods uncertainly. The artisan lights the gas and motions the other man away. He adjusts the flame, pulls on the goggles and then concentrates the flame on the moulding surfaces, heating up and gouging metal from the highly polished surfaces of the tooling. In a minute the tooling is damaged beyond repair.

The artisan switches off the gas, hangs up the torch and takes off the goggles. He turns swiftly, grabs the QAW by the sleeve and pulls him deeper into the factory. When they reach a storage rack he walks along it until he comes to a large cardboard carton marked 802434. He lifts it off the rack and carries it towards another machine with a large throat at about shoulder height. He places the box on the floor, opens it and removes a plastic bag filled with several thousands of the small screw covers.

He switches the machine on and empties the bag into its throat. The machine, designed for larger items, barely gives a burp as it grinds the parts to a heap of chips. The artisan pulls a bin from the base of the machine. "You won't be able to accept these, will you?"

The QAW shudders inside his white coat and hesitantly utters a hoarse, "No."

"So," says the artisan tearing up the sheaf of forms "I'm now on the list of non-compliant suppliers. That'll save you having to go through the whole procedure. You can find another supplier to make these parts you. Shouldn't take you more than two weeks. Here take these with you – you've paid for them."

The QAW takes the bag containing the offending parts and, now with a slightly stooped posture, walks out through the factory door. In his mind he starts to add up what the artisan's action will cost his company. In a few hours none of their products will leave the factory – their own quality assurance procedures will require that all production will have to go into quarantine until another supplier for the screw covers can be secured. Trucks and ships will wait in vain for cargo. Clients in Asia and Europe will start to phone and eventually there will be penalties to pay for late delivery. It was starting to add up to millions.

For the first time he begins to doubt the purpose that has always underpinned his existence. He remembers how irked he is too by the silly procedures which govern his own work. He realises that the economy employs large numbers of people like him – their sole purpose to regulate and impose on those who are doing things. The joy of doing becomes less and less attractive. The bright and inventive ones that he saw when he first started his work have all disappeared like wraiths. Those that who are left are dull clods whose sole purpose is to conform, and only just conform, to the quality procedures that he regulates. They make no attempts to innovate, improve or excel.

And so as he climbs into his motor car he looks at the non-conforming covers in the little bag in his hand. The thus enlightened quality assurance wallah thinks of the blue-coated artisan with a trace of envy – how few in this world have the courage to rebel against this relentless, world-wide drive to conformity and mediocrity.

In memory of the master story teller, Heinrich Böll and, in particular, his story *Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity*.