Even in a recession, companies can experience dramatic growth. For proof, just look to Softronics Ltd. The Marion-based contract-engineering firm, with fewer than 20 full- and part-time employees, is charted toward expansive growth this year. All this is due to talented and highly experienced management, plus a commitment to work with CIRAS and pursue the long and sometimes arduous ISO certification process.

ISO stands for International Organization for Standardization. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the group seeks to apply uniform procedures and quality measures throughout the world. Becoming ISO certified helps companies, or any organization for that matter, get a firm handle on the procedures they require in their operations—everything from accounting for parts and testing products to dealing with outside suppliers. Devising and adhering to measurable procedures also helps companies achieve a more efficient, safer workplace, while boosting the quality of their products and services.

Like Softronics, most companies also discover there’s one more very important benefit to ISO certification. In a word: credibility. As Tony Nurre, Softronics’ director of operations, explains, “We were losing business because we weren’t ISO certified. We just looked like a bunch of guys in a garage designing radios.”

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Many of Softronics’ employees, including founder Robert H. Sternowski, had years of experience at defense and aerospace giant Rockwell Collins, located in nearby Cedar Rapids. Despite its small size, Softronics had successfully developed three healthy product lines, each centered around radio technology; namely, antenna systems for cell-phone towers, miniature receivers used by the intelligence community, and what Nurre calls Softronics’ legacy business, which is designing updated transmitters and receivers for customers at Rockwell and ATT.

Just like a fast-paced Silicon Valley start-up, Softronics operates largely as a virtual company. Softronics’ engineers dabble in amateur radio the way West Coast computer programmers make video games in their spare time. Many Softronics employees also work at home and keep their own schedules. “Our software engineers are kind of the pizza and Mountain Dew type people,” says Nurre. “They come in at two or three in the afternoon and work till one or two in the morning. Our philosophy is work where and when you’re most productive.”

The road to certification

You might think the procedure-dominated ISO certification process would quash Softronics’ laissez-faire culture. In fact, Softronics crunched through the entire process without holding a single all-staff meeting. Nurre proudly notes, adding, “We did it all through e-mail. All we had to do is tell everyone at the company what quality procedures were set up and where to find them.”

As work toward certification progressed, Nurre and Softronics’ quality assurance manager Claudia Wiles continued to document the procedures the company used and map out the additional ones that would be needed in order to be certified. CIRAS’ ISO expert Verl Anders (now retired) along with Lesa Vold, director of management systems at Validus Services LLC, a business-process auditing firm and CIRAS partner in Urbandale, provided guidance along the way. The two also grilled Nurre and Wiles with questions similar to those they would later experience when going through an actual ISO audit. (See sidebar, “CIRAS’ BioPreferred earns ISO 9001:2000 certification,” for more details on the ISO process.)

The benefits of the process were immediate: “A lot of things we came up with were helpful. We implemented a part-numbering system and a more extensive system for backing up data. All in all, Nurre estimates the actual process cost Softronics $8,000, with an additional $22,000 charged to company staff time.

Realization of the true benefit of ISO certification occurred some months later when the company received an order from Rockwell to produce 250 radios destined for airport control towers throughout the world. “We won the business because our radios are customizable,” Nurre says. Each country wanted slightly different options, so drawing upon the workflow procedures spelled out during the ISO certification process, Softronics devised a modular...
design that can be readily adapted to each client’s needs. By contrast, Softronics competitors proposed a one-size-fits-all strategy.

The next rung of the supply chain

Eventually, Nurre expects Softronics will produce upward of 10,000 radios. That may make the entire Rockwell deal worth $200 million over the coming decade and inevitably bring further changes to the company. “Softronics has to move from small batch orders to large-scale manufacturing,” says CIRAS account manager Sean Galleger.

CIRAS project manager Michael Willett has already stepped in to advise Softronics on how to set up the necessary workflow procedures. Meanwhile, Softronics’ work for Rockwell should allow company founder Sternowski to look for new areas of business that incorporate his love of radio, including medicine and space communications. As Galleger says of Sternowski, “You’ve got to hand it to a guy who retired once and turns a hobby into a multi-million-dollar business.”

Learn More

CIRAS specialists have guided more than 300 Iowa firms through the ISO certification process. To learn how ISO certification could benefit your company, contact Robert Coacher at 515-419-2162; coacher@iastate.edu.