ISO 9000: Outside the Iron Cage

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Abstract
Adopted by an increasing number of organizations around the world, the ISO 9000 standards have become a growing concern for more and more managers who are often compelled to adopt this system without really knowing its requirements and implications for employees. Though the effects of this standard on quality management and on performance improvement have been widely debated, there is little knowledge of how the managers and employees who are asked to implement and maintain it perceive the ISO 9000 standards or resist its use. This study will thus attempt to analyze this perception and resistance with regard to both the standard and the certification process. So as to avoid the traditional and idealized view of this standard, whose commercial stakes often give rise to uncritical statements, almost 50 interviews were conducted outside of the workplace. The results of these interviews revealed highly contrasting attitudes that were frequently critical of the ISO 9000 system, which was often given only superficial support. A qualitative analysis of the data allowed us to identify three types of respondents. They were grouped according to their opinions and attitudes about the implementation of this standard. The three groups were ceremonial integrators, quality enthusiasts and dissidents. Although the “quality enthusiasts” discourse often reflects managers’ “rhetoric of success” described by Zbaracki (1998) about the implementation of total quality programs, this rhetoric is not shared by the other respondent categories. Hence, this research project contributes to a better understanding of how institutional pressures, which create “isomorphic” organizations by leading them to adopt identical management models, are reinterpreted, renegotiated, and modified within organizations. The proposed typology casts doubt on the mechanistic, consensual, and monolithic view of the ISO 9000 system that underlies most of the work on this theme. In particular, this study demonstrates the relevance of adopting both the institutionalist and critical approaches in efforts to explain the respondents’ opinions. In so doing, the personnel’s support for the ISO 9000 system and the certification process can then be analyzed from different angles. This certification process would ultimately appear to be a rite of passage that gives rise to various strategies that depend on the respondents’ category and their support for the standard.

The ISO 9000 standards have increasingly come to represent a commercial imperative that is difficult for organizations to avoid without also jeopardizing client loyalty and market access (Anderson 1999, Simmons and White 1999). The many practical manuals that describe the standard’s requirements, the implementation stages, and the benefits for organizations (Tricker 2001, Kanholm 2000, Hoyle 1998, Wealleans 2000) bear witness to the growing interest of managers for these highly prescriptive management systems. The objective, rational, and structured appearance that it presents and the concern for image and conformity that it addresses characterize the resolutely mechanistic and instrumental view of quality management on which the ISO 9000 standards are based. What is more, this functionalist viewpoint is shared by most of the studies of ISO 9000. The literature on the subject focuses primarily on describing the objective of this standard and its implications for quality management and organizational performance improvement (Acharya and Ray 2000, Hughes et al. 2000, Docking and Downen 1999, Carlsson and Carlsson 1996). The ISO standard is seen as a system of objective, collectively accepted rules whose legitimacy is rarely challenged inside organizations.

This consensual, homogeneous, and mechanistic view of organizations has been strongly contested by critical theory (Burrell and Morgan 1979, Clegg 1975, Alvesson and Willmott 1992, Parker 1995). To begin with, management practices are not politically neutral. Rather, they represent instruments of power that reproduce or reinforce often oppressive systems of employee control (Clegg 1981, Alvesson and Deetz 1996, Alvesson and Willmott 1992). However, when the employees’ subjectivity is considered, the many possible interpretations of real situations and their socially constructed character become more obvious, thereby casting doubt on the rationale of order and shared objectives that the traditional, dominant paradigm puts forward (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Morgan 1980, Putnam and Pacanowsky 1988). Much of this same criticism of the functionalist paradigm also applies to the predominant role that authors accord to mechanistic and consensual views when analyzing ISO 9000. Consequently, the
were conducted outside of this symbolic iron cage—that system. In order to limit this bias, close to 50 interviews would during an audit, to legitimize the implemented external interviewer, respondents try, much like they perspective can partly explain: While dealing with an may convey a methodological bias that the institutional standards. Furthermore, excessive optimism of managers constitute the only organizational discourse on ISO 9000 practices (Zbaracki 1998), this rhetoric truly does not the institutional logic, the optimistic rhetoric of top managers is often dissociated from technical quality implementation of quality programs. If, according to put into perspective and to better qualify the "organi- the results of the present study show that this support is often superficial and ceremonial in nature and only really involves a small proportion of the personnel in certified organizations. What is more, the adopted standard is often perceived as an iron cage from which many employees attempt to escape through various strategies.

These strategies do not belong to a single model of resistance to change or of direct opposition to management systems, which are often perceived as cumbersome and of questionable effectiveness. Rather, the strategies attest to the diverse, ambivalent attitudes adopted with regard to a "rational myth" (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Furthermore, the implementation of this myth has neither the same meaning nor consequences for all those involved. Consequently, there is a need to put into perspective and to better qualify the "organizational rhetoric" (Zbaracki 1998) associated with the implementation of quality programs. If, according to the institutional logic, the optimistic rhetoric of top managers is often dissociated from technical quality practices (Zbaracki 1998), this rhetoric truly does not constitute the only organizational discourse on ISO 9000 standards. Furthermore, excessive optimism of managers may convey a methodological bias that the institutional perspective can partly explain: While dealing with an external interviewer, respondents try, much like they would during an audit, to legitimize the implemented system. In order to limit this bias, close to 50 interviews were conducted outside of this symbolic iron cage—that is, outside of the workplace away from any institutional constraints.

This paper will begin by describing this standard’s characteristics and the general thrust of the literature on this subject. It will then outline the research method used here. This will be followed by an examination of the main types of opinions and behavior concerning ISO 9000. The preparation and ceremonial aspect of the certification process will be analyzed on the basis of the three types of respondents that were identified, namely: ceremonial integrators, quality enthusiasts, and dissidents. We will conclude by showing how the opinions of these respondents stem from different and distinct viewpoints concerning the how and why of this standard’s use.

Managing with ISO 9000
The ISO 9000 standard has undergone almost exponential growth since it was first launched in 1987. With more than 400,000 certified organizations around the world, which is two times more than in 1997 (International Organization for Standardization 2001), this standard has increasingly become a necessity for market access. The reasons behind this craze are largely commercial and institutional in nature. On the one hand, market globalization is calling for common international standards to be developed so as to foster easier trade and limit trade barriers linked to national standards and sectorial competitors (Mispelblom 1995, Sampson 2000). On the other hand, ISO 9000 certification is increasingly used as a selection tool by suppliers, as much by multinationals as by local companies and public organizations (Douglas et al. 1999, Jaideep et al. 1996, Mispelblom 1995). Finally, even in sectors where these standards are not required by the client, more and more organizations are adopting the ISO 9000 system to differentiate themselves from the competition and to improve their image or their competitiveness (Simmons and White 1999, Segrestin 1997, Standards Council of Canada 2000).

The external pressures behind the initial development of ISO 9000 have tended to turn this standard into a marketing-driven certificate (Berny and Peyrat 1995, Mispelblom 1995, Hayes 1994). Nonetheless, the ISO 9000 system is first of all based on management practices intended to integrate quality concerns into the daily management of organizations. In reality, these practices go back to classical management principles, in particular the “plan, organize, lead, and control” model that is used today in most introductory management manuals (Boiral 1998). Though there is little that is innovative about these principles, it must be said, to their credit, that they provide a general structured framework for the
integration of basic quality management practices and the verification of their application. Such a framework is often lacking in texts about Total Quality Management (TQM). Indeed, the definition of TQM, its practices, and concrete implications are far from having received unanimous acceptance (Zbaracki 1998, Hackman and Wageman 1995, Reger et al. 1994, Sitkin et al. 1994). The development of ISO 9000 thus makes it possible to cultivate a common TQM language and tools for use by organizations, even though the concept itself is much broader and cannot be reduced to the propositions of a specific standard (Sun 1999, Douglas et al. 1999, Zuckerman 1993). Consequently, the ISO 9000 system should be seen as a starting point in the implementation of a broader total quality program (McAdam and McKeown 1999, Rao et al. 1997, Sun 1999). Though this starting point is not always enough to meet the requirements of total quality, it assures organizations and their clients that precise and recognized practices were used and verified during a certification audit (Wealleans 2000, Ismail and Hashmi 1999).

However, this conformity and certification rationale tends to diminish the diversity of opinions about ISO 9000 and ignore any criticisms of it. Moreover, these dissident opinions have gone unrecognized in the literature on this topic. Accordingly, of the more than 140 articles, studies, or texts devoted to ISO 9000 that we consulted, only two (Bonnet 1996, Cochoy et al. 1998) actually make note of diverging views on this system, based on interviews conducted within certified organizations. Most of the empirical studies were based on quantitative research that used mailed questionnaires or telephone surveys with a varying sample size of certified organizations. The main goal of these studies was to describe the following: the motivations for or obstacles to adopting ISO 9000 (Carlsson and Carlsson 1996, Standards Council of Canada 2000, Acharya and Ray 2000); the impact on quality management (Hughes et al. 2000, Rao et al. 1997, Bhuian 1998, Ismail and Hashmi 1999, Lee and Palmer 1999); the internal gains (Beattie and Sohal 1999, Douglas et al. 1999); and the effect on the overall performance of organizations (Simmons and White 1999, McAdam and McKeown 1999, Docking and Dowen 1999, Sun 1999).

The results of these studies have led to a better understanding of the strategic issues involved in implementing ISO 9000. However, the way these management systems are seen within the studied organizations is implicitly considered to be relatively homogeneous and consensual. The people in charge of quality who participate in these studies are usually the only spokespersons for the organizations. It would thus seem that ISO 9000 conformity should necessarily lead to conformity of opinions about the system. These opinions, in turn, would belong to a resolutely mechanistic paradigm. Indeed, the ISO 9000 standard is presented as a rational and systematic management method whose goal is to improve company performance. The people within these organizations all seem to see the standard in the same way and to adopt its requirements mechanically.

This mechanistic view tends to impose a monolithic management system on organizations. The legitimacy of this system can be easily demonstrated by managers despite the internal constraints and resistances it can engender. The adoption of ISO 9000 or other total quality programs would thus seem to be an instrument of authority and control which is all the more effective because it mobilizes all of the employees (De Cock 1998, Hackman and Wageman 1995, Spencer 1994). The goal of this mobilization is to respond to commercial pressures and strategic challenges for which the senior executives are the main spokespersons. From this critical point of view, the ISO 9000 standards are thus the expression of a managerial ideology based on customer satisfaction, performance improvement, and support for a management system that reinforces the control of work behavior (Lawrence and Phillips 1998). This ideological and alienating character of management practices is at the centre of critical theory (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, Alvesson and Deetz 1996, Morgan 1980). Whether they are expressed through an organization’s objectives, structure, work process, or communication modes, management practices tend to reproduce and rationalize the politically determined relations of authority and control (Clegg 1981, Lawrence and Phillips 1998).

By adopting the ISO 9000 management system, the different aspects of managerial control can be formalized and perpetuated while affirming that they belong to an internationally accepted model. The principle “we say what we do, we do what we say,” which is at the heart of the implementation process of this standard, reflects the rational of reification and reproduction of work processes as well as underlying power relationships. One of the main objectives of documenting system management is, moreover, to perpetuate the practices in place so as to ensure work method continuity and product quality (Wealleans 2000, Mispelblom 1995). However, this formalization and systematic documentation can lead to excessive bureaucratization which is unwieldy, inflexible, and alienating (Cochoy et al. 1998, Mispelblom 1995, Seddon 1997, Beattie and Sohal 1999, Anderson 1999). The metaphor of the iron cage proposed by Weber (1968, 1958) faithfully expresses this type of perverse
effect. Weber believes that the growing rationalization of human activities constitutes one of the dominant traits of modern society and leads to the development of bureaucratic organizations. Though Weber considers the latter to be precise and efficient, they are also characterized by impersonal and alienating employee control mechanisms. The iron cage metaphor has been particularly used to describe the inflexible control of values and behavior, the lack of communication in organizations and, more generally speaking, the perception that employees have of their organizations as “psychic prisons” (Prasad and Prasad 2000, Klagge 1997, Barker 1993, Ritzer 1996, Morgan 1986).

These different critical approaches shed some light on the constrictive ideological and political currents underlying the adoption of ISO 9000 by organizations. Though this critical viewpoint casts doubt on the mechanistic, consensual, and instrumental view that dominates most of the studies on this theme, it seems to be too radical and restrictive to capture the diverse facets of normalization. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992) have pointed out, the emancipation project inherent in critical theory is too abstract and ambitious, in addition to being marked by “totalizing tendencies” that place a strict ideological limit on organizational analysis. In other words, ISO 9000 cannot be reduced to an instrument of domination of a hegemonic and alienating managerial ideology which employees must resist and from which they must free themselves. To begin with, not all the employees feel the same way about this standard, and their opinions do not necessarily reflect internal political splits (Bonnet 1996). It is therefore not inconceivable that employees could see a few advantages in adopting ISO 9000, whereas the senior management might conversely judge this system to be too restrictive and destined primarily for marketing purposes. Furthermore, this standard does not seem, in practice, to be controlling, unwieldy, and inflexible as it first appears.

As Hackman and Wageman (1995) have pointed out, very few studies have demonstrated that organizations really fully implement the TQM programs to which they adhere. These programs are often based on rhetoric and language games that are somewhat unrelated to the actual work practices (Zbaracki 1998, De Cock 1998, Astley and Zammuto 1992). The goal of this managerial rhetoric is, above all, to show that an organization is adopting certain practices dictated by institutional pressure. As is shown by institutional theory, the search by organizations for legitimacy and rationality is based more on a mimetic process than on a real concern for efficiency (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Scott 1985, Selznick 1996). Thus, there is an isomorphic effect that occurs among organizations when they adopt identical practices and structures in order to respond to the same institutional pressures (Kostova and Roth 2002). However, this mimetic process does not necessarily bring about profound changes. Strong social and commercial pressure and even trends to adopt TQM practices that are not always considered technically necessary, often lead to a legitimization rhetoric in organizations (Cole 1999, De Cock 1998).

As Zbaracki has noted, “managers will use the rhetorical TQM to gain legitimacy without affecting activities at the technical core of the organization” (Zbaracki 1998, p. 603).

Due to the international recognition that ISO 9000 is liable to bring and the commercial issues it is meant to address, this standard is implicitly considered as a model to which organizations must conform if they are to ensure their legitimacy and credibility. Moreover, a successful certification audit generally receives a great deal of publicity, whether it be through newspapers, business cards, banners outside certified facilities, or otherwise. However, this legitimization rhetoric can hide a superficial commitment to the standard. As Reger et al. (1994) have shown, most TQM programs develop an “ideal organizational identity” to which organizations then attempt to conform in their words and actions. The image that is projected outside the organization tends to reinforce this quest for identity, which is often fairly removed from the daily reality of these organizations (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). In this context, ISO 9000 certification corresponds more to a “rational myth” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) than to an effective management tool that is genuinely integrated in company practices.

This rational myth and the institutional pressures to which it responds largely explain why the mechanistic approach dominates in the analysis of ISO 9000. Indeed, certified organizations and the people and groups who help to develop and implement the ISO 9000 standards (standardization agencies, registrars, consultants, etc.) are above all concerned with promoting the standard’s advantages and legitimacy (Standards Council of Canada 2000, International Organization for Standardization 2001). In this context, organizations are most concerned with their image and being in synch with ISO 9000’s prestige. These concerns make it seem highly unlikely that dissent or critical opinions would be freely expressed, and if they were, they would most likely be diluted. According to Morrison and Milliken (2000), the acknowledgement of divergent viewpoints runs into a wall of organizational silence that tends to excessively and artificially homogenize people’s
attitudes. This organizational silence, along with the tendency of management models to underestimate diversity and paradox (Glynn et al. 2000, Lewis 2000), make it more difficult to consider divergent opinions about ISO 9000.

Analyzing the different opinions about ISO 9000 and challenging the dominant mechanistic paradigm thus represented a sizeable methodological task for the present research. So as to free ourselves from this “iron cage” of opinions and statements, a qualitative study was conducted outside of the workplace. The results of this study reveal highly contrasting opinions which support, depending on the case, the arguments advanced by the mechanistic, critical, or institutional theories about organizations.

Methods
The goal of the present study was to determine the main types of statements made in certified organizations about ISO 9000 so that we could analyze the personnel’s support for this system, their opinions, and their resistance to the actual certification process. The study thus focused on individual opinions about ISO 9000 and not on an organizational or official viewpoint. Close to 50 interviews of managers and employees from certified organizations were conducted outside of their workplaces to analyze these opinions. The hypothesis underlying this methodological approach was that the respondents would speak more freely and openly outside the company than if they had been interviewed on company grounds or by mail questionnaire or telephone interview. Recent research into organizational silence and the tendency of organizations to level diverging viewpoints (Morrison and Milliken 2000, Glynn et al. 2000, Lewis 2000) justify this hypothesis.

A relevant analytical framework for the interpretation of these different opinions was provided by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990, Turner 1981). This analytical framework proposes a systematic method for classifying, comparing, and interpreting qualitative data—in particular, interview transcriptions. The reiterative process of grouping field data and comparing it with the ideas and concepts proposed by the researcher facilitates the emergence of interpretations that are well rooted in the reality of the field study. The interpretative approach of our study was therefore inductive and did not entail the use of a specific and defined conceptual framework from the outset.

Data Collection
The study was based on 47 semistructured individual interviews that were conducted in Québec between June 1998 and March 2001. The main challenge in carrying out these interviews was to find people working in certified organizations who would agree to meet the interviewers outside of their workplace. A total of nine interviewers contributed to the study. These interviewers were chosen according to their direct or indirect knowledge of the people working in the ISO 9000 certified organizations. Each interviewer carried out from two to eight interviews after having received detailed instructions about the study’s objectives, how it was being conducted, and the questionnaire. The managers and employees in the sample had to have recently worked for at least six months in a certified organization. The respondents also had to have fairly good knowledge of the ISO 9000 system due to their direct use of it in their daily work. Most of the respondents had participated in the system’s implementation and in the certification audits.

The search for relevant respondents and qualified interviewers explains the fairly long duration of the study, which stretched over 34 months. There were three categories of employees interviewed, namely: managers (essentially middle management), quality specialists (generally in charge of implementing the ISO system in the organizations), and line workers. The following table describes the main characteristics of the sample of people interviewed (see Table 1).

The interviews lasted, on average, 1.5 hours and were recorded on audiocassettes. Only those interviews that

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<th>Table 1 Distribution of the Study Sample (n = 47)</th>
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<td>People Interviewed</td>
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<td>Activity sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Small (fewer than 50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Medium (50 to 300)</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Large (more than 300)</td>
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<td>Type of standard adopted</td>
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<td>— 9001</td>
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Note. *This category brings together both middle and senior managers other than quality directors. No company presidents were met.
were clearly recorded and retranscribed in full with a word processor were considered. Ten interviews thus went unused because of the poor quality of the recordings, which made it impossible to retranscribe them, or due to missing information about certain respondents.

The meetings were mainly held in three places, namely university rooms, restaurants, and the respondents’ homes. None of the meetings took place within certified organizations. Anonymity was ensured before the interview for both the respondents and the organizations for which they worked. The main themes dealt with during each interview were as follows: the respondent’s and organization’s attributes, the respondent’s role in and experience with the ISO 9000 system, the reasons for adopting this system, the respondent’s thoughts about its advantages and disadvantages, the employees’ participation in the implementation and use of ISO 9000, and how the certification process actually took place.

Data Analysis
Transcribing the 47 interviews into a computer file greatly facilitated the subsequent processing and analysis of data. The transcription, which represented more than 750 pages of text, was then examined using NUD*IST Vivo qualitative analysis software. This software was chosen because of its flexibility, coding possibilities, and information cross-referencing (Richards 1999). The interviews were analyzed by systematically segmenting and reclassifying them according to different categories that embodied the concepts, problems, and themes that emerged from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The basis of the initial set of categories was the questions in the questionnaire and the study’s objectives. These categories were then modified and reorganized using a reiterative process in keeping with the results of the analysis. Several categories that were found to be fairly close and that had little data were consequently grouped together. Conversely, analysis showed that other categories were much richer, and these categories were subdivided into specific subcategories. This was the case, for example, for the information about the preparation and conducting of the certification audits. Many of the statements touched on this topic, thereby shedding light on how ISO 9000 was perceived. The emergence of new categories based on data interpretation is one of the characteristics of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

A total of 50 categories organized into 8 main themes were finally decided upon. These categories were then used to code the more than 4,000 passages we drew from the interviews. The coding was carried out by two of the interviewers. In order to favor homogeneous coding, the interviewers received the same training and used the same analysis grid. The grid described the characteristics of each category in detail. A comparison of the two interviewers’ categorizations basically showed the same results. In particular, the categories concerning ISO 9000’s internal implications (advantages, difficulties, impact on management practices, negative effects, etc.) and the certification process (company preparation, conducting of audits, role of consultants, etc.) were examined. These categories provided the richest insight into the respondents’ opinions about the internal pertinence of the ISO 9000 system in their workplace. Interpreting the interview excerpts in each category made it easier to compare the respondents statements, to identify their viewpoints in relation to specific themes, and to find quotes that represented various categories. NUD*IST Vivo software allowed us to examine these excerpts in the context of the various attributes and carry out several types of research, such as cross-referencing among categories and attributes and identifying passages or words.

Heterogeneous Opinions About Certification
An analysis of the respondents’ opinions about the internal usefulness of ISO 9000 certification led to some highly contrasting results. Though this standard is based on supposedly universal management principles that are brought together in a quality assurance model, the personnel’s support and conviction could by no means be taken for granted. The data analysis thus allowed us to identify three main respondent groups—namely, the ceremonial integrators (Group A), quality enthusiasts (Group B), and dissidents (Group C). The respondents were classified in the various groups based on a systematic rereading of each interview’s transcription and on an analysis of several categories associated with the internal implications of the certification process: improvement of management practices, quality control, personnel mobilization, resistance to change, bureaucratization of practices, etc. The classification was carried out by two of the interviewers who worked together on the distribution of the interviewees and the characteristics of each group. The following table (Table 2) summarizes the main attributes associated with these three groups.

Ceremonial Integrators (Group A)
With more than 40% of the respondents, the ceremonial integrators represented the biggest group. These respondents believed the implementation of ISO 9000
Table 2  Typology of Opinions About the ISO 9000 System  
\( n = 47 \)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion About ISO 9000</th>
<th>Group A: Ceremonial Integrators (43%)</th>
<th>Group B: Quality Enthusiasts (36%)</th>
<th>Group C: Dissidents (21%)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 15)</td>
<td>(n = 16)</td>
<td>(n = 6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position of respondent</td>
<td>— Manager</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— Quality specialist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>— Employee</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity sector</td>
<td>— Industry</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>— Services</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of organization</td>
<td>— Small (fewer than 50)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>— Medium (50 to 300)</td>
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<td>— Large (more than 300)</td>
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<td>— 9003</td>
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was primarily intended to respond to external business concerns with which the organization needed to comply. Conversely, these respondents saw the system as being of unconvincing and even questionable internal relevance. Above all, ISO 9000 was seen as a way of improving the organization’s image and obtaining new contracts. Accordingly, the standard was not considered to be a genuinely useful tool for improving quality management:

Implementing the standard was done more to prove to outside people that we have good process control than to have good control itself. To tell the truth, the standard wasn’t implemented to improve our work practices (manager in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME (small- and medium-sized enterprise).

If the clients hadn’t asked for it, the company wouldn’t have needed to be certified. The reason the standard exists is to provide international recognition for our quality system (engineer in a small, ISO 9003-certified engineering firm).

Simply put, the ultimate goal of ISO 9000 is to give you a piece of paper so you can find new clients (manager in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

The fact that lip service to the ISO 9000 standards was so frequently paid can be explained in large part by intense external pressure that greatly surpassed the real needs of organizations. In fact, many certified organizations implement this management system because their clients demand it and not because of its intrinsic qualities (Cochoy et al. 1998, Mispelblom 1995). From this viewpoint, ISO 9000 certification tends to be an end in itself. The system’s implementation is primarily managed and seen as a commercial requirement (Berny and Peyrat 1995) which organizations cannot easily avoid.

The image that is conveyed outside an organization of possessing a world-class quality assurance system has little basis in the real work situations of its employees. While organizations seek external recognition for their management system, its internal usefulness and credibility are contested:

The standard was imposed on us. Now we’re trying to live with it (operator in a small ISO 9002-certified manufacturing firm).

ISO is mainly a marketing tool for us. We never had any use for it internally and we don’t pay much attention to it (engineer in a small, ISO 9003-certified engineering firm).

This lack of commitment to the ISO 9000 system did not mean, however, that its adoption was challenged. Just the opposite was true, since the ceremonial-integrator group recognized that obtaining the certificate was of vital importance for their organizations. Hence, the respondents comprising this group supported the decision to implement this system and had no intention of opposing its use. Nonetheless, the adopted standard was not seen as being suited to their organization’s needs. For example, an efficient quality control system may already have been in place. This was quite often the case in large industrial organizations. Furthermore, adopting ISO 9000 requirements to “the letter” was often seen to be restrictive, procedural, and capable of turning the system into an iron cage. Ceremonial-integrator respondents thus focused on superficially implementing the ISO requirements, while limiting the genuine changes to their work practices to a minimum. For example, quality manuals were developed in keeping with the standard’s instructions, but the documentation was rarely consulted. Moreover, it was only to be strictly applied and updated during audit periods. As one manager from an ISO 9001-certified industrial SME told us, “we put ISO on the shelf between audits.”

In comparison with the other two types of respondents, there was a proportionally higher number of managers in the ceremonial-integrator group than there was in the other two groups, as they made up two-thirds of the respondents in this category (see Table 2). The people in this category had to deal with contradictory demands. First, the organizations’ senior management,
clients, and auditors put pressure on work teams to conform to ISO 9000. Second, this "conformitization" took time and thereby was not always easy to reconcile with the smooth daily operations of the organization. Finally, the presence of dissident-type members in work teams did nothing to favor personal commitment to the system. Many managers consequently solved these dilemmas by responding in a ceremonial and procedural way to the standard's requirements (procedure documentation, quality manual development, definition of tasks and responsibilities associated with the system, etc.), and thereby avoided threatening the certification process. This type of attitude seemed to be more frequent in the service sector than in the industrial sector. Accordingly, two-thirds of these Group-A respondents were from the service sector. This observation would seem to indicate that the ISO 9000 system is better adapted to manufacturing companies, for whom this standard was originally designed. Conversely, the size of the organization and the type of standard implemented did not play a very significant role in the respondents' distribution.

Quality Enthusiasts (Group B)

Approximately one-third of the respondents saw the ISO 9000 system as more than a marketing tool. They believed the standard provided a structured approach to implementing effective and proven quality assurance principles, including procedure documentation and monitoring, operation traceability, error reduction, client communication, and after-sales service. Besides its commercial advantages, adopting this system provided an excellent way of promoting total quality in the workplace:

> People paid little attention to quality before. If a piece of kitchen furniture was out by a quarter of an inch, no one worried about it. But since we've started using ISO 9002, we pay more attention to work quality, precision and handling. The standard has also helped our relationship with our clients a lot (worker in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

> The standard has had a positive impact on our practices. For example, it's really important to have an efficient quality control process when we subcontract for pharmaceutical companies that have strict standards. The ISO system helps us to monitor the products better (manager in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

> The standard has helped us to improve the way we work with the procedures. The employees know the processes, machines and products much better now (quality specialist from a large ISO 9001-certified industrial firm).

The respondents in this category were relatively convinced of the intrinsic usefulness of ISO 9000 for their organizations. The reasons they put forward to justify their support were a fairly faithful reflection of the internal and external advantages described by the standard's promoters and the related literature (Carlsson and Carlsson 1996, Standards Council of Canada 2000, Beattie and Sohal 1999, Douglas et al. 1999). These advantages include improved management practices, reduction in production costs, greater personnel awareness of quality, and an opportunity for savings. The improvement in product and service quality due to ISO 9000's implementation was not, however, considered to be systematic. Most of the "quality enthusiasts" we met agreed that adopting the standard was not, in itself, enough and that a certified organization would not necessarily provide more assurance than another organization in this field. From this viewpoint, the certification results depend above all on the way the system is implemented, and particularly requires the employees' support and mobilization. They must, above all, be convinced of the system's relevance:

> When the system is well set up and people believe in it, the work methods and product quality improve. But if the system is poorly set up, it can have the opposite effect (manager in an ISO 9001-certified industrial SME).

> It's the personnel's involvement and motivation that makes the difference (quality specialist in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

> Persuading the people that it's important is the most important thing. And the most difficult thing has nothing to do with setting the system up. It's convincing people that the system is good and that we should use it (manager in a large ISO 9002-certified service company).

These remarks show that the personnel’s opinions were not unrelated to a successful implementation process. The fact that only a third of the survey respondents expressed clear support for the standard confirms, moreover, that obtaining the personnel’s commitment is a difficult challenge in itself. It is noteworthy that more than half the safety specialists we interviewed belonged to this group (see Table 2). Because most of these specialists were in charge of the ISO 9000 file in their organization, it would seem logical that they were convinced of this system's relevance. Likewise, almost half of the respondents from the industrial sector belonged to this category, as opposed to only 20% in the service sector (see Table 2). These results are in keeping with the above observations concerning the more successful adaptation of the ISO 9000 standards to the industrial sector. Finally, the majority of the respondents working in small organizations (fewer than 50 employees) fell into the quality-enthusiast category, whereas this attitude was less frequent in large organizations.
The preceding observation might seem somewhat paradoxical. Indeed, the management practices in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) are generally less standardized than in large organizations (Mintzberg and Quinn 1991, Lee and Palmer 1999). The procedural logic of ISO 9000 standards is often considered to be less well adapted to small organizations, which often do not have the means to implement this type of system (Segrestin 1997, Bhuian 1998, Lee and Palmer 1999). However, our interviews with people working in SMEs showed that, in certain cases, the ISO 9000 system constituted an excellent way of setting up a quality assurance program. The lack of such a program could, in fact, represent a serious handicap. This management system could also respond to a need for training and guidance in an organizational growth context:

We adopted the standard because of strong growth. We were at a stage where we had to become more organized. The managers were aware that we had to find a way of standardizing our work methods so that departments could communicate more easily. That’s why we brought in the ISO standard. Everybody knew we had to make up for a lack of organization. We saw ISO as a way of making things easier and clarifying them (quality specialist in an ISO-certified industrial SME).

Dissidents (Group C)
The last category accounted for 20% of the respondents. It was comprised of people who clearly manifested their disagreement with and even their opposition to their organization’s implementation of ISO 9000. These people felt that the standard had had rather negative effects on management practices and had created an iron cage that restricted their maneuverability. Furthermore, the commercial advantages appeared to be too uncertain, feeble, and insufficient to compensate for the negative effects in the workplace. These negative effects were especially linked to the system’s red tape, with which the employees had to cope without reaping the rewards:

The people here see the standard as an extra work load that isn’t very useful. It really hasn’t added anything (manager in a large ISO 9003-certified service company).

The ISO standard is mostly just a lot of paper work. I think it’s all a bit excessive. There are other systems that are just as good that don’t create as much paper work. This is a really cumbersome and restrictive process. We’re drowning in procedures (manager in an ISO 9001-certified service SME).

ISO is a very demanding system that has made everything more complicated (manager in a large ISO 9001-certified consultation company).

These remarks about the excessive bureaucratic nature of ISO 9000 were also expressed by most of the respondents in the ceremonial-integrator group. However, contrary to the latter group, the dissidents believed that their organization’s decision to adopt this system was a mistake: with which they clearly disagreed. Not only was their support for this standard not superficial, it was nonexistent. Accordingly, there were no attempts, for the sake of appearances, to bridge the gap between the organization’s practices and ISO 9000 requirements. Obtaining certification was not, in their opinion, a sufficiently good reason to try and “play the game” involved in ISO requirements. Rather, it was seen as a source of tension and opposition. This dissidence frequently led to resisting management and its pressure to adopt this system:

The employees see the standard as some abstract thing that has been imposed by management (employee in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

Management says that ISO is like a bible, but the employees don’t have any use for it at all (employee in a large, ISO 9002-certified service company).

Nonetheless, insufficient commitment on the part of management can also reinforce or give rise to dissident attitudes:

Management was never really committed to implementing the standard and the employees aren’t very committed either. So those who can get around the standard do it (manager in a large, ISO 9003-certified service company).

Resistance to the system’s implementation was not only expressed verbally and formally through individual and collective protests. Rather, it seemed to take shape indirectly and informally in daily work practices. Indeed, the ISO 9000 system has a direct impact on an organization’s routines. It modifies procedures, the consultation and updating of the quality manual documentation, nonconformance declarations, etc. The degree to which these requirements are followed would seem to serve as an indicator for the support or rejection of the ISO system. Deliberately ignoring or being indifferent to this system and its requirements is indicative of routine resistance (Scott 1985, Prasad and Prasad 2000), which is not easily noticed but which hinders the successful integration of the standard in work practices:

We don’t talk about ISO very much in our workshop. Frankly, it’s the last thing we worry about (employee in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).

The people here don’t even know where the ISO documentation is. They don’t need to, because they know what they have to do (employee in a large ISO 9002-certified service company).

There are people here who don’t follow the procedures and don’t want to write them down. There are others who don’t want to see the auditor. Basically, we don’t want anything to do with this system (employee in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME).
The respondent’s position seemed to play an important role in whether or not the person belonged to the dissident group. Accordingly, one out of two of the employees we met, and one manager out of three, fell into this category (see Table 2). Conversely, none of the quality specialists really expressed any formal resistance to the ISO system implemented in their organization.

The Certification Process: Preparation and Ceremony

The diverse opinions about ISO 9000 and the limited support for this system point to several contradictions. As most of the respondents mentioned, the successful implementation of this system strongly depended on the personnel’s commitment. However, this commitment would seem to have been compromised by the sizeable proportion of respondents in the ceremonial-integrator and dissident groups. Furthermore, ISO 9000, like ISO 14001, is based on the principle “we say what we do, we do what we say” (Tricker 2001, Kanholm 2000, Cochoy et al. 1998). The goal of the certification audit is, to a large extent, to check whether or not this principle is well applied in an organization (Wealleans 2000). Theoretically, the employees we interviewed, including the dissidents, should therefore have known and rigorously followed their workplace’s ISO regulations. The interviews, however, showed that this rigor was often apparent or absent, despite the fact that their organizations had been certified. What is more, the quest for certification for commercial reasons and the doubt cast on ISO 9000’s relevance as a quality control tool are not very compatible with the standard’s spirit and managerial requirements. If we are to understand these contradictions, it is essential to analyze the respondents’ opinions about the certification process, especially since this aspect has largely been ignored in studies of ISO 9000. Most of the respondents we interviewed spoke spontaneously about this process and underlined its importance for their organization.

Preparing for the Certification Audit

Implementing ISO 9000 is often associated with preparing for the certification audit, which determines whether an organization conforms to the standard and when it will be able to use the ISO certificate. The preparation is often laborious. On average, it lasts 18 months and costs from $1,000 to $1,500 per employee (Simmons and White 1999, Docking and Dowen 1999, Jaideep et al. 1996, Anderson 1999). This considerable investment in time and money often leads to upheavals in the organization. In the first months of the implementation process, the work involved in the standard’s development is conducted in addition to the normal tasks, since the ISO system is not integrated into the organization’s practices. Some of the respondents spoke of working overtime in the evenings and on weekends so as to complete the documentation in time. Others spoke of a notable drop in productivity and operating smoothness due to the increase in administrative tasks. These changes tended to quickly polarize everyone’s opinions about the standard. The respondents from the quality-enthusiast group (B) and some of the ceremonial integrators (Group A) felt that this preparatory period was a necessary investment that the personnel had to understand and accept. The other respondents, however, thought that this investment was unwarranted and out of proportion:

There are some really useless things. You can spend weeks working on procedures that will never be applied (manager in a ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group A).

The amount of work increased in the beginning. But now we save a lot of time because there are fewer mistakes (quality specialist in an ISO 9002-certified service SME, Group B).

Our people needed time to write up the documentation. But there came a moment when we had more people doing ISO paperwork than making products. That’s completely ridiculous in a highly competitive industry like ours (manager in an ISO 9002 industrial SME, Group C).

The time constraints evoked by the respondents seemed to weigh them all down as the date for the certification audit approached. Many of the respondents compared the audit to an “exam” or some type of school test. Just like for an approaching exam, the employees wondered about how well prepared they were, the questions they were likely to be asked, the auditor’s personality, the aspects that had to be improved, the probability of success, the impact of failure, how they should act during the audit, and so on.

The respondents, particularly those from Groups A and B, often talked about the fear of being responsible for a nonconformance, of not being equal to the task, of being caught by the auditor making a mistake, of bringing down the whole certification process, and about the stress associated with the audit.

People can be blamed if there are mistakes in the audit, if they don’t fit the auditor’s criteria. At the very least, they’ll have a black mark in their file (manager in a large, ISO 9003-certified industrial firm, Group A).

It was like a really, really important exam. I think it created a lot of stress and pressure (manager in a large, ISO 9001-certified industrial firm, Group B).

There was an excitement in the air. Everyone was nervous because they didn’t want to be blamed for answering a question incorrectly (quality specialist in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME, Group B).
Depending on the person, the pressure of the certification process had two fairly opposite consequences. The first was to reinforce attempts to integrate the standard into company practices so that everything would be genuinely ready and the risk of failure during the audit would be reduced to a minimum. This behavior was typical of the quality-enthusiast respondents (Group B). The second consequence was, on the contrary, to try to put on a facade during the audit while limiting as much as possible the energy and changes needed to achieve this. The goal was thus not to integrate the new quality management system, but to “pass” the exam, which had its own requirements. This exam was all the more stressful given that the preparation for it was belated and superficial. In this context, the preparation tended to be done hastily and to be based on the way that the verification was expected to unfold. The fact that organizations knew when the audit was to be conducted, the people who were to conduct it, and their usual requirements, encouraged this type of attitude. It was expressed, in particular, by people from Group A as well as some from Group C.

We learned the company’s mission statement by heart because we knew we had to know it for the audit. We also checked two or three things so we could give the right documents if the auditor asked for them. (manager in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group A).

The preparation really begins one or two weeks before the audit. We take out the piles of project-monitoring files and we start doing the paperwork. We check for nonconformances and we make sure everything is ready for the audit. It’s a good thing we don’t have to do that everyday (manager in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME, Group A).

The Rite of Passage or Passing the “Exam”
Most organizations pass the audit certification fairly easily, which is seen, moreover, as a sort of exam, a rite of passage. When nonconformances are noted by the auditors, the necessary adjustments are made and the certification is obtained a little later. The respondents in our study generally recognized that their fears concerning the exam turned out to be somewhat exaggerated. However, opinions about the auditors varied considerably from one person to the next. Several of the respondents from the quality-enthusiast group (B) felt that the auditors should be seen as partners who could help their organization improve its quality assurance system and help the personnel take better charge of these issues.

The auditor isn’t there to judge us. He’s there to judge how well the procedures are applied. He helps us implement the system (quality specialist in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME, Group B).

There’s a certain cooperation between the auditor and the managers. The auditor will make suggestions and point out the weak points. We’re quite happy with that because it can get upper management to give us extra resources (technician in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group B).

However, not everyone agreed with this view of the auditor as facilitator. For instance, almost half the people interviewed from the three respondent groups had various criticisms about the consultants in charge of the certification audit: lack of knowledge about the certified organizations or their activity sector, the cost and commercial character of the audits, lack of training, variation in audit difficulty depending on the organizations and regions, misunderstandings with the auditors, and so on. Furthermore, the precision and exhaustiveness of this “exam” were frequently questioned. Indeed, the audit rarely lasted more than two or three days. This was seen to be far too short to really know an organization and to evaluate its conformance with a management system that involved numerous employees for months at a time. Indeed, the different procedures and aspects of the ISO 9000 system could only be partially checked. For most of the respondents from the ceremonial-integrator group, the incompleteness and short length of these verifications made it relatively easy to keep up the facade despite the failings of the implemented system. The certification process was thus seen as being a ceremony whose most important element was to make a good impression on the auditor:

Auditors can be made to believe a lot of things (manager in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group A).

There were inconsistencies in our system, but he didn’t notice them (employee in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group A).

There were so many things that weren’t ready that we wondered how we passed the audit (manager in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group A).

The respondents from Group C, who were the most reluctant about ISO 9000, saw fooling the auditors as a sort of game through which they expressed their resistance to the system and denounced its weaknesses. The clearest expression of this dissidence was the absence of certain people during the audit certification. Respondents from the three groups spoke of this type of behavior, which seemed to be fairly frequent among people who were the most poorly prepared for the audit and the least convinced of its usefulness. Furthermore, the ISO 9000 enthusiasts and dissidents were all in agreement with these absences—the former because the collective success of the audit was not compromised by people whose cooperation was unsure, and the latter
because their absence allowed them to avoid the system’s constraints and display an exemplary and even heroic attitude. Dissident behavior was also expressed through the retention or dissimulation of information during the audit. At least seven different people, most of them from Group C, told us about this type of behavior:

We learned that our auditor only looked at things that were nearby. So we put reliable documents in easy-to-see filing cabinets. We put the rest in boxes that were as far away as possible (manager in an ISO 9001-certified service SME, Group C).

The auditor can’t check everything in two days. What’s more, he’s picked by our company. Anyway, he can’t possibly see everything. And we tidy things up so that he can’t. That way, everybody is happy. The company gets its certificate, the auditor gets paid and we get left alone until the next audit (employee in an ISO 9002-certified industrial SME, Group C).

In a paradoxical way, the cracks in the certification process made it easier to reconcile the very different viewpoints of the three respondent categories. Using diverse strategies, these three categories helped the organization pass its exam.

Discussion
In the course of this study, we examined different categories of ISO 9000-related opinions, resistance, and support by interviewing people working in certified organizations. Understanding these categories is fundamental if we are to comprehend the paradoxes and dynamic organizational relationships that underlie the ISO 9000 implementation process. The paradox could be defined as “the simultaneous existence of two inconsistent states, such as between innovation and efficiency, collaboration and competition, or new and old” (Eisenhardt 2000, p. 703). Using the concept of paradox in the analysis of organizations particularly enhances the recognition and interpretation of multiple, ambivalent, and opposing viewpoints of the same phenomenon (Eisenhardt 2000, Lewis 2000). Such diverse viewpoints can be clearly seen in our analysis of opinions about ISO 9000. Accordingly, the support for the standards, the preparation for the certification process, the audits, and the ISO system maintenance all took on different meanings depending on the respondent category (see Table 3). Moreover, the most critical opinions about ISO 9000 cannot be solely explained as a “resistance to change.” For instance, most of the ceremonial integrators supported the certification project and actively helped to set up the documentation system while recognizing its contradictions and aberrations. This type of paradoxical behavior confirms Piderit’s (2000) observations about the ambivalent reactions to change and simplistic nature of the “resistance to change” concept.

### Table 3 Summary of ISO 9000-Related Opinions and Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ceremonial Integrators (Group A)</th>
<th>Quality Enthusiasts (Group B)</th>
<th>Dissidents (Group C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant attributes</td>
<td>Mainly managers and some quality specialists, primarily from service organizations</td>
<td>Mainly quality specialists and some managers, primarily from industrial firms</td>
<td>Line workers and some managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for ISO 9000</td>
<td>Motivated above all by a concern for the organization's external legitimacy and image, superficial internal support</td>
<td>Active commitment motivated as much by the system's intrinsic qualities as by the obtaining of a &quot;commercial certificate&quot;</td>
<td>Opposition to the standard that is seen as an iron cage imposed by the hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification preparation</td>
<td>Procedural and scholastic preparation, limiting difficult questions and superficially meeting ISO requirements</td>
<td>Working continuously to integrate the standard into their organization's practices</td>
<td>Resistance to the preparation process, nonconformance with procedures, lack of interest in the standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification audit ceremonial</td>
<td>Putting up a facade, aspect of the audit</td>
<td>Partnership with the auditor to improve the system</td>
<td>Absence during the audit, dissimulation of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System maintenance</td>
<td>Challenge of maintaining certification</td>
<td>The system has to be maintained daily</td>
<td>The system does not need maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant paradigm</td>
<td>Institutionalist</td>
<td>Mechanistic</td>
<td>Critical-political</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The differences and paradoxes in the statements representing each of the three categories can be better understood using three different paradigms, namely mechanistic, institutionalist, and critical-political. By combining these paradigms, which propose an “implicit or explicit view of reality” (Morgan 1980, pp. 606–607), it is possible to avoid the overly restrictive interpretation that follows from using one view or another of the standard. The pitfalls associated with the generalization of theoretical models and the need to analyze complex organizational phenomena from several points of view have been raised by various authors (Morgan 1986, 1980; Lewis 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Glynn et al. 2000). Accordingly, each of the three paradigms mentioned in the present study sheds light on different aspects of people’s experiences with ISO 9000. They likewise provide a coherent interpretative framework for analyzing the statements in each of the three respondent categories. This interpretative framework was not established from the outset, before analyzing the respondents’ statements and defining the ensuing categories. Rather, its relevance became more evident as an overall interpretation was drawn up using the inductive approach of grounded theory.

The statements of the quality-enthusiast respondents clearly fit into a mechanistic and functionalist paradigm. This approach sees an organization as a coherent and ordered system in which work practices must obey rationally and formally defined rules (Spencer 1994, Morgan 1980, Gharajedaghi and Ackoff 1984). Like cogs in a well-oiled machine, people must submit to practices and standards that are adopted by the hierarchy and seen to be intrinsically efficient. In the opinion of quality enthusiasts, the mechanistic model proposed by ISO 9000 can bring about substantial improvements to an organization. These improvements follow from the precise application of explicit, rational, and proven rules. Organizations are seen as being coherent systems that must be audited regularly to reduce nonconformance with the proposed model. The auditor is seen as a sort of “organization mechanic” who works with managers to improve ISO 9000 system performances and makes the necessary corrections. Because this system has proven itself in other contexts, it can be considered to be relatively universal. Finally, the importance given to the personnel’s collaboration and support for a successful implementation of the standard translates a consensual view of organizations. Though this collaboration is not necessarily complete, it is in keeping with an ideal, orderly, and cohesive view that is central to the mechanistic and functionalist paradigm (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

The statements of the ceremonial-integrator respondents fit into an institutionalist paradigm. This paradigm is contrary to the mechanistic approach, the latter being based on an instrumental and objective view of social systems. Institutional theory, on the other hand, attempts to describe how people interpret and construct their reality by conforming to standards and values that define “the way things are and/or the way things are to be done” (Scott 1987, p. 496). As Meyer and Rowan (1977) have shown, organizations adopt formal structures and rational management methods in order to establish their legitimacy and comply with the “cult of reason” dominating their institutional environment. Complying with these methods is part of a “myth” and “ceremony” enacted more out of a concern for an organization’s image and external recognition than out of any internal necessity. Similarly, our study pointed to a contradiction between the ceremonial integrators’ legitimacy rhetoric and the real application of quality management techniques. These respondents felt that the ISO 9000 system was implemented more to meet the clients’ and managers’ demands than to meet internal needs. The system was therefore integrated superficially so that the organization could pass the certification audit without posing serious questions that were seen to be unnecessary and undesirable.

As stated above, the conformance with the standard had a ceremonial and mythical aspect (Meyer and Rowan 1977) in which organizational members partook more for mimetic and legitimacy reasons than out of conviction. This ceremonial aspect, whose goal is to project a rational and institutionally approved image, was particularly visible during certification audits. The goal of the audits and system implementation was the ISO certificate rather than the systematic improvement of company practices. The documentation required by ISO 9000, the statements, and accompanying publicity were, hence, part of rhetoric and language games whose objective was more symbolic than practical.

Though the ceremonial integrators were at ease with the ceremonies and paradoxes that came with this standard, the dissident respondents believed that the management system’s implementation created an iron cage which had to be resisted. The attitude of the latter group is best described by a critical-political paradigm. This approach sees management practices as instruments of control, and even domination, that shape or reproduce power relationships within an organization (Clegg 1981, Frost 1987, Biggart and Hamilton 1984). Dissident respondents see ISO 9000 as an alienating, unjustified system which is imposed by management. Nonetheless, the resistance to this system rarely takes the form
of a direct confrontation with management, which critical theory authors depict as being part of a larger quest for emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott 1992). Rather, it is expressed in localized and context-specific power games. As Crozier and Friedberg (1980) have shown, these power games are inherent in all organizational activities and are based on the implicit mastery of zones of uncertainty that are continuously renegotiated. “Organizational games are concrete mechanisms that actors use to structure and regulate their power relations while preserving some freedom to act in their own best interests” (Crozier and Friedberg 1980, p. 56). Everyone in an organization, whatever their position, can use these games to exercise power or resist the control mechanisms in their workplace. The study of routine workplace resistance provides diverse illustrations of these power games (Prasad and Prasad 2000, Scott 1985). Examples of kinds of opposition to the standard that provide people with some latitude include not following procedures, denying the existence of ISO 9000, deliberately being absent during certification audits, and dissimulating information. Contrary to formal and explicit protests, routine workplace resistance is all the more difficult to control precisely because of its inconspicuous nature. The certification process is seen as a game in which dissident individuals try to avoid the standard’s constraints and point out its contradictions without confronting managers directly. Indeed, there is often too much at stake for managers in the adoption of ISO 9000 for it to be renegotiated with employees. The opposition between the standard’s most vibrant promoters and its most unwilling dissidents is thus played out through indirect confrontation.

The differences among the respondent categories in our study did not seem to lead to open conflict or seriously threaten the organizations’ ISO 9000 certification. Interestingly, the different approaches to adapting to the standard were compatible both amongst themselves and with the certification process. The quality enthusiasts were a driving force in promoting the standard’s implementation. The ceremonial integrators appeared to be fundamentally unconvinced followers of the standard who nonetheless wanted to pass the final exam in order to obtain the ISO certificate. Finally, the dissidents succeeded in coming to terms with the very flexible requirements of the certification audit while indirectly showing their opposition to the system’s contradictions.

Contributions and Implications
This research demonstrates the coexistence of several manners of integrating and interpreting the ISO 9000 standards. The study’s results indicate that, despite viewpoints that are often quite different from one another, the three respondent categories seem to be compatible, this in large part due to the failings and ceremonial aspects of the certification process. The ceremonial aspects make the quality management system appear coherent and orderly even though, in reality, it gives rise to highly diverging and even dissident opinions. One important contribution of this study is to demonstrate the relatively modest support for ISO 9000 among the personnel of certified organizations. A second is to show the usefulness of institutionalist and critical theories in explaining this lack of support. Accordingly, only one-third of the respondents could be described as quality enthusiasts who genuinely supported the ISO 9000 propositions. Considering that half of the respondents in this category were quality specialists, the proportion of the people who were genuinely convinced of the internal relevance of ISO 9000 is probably still lower. Given this context, the predominance of the mechanistic paradigm in many organizations’ statements and in studies of this standard would seem to be somewhat debatable.

This observation should encourage managers and researchers to consider implementing ISO 9000 using an approach that is not entirely technical, consensual, and instrumental. Acknowledging the diverging points of view, resistance to the standard and ceremonial behavior would bring to light contradictions that hamper the system’s internal credibility and its real integration into company practices. The fact that the respondents were interviewed outside the workplace certainly helped those who were not entirely convinced by the ISO 9000 system to express their opinions. Another interesting contribution of the study is to show that belief in the system strongly depends on the respondents’ job. Accordingly, the quality specialists’ statements were not very representative of the opinions of the employees from the other categories. On the whole, the quality specialists were less critical about ISO 9000 than were the employees and managers, even though the latter two groups played an essential role in implementing the system. Despite this fact, it is quality specialists who are most likely to participate in studies of ISO 9000. Apart from the respondents’ job, the activity sector and organization size likewise seemed to have an impact on the opinions about the standard. The ceremonial integration of the standard thus seemed to be more frequent in the service sector than in the industrial sector. Conversely, and contrary to conventional wisdom, small organizations often strongly supported the ISO 9000 system because it provided them with a highly structured approach to developing their quality assurance program.
Finally, the present study helps to relativize the implications of the certification process. For instance, despite the work required and the pressure involved in implementing the system, organizations seemed to regularly and easily get around the ISO 9000 requirements, including during the certification audits. These audits represent a very stimulating field of research that would be worthy of further exploration. The numerous studies conducted to show the consequences of certification on quality management or on performance improvement (McAdam and McKeown 1999, Docking and Down 1999, Sun 1999, Standards Council of Canada 2000, Bhuian 1998, Ismail and Hashmi 1999, Lee and Pulmer 1999) have tended to forget the certification process itself. The latter is implicitly considered to be homogeneous, precise, and predictable. However, the people interviewed in the course of this study indicated, on the contrary, that the requirements and concrete unfolding of this “exam” differed greatly from one auditor to the next and from one organization to the next. These differences suggest that we should more carefully consider the value accorded to ISO 9000 certification.

**Limitations and Future Orientations**

The limitations encountered in this study have nonetheless helped us to identify the directions that future studies of this topic might take. To begin with, it is quite difficult to have a large sample of respondents when using this method and it is just as difficult to choose them randomly. From a statistical point of view, the study’s results therefore cannot pretend to represent the whole population of people working in these organizations. This being said, external generalization is not a crucial issue in qualitative studies (Maxwell 1996). Moreover, certain respondent categories, particularly the employees, are underrepresented in the sample. Additional interviews with these respondents would be useful. A better understanding of dissident behavior, which is more frequent among employees than among managers, would be of particular value. It would likewise be interesting to determine whether or not the respondents’ age and occupational background and the organizations’ activity sector have a significant impact on the type of response. The state of an organization’s quality management at the time when the ISO 9000 system is implemented and the certification date might differ greatly from one auditor to the next and from one organization to the next. These differences suggest that we should more carefully consider the value accorded to ISO 9000 certification.

The ISO 9000 implementation could prove, however, to be imitating the early adopters to maintain their legitimacy (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Tolbert and Zucker 1983, Zbaracki 1998, Shuer and Lee 2002). According to this model, recently certified organizations are more exposed to the ceremonial and artificial aspects of the certification process. Verifying these different hypotheses would require, however, a much greater organization and respondent sample, which is beyond the scope of qualitative and inductive research methods.

Second, it would be worthwhile extending this type of study to other fields and other cultural contexts. For example, the opinions and behaviors that characterize the three respondent categories are probably not unique to ISO 9000, despite its specificity. Implementing other management systems and practices is also likely to lead to ceremonial, dissident, or mechanistic attitudes. Furthermore, the occurrence of these attitudes depends on an organization’s culture. Indeed, as has been shown in research conducted in French and German ISO 9000-certified organizations, the ISO implementation process and its organizational implications tend to reproduce national cultural specificities (Casper and Hancke 1999). Given the international recognition and use of these standards, it would be interesting to study cultural differences in support for this system.

Finally, conducting a study outside of the workplace limits access to information about certified organizations, their standard implementation process, and the relationships among the various respondent categories. In the case of the present study, the information presented here is drawn from individual opinions that do not necessarily represent the overall certification process. Observations from inside organizations could provide a complementary viewpoint of the process and make it possible to compare data obtained from the statements of respondents interviewed outside of the workplace. This approach could also be used to evaluate the degree to which and the reasons why certain attitudes can dominate in a certified organization. Analyzing the factors that foster ceremonial-integrator, dissident, quality-enthusiast, or other types of behavior would undoubtedly help managers to better anticipate their employees’ reactions to adopting the ISO standard. The ceremonial aspects of the certification process described in the present study should, moreover, be further explored using an ethnographic approach of participant observation. This approach could also be used to analyze how and when different types of attitudes about the standard take form. Participant observation of ISO 9000 implementation could prove, however, to
be a delicate task, given the stakes involved in certification, the process’s confidentiality, and the “organizational silence” (Morrison and Milliken 2000) that researchers could run into.

Whatever approaches are chosen, the rapid growth in the number of certified organizations would seem to indicate that new studies are required if we are to better understand the implications of this standard for management practices. The present study shows that ISO 9000 is not a monolithic system that can be imposed in a mechanistic way. Rather, this standard would appear to be a socially constructed management system that people adopt, reinterpret, or reject depending on the situation. This observation suggests that ISO certification should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a management tool whose effects on an organization and its quality control give rise to ambiguous interpretations that are difficult to foresee.

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