

Companies seek ISO certification for various reasons — to improve efficiency, expand into overseas markets, provide assurance to customers. On Pages 12, 13, and 14, we profile six companies, from diverse industries, which were ISO certified this year.

## E&P TRAINING CENTRE

# Children's education institute scores a first with ISO 9002

E&P's decision to seek quality certification was given impetus by the Economic Development Board. Caroline Chan reports.

Local education company E&P Training Centre has broken new ground with its ISO 9002 certification, a scheme associated with manufacturing companies seeking to endorse the quality of their management.

Unlike companies which use the certification to break into new markets, E&P sought the certification for itself.

Managing director Jeremy Ng said: "There was no request from parents for such a certification, most of them knew our reputation by word of mouth. But we went ahead with the certification because we wanted to make sure our courses were good and would meet international standards."

He pointed out that, aside from Informatics Holdings and the Singapore Institute of Management, E&P is the only other education-type organisation which has been certified in Singapore.

"As far as children enrichment schools are concerned, we are probably the first in the world to be certified under ISO 9002."

E&P runs classes on mental arithmetic/mental abacus, IQ improvement and speed reading for more than 4,000 students aged between four and 15. It has eight branches and 20 trainers.

Launched in 1991, the courses have increased in popularity and today, there are 700 children on the waiting list.

The school's decision to seek quality certification was given further impetus with the support of the Economic Development Board (EDB).

"The EDB was very supportive about the service industry acquiring ISO 9002 certification. It helped us with a grant of \$14,000, which we used to bring in consultants JQ Management to help us with the documentation and processes for certification."

Altogether, E&P spent \$50,000 to initiate the ISO 9002 certification, which started sometime last year. It received its certification in March this year from British-based appraiser Quality Certification Limited.

"We believe our system was already very good and it only took eight months



Hands-on instruction from a teacher at an E&P mental arithmetic class.

to achieve the award. Most parents already know of the high standard we set for our courses," Mr Ng said.

Still, the ISO programme revealed weak areas where the school could improve on.

Said Mr Ng: "The ISO process showed that we should standardise our teaching methods, the quality of our trainers and reduce the drop-out rate among our students."

"We also had to change some aspects of our management style, which was very much like how many traditional Chinese companies are run."

He also recognises that the international certification will be an important competitive tool for the company' overseas expansion plans.

E&P already has 14 branches in Malaysia, nine in Indonesia and two in Hongkong. It plans to set up a 10th branch in Indonesia and open new schools in Taiwan and mainland China.

While the certification process was a positive step for the company, there were some negative side effects as well. A few trainers could not accept the changes arising from the process, and chose to leave.

Executive director Amanda Lian said:

"In a way, it was a slight setback for the school, but the good thing was that those who stayed on were willing to adapt and improve. Overall, it helped us understand our people better. ISO certification can only work if everyone works together."

As for improvements resulting from the certification, Ms Lian said that one benefit was a clear procedure to appraise teaching methods.

"We now have weekly discussions among trainers and a proper agenda to assess our trainers," she said.

"We are also more effective when handling customers' complaints — there are proper procedures in place. We can even set targets like having a maximum of three complaints from parents each term."

Since the certification process, the school's drop-out rate has been reduced from 12 per cent to less than 10 per cent, with many classes boasting a drop-out rate of less than 5 per cent.

"We have free make-up classes for the slow learners. We also make the effort to talk to parents when their children fail to do their homework. Overall, this has helped to improve the children's attitude to their classes," Ms Lian added.