

20 Years of Quality Milestones Mark United Arab Emirates' Journey to Excellence

by Sunil Thawani

At a Glance . . .

- To enhance the competitiveness of organizations and the nation as a whole, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the 1990s instituted a number of strategic quality and excellence initiatives to improve quality and customer service.
- Leaders have spearheaded the adoption of recognition programs, e-government initiatives, research, and key partnerships with quality-focused associations.
- The adoption of quality frameworks and standards has led to significant improvements in quality, productivity, customer experience, and improving UAE's competitive ranking in the world.
- Although challenges remain, there is optimism and passion for quality, and the journey toward excellence continues.

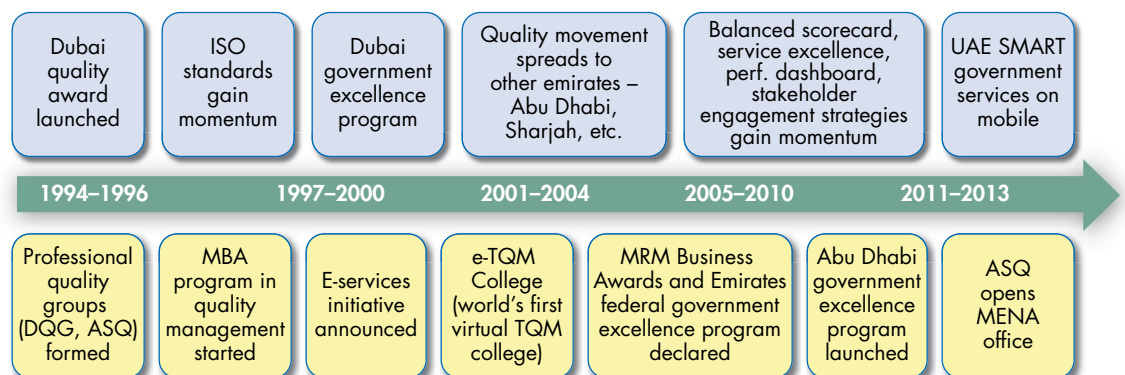
Oil and gas has always been a major contributor to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) economy. In the mid-1990s, visionary leaders of UAE started diversifying the economy to reduce reliance on oil and set up policies to encourage trade, travel, tourism, real estate, construction, services, and more. In 2011, the share of the non-oil sectors in GDP was 69.5 percent United Arab Emirates dirham (AED \$674.8 billion) of the total GDP of UAE. Service activities including wholesale, retail trade, repair services, real estate, transportation, storage, communication, financial enterprises, government services, and others composed about AED \$440 billion of the total GDP, according to UAE's Annual Economic Report 2012.

Given the context that the UAE was gradually becoming a service- and knowledge-based economy, UAE's leaders realized the need for organizations to improve quality and customer service to become competitive. To accomplish this, they instituted a number of strategic and far-reaching macro-level quality and excellence initiatives for all sectors of the economy, namely the government departments and the public and private sectors. Within this context, Dubai's "Drive for Quality" (which is further explained below) was born in the mid-1990s. Government became the key driver of quality excellence in the UAE, and organizations started adopting best practices, international standards on quality, business excellence frameworks, and investing in people development.

About the United Arab Emirates

The UAE is composed of seven emirates, namely, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain. Abu Dhabi is the capital. The country's gross domestic product (at constant prices) reached about AED \$981 billion in 2011 (about USD \$270 billion).

Figure 1 — Key milestones in UAE's journey to excellence



NOTE: Not all initiatives listed. Indicative timeline. Not to scale.

Key Milestones in UAE’s Journey to Excellence

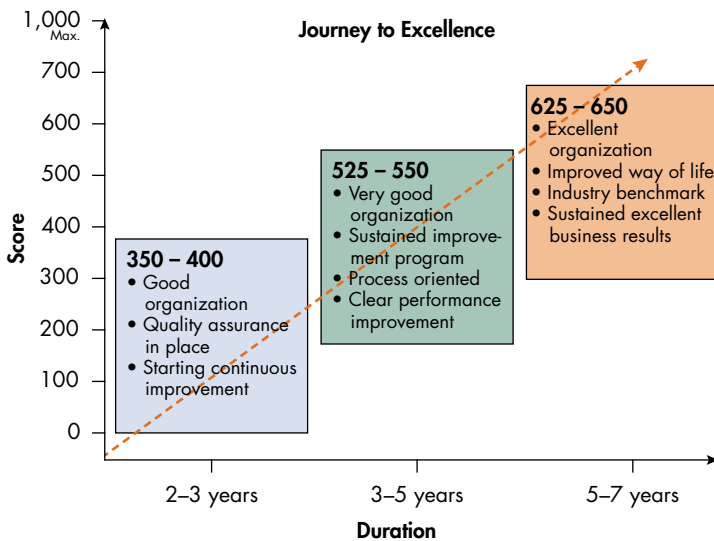
Listed below are some of the most significant quality and excellence initiatives launched in the UAE in the past 20 years. The initiatives provided below are by no means the complete list; rather this provides individual insights into UAE’s journey toward excellence.

Dubai Quality Award: Dubai’s “Drive for Quality” began with a vision of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, and the vice president and prime minister of UAE, with establishment of the Dubai Quality Award (DQA) in 1994. The DQA—intended initially only for private-sector organizations—was introduced to improve the business standards of those operating in Dubai, and thus boosting external and internal trade.

The DQA is awarded to companies that have demonstrated a consistent commitment to best practices in their respective fields, and to promote organizational excellence. Organizations from 11 sectors of the economy such as manufacturing, service, tourism, and construction can participate in the award program. As seen in Figure 2, there are three levels of recognition:

- DQ Appreciation Prize
- DQA
- DQA Gold

Figure 2 — The three levels of DQA recognition



These levels of recognition are part of an organization’s maturity in attaining excellence, and can be used to measure an organization’s journey toward excellence. Cut-off scores are decided by the award office in consultation with members of the jury. Once an organization participates in the award process, a team of qualified assessors carries out assessment of organization systems, performance, etc., and scores them per the requirements of the award criteria.

The DQA model was initially based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award framework and began to show closer alignment with the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model in 1999.

Since 1994, the DQA has played a role in the efforts of thousands of individuals and organizations seeking to build capacity and competence in the field of quality (see Table 1).

Table 1 — DQA stats

No.	Indicator	No. (since 1994)
1	Organizations’ representatives trained for DQA	1,000+
2	Organizations applied for DQA	500+
3	Organizations reapplied for DQA	100+
4	Winning organizations for DQA	250+
5	Assessors trained in EFQM methodology	2,000+

Source: DQA Office

Dubai Quality Group (DQG): Established in 1994, DQG is a not-for-profit business organization to develop and promote quality and business excellence practices in UAE. The DQG has made positive contributions in raising the voice of quality and enhancing competencies.

ISO 9000: Around the same time, organizations started implementing international quality management systems standards, including ISO 9000. In 1995, 104 certifications were issued in UAE, while the figure had increased to more than 3,200 by December 2012, according to the [2012 ISO Survey Report](#). Implementing ISO standards has helped organizations build a foundation for institutionalizing the improvements made, while adoption of management systems has significantly increased the number of businesses offering ISO consulting, training, and certification services, and thereby the competencies of quality professionals.

Master of Quality Management (MQM): In 1996, the University of Wollongong in Dubai started MQM. To date, hundreds of students have acquired formal education in quality and excellence leading to huge capacities in the quality domain. These professionals are working in all types and sizes of organizations to improve business performance and create a culture of quality and excellence.

Dubai Government Excellence Program (DGEP): To improve delivery of government services to citizens, visitors, and businesses, the Dubai government established the DGEP in 1998 to improve the performance of Dubai’s government, and to simplify governmental procedures and improve services. DGEP recognizes and rewards exceptional government employees, departments, and initiatives/projects. DGEP won the prestigious

2007 United Nations Public Services Award in the “Improving of Delivery Services” category in the West Asia region.

ASQ: In 1998, ASQ, the world’s largest not-for-profit association of quality professionals, appointed Sunil Thawani the country counselor for UAE. In 1998–1999, ASQ had a mere 15 members in UAE—a figure that has since grown to about 450 members in 2013. In November 2013, ASQ opened its Middle East North Africa (MENA) office in Dubai. Hundreds of quality professionals have attained ASQ certification in several quality-related programs such as Certified Manager of Quality/Organizational Excellence (CMQ/OE), Certified Process Analyst (CPA), Certified Six Sigma Green Belt (CSSGB), and more.

ISO 14000 and OHSAS 18000: Adoption of international health, safety, and environment management systems standards gained momentum in early 2000. As of December 2012, a total of 882 ISO 14001 certificates have been issued in UAE, compared to only 48 certificates issued in 2000, according to the 2012 ISO Survey Report. In 2009, the Abu Dhabi government issued Abu Dhabi Environment, Health and Safety Management System (AD EHSMS) regulatory framework for Abu Dhabi government departments to adopt ADEHSMS.

Dubai Human Development Award (DHDA): To develop employees’ abilities and emphasize their role in the future of the UAE, the Dubai government launched DHDA in 2002. DHDA recognizes and rewards the HR initiatives undertaken by organizations toward achieving the Dubai human development goal.

Dubai Service Excellence Scheme (DSES): To promote excellence in customer service standards in the private sector, and to make the experience of shopping in Dubai a pleasurable one, DQA office launched the DSES in 2002. It is a membership-based program wherein member organizations, primarily retail businesses, must commit to customer service excellence standards and code of business ethics and comply. Core principles of DSES are:

- Transparency of product pricing and policies on refund, replacement, etc.
- Integrity: no fraud, counterfeit products
- Reliability of services and responsiveness
- Customer care
- Competence of staff—product knowledge and behavior
- Continual improvement

Compliance and commitment is monitored through a robust mystery-shopping program.

Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University (formerly e-TQM College): The world’s first online (virtual) school in the field of TQM, Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University was set up in 2002 by Dubai Police. Sheikh Mohammed serves as its president.

Thousands of students have enrolled to learn about core principles and practices in the field of TQM and excellence.

Quality and Excellence Movement Spreads From Dubai to Other Emirates

Recognizing and appreciating the positive impact and benefits of the quality movement in Dubai, other emirates and federal government departments created programs with a focus on improving efficiency, effectiveness, customer service, and overall competitiveness of industry and nation. Table 2 highlights a few major initiatives.

Table 2 — Major UAE quality initiatives

Initiative	Administered by	Background
Sharjah Economic Excellence Award	Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Established in early 2000 for organizations registered with the Sharjah Chamber. They originally developed their own framework, but have since adopted the EFQM model.
Sheikh Khalifa Excellence Award (SKEA)	Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Established in 2001 by the Abu Dhabi Chamber for private and public sector. SKEA uses framework similar to EFQM.
Sheikh Saqr Award for Government	Sheikh Saqr’s Government Excellence Department	Launched in 2004, the program supports the overall development in the UAE through the preparation of future leaders, institutional capacity building, and enabling government agencies to apply international standards of excellence.
Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Business Awards (MRM Business Award)	Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Launched by the Dubai Chamber in 2005 to recognize and reward firms that contribute to the UAE’s economic development. Participation is open to all firms that are registered with the respective chambers of commerce and industry in the UAE.
Abu Dhabi Award for Excellence in Government Performance	Abu Dhabi Award Office, Executive Council of the Government of Abu Dhabi	Established in 2008 for Abu Dhabi government entities/departments.
Emirates Government Excellence Award (EGEA)	UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs	Established in 2009 for federal government departments as part of the Sheikh Khalifa Government Excellence Program with the objective of federal governments improving service to the UAE community.
Ajman Award Shield for Government Excellence	Ajman Chamber of Government Department	Launched in 2010 and managed by Ajman Chamber of Government Department.
Emirates Excellence Council	UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs	In 2013, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed, vice president and prime minister of UAE, issued directives to set up the Emirates Excellence Council to bring together all local and federal excellence programs under one umbrella, to coordinate efforts, exchange knowledge, promote teamwork, and establish excellence as a national culture in the UAE.
Emirates Quality Mark (EQM)	The Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology	Developed by the authority to grant the EQM to ensure that products comply with the approved standards for local and export markets.

Year 2000: E-Services Become Next Wave of Quality Improvement

Information communication and technology (ICT) is revolutionizing the design and delivery of services. The dependence on ICT is increasing by the day, as it has a profound effect on the ways people live today and how customers interact with service providers. ICT enables the modernizing/transforming of services, thereby revolutionizing business process management, quality, customer service and experience, and business performance (see Table 3).

Table 3 — Impact of ICT on business performance

Improved	Reduced
Convenience	Cost
Customer services and customer experience	Errors
Discipline	Time
Speed	Inconsistency in delivery
Efficiency	Manual intervention
Performance measurement	

Recognizing the potential use of information technology in transforming services, the Dubai government in 2002 announced a series of comprehensive electronic transformation initiatives, including e-government, thereby making government services available through the Internet. Dubai’s e-government initiative led to a quantum leap in service delivery and customer service. Today, delivery of government services through the Internet has spread to other emirates, as well as the public and private sector.

Year 2013: UAE Smart Government Initiative Launched

With a high rate of mobile penetration within the UAE—14 million subscribers for a population of about 7 million—and extensive use of smart phones and IT tablets, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed, vice president and prime minister of UAE, in 2013 announced a pioneering UAE Smart Government initiative in the region. The objective of Smart Government is to enhance the leading position assumed by the UAE in the field of e-development, and to keep pace with best international practices in this domain. Under this initiative, all government services will be made available on mobile devices within a two-year period, ushering in a new era of customer service and customer experience. The UAE is ranked very high in e-government services and has boosted this position by launching the mobile/smart government initiative, which is even more sophisticated.

During the 2013 Emirates Government Excellence Conference, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed emphasized that, “excellence is a lifestyle, a government culture, and a national advantage by which we can make a lot of achievements. The implementation of the UAE Vision 2021 becomes more feasible for us if we establish excellence at all government departments.”

The M-Government Service Award was announced in mid-2013 with the objective of stimulating the delivery of government services to the public through smartphones around the clock.

Commonly Used Quality- and Excellence-Related Strategies in the UAE

To enhance business performance and competitiveness, some of the strategies and methodologies commonly used by organizations in the UAE are listed below in alphabetical order. The “ASQ Global State of Quality Research: Discoveries 2013” revealed that there is, in fact, no significant indication the use of quality practices differs by region.

Commonly used strategies and frameworks to improve quality

- Balanced scorecard
- Benchmarking and best practices (currently at infancy stage with a long way to go)
- Business process management including reengineering
- Corporate governance
- Corporate social responsibility (had a slow start but is now catching on rapidly)
- Customer complaints management framework (ISO:10002)
- Customer loyalty/satisfaction measurement
- Employee engagement/satisfaction measurement studies
- Enterprise risk management (ISO:31000)
- Financial management standards such as International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS)
- Innovation methodologies
- International management systems standards (ISO standards) such as 9001, 14001, 20000, 22000, 10002, 27001
- Kaizen
- Lean Six Sigma
- Mystery shopping
- Performance management including performance dashboard
- Stakeholder engagement
- Suggestion scheme

Opportunities for Further Improvement

We live in a world where change is constant and improvement is continual. Though much has been accomplished in a relatively short period of time in the UAE, opportunities for further improvement exist, including:

- **Thought leadership in the quality domain:** There is a need for independent think tanks to provide thought leadership and guide the quality profession. There is a shortage of credible research data in the field of quality and excellence in the region. Good opportunity exists to conduct leading-edge research on key performance indicators of industries, including retail, oil and gas, hospitality, healthcare, and logistics.

- **Business leaders make quality a top priority:** Corporate executives (CEOs, CFOs, COOs) still need to be convinced of the potential that quality management offers to reduce cost and improve product features, thereby positively impacting corporate performance. As quality guru Dr. Joseph Juran said, the return on investment from quality improvement programs is six times the investments made, the greatest return on investment as compared to any other investment made.
- **Create a culture of sharing data/benchmarks:** Still, organizations are finding it hard to access industry-specific data/benchmarks to compare their performance and share best practices. Business environments need to open up to share good practices within peer industries. Best-practice reports on industries, functions, processes, and services can be shared, such as the pioneering “DQA Winning Practices” report published by the DQA office in 2011.
- **Use of advance quality tools:** The current application of quality tools is at basic-plus level. Advanced techniques such as quality function deployment (QFD), process capability, run charts, and design of experiments (DoE) are not widely used by industry.
- **Measure the impact and benefit of TQM on corporate performance:** Potential to conduct research studies on the impact of quality and excellence on corporate performance is a constant need.
- **Exploiting synergies in quality, risk, corporate social responsibility, and corporate governance:** To enhance transparency, accountabilities, performance, and mitigate risks, opportunity exists for these specialized functions to leverage knowledge and help businesses improve performance.
- **Quality in design:** Applying principles and techniques of quality in the design phase, especially in the service sector.

The UAE Journey Continues

The UAE is progressing toward realizing its UAE Vision 2021 to be among the best countries in the world by 2021. A few indicators are:

- According to the World Economic Forum, UAE’s ranking in the Global Competitive Index has improved from 37 (in 2007–2008) to 19 (in 2012–2013) out of 148 nations.
- According to the World Happiness Report, released by the United Nations, UAE’s ranking (in 2010–2012) is 14th out of 156 nations.

While there is no scientific evidence or credible research study to prove it, many quality professionals believe that quality and excellence initiatives launched by UAE leaders have made positive contributions in improving the competitiveness of the UAE and making it a happier place in which to live and prosper.

Though challenges remain, there is tremendous optimism and passion in the UAE about continually improving the quality, productivity, customer experience, and competitiveness of organizations and the UAE as a nation.

For More Information

- Contact author Sunil Thawani at thawanis@hotmail.com.
- To learn more about ASQ’s Global State of Quality, visit www.globalstateofquality.org.
- Find more ASQ case studies on quality improvement in the ASQ Knowledge Center at asq.org/knowledge-center/case-studies.

About the Author



Sunil Thawani is an ASQ Fellow and member of the ASQ Global Advisory Committee, which advises the organization’s board of directors on ASQ Global’s plans and activities. Sunil has also served as a member of the jury for the Dubai Quality Award. He has presented and published 50 papers, as well as authored the book, *Business Excellence*

Awards – Strategies for Winning. Sunil has traveled around the world on motorcycle (www.worldwideonwheels.com). He lives in the United Arab Emirates.