Certification ... ... that's the name of the game

Members of the 'certified' Environ team: standing (l-r): Bobby-Jon Sabadina and Josh Miller, and, seated Tom Prest and Helen Hook.

When most people are told, "You ought to be certified!" they take offence. Not so Environ Enterprises' Gill Christiansen. He is far more likely to smile and say, "I already have been!"

Gill and his wife, Maree (he's the managing director and she's the general manager) operate Environ Enterprises out of Garbutt, a suburb of Townsville.

Currently Gill and Maree are not planning to extend their office. However, if their string of business quality certificates continues to grow they may well have to move up or out simply to provide additional wall space on which to display their expanding accumulation of quality recognition "gongs".

It is not that Gill and Maree are into certification for its own sake or, despite their obvious pride in their team's achievements, to show off or big note themselves.

For Gill, quality related certification and all that goes into gaining official recognition is simply good for business.

Most recently Environ Enterprises was awarded Integrated Management Systems certification, demonstrating its compliance with international management systems standards which provide a framework for managing risks.

The payoff as far as Gill and Maree Christiansen is concerned is that their company now has "an integrated approach to risk management to help us

make effective decisions and implement strategic organisational objectives".

In order to gain IMS certification Environ had to adopt three business assistance models.

The first was ISO AS/NZS9001: 2000, which is all about achieving and delivering customer satisfaction. Compliance with 9001:2000 entitles a business to the familiar SAI Global logo with five white ticks in a red box ('the red ticks').

The next was ISO AS/NZS14001: 2004 which focuses on environmental protection (SAI Global's 'green ticks').

And the third was AS/NZS4801: 2001 which governs occupational health and safety ('yellow ticks').

Between them, the three models require documented high level management of, improvement in and commitment to (among others): advanced quality, environmental and safety practices; customer service and achieving customer satisfaction; fair and effective human resources practices; infrastructure development and deployment; work environment; and responsible purchasing processes.

"From a business management and personal perspective, the really big thing we needed to do to help us gain IMS certification was to change how we communicated with our team," Gill said.

"So much of what is involved in compliance, regulation and ethics can be quite complex and potentially meaningless to people who are not right into this type of thing.

"This meant we had to work through and cut through all the clutter to make it easily accessible and meaningful to all our employees, at all levels.

"But it was something … a risk management thing … we felt we really had to do because governments, industry and public sectors are demanding higher levels of conformance, compliance and commitment to quality, training, continuous improvement, safety and the environment."

IMS 'driver', Maree Christiansen & Gill Christiansen (below), leaving nothing to chance.

Seriously under prepared

A few years back, in the face of mounting consumer pressure and increased costly litigation involving pest managers and builders, Gill said he and Maree (who is the main driver behind implementing IMS) began to feel seriously under prepared to face the future if something went wrong with his business.

"We began to realise that we could be right in the firing line and that we would need to do as much as we could to protect ourselves," he said.

"There are so many different aspects of the law which can impact on a business such as ours, including contract law, civil law, torts, statute of limitations, duty of care, duty of disclosure, duty of good faith, common law and so on.

"But we, like most pest managers and builders, didn't know nearly enough about these things. But we realised we needed to in order to not only protect ourselves and our livelihoods but also our clients … not to mention the health and safety of consumers and the environment.

"It was plain to us that just one lawsuit could ruin our business, and that 'she'll be right' would never hold up if and when the crunch came.

"We not only wanted to remain in the industry but we also wanted to grow in the industry. This meant we needed to grow personally and become even hungrier to learn."

When Gill started to look around, he asked himself: "How many business and operators out there are breaking the law knowingly and unknowingly? How many have risk management systems, a business plan, positive cash flow, investment strategies, or even exit strategies? How many are able to leave their business and know that everybody else in the business knows what to do and does it with commitment and integrity?"

To minimise the risks to their own business, Gill and Maree realised they needed a plan as well as proper

systems to impose a high level of discipline on the business.

"But, we also wanted the business to work for us and not the other way around. So our program was to build this requirement in as well," he said.

"In the end, we chose to go with IMS because it provided the plan and also the disciplinarian systems we required to establish our risk management firewalls. And we also figured we could leverage some significant advantages from what we were doing and achieved."

Gill said IMS has now become the core functional structure around which Environ is built, "our ultimate business system that pulls every facet together".

"But it was and still is a huge learning curve."

Already they have seen many benefits and advantages.

"Clients are becoming more aware, and we have many cases where we are considered as a first choice on tenders because we align with their quality policies as preferred suppliers," he said.

IMS is not something you put in place and then sit back and not expect to lift a finger.

Environ's architect, Robert Burton (B Arch), who quantifies, carries out risk assessments and designs termite protection on new constructions.

Regular audits

To maintain certification, businesses must undergo independent audits undertaken every six months by third party certification bodies such as SAI Global.

"The audits, by professional auditors with experience in our industry, provide a constant review of how we are going, how we are doing things and check to make sure we are meeting the minimum requirements of all three standards," Gill said.

He said IMS also provides a framework for not only demonstrating compliance and commitment but a means of educating clients and suppliers about ways to minimise their own risks by doing things the right way.

"It also lifts their expectations and understanding about what needs to be done before we and they should consider a job is finished.

"And it may also set a benchmark for prospective clients to work from.

"In the government sector, for instance, we have become a preferred supplier because of our IMS certification.

"For instance, when a tender went out for termite work at a national park, they received three quotes from other companies. When I rang in and explained our situation, we were immediately commissioned to do an environmental impact/aspect evaluation."

All of us in the business have responsibility for making sure all the 'T's are crossed and the 'I's are dotted.

So how does Environ Enterprises set about generating awareness of its special certified status?

"Well, we have put a lot of effort into incorporating the ticks into all our materials, advertising, brochures, and our web site," Gill said.

"And we also do what we can to lift our profile and achievements in local media.

"What we are finding is that, apart from winning more government work, we are also making a major impression on private and commercial customers, especially those who are looking for that little bit extra assurance about health and safety, environmental protection, and of course, customer satisfaction."

Importantly, complying with all the certification requirements provides a process by which Environ can benchmark the effectiveness of its operations and procedures and through which it can plan, manage and operate in ways which dramatically reduce its exposure to risk.

"We are able to see our business from an entirely different perspective," Gill said.

"Our weekly toolbox meetings, management meetings, and admin meetings identify areas that require attention, provide a framework for allocating tasks and time frames in order of priority.

"Everybody is involved to some extent.

"We are only a small firm. However, every person in our team has some ownership in everyday operations and decisions within our business.

"All of us in the business have responsibility for making sure all the 'T's are crossed and the 'I's are dotted.

"And don't think for a minute that this is all about drudgery. Quite the opposite. Our business is not only successful and secure. It is also fun. In fact, fun is a key element for all of us. If we didn't have fun and enjoy what we are all doing, we certainly would not be doing it!" ■