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Complaint handling in organizations – Specification

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Foreword

Publishing information

This British Standard is published by BSI Standards Limited, under licence from The British Standards Institution, and came into effect on 30 June 2015. It was prepared by Subcommittee SVS/0/4, *Complaints handling*, under the authority of Technical Committee SVS/0, *Customer service – Fundamental principles*. A list of organizations represented on this committee can be obtained on request to its secretary.

Use of this document

It has been assumed in the preparation of this British Standard that the execution of its provisions will be entrusted to appropriately qualified and experienced people, for whose use it has been produced.

Presentational conventions

The provisions of this standard are presented in roman (i.e. upright) type. Its requirements are expressed in sentences in which the principal auxiliary verb is "shall".

Commentary, explanation and general informative material is presented in smaller italic type, and does not constitute a normative element.

Requirements in this standard are drafted in accordance with *Rules for the structure and drafting of UK standards*, subclause J.1.1, which states, "Requirements should be expressed using wording such as: 'When tested as described in Annex A, the product shall ...'". This means that only those products that are capable of passing the specified test will be deemed to conform to this standard.

Contractual and legal considerations

This publication does not purport to include all the necessary provisions of a contract. Users are responsible for its correct application.

Compliance with a British Standard cannot confer immunity from legal obligations.

Introduction

This British Standard provides a specification for the design and implementation of an effective and efficient complaint-handling process for all types of commercial or non-commercial activities. It is intended to benefit an organization and its customers, complainants and other interested parties.

The effective management of complaints enables an organization to identify any problems that customers might be experiencing from its products and/or services. The information subsequently obtained can be used to provide remedial action to put things right for affected customers and also lead to improvements in products services and processes. Also, if complaints are properly handled and managed, an organization can improve its reputation, regardless of size, location and sector.

An effective and efficient complaint-handling process reflects the needs of both the organizations supplying products and services and those who are the recipients of those products and services.

The handling of complaints through a process as described in this British Standard can enhance customer satisfaction. Encouraging customer feedback, including complaints if customers are not satisfied, can offer opportunities to maintain or enhance customer loyalty and approval (see BS 8477), and improve domestic and international competitiveness.

Implementation of the process described in this British Standard can:

- provide a complainant with access to an open and effective complaint-handling process;
- enhance the handling of complaints from vulnerable or disadvantaged complainants, including children;
- encourage feedback from those who do not currently complain;
- provide a high quality and consistent response to complaints made through all channels, e.g. social media, webchat and other emerging channels (including those posted on third party review sites);
- enhance the ability of the organization to identify and resolve complaints in a consistent, systematic and responsive manner, to the satisfaction of the complainant and the organization;
- enhance the ability of an organization to identify trends and eliminate causes of complaints, and improve the organization's operations;
- help an organization create a customer-focused approach to resolving complaints, and encourage personnel to improve their skills in working with customers; and
- provide a basis for continual review of the complaint-handling process to meet any changes in organizational requirements, consumer expectations and external factors such as regulatory changes.

Findings from the complaint-handling and any alternative dispute resolution processes can be used in conjunction with other feedback from customers, personnel and benchmarking studies, to drive further improvements in customer satisfaction.

1 Scope

This British Standard specifies requirements for a complaint-handling process, including planning, design, operation, maintenance and improvement. The complaint-handling process is suitable for use as one of the processes of an overall quality management system.

This British Standard specifies the following aspects of handling and managing complaints:

- a) enhancing customer satisfaction by creating a customer-focused environment that is open to feedback (including complaints), resolving any complaints identified, and enhancing the organization's ability to improve its customer service;
- b) involving top management and commitment through adequate acquisition and deployment of resources, including personnel training;
- c) recognizing and addressing the needs and expectations of complainants;
- d) providing complainants with an open, effective and easy-to-use complaints process;
- e) analysing and evaluating complaints to improve products, services and customer service quality;
- f) auditing of the complaint-handling process;
- g) reviewing and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the complaint-handling process;
- h) publicizing anonymized learning that has been implemented from complaints and other feedback.

This British Standard covers complaints made through any contact channel and is intended for use by organizations of all sizes and in all sectors. It includes complaints from any customer or user of the service, including businesses.

This British Standard does not apply to disputes that are referred for resolution outside the organization or for employment-related disputes.

2 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this British Standard, the following terms and definitions apply.

2.1 alternative dispute resolution

external service provided for settling disputes, between an organization and its complainants, as an alternative to taking action in the civil courts

2.2 complainant

person, organization, or its representative, making a complaint

[SOURCE: BS ISO 10002:2014, 3.1]

2.3 complaint

expression of dissatisfaction made to an organization, related to its products, services, practices, staff or the handling of a complaint where a response or a resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected

[SOURCE: BS ISO 10002:2014, 3.2, modified]

NOTE Organizations may also want to consider for insight purposes any general comments left on social media sites where a response is not expected.

2.4 customer

organization or person that receives a product or service

EXAMPLE Consumer, client, end-user, retailer, beneficiary, and purchaser.

[SOURCE: BS EN ISO 9000:2005, 3.3.5, modified – Note has been deleted]

2.5 customer satisfaction

customer's perception of the degree to which their requirements have been fulfilled

[SOURCE: BS EN ISO 9000:2005, 3.1.4, modified – Notes have been deleted]

2.6 customer service

interaction of the organization with the customer throughout the life cycle of a product or service

[SOURCE: BS ISO 10002:2014, 3.5, modified]

2.7 customer vulnerability

condition in which a customer is at greater risk of mis-selling, exploitation or being put at a disadvantage in terms of accessing or using a service, or in seeking redress

[SOURCE: BS 18477:2010, 2.7, modified – Note has been deleted]

2.8 feedback

opinions, comments, and expressions of interest in the products, services or the complaint-handling process

[SOURCE: BS ISO 10002:2014, 3.6]

2.9 frontline

personnel directly responsible for customer contact or complaint resolution within an organization

2.10 interested party

person or group having an interest in the performance or success of an organization

[SOURCE: BS EN ISO 9000:2005, 3.3.7, modified – Example and note have been deleted]

NOTE Interested parties might include anyone who is directly impacted, e.g. an organization's vehicle obstructing access to a private property.

2.11 personnel

those involved in delivering the organization's service to its customers

NOTE This includes employees, agents, contractors and volunteers.

2.12 process

set of interrelated or interacting activities which transforms inputs into outputs

[SOURCE: BS EN ISO 9000:2005, 3.4.1, modified – Notes have been deleted]

3 General principles

3.1 Enabling and identifying complaints

3.1.1 General

A proactive, customer-focused approach shall be adopted in seeking and encouraging customer feedback and in identifying and receiving complaints (see Clause 6).

The complaint-handling process and supporting information shall be easy to understand and use with the information provided in clear language (see 6.1).

NOTE Organizations should check that information is clearly understood by checking with consumers and/or obtaining independent assurance.

Access to the complaint-handling process shall be free of charge and a complainant shall not be charged a fee or be required to use premium phone lines when making a complaint (see **D.3**).

3.1.2 Visibility

Information about how and where to complain shall be sign-posted and publicized with information made available on the various ways of making and resolving complaints including any external alternative dispute resolution scheme (see **6.1**).

3.1.3 Accessibility

The complaint-handling process shall be accessible, including support provided to people who might require assistance to make a complaint (see **D.2**). Where the organization provides products or services that are purchased or used by children and young people, it shall also ensure that its complaint-handling process is child friendly (see **D.1**).

Information and assistance shall be made available, in whatever languages or formats that the products and services were offered or provided in, including alternative formats so that no complainants are disadvantaged (see **D.1**).

NOTE Information and assistance might include an advice helpline (where translation services might be made available and/or information is provided upon advocacy services that might be able to assist a complainant), referral or signposting to independent source of advice, specific content which can be easily located on an organization's website, printed leaflets and also alternative formats such as Braille (for the visually impaired) and audio.

The following components shall be addressed for accessibility in the complaint-handling process:

- a) access to readable and easy to understand information about how to make a complaint and the complaint process;
- b) the options and process for making a complaint;
- c) personnel training for those likely to receive complaints in:
 - 1) identifying and recording complaints;
 - 2) identifying people who may require additional assistance to make a complaint;
 - 3) providing an initial acknowledgement of complaints received;
 - 4) the complaint-handling process;
 - 5) acquiring the complainant's preferred method of contact and particular requirements for access to information or communication where supported by the organization's processes; and
 - 6) possible escalation paths.
- d) assistance for people to make a complaint if required;
- e) the process for accepting complaints from family members, friends, agents, advocates or others who act on behalf of, or support, a person who themselves might have limited capacity to make a complaint.

3.1.4 Representatives

The organization shall permit authorized representatives to represent complainants.

NOTE Authorized representatives might include persons acting on behalf of others, e.g. family members, legal representatives, consumer organizations and elected representatives.

3.2 Complaint handling

3.2.1 Responsiveness

Receipt of each complaint shall be promptly acknowledged (see 6.2). Complaints shall be dealt with as a workload priority and investigated thoroughly to ensure a fair outcome (see 6.5).

NOTE 1 Organizations should make sure that complaints are appropriately prioritized so that complaints are not left unattended due to other work pressures that might otherwise be given a higher priority.

An organization shall make sure that all personnel members are aware of the need to treat complainants courteously. Complainants shall be kept informed of the progress of their complaint with expectations actively managed.

NOTE 2 Organizations should seek to actively involve a complainant in the complaints process as far as practicable and appropriate in the circumstances. This could involve regular conversations with the complainant including discussion about any suggested resolution of the complaint.

3.2.2 Objectivity

Each complaint shall be addressed in an equitable and unbiased manner (see Annex A).

The organization shall implement policies and/or guidelines that set out the behaviour expected of both its personnel and complainants (see Annex B).

3.2.3 Accountability

Accountability for the development, operation and review of the organization's complaints handling policy shall be clearly documented (see Annex C).

Personnel shall be authorized and trained to implement the complaint-handling policy (see 4.3).

3.2.4 Ensuring no detriment to complainant

All reasonable steps shall be undertaken to ensure that complainants are not adversely affected because of a complaint made by them or on their behalf.

3.3 Prevention of ongoing disputes

The organization shall develop and implement processes that minimize the possibility of complaints escalating into ongoing disputes (see 5.4).

3.4 Communication

The organization shall inform its customers about its complaint-handling procedures.

The organization shall regularly make information on its complaint-handling performance, including improvements made in response to customer feedback, readily available to reassure customers and assist in the choice of products, services and suppliers.

NOTE Information on complaint-handling performance includes details of the numbers and types of complaints received and timescales for resolution.

All information and communications provided to customers shall be consistent with the provisions of the organization's complaint-handling policy and procedures.

4 Complaint-handling framework

4.1 Commitment

The organization shall demonstrate a commitment to effective and efficient complaints handling; this shall be part of the management's responsibility (see 7.2).

NOTE This should be demonstrated by, and promoted from, the organization's top management by establishing a service culture where complaints are seen as opportunities to strengthen relationships with customers and personnel are encouraged to understand how the customer feels by putting themselves in the complainant's shoes.

4.2 Policy

The organization's top management shall establish a complaint-handling policy that focuses on the needs and expectations of customers (see 5.1). The policy and guidance shall be made available to, and known by, all personnel.

The policy shall be supported by procedures and consistent objectives for each function and personnel role included in the process.

The policy shall be easily accessible to customers and interested parties (see Annex D).

NOTE 1 For example, including signposting the policy on the organization's communications.

When establishing the policy and objectives for the complaint-handling process, the following factors shall be taken into account:

- a) the input of customers, personnel and other interested parties;
- b) any relevant statutory and regulatory requirements; and
- c) the content of the organization's quality procedures.

NOTE 2 For further details see BS EN ISO 9001.

- d) contact channels.

A clear escalation process shall be established (see 5.5).

NOTE 3 There are some sectors where, due to regulatory reasons (usually imposed by an external governing body) an escalation process is not permissible. In such cases this would override internal processes.

4.3 Responsibility and authority

The organization shall establish the roles, responsibilities and authorities of its management and other personnel for the complaint-handling process (see Annex C).

The organization shall specify the responsibilities of interested parties involved in the complaint-handling process.

5 Planning and design

5.1 Establishing customer expectations

The organization shall regularly gather information on the expectations of its current and potential customers [see 7.4b)] as well as other interested parties (if they need to make a complaint) including:

- a) communication of information to customers and visibility of the complaints procedure;