

Customs recognised FOR BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

The annual Australian Quality Awards for Business Excellence attract applications from both public and private sector organisations seeking external recognition. This year, the Australian Customs Service will be recognised at the Business Improvement Level, at either Foundation in Business Excellence or Progress Toward Business Excellence.

The process to gain Australian Quality Council (AQC) recognition is rigorous and involves a detailed examination of the performance of an applicant against the Australian Business Excellence Framework.

While the successful Customs submission and site visits were the product of a dedicated team of Quality and Survey Management staff from Central and Regional Offices, the recognition by the AQC reflects on the organisation as a whole.

The road to the award began in April this year when Customs considered that it was ready to apply on the strength of the significant progress made in its reform program which commenced in 1995.

This program has provided evidence of the determination of Customs to improve its efficiency, and to deliver tangible benefits to government, industry and the Australian community.

While Customs has addressed significant challenges over the past four years, a total of 49 major changes have been achieved in the way business is conducted.

Some of the initiatives included:

- risk management
- compliance improvement
- the export awareness program
- benchmarking - providing technical assistance to other Customs administrations, and participation in international Customs fora
- the financial management reform program
- re-engineering of Customs business systems
- the cargo management strategy
- diesel fuel modernisation; and
- development of Customs Information Centres.

It should also be stated that the formal recognition by the AQC took into account previous achievements and awards including the Victorian Commonwealth Executive Forum Innovation award won by the Quality Border Service, and the AQC's National Teams Award

won by the New South Wales Cargo Automation Help Desk Quality Improvement Team.

In developing the Customs submission for the AQC, the coordinating team liaised with line areas around Australia to obtain details of activities and achievements that could be included.

After initial scrutiny by the AQC, the Customs submission moved onto the next stage of site visits to enable the evaluators to verify the content of the submission and see at first hand the way in which the organisation addressed the award criteria.

It should be noted that site visits are not automatically awarded to applicants, and a decision as to whether a site visit will occur is made for each applicant by the evaluation team.

In addition, the awarding of a site visit does not necessarily mean that the applicant will receive recognition at any particular level within the awards program.

This method of evaluation is unique in that it ensures rigour in the process.

In the case of Customs, staff in Canberra and Sydney had the opportunity to contribute to the award process by participating in interviews to answer questions posed by the evaluators.

The success of the site visits was testimony to the ability and understanding by staff of their own work areas.

The evaluation team comprised experienced managers and quality specialists from public and private sector organisations across Australia. They were selected for their capacity to participate expertly and effectively in the evaluation process.

Their findings were subsequently reviewed by a panel of experts not involved in the evaluation process and included leading business people, academics, government representatives, and chief executives of organisations which had received awards previously.

It was this panel which made the final decision on the award to Customs.

The AQC Feedback Report found "Customs is very advanced in its journey of business excellence".



* Vol 1 No 1: Early article on Quality Management program in Customs.