

The new normal for quality

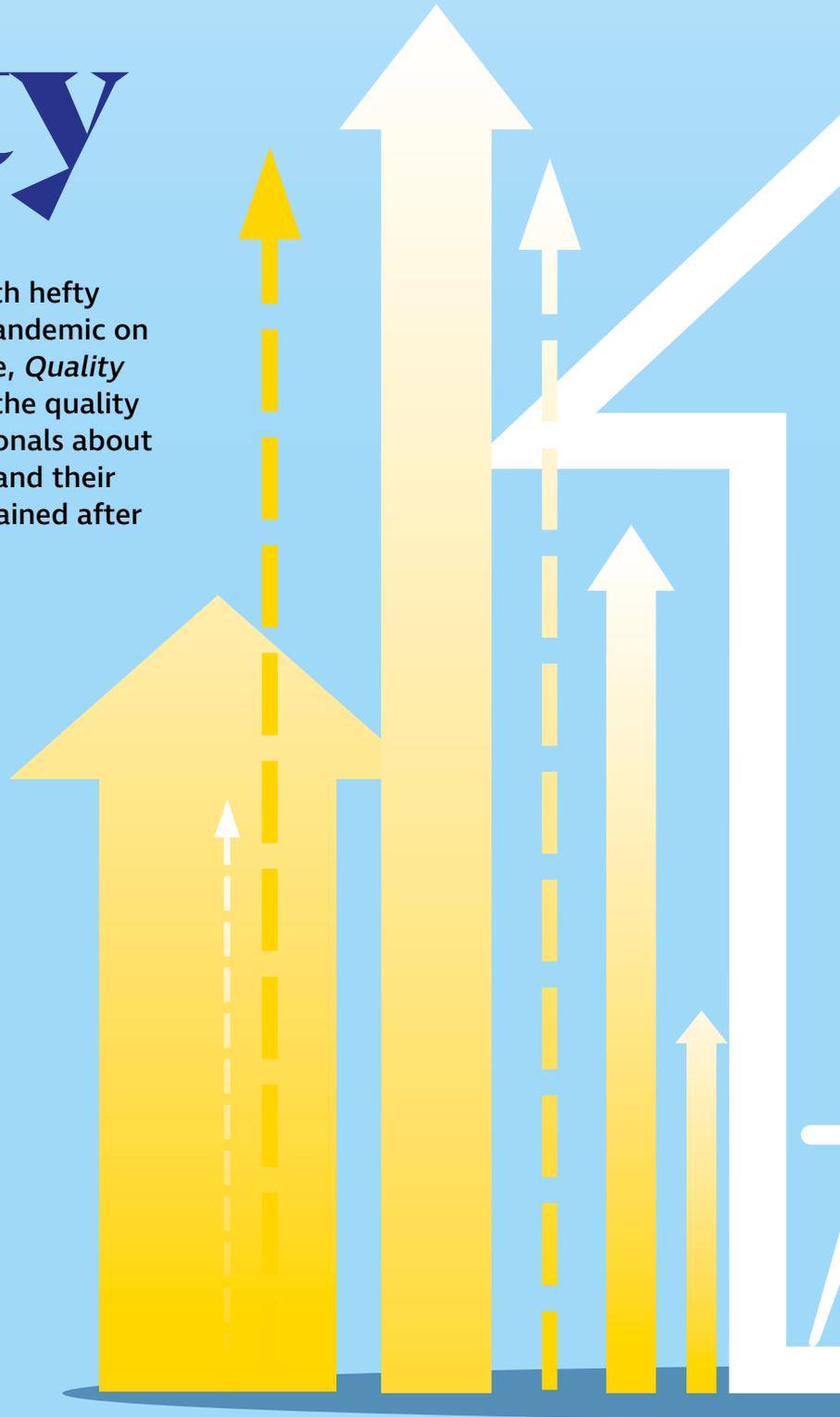
Bookshelves of the future will be filled with hefty tomes about the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on countries around the world. In this feature, *Quality World* investigates what has changed for the quality sector by talking to some quality professionals about what the new normal looks like for them and their businesses, and what insights they have gained after a year of immense change

Words: Rachel Ifans

Undeniably, the coronavirus pandemic has had huge, negative effects on communities and industries, including travel, retail and hospitality, as well as impacting individuals around the world. But if we're looking for some positives in these torrid times, we can turn our gaze to the ways we work and the changes this virus has forced on some organisations – changes that could provide widespread benefits in the long run.

The pandemic has provided a catalyst for changes that were happening gradually already, namely the digitalisation of the global workforce. Indeed, the CQI's *Future of Work (FoW)* report (bit.ly/3oOBKjV) – which was published before the coronavirus outbreak took hold in the UK – seems particularly perspicacious now, given what has happened since then.

For instance, the *FoW* report quotes a Deloitte survey of companies in Switzerland, entitled *Workplace Transformation in the Digital Age*, which found that 42 per cent did not provide hardware for their employees to access their ▶





systems remotely, and 25 per cent of employees had no mobile access at all to the company's network. These companies will presumably have had to speed up investment in updating their technology for remote working to survive and continue operating during the pandemic.

Given that digitalisation was on the cards anyway – and is here to stay – cutting costs on investment in technology last year would have been a false economy. Further findings from the *FoW* report were that technology and marketing company IDG Research estimated that technical debt was costing companies in the US and EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa) around 40 per cent of their development time, at the time of writing.

As the *FoW* report clearly shows, change was definitely on the horizon, but it was looking like evolution, not revolution – until, that is, Covid-19 came along, and its effects accelerated change at a rate that no one could have predicted.

In this article, *Quality World* looks at the changes organisations have made or are introducing into their workplaces as a result of the pandemic, and how some of these new practices have changed the ways in which companies, their quality teams and workplaces will operate in the long term.

A year of change

When the national lockdown hit in March last year, it quickly became clear that its effects on organisations would span across a broad spectrum. We spoke to Sally Swingewood, a Committee Manager for ISO, who led the development of ISO/PAS 45005:2020 – Occupational health and safety management – General guidelines for safe working during the COVID-19 pandemic, about what she saw in those early days.

She says: "Many of us were in the privileged position where if we had a computer, it didn't matter where we were; we were still able to work." But that wasn't the case for many others, such as tattooists, pub owners or manufacturers. It was the people on construction sites, in factories and laboratories – those who use specialised equipment for their jobs – who felt the full force of Covid-19.

Swingewood explains: "Whenever we did an online event, the questions we got shown were that people were struggling, not just in hospitality, but also in retail and lots of small businesses. They wanted advice on how they could keep going safely and make some money."

Business as usual

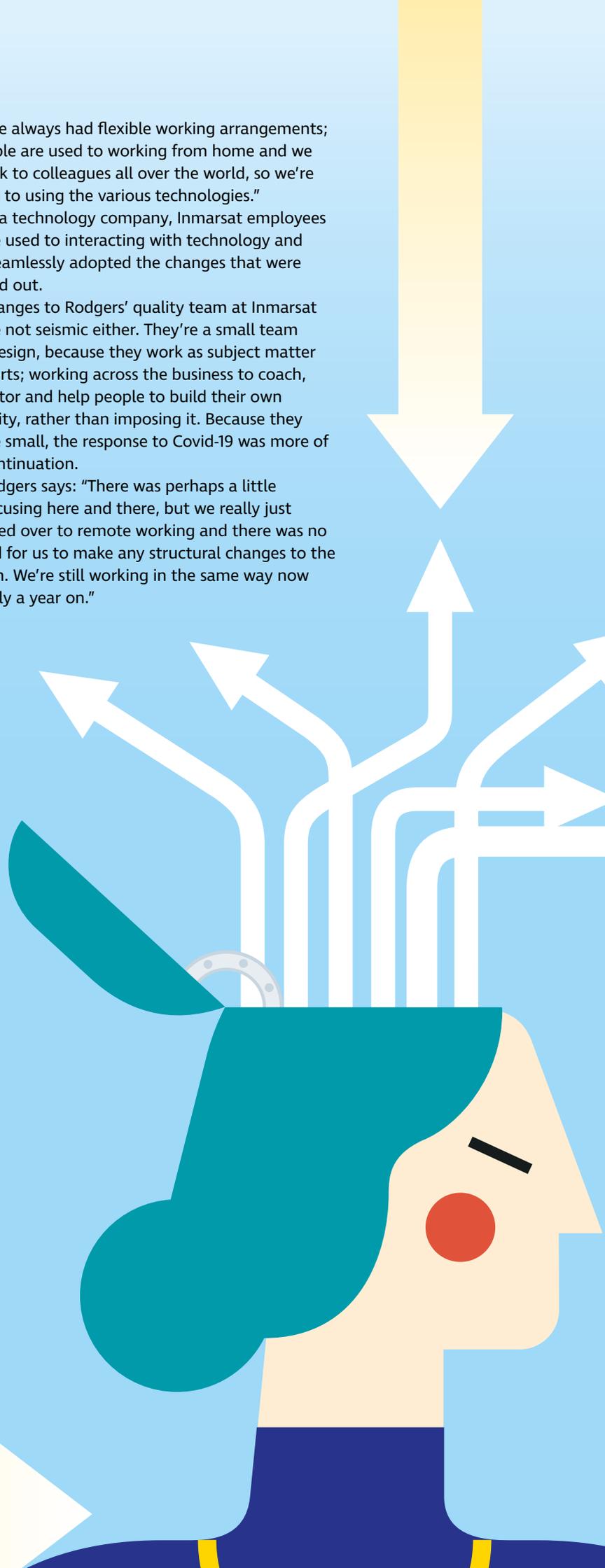
At the other end of the scale were companies such as Inmarsat, a global mobile satellite communication company. Martin Rodgers, Director of Quality Management at Inmarsat, says they did not miss a beat with the changes. Rodgers says: "We're a global organisation and, as such,

we've always had flexible working arrangements; people are used to working from home and we speak to colleagues all over the world, so we're used to using the various technologies."

As a technology company, Inmarsat employees were used to interacting with technology and so seamlessly adopted the changes that were rolled out.

Changes to Rodgers' quality team at Inmarsat were not seismic either. They're a small team by design, because they work as subject matter experts; working across the business to coach, mentor and help people to build their own quality, rather than imposing it. Because they were small, the response to Covid-19 was more of a continuation.

Rodgers says: "There was perhaps a little refocusing here and there, but we really just moved over to remote working and there was no need for us to make any structural changes to the team. We're still working in the same way now nearly a year on."



An agile mindset

This is in contrast to IMI Truflo Marine, a company that makes valves, actuators and pressure-reducing stations for nuclear and naval marine use.

Nora Asselah, CQP MCQI, Senior Quality Assurance Engineer at IMI Truflo Marine, talked to *Quality World* about why the company needed to increase its numbers of quality professionals. Indeed, IMI Truflo Marine has been in a purple patch during the pandemic, growing a remarkable 30 per cent during 2020, and is looking to keep growing even as uncertainty continues to hang over global markets.

With this buoyancy came a time pressure that has ultimately brought about an holistic change in mindset at the company – an agile way of working that will continue once the pandemic is over.

Asselah explains: “As a key supplier into UK defence, we’re lucky our orderbook has been maintained and our sub-contracting work has not been reduced. But it did mean that we had no option but to find innovative ways to maintain normal business practices such as third-party and supplier witness inspection. The critical importance of continuity of supply had never been greater.”

“Companies had to be more agile in the way they dealt with suppliers and their supply chains, by upping their game on communication and really start working together”

Swingewood agrees, and adds: “I think companies had to be more agile in the way they dealt with suppliers and their supply chains, by upping their game on communication and really start working together.”

Enhancing agility

Swingewood has seen organisations completely rethink their pre-pandemic working practices: “To ensure they could deliver their services in the way they’d always promised they would, they altered processes; things such as creating a central pool with more cooperation between suppliers, and centralising and decentralising provision of resources as appropriate to make the organisation more agile,” she says, adding: “It’s been about being less rigid, but also more organised.”

Asselah describes how the quality team at IMI Truflo Marine had to evolve their customer release

inspection process: “From a ‘normal’ approach of on-site physical testing, we were able to work with our customers to adopt remote approvals, relying on digitally transmitted documentation and recorded live videos of product validation testing. The focus at all times was to reduce travel and unnecessary exposure of the Truflo Marine staff to external infection risks, while ensuring the quality of the product was never compromised. This approach is developing all the time.”

Areas of concern

It is interesting to look back to the start of the pandemic and examine what the red flags were to quality teams in organisations, and to consider whether those were the right flags to raise, knowing what we know now. Rodgers talks about how, in the initial phases of lockdown, he thought it would last a month or two before returning to business as usual. As such, the immediate red flag for him was to make sure that they continued as normal.

He reflects: “We have a quality strategy, and we have tactics and an approach that we use. We knew those things were working for us, so it was about making sure that we continued to do them and didn’t make any kneejerk responses or rash decisions. We look back now, almost a year later, and I think that was absolutely the right call.”

For IMI Truflo Marine, risk areas centred on the supply chain and the importance of ongoing communication was immediately obvious. “We worked to further increase ‘touch points’ to ensure we were aware of any disruptions or concerns within the whole supply chain so that we could react accordingly,” says Asselah.

A quadrant approach

In order to understand how companies have maintained quality standards through the pandemic, and how they will take this forward in the future, we need to understand how they measure quality.

Inmarsat is a good example. Rodgers explains that the business uses three frameworks: the CQI Competency Framework, PDCA (plan, do, check and act) methodology and their own internal quality management system, which they call QMS 24. “The CQI Competency Framework is the strategic framework, PDCA is the tactical framework, and QMS 24 is our operational framework. If you think of a Venn diagram, each one of those frameworks is a circle and they all interact and overlap with each other to a greater or lesser extent.”

When Rodgers looks at what quality processes they have enhanced during 2020, audits take centre stage. He expands: “We introduced, just prior to lockdown, what we’ve called Efficiency and Effectiveness Audits, and ramped ▶

it up during lockdown. Our simple definition of effectiveness is how well and how consistently we are hitting our targets, metrics and KPIs. And our definition of efficiency is how well we're doing that, how organised we are and how smooth."

The way that Rodgers delivered the results of these audits became key in lockdown; with employees remote working, it had to be something that worked on screen. He says: "We report this back in a simple quadrant approach. There's a chart with four boxes, and across the bottom we've got low efficiency to high efficiency and on the other axis we've got low effectiveness to high effectiveness. I felt it was important that we show information in a visual way that's easily understood, and it's worked well, so it's definitely something we'll take forward. I think, without Covid, I wouldn't have invested the time thinking about how to boil the findings down to the purest form and show it in this quadrant."

Flexible processes

IMI Truflo Marine has also managed to maintain a continuous improvement mindset throughout the pandemic. The quality requirements in its industry are often complex and, according to Asselah, issues with documentation account for over half of supplier-related concerns and can cause significant disruption to deliveries. Before the pandemic, the quality audit team developed a comprehensive training programme to strengthen the understanding and compliance of quality requirements within their supply chain.

She explains: "The Supplier Quality Assurance Programme (SQAP) uses classroom teaching, real-time hands-on workshops, manuals and checklists to ensure that requirements are clear and fully understood, and its implementation resulted in a significant improvement on certification RFT [right first time]."

However, the process had to be adapted due to the restrictions on in-person contact. "The quality assurance team was able to rapidly adapt the training programme into a virtual event and has managed to continue the ongoing improvements and positive improvement trend, despite not being able to conduct the training on-site with the suppliers," Asselah adds.

SQAP is not the only way in which IMI Truflo Marine is pushing its continuous quality improvement mindset. It has also introduced company advanced product quality planning implementation across new projects, and production part approval process implementation through the supply chain on critical products. In addition to this, the company continues to push towards zero defects. One of its future strategic objectives is a full visual factory and real-time data analysis. This will provide accurate and timely feedback on performance, overall

equipment effectiveness, inspection results, non-conformities and manufacturing efficiencies, which will let them identify areas of concern and proactively predict issues in the facility.

Asselah elaborates: "We developed several new flexible processes to adapt to the new normal and, as they're now part of our management system, we'll maintain and develop them further. The remote quality surveillance is a significant step forward and customers are already suggesting this should remain post-pandemic." She continues: "It's especially relevant to overseas customers who spend thousands sending their representatives around the world for witness inspections. As a happy by-product, less travel also has a positive impact on our environment."

Asselah adds: "The objective today is not be static in our approach, but to be able to cover all challenging eventualities. These new tools are proving to be invaluable as we move forward."

Swingewood has also picked up on permanent changes in the auditing world: "There's no way it will go back to what it was before; rather, I think it'll be a really good combination of remote audit and in-person audit." She reflects: "There are bound to be wrinkles and some failings in remote audit, while we all learn how to do it better and identify where the risks are, but I think a lot of good will come out of it and it will help to improve working practices in many places."

Lessons learned

What have organisations learned in the past year? For Rodgers, it is clear: it is all about simplification. Keep things as simple as you possibly can. For IMI Truflo Marine, it has been about flexibility and evolution; the lessons learned will undoubtedly shape the company in the future. Asselah says boldly: "The old Truflo Marine is gone; but a forward-thinking, boundary-pushing Truflo Marine has emerged to stay. The mantra for the quality team will now be adaptability, flexibility, fluidity and sustainability, and all this whilst maintaining quality standards at all times."

Swingewood concurs: "It became clear early on how many organisations didn't have business continuity plans. They didn't have the plans in place for resilience and agility, but they will have next time. The sensible people won't go back to working the way they worked before, because

"The mantra for the quality team will now be adaptability, flexibility, fluidity and sustainability, and all this whilst maintaining quality standards at all times"



they'll have seen how instantly it can all go under."

It seems that knowledge-sharing will be an additional focus for the future. People are integral to organisations and sometimes that is forgotten in quality teams. You need to look after your people and their knowledge – and remember to share it.

For Swingewood, there has been a real, standout learning from all this: "From an ISO point of view, it's been so beneficial having a global community. We've learnt so much from having colleagues in other countries. Everywhere has managed the pandemic slightly differently and those countries with more recent experience of managing epidemics, such as SARS or Ebola, have been able to share practices they know to work. Having a broad international community and getting a global perspective really helped."

People power

What about the people? Rodgers reverts to his quality quadrants: "We've been able to identify those areas where we're being highly effective, but it's really hard work for our people to deliver. Thinking about our high-performance culture and the wellbeing of our people, that is not a sustainable position. Everybody has to work hard,

and we expect to work hard, but we don't expect people to be having to work ridiculously hard to achieve things."

The mental health and wellbeing of staff has been a prime focus for many companies in the past year, and some organisations have seen unlikely benefits from the situation.

Asselah says: "Covid-19 has been a unique opportunity to bring people together and develop new ways of working that have been positively received and embraced. Paradoxically, although the pandemic is causing isolation and restrictions in physical face-to-face interactions, it has emphasised the need for community and it has really developed the team spirit in our workplace."

She continues: "Nowadays, working means partnerships between departments and employees. As people aren't on site, they've been more proactive and quicker in their response time. It's this positive spirit that we are going to nurture and embed into our quality culture."

While we are not out of the woods yet, it seems that, for now we're looking to a hybrid future. Working life will not go back to the way things were, but that some of the good things and positive learning that have come out of the pandemic will not be discarded.

Many organisations seem set on less office space, but they acknowledge that there's still a place for it and a time when it is valuable. Others will be asking if their technology is fit for purpose and making huge investments in better systems.

Will trust reign over the ugly presenteeism of the past? Certainly, the enhanced hygiene of having fewer people on-site will be attractive to many organisations, and they may well start to see fewer sick days and mental health issues.

"There's no way we've had the same rates of sickness for coughs, colds and stomach upsets and there's a financial benefit to that," Swingewood asserts. "There's a large productivity benefit and a continuity benefit too; you can depend on your people much better if you're not constantly exchanging bacteria and viruses that cause infectious diseases."

The pandemic has brought home to all of us just how interconnected and how interdependent we are. We know now that we need to have something built into the system, in terms of quality management, in case of any future disruptions. Furthermore, people need agility and to have a plan in place, so that if something this severe happens again, there is a way they can continue to carry out their work. ■

To find out more about how digital tech is transforming the ways in which businesses are operating, go to: quality.org/future-of-work

