



Motor for Modernisation

By Fernando Lamas de Oliveira, CEO of SQS Portugal, Lda.

Portugal experienced an extraordinary economic boom in the period 1996 to 2001 with growth rates much higher than the EU average. So the current crisis is even more sobering. Eurobarometer's research, for instance, shows that 64% of Portuguese expect an economic downturn this year - making them the most pessimistic nation in the Union.

According to the latest OECD report on Portugal, Portuguese industry could itself do a lot to bring about sustainable improvement. The report points out that "technological diffusion" should be increased and states that "Successful innovation often requires the creation of new firms."

One such new firm is SQS Portugal, which is committed to introducing new technologies. The Lisbon office has been offering software quality assurance on the market since February 2002, making it a pioneering force in the region between Porto and the Algarve. What makes its products and services important is not that they help make Portuguese IT producers shining examples of good quality, but that they help structure software development and testing in a way that makes it efficient, more productive and thus internationally competitive. To put it in a nutshell, the point is to reform numerous work processes.

Portugal has proven a good venue for these types of reform. The country's economic development since joining the EU demonstrates that it introduces new company and work models quickly and easily. SQS Portugal's experiences in its first year of business show that, at many of the country's companies, willingness to innovate extends to IT processes too. The SQS consultants' main activity has been process assessment. The companies wanted an assessment to see how their IT ranked. They wanted to know which parts of their software development were already in line with best practices and where there was still room for improvement. For example, SQS conducted an assessment for Rede Eléctrica Nacional (REN), the wholesale energy distributor in Portugal. REN can now use the findings to determine its position in the competition between energy groups on the European market - competition which is increasingly spreading to Portugal.

But knowledge alone does not equate to action. And in quality assurance, action means testing - systematic testing. If the software test is structured and runs automatically, results can quickly be achieved. Development costs fall whilst system quality rises. The added quality prevents expensive software bugs which would otherwise have cropped up during operation and which usually cause considerable damage to image too.

These challenges are the same for Portuguese companies as they are for companies elsewhere in Europe. In Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands too, IT projects get out of hand in terms of time and money and many even fail completely. But in those countries various companies have already realised that it makes more economic sense to see quality assurance as a task in its own right and to give it the proper funding.

In Portugal, however, software testing is usually still just an additional programming task. So systematic quality assurance can still achieve a great deal and act as a motor for the modernisation of the economy. SQS is positioned to be a part of this process, a process which is inevitable in Portugal's current evolution.