

ACCREDITED CERTIFICATION OF MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AS A FACTOR OF COMPETITIVENESS FOR ITALIAN EXPORTERS

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The progressive globalization of commerce, the increasing complexity of goods and services and the established existence of production processes organized according to global value chains have led to the need for increased coordination and cooperation capacities, also amongst independent enterprises (ICE, 2019). This, in turn, has favoured the adoption of technical and organizational standards on a shared, international level, both to ensure product and process compatibility in chains of production of businesses and purchasers of worldwide dimensions, and also to ensure the characteristics of goods and services for the market.

Standards transmit information, they enhance interoperability between products and processes, they guarantee a minimum level of quality and safety and they respond to the growing importance given by businesses to their environmental and social impact, and by signaling their commitment in these areas to the market they also improve the public image of those who adopt them.

The effectiveness of these standards in carrying out their economic and social role requires tools which can ensure the compliance of products and services with the specific qualities envisaged. The real capacity of standards to engender trust in the markets is backed up by conformity assessments (certifications, inspections, laboratory tests, and calibration tests conducted on measuring instruments) issued by laboratories and bodies whose impartiality, independence and technical competence must be both recognized and indisputable. The accreditation of conformity assessment bodies and testing laboratories ensures these qualities, making certifications and laboratory tests credible instruments both nationally and internationally.

Under the provisions of Regulation 765/2008, every EU Member State nominates its own body to provide accreditation of conformity assessment bodies. In Italy, this Regulation is implemented by the Law 99/2009, laying down "provisions for the development and internationalization of business enterprises, also regarding energy", and by two inter-ministerial decrees of December 22, 2009 whereby ACCREDIA is nominated the sole national accreditation body.

The Regulation provides for a rigorously uniform approach among all Member States. The advantage of the European system of accreditation is the obligatory recognition of an issued certificate on the part of all Member States on the basis of the agreements of mutual recognition signed by the national accreditation body¹.

On the basis of an agreement between ACCREDIA and ISTAT - Italian National Institute of Statistics signed in November 2018, initial information concerning the level of diffusion of management system certifications amongst exporters, issued by conformity assessment bodies under ACCREDIA accreditation, has been made available. These management systems involve multiple aspects of business activities, of the quality of processes, environmental impact, occupational health and safety and information security; they can also constitute a tool for monitoring the correctness of every phase of the chain of values of the business in question. In general terms, all the management systems describe the procedures that a business must follow to ensure continuous quality of services and products. This way the clients are aware of its technical competence and capacity to produce goods and services which match expected characteristics.

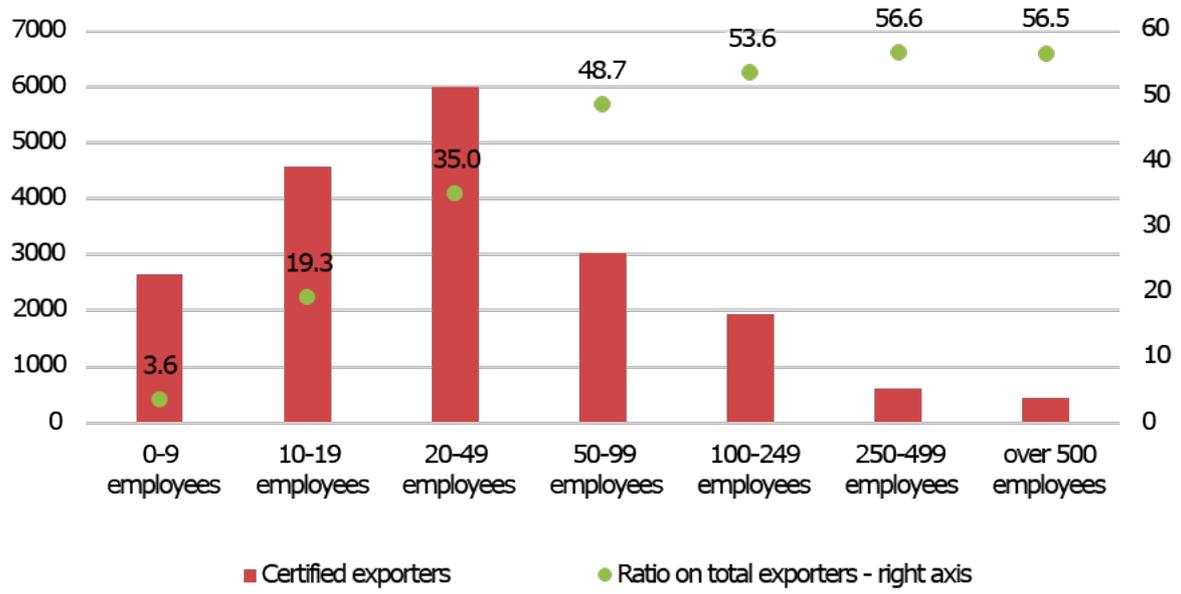
In 2017, export businesses in possession of accredited management system certification numbered 19,235, or 15.3% of the total number, with a corresponding export value of €224.3 billion (53.5% of the total value) and employing a little fewer than 2 million workers (48.8%).

Despite the fact that a large majority of certified exporters are small and medium enterprises, certification is more frequently sought by big businesses (about 56.5% of exporters with a staff of at least 500), and, in particular, those with greater export activities (certified companies with at least 500 staff account for over 70% of exports of the business size class). Small businesses with a small structure are generally less aware of the benefits of accredited certification, as well as being less involved in the global value chains (Figure 1).

Nevertheless, in the processes of internationalization it is more the small and medium enterprises which would benefit from accredited certification, avoiding unnecessary conformity assessment procedures which vary considerably from country to country, often constituting a technical barrier to larger scale commerce.

¹ In order to ensure the quality equivalence of accredited bodies to issue conformity assessments carried out in different countries, there is a rigorous system of peer evaluation organized by EA (European co-operation for Accreditation), with EU recognition, in accordance with Regulation 765/2008 which provides the European accreditation infrastructure. Successful completion of a peer assessment bestows signatory status of the international agreements of mutual recognition (EA - MLA). These agreements ensure the competence, procedural rigour and uniformity of operative approach of all EA member national accreditation bodies. Under the agreements, certifications, test reports and calibration certificates issued by laboratories and bodies which have been accredited by accreditation bodies, signatory to the EA MLA agreements, are valid within the single market. The application of harmonized standards on an EU level aims to create the necessary level of transparency and to ensure that the European system of accreditation is compatible with the international system of accreditation by means of the global agreements of mutual recognition (IAF - MLA, ILAC - MRA).

Figure 1 – Number of certified exporters - 2017 (left scale: absolute values; right scale: percentage values)

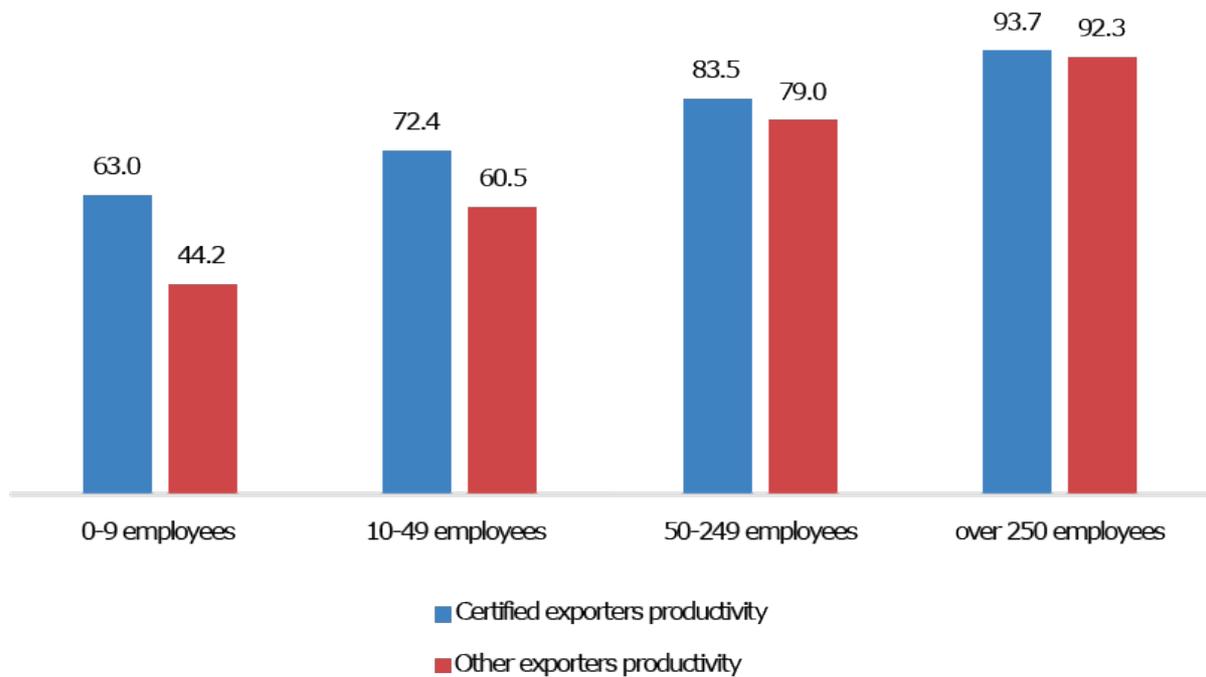


Source: ISTAT and ACCREDIA data.

ISO 9000 certification is more common in the manufacturing sector (13,900 out of 19,000 analyzed certified exporters) in which quality and safety during the various production phases are of greater significance. This area permits greater possibilities for the specification of technical requirements and offers a more fragmented approach to the production phases. With regard to the sector, accredited certification of a management system is more widespread in the metallurgy business, in the production of machinery and equipment, and in the manufacture of rubber and plastic goods.

Certified exporters in the manufacturing area are more productive than non-certified ones, irrespective of their size (Figure 2), and the difference actually increases in the case of smaller producers.

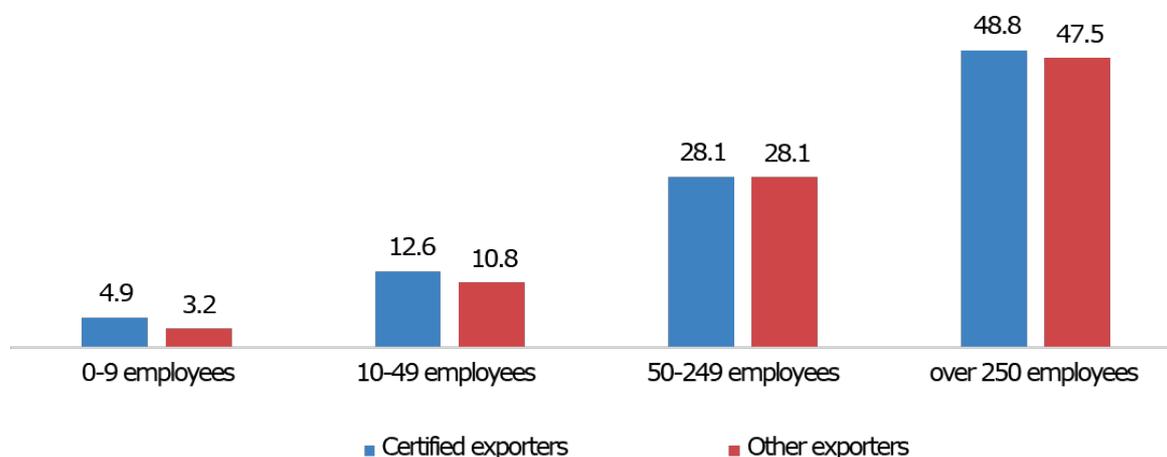
Figure 2 – Productivity differentials between manufacturing exporters and non-exporters by numbers of employees – 2017 (Value added per worker; in thousands of euro)



Source: ISTAT and ACCREDIA data.

Also with regard to geographical diversification of markets of manufacturing exporters, those which are certified have an advantage over non-certified ones which increases as the size of the enterprises becomes smaller, confirming that certification is a useful tool for competitiveness, especially for small and medium enterprises, in the global value chains (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Average number of destination countries of sales of manufacturing exporters per quantity of workers – 2017



Source: ISTAT and ACCREDIA data.

To conclude, certified management systems of accredited businesses facilitate relations between supplier and buyer, standardizing communications and organizational practices, and they constitute an important competitive factor, especially for organizations which need to operate in international markets in which the cultural and economic contexts may be very distant from those of the country of origin.

The document "Accredited certification of management systems as a factor of competitiveness for Italian exporters" is a focus realized by ACCREDIA and ISTAT within the ISTAT Report on competitiveness of production sectors - Edition 2020, which demonstrates through data that management systems subjected to the certification of accredited companies facilitate the exchange between supplier and buyer, standardizing language and organizational practices, and represent an important competitive factor, especially for organizations that have to deal with international markets where cultural and economic contexts can be very distant from those of origin.
