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EUROPEAN
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QUALITY



TURKISH
NATIONAL
COMMITTEE

Quality:
The Bridge
to Global
Competition

PROCEEDINGS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A1 ISO 9000:20001
ISO 9000:2000 – MORE THAN JUST A STANDARD!	
"AN INTEGRATED PROCESS LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR THE 21 st CENTURY"1
ISO 9000:2000 - OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM5
"MANAGEMENT QUALITY TO ACHIEVE COMPANY QUALITY MADE EASIER BY ISO 9000:2000"- HOW TO IMPROVE THE MARKET SITUATION OF A COMPANY? THE 2 nd REVISION OF ISO 9000 IS AN IDEAL BASIC DOCUMENT.9
B1 IT AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY19
A PRACTITIONER'S APPROACH TO SOFTWARE EVALUATION AND CERTIFICATION19
METRICS FOR DATABASE MODELS29
HOW TO INSTITUTIONALIZE CMM IN A SOFTWARE ORGANIZATION: A CMM COMPASS36
C1 LEARNING ORGANIZATION44
SUPPORTING THE WAY TO EXCELLENCE44
LINKING LEARNING AND QUALITY WITH GLOBAL SUCCESS: FACTS, FICTION AND THE FUTURE53
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODELS AND APPLICATIONS IN ARÇELİK A.Ş. (MANAGEMENT TOWARDS THE VISION)62
D1 QUALITY IN HEALTH SECTOR64
USING BUSINESS CONTEXTS TO BUILD A TRIPLE-LOOP HEALTHCARE PROCESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM64
PERFORMANCE EVALUATION PROGRAMME70
TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HEALTH SECTOR76
A2 QUALITY AWARD WINNER'S IMPLEMENTATION78

AWARD WINNING QUALITY MANAGEMENT AT ARÇELİK	78
JOURNEY TO EXCELLENCE IN VİTRA	81
INTEGRATION OF THE ASSESSMENTS IN BRISA	93
B2 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND 6 SIGMA	95
INTEGRATING THE QUALITY MANAGEMENT FUNCTION BY USING THE BALANCED SCORE CARD MODEL	95
SIX SIGMA: THE WESTERN STRATEGY TO WORLD CLASS QUALITY	108
EXECUTIVE PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE: SIX SIGMA CUSTOMER DASHBOARD DEVELOPMENT	111
C2 COMPETITIVENESS OF SME'S	127
ISO 9000 – GOAL OR MEANS?- EXPERIENCES FROM IMPLEMENTING QUALITY SYSTEMS IN SWEDISH SMALL ORGANISATIONS	127
IMPROVEMENT OF THE ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT IN THE ECONOMICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD	138
AN INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ROUTE MAP FOR SME'S	141
D2 QUALITY IN EDUCATION	151
A TQM AND ABET BASED QUALITY MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY	151
APPLYING TQM FOR IMPROVED QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION	161
UNIVERSITIES IN TERMS OF QUALITY PARADIGM	166
A3 ISO 9000 IMPLEMENTATION	181
A METHODOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION TRAINING BASKENT UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE	181
THE PROCESS APPROACH AND THE ISO 9000:2000 QUALITY SYSTEM.	187
QUALITY IN POST-SALES CUSTOMER SERVICES	194
B3 QUALITY PERSONNEL REGISTRATION AND CERTIFICATION	209
TURKISH STANDARDS INSTITUTE PERSONNEL CERTIFICATION ACTIVITIES	209
C3 EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY TOOLS	213

INCLUSIVE CONCEPTUAL DESIGN METHOD - ICDM FOR BETTER CUSTOMER DRIVEN CONCEPTS OF NEW PRODUCTS	213
HOW TO INCREASE THE CHANCES TO WIN THE COMPETITION OF A DEVELOPMENT PROJECT USING CVM	225
WORLD CLASS MANUFACTURING JOURNEY OF TETRA PAK TURKEY	233
RESULTS FROM SECTORAL BENCHMARKING STUDIES: QUALITY ISSUES IN THE TURKISH MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES	243
D3 QUALITY IN FOOD SECTOR	250
APPLIED RISK ASSESSMENT METHODS IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY	250
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION & PRODUCT MANAGEMENT PROCESS	257
E3 6 SIGMA	258
QFD AND DESIGN FOR SIX SIGMA: CUSTOMER DRIVEN DFSS	258
APPLYING SIX SIGMA IN A PUBLIC SERVICE ORGANISATION	265
SIX SIGMA QUALITY METRIC VS. TAGUCHI LOSS FUNCTION	276
A4 TQM TOOLS & TECHNIQUES	286
TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT (TQM)	286
THE FINANCIAL PAY-OFF FROM TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT (TQM)	296
STRATEGIES AND PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN INDUSTRIAL CONCERNS	302
B4 BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT	304
A COMPREHENSIVE PROCESS APPROACH FOR BUSINESS EXCELLENCE A CASE STUDY: SONERA CORPORATION	304
BUSINESS PROCESS IMPROVEMENT: DEVELOPMENT OF AN "QUALITY-CHARACTERISTICS-LIBRARY" AS A CONTROLLING INSTRUMENT FOR BUSINESS PROCESSES	313
"BUILDING AN INTRANET BASED BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM"	324
C4 BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AND QUALITY AWARDS	332

MATURITY OF ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESS EXCELLENCE -	
THE FOUR-PHASE MODEL	332
USING SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT: EXPERIENCE OF THE	
BEST UKRAINIAN COMPANIES	345
DEVELOPED MODEL FOR ASSESSMENT OF BUSINESS EXCELLENCE OF	
MANUFACTURING SYSTEMS	351
D4 QUALITY IN CONSTRUCTION SECTOR	358
QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS. SPANISH AND	
DANISH SYSTEMS	358
IMPROVEMENT INTEGRATED PROGRAM (PIM) IN CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES	371
PERFORMANCE QUALITY OF LAID CERAMIC TILES	389
E4 PUBLIC SECTOR IMPLEMENTATION	397
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC ENTERPRISES - THE WAY TOWARDS A	
FUTURE ORIENTED QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM	397
QUALITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	400
QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IN A	
PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATION	406
APPLICATIONS OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT AND ISO 9000 IN MINISTRY	
OF INDUSTRY AND TRADE	413
A5 QUALITY: COMPETITION AND COOPERATION	428
EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION - INDISPENSABLE FACTOR FOR CUSTOMER	
SATISFACTION	428
PROPOSAL OF "KG-ACCOUNTING" FOR COOPERATION IN CONTRAST WITH	
"DOLLAR-ACCOUNTING" FOR COMPETITION	434
FROM CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT TO CONTINUOUS INNOVATION*	441
B5 TQM TOOLS & TECHNIQUES	451
INNOVATION BY QUALITY - MY EXPERIENCES WITH HEWLETT-PACKARD	451

THE BARRIERS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF TQM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES	454
DEFECT BUDGETTING AND QUALITY COSTING	467
C5 DIVERSITY AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT	480
NEW LEADERSHIP VISION IN THE 21 st CENTURY	480
FACTORS RESTRICTING CREATIVE THINKING	496
THE EMERGING SCIENCE OF QUALITY - NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE	
UNITED STATES DURING THE PAST THIRTY YEARS	497
D5 QUALITY IN SERVICE SECTOR	518
SIX SIGMA CREATES SUCCESS IN THE SERVICE SECTOR	518
COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE	522
A CONTRIBUTION TO BUSINESS AND QUALITY SERVICES IMPROVEMENT IN	
THE NURSERY-HOME FOR CHILDREN BASED ON ISO 9001:2000	528
E5 QUALITY IN EDUCATION	535
QUALITY EDUCATION: PREPARATION FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE	535
QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING	541
THE FUNDAMENTAL COMPETITIVE STRATEGY IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY: QUALITY	
A STUDY ON FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY	545
A6 HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	554
THE KEY-STONE OF THE QUALITY ARCH: HUMAN RESOURCES	
TOOLS AT PRAXAIR ARGENTINA	554
CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN	559
ROLE OF QUALITY PROFESSIONALS IN GLOBAL COMPETITION	565
STAND-BY PAPER - INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	
MANAGEMENT IN OLTCHIM	574
B6 PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY	579
SYSTEMATIZING QUALITY CONTROL OF PROCESSES AND THEIR RESULTS	
BY STANDARDIZED DISTRIBUTION TIME MODELS	579

CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF DESIGN TROUBLES BASED ON THE KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURE OF FAILURE MECHANISMS	586
TPM at ARÇELİK A.Ş.	599
TECHNOLOGY IN CERAMIC TILE PRODUCTION AND INFLUENCE OF NATURE IN USE	609
C6 PUBLIC SECTOR QUALITY APPLICATIONS	622
THE QUALITY PROJECT FOR THE ITALIAN TAX OFFICES	622
LESSONS FROM USING SELF ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES IN ROYAL MAIL (PART OF THE CONSIGNIA GROUP)	627
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND ISO 9001 IN PUBLIC SERVICE SECTOR: ISTANBUL CHAMBER OF INDUSTRY CASE	631
D6 BENEFITS OF ISO 9000 IMPLEMENTATION	639
ISO 9000 SURVEY '99: AN ANALYTICAL TOOL TO ASSESS THE COSTS, BENEFITS AND SAVINGS OF ISO 9000 REGISTRATION	639
EFFECTS OF ISO 9000 CERTIFICATION ON COMPANIES' PROFITABILITY	646
ISO 9000: A STEPPING STONE TO TOTAL QUALITY	653
E6 QUALITY IN SERVICE SECTOR	662
QUALITY IN THE INSURANCE SECTOR A COMPLETE QUALITY PROCESS (CQP)	662
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN HOTEL INDUSTRY: DO CONSUMERS' REASONS TO STAY IN INFLUENCE THE PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICES AND SATISFACTION?	684
THE QUALITY OF LIFE ENDANGERED BY THE HARD COMPETITION ON THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) MARKET	691
A7 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	697
EFFECTIVE METHODS FOR CUSTOMER MEASUREMENTS	697
HOW BENCHMARKING HELPS TO MEASURE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	703
CUSTOMER FOCUSED MANAGEMENT	709
CUSTOMER VALUES MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY IN SERVICE	712
B7 QUALITY IN AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR	718

SIX SIGMA ROADMAP AND CORE COMPETENCIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL 21 st CENTURY ORGANIZATION	718
CUSTOMER VALUE MANAGEMENT ORIENTED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	725
SUBCONTRACTOR/SUPPLIER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF OYAK RENAULT FROM THE TQM POINT OF VIEW	740
PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS DURING IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY SYSTEMS IN FAMILY OWNED COMPANIES	744
C7 ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT	747
ERDEMİR'S ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNEY	747
IMPLEMENTATION OF ISO 14001 AT DSBG-BROOMCHEMIE	758
ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION IN THE WORLD	765
CLOSING PLENARY SESSION	777
TRANSFORMING THE AMERICAN QUALITY MOVEMENT	777
THE QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE IN EMERGING MARKET ECONOMIES	780
SELECTED PAPERS	785
TOTAL QUALITY OCCUPATIONAL NOISE CONTROL: COMBAT NIHL AND PROMOTE QUALITY OF WORK LIFE (QWL)	785
ENTERPRISES OF RUSSIA AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY: IMPLEMENTATION OF MODERN MANAGERIAL MECHANISMS OF TOTAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT	803
HIERARCHICAL CROSS-FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM OF CORPORATION MANAGEMENT	809
MODERN MANAGERIAL TECHNOLOGIES IN PROCESSES OF INTERACTION AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES AND LARGE CORPORATIONS	812

AUTHOR INDEX

A.G.ANDREEV,	138
AHMAD HUSSEINI*,	765
ALFREDO SARMIENTO	371
ALPER ÖZEL, TOLGA ÖZYAPICI	233
AMIHUD HARI, CHAVA SCHER,	225
AMIHUD HARI, MENACHEM P. WEISS, AVIGDOR ZONNENSHAIN,	213
ANDERS MORTENSEN	324
ANDREY V. KRAINOV, VYACHESLAV V. GRANKIN, STANISLAV A. YARIGUIN	812
ASSIST. PROF. DR. REMZİ ALTUNIŞIK, ASSIST. PROF. DR. SERKAN BAYRAKTAROĞLU	684
ASSOC. PROF. OYA GÖKMEN M.D.	76
ASSOC. PROF. ZUHAL CAFOĞLU	166
ASSOC. PROF. DR. ÖZLEM İPEKGİL DOĞAN, HATİCE CAMGÖZ AKDAĞ	545
ASSOC. PROF. DR. SEVAL AKGÜN MD.*	70
ASSOC. PROF. DR. TÜRKER BAŞ, DR. KADİR ARDIÇ	653
BENGT KLEFSJÖ, ULRIKA GRANFORS WELLEMETS,	127
ROBERTH GUSTAFSSON, ERIC BERGGREN	497
BLANTON GODFREY	497
BORISLAVA JAKSIC, ANA GAVRILOVIC, PROF. RATKO UZUNOVIC,	528
CEM GÜNTÜRKÜN, BURAK KILANÇ	631
CHARLES A. AUBREY II	518
CSABA LENGYEL	95
DANA SZABADOS	574
DR. MIFLORA M. GATCHALIAN	565
DR. A. KEMAL TUĞCU	78

DR. DIANE B. STOY, JENNIFER S. BRYAN	53
DR. GERHARD SCHOENBACH	9
DR. IÑAKI HERAS, DR. MARTÍ CASADESÚS, DR. CARLOS OCHOA	646
DR. LARS SORQVIST	697
DR. JOHN D. HROMI	535
DR. JUR. FRIEDRICH CLEVER,	286
DR. NECMETTİN KARAKUŞ	413
DR. NEJLA ÖZASLAN	389
DR. NORIAKI KANO	434
DR. PAVEL GRABOV, DR. ZIGMUND BLUVBAND	467
DUSAN PLICHTA	718
E. FASSOULA (GREECE), J H ROGERSON (UK)	141
EGE İZGİ	209
EITAN NAVEH AND ALFIE MARCUS	639
EKİN BALKOCA YİĞİT	522
ENRICO PESCE	622
ESAT EDİN	480
FAHRİ ÖZOK	93
FARZIN ENTESSARIAN	454
FİKRET ELLİBEŞOĞLU	709
GLENN H. MAZUR	258
GREGORY H. WATSON	111
HAKAN ÖZENÇ	725
HANS-LUDWIG HAUSEN	19
HORACIO L. ROMANA	554
ING. MANFRED MERTEN	397
JAN STOLWIJK	758

JOHN E. (JACK) WEST	5
JUHANI ANTILLA	304
KENZO SASAOKA	451
LUIS ARIMANY DE PABLOS PhD	276
LYNDA FOX	1
MARCOS E. J. BERTIN	780
MARIA CRISTINA MENDONÇA	541
MARIO PEREZ-WILSON,	108
MARIO PIATTINI, CORAL CALERO, MARCELA GENERO,	29
MARTIJN HESSELINK, TON VAN DER WIELE	44
MEHMET CEMAL YILDIRIM, YILDIRIM MERKAN	747
MEHMET HIZ	559
MEHMET KEPOĞLU	609
MEHMET KOCABAŞ	496
MEHMET SAVAŞ	599
MR. JOSÉ FCO. GONZÁLEZ PRADO AND MRS. VILMA GARCÍA DE GONZÁLEZ	187
MUSTAFA ZAİM	744
NEDRET YAYLA	740
NESLIHAN YEŞİLYURT	712
NIKOLAY V. LYACHENKOV, VITALY A. VILCHIK, VALERY Y. KOKOTOV,	
PETR A. NAKHMANOVICH, YURI V. MIKHEEV, VIKTOR E. GODLEVSKY	803
ÖNDER KIRATLILAR	194
PAT TOWNSEND	662
PAUL PUAH K.Y.	64
PÉTER KESSELYÁK	691
PETRIDIS K.D., PFEIFER T., SCHEERMESSER S.	313
PROF. JOHN SHARP, DR. JAMIL HAMALI* AND KEMAL KUTUCUOĞLU	406

PROF. MICHAEL KAYE AND DR MARILYN DYASON	265
PROF. VINOD R. SINGHAL	296
PROF.DR. GÜNDÜZ ULUSOY	243
PROF. DR. MİTHAT ÇORUH MD.	181
PROF. DR. OVE HARTZ	302
PROF. DR. ÖMER PEKER	400
PROF DR RIGARD STEENKAMP	785
PROF. DR. VIDOSAV D. MAJSTROVIC, IGOR DURIC	351
PROF. DR. VIOLETA CHEPUJNOSKA, PROF. DR. GJORGİ CHEPUJNOSKI	161
ROB DURRANT	627
ROBERT E. COLE	441
ROSEMARY COOPER-CLARK	703
SELİM SARPER, ORHAN KALAYCI	36
SERGIO VÁZQUEZ JIMÉNEZ	358
STEPHEN K. HACKER	777
ŞADİ BURAT	81
ŞAHİN KÖŞKLÜ, YILMAZ TAPTİK, EKREM EKİNCİ, GÜLSÜN SAĞLAMER	151
ŞERİFE FÜSUN ÖMÜR	62
T.W. HARDJONO	332
TARAS KALYTA	345
ÜMİT SAVCIGIL	257
WALTER GEIGER,	579
YASUHIKO TAMURA, YOSHINORI LIZUKA	586
YOSHIO KONDO	428
ZOLTÁN SYPOSS PhDs, GÁBOR KOLLÁR PhD	250

commercial considerations. The selected assessment attributes strongly influence the set of necessary assessment evaluation modules. Obviously, each evaluation module must be associated with at least one attribute and conversely each attribute must be assessed by evaluation modules. The choice of evaluation modules for assessing a particular piece of software will be based on the type of available information. For example, the programming language used may restrict the number of available tools for static analysis. On the other hand, an evaluation module might not be explicitly related to any higher level quality characteristics. Its result may be used in the assessment of various characteristics. However, the definition of evaluation modules using other evaluation module results will provide some structuring elements. It may be that no complete set of evaluation modules exists that would completely assess to the required level for a particular software product. In this situation there may be a case for constructing a new evaluation module or rejecting certification of the product.

7 Conclusion

The report summarizes the ideas and views of several evaluation and certification initiatives as they appeared during the 90ies. The models and methods used for assessment and certification might need further refinement and the case studies being carried out in phase two may also indicate the need for modifications.

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METRICS FOR DATABASE MODELS

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, in a global and increasingly competitive market, quality is a critical success factor for all economical and organisational aspects, and especially in Information Systems (IS). It is important that software applications can be evaluated for every relevant quality characteristic using validated metrics. Software engineers have been putting forward huge quantities of metrics for software products, processes and resources. Unfortunately, almost all the metrics proposed are focused on programs, disregarding data-related quality. In this paper we present different metrics to analyse the quality of databases, measuring the complexity of entity relationship diagrams and relational database schemas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in a global and increasingly competitive market, quality is a critical success factor for all economical and organisational aspects, and especially in Information Systems (IS). Developing and selecting high quality software applications is fundamental. It is important that the software applications can be evaluated for every relevant quality characteristic using validated metrics.

Taking into account that databases are the core of information systems, it is clear that their quality has a significant impact on the quality of the information system which is ultimately implemented. Database quality deals with different aspects: DBMS quality, data model quality (both conceptual and logical) and data quality, see figure 1. We only refer in this work to data model quality.

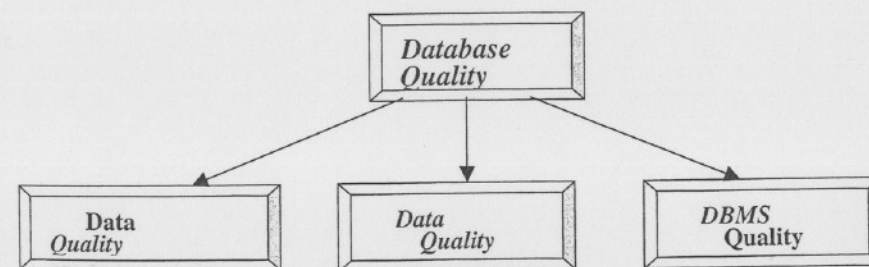


Figure 1. Different aspects of database quality.

Metrics are good mechanisms for improving the quality of a software product. A lot of metrics for software products, processes and resources can be found in the related literature (Melton, 1996; Fenton and Pfleeger, 1997). Unfortunately, almost all the metrics proposed are focused on programme, disregarding data-related quality (Sneed and Foshag, 1998). This neglect could be explained as databases have developed until recently just a secondary role with minor contribution to the quality of the overall system. Nowadays, databases are introduced in most of the important IS, becoming their essential core, so assuring the quality of databases means assuring the quality of the Information Systems.

Following the ISO/IEC 9126 quality model (ISO, 1999), several characteristics can be identified in software quality: functionality, reliability, usability, efficiency, maintainability and portability. Taking into account that maintenance arrange between 60 and 90 percent of life cycle costs (Card y Glass, 1990; Pigoski, 1997), we focus our work on maintainability. ISO/IEC 9126 distinguishes five subcharacteristics for maintainability: analysability, changeability, stability, testability and compliance (see figure 2). Analysability, changeability and testability are in turn influenced by complexity (Li y Cheng, 1987). However, a general complexity measure is "the impossible holy grail" (Fenton, 1994). Henderson-Sellers (1996) distinguishes three types of complexity: computational, psychological and representational, and for psychological complexity he considers three components: problem complexity, human cognitive factors and product complexity. The last one is our focus.

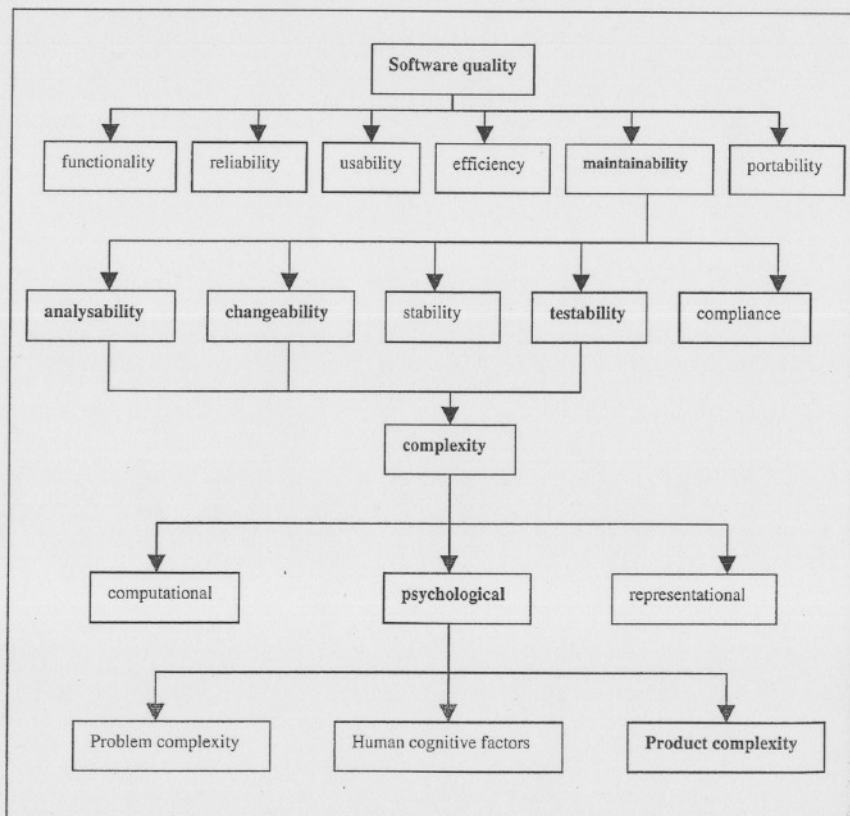


Figure 2. Relation between products complexity metrics and software quality

So, the metrics we define are for measure internal attributes of data model, which can characterised their complexity which can help to assess its maintainability (the external attribute).

As we have said previously, we cover both conceptual and logical data model quality. The conceptual data model specifies the requirements about the database and is the first product within the database life cycle. Moreover conceptual data models determine what information can be represented by an information system (Feng, 1999). So that, it is really important to build them as "good" as possible because the cost of correcting a mistake introduced in the first stages of software development grows up exponentially when the project advances.

We will focus on entity relationship (ER) diagrams (Chen 1976; Teorey, 1999) because in today's database design world it is still the dominant method of conceptual modelling (Muller, 1999).

The logical model organizes the entities and relationships identified in the previous step, in several tables. We will focus on the relational model because relational DBMSs are the most used today, so if we have some metrics for assuring relational databases quality, we will be able to control the quality of a high percentage of the current IS.

The metrics we have proposed for E/R diagrams and for relational databases will be presented in the next section.

2. PROPOSED METRICS

2.1. Metrics for conceptual modelling

Here we present the definition of Genero et al. (2000a)'s metrics for measuring ER diagrams structural complexity. These metrics can be classified into the following categories: Entity metrics, Attribute metrics and Relationship metrics.

Entity metrics

NE METRIC. Is the total the number of entities within the ER diagrams.

Attribute metrics

NA METRIC. Is the total number of attributes that exist within the ER diagrams, taking into account both entity and relationship attributes. In this number we include simple attributes, composite attributes and also multivalued attributes, each of which take the value 1.

DA METRIC. An ER diagrams is minimal when every aspect of the requirements appears once in the diagram, i.e. an ER diagrams is minimal if it does not have any redundancies. One of the sources of redundancies in the ER diagrams is the existence of derived attributes. An attribute is derived when its value can be calculated or deduced from the values of other attributes. The Derived Attributes metric is the number of derived attributes existing in the ER diagrams.

CA METRIC. Is the total number of composite attributes within an ER diagrams.

MVA METRIC. Is total number of multivalued attributes within the ER diagrams.

Relationship metrics

NR METRIC. Is the total number of relationships within the ER diagrams, taking into account only common relationships.

M:NR METRIC. Is the total number of M:N relationships within the ER diagrams.

1:NR METRIC. Is the total number of 1:N relationships (including also 1:1 relationships) within the ER diagrams.

N-ARYR METRIC. Is the total number of N-ary relationships (not binary) within the ER diagrams.

BINARYR METRIC. Is the total number of binary relationships within the ER diagrams.

NIS_AR METRIC. Is the total number of relationships IS_A (generalisation/ specialisation) that exist within the ER diagrams. In this case, we consider one relationship for each child-parent pair within the IS_A relationship.

REFR METRIC. Is the total number of reflexive relationships that exist within the ER diagrams.
 RR METRIC. Another source of redundancy in an ER diagrams is the existence of redundant relationships. We define the Redundant Relationship metric as the number of relationships that are redundant in the ER diagrams.

These metrics are open-ended metrics, i.e. they are not bounded in an interval. Close-ended metrics (ratio metrics) could also be useful, such as the following: RR/NR; DA/NA; M.NR/NR; 1:NR/NR, BinaryR/NR, N-AryR/NR, etc.

2.2. Metrics for relational schemas

Traditionally, the only indicator used to measure the "quality" of relational databases has been the normalization theory, upon which Gray et al. (1991) propose to obtain a normalization ratio. But we think that normalization is not enough to measure the quality of relational databases, so we propose the following three metrics in addition to normalization (Calero et al., 2000):

NT, the number of tables in the database

NA, the number of attributes in all the tables of the database

NFK, the number of foreign keys in the database

DRT (Depth of the referential Tree), defined as the longest referential path between tables in the schema database

All these metrics have been validated formally and empirically (Calero et al., 2000) demonstrating their utility as database quality factors.

3. EXAMPLE

In this section we present a metrics application example of an hospital database. We will present the conceptual and the relational schemas with the corresponding values for the presented metrics. In figure 3 the conceptual schema is shown.

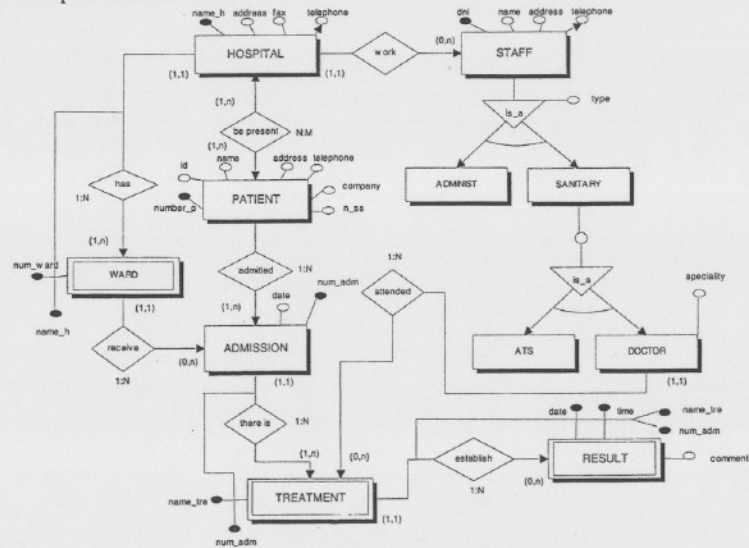


Figure 3. Conceptual schema of the example

3.1. Conceptual schema

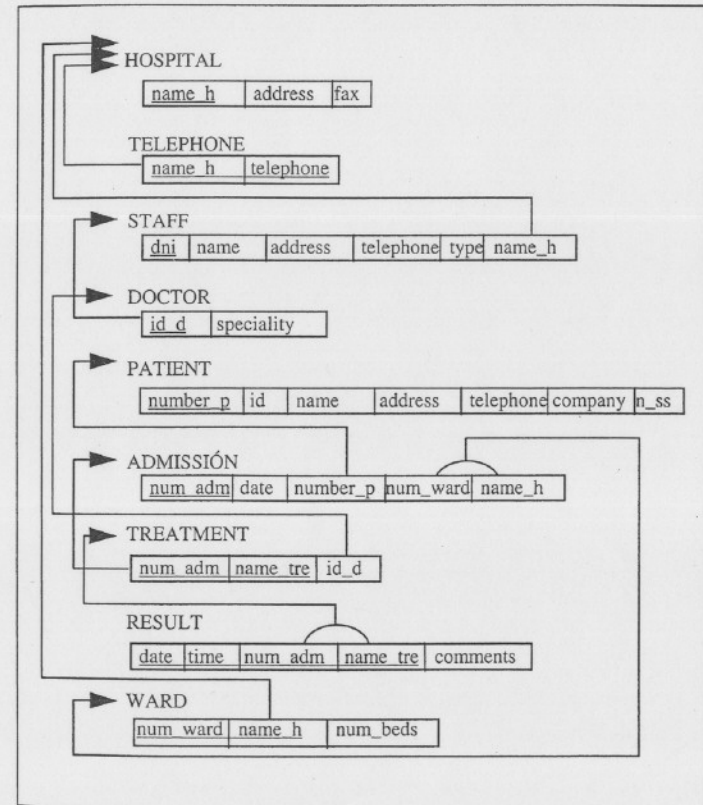
The values of the metrics are:

NE METRIC = 11	NA METRIC = 28	DA METRIC = 0
CA METRIC = 1	MVA METRIC = 0	NR METRIC = 7
M:NR METRIC = 1	1:NR METRIC = 6	BINARYR METRIC = 7
N-ARYR METRIC = 0	NIS_AR METRIC = 4	REFR METRIC = 0
RR METRIC = 0		

3.2 Relational schema

In figure 4, we represent the tables with the corresponding primary and foreign keys.

Figure 4.- Relational database of the example



The values of the metrics are:

NT = 9	NA = 36	RFK = 9	DRT = 4
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4. CONSEQUENCES FOR QUALITY DATABASE DESIGN

In the previous sections we have presented the metrics that can be applied to the E/R model and to the relational model. But, how can these metrics help us in designing and in improving the quality?

On the one hand, let us think in the situation of a totally new database design. In this case, we can obtain from the requirements of our future system, more than one alternative of conceptual modelling. Usually the designer selects one of them based on his/her own experience. This method, although used, is not the best one because decisions are taking attending only subjective considerations. For avoiding these situations we can apply the proposed metrics. From the conceptual schema more than one relational schema can be derived, depending on the transformation rules selected. This selection is made by the designer following his/her intuition and his/her experience. As in the conceptual modelling, a big part of the design is based in the designer background. So, metrics can help in the selection of the best option independently of the designer subjective factors.

On the other hand, let us think in an existing database. Usually, databases as other software product must be submitted to a maintenance process. As a result of the maintenance process, some changes can be necessary in the relational schema (reorganization, restructuring, partition, etc.). In this situation, different alternatives for implementing these changes could be considered and the proposed metrics can be applied for guiding the designer in choosing the best one.

Summarizing, metrics can drive designers along the different steps of a database design or in the database maintenance, assuring database quality.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Due to the growing complexity of IS, continuous attention to and assessment of the data models are necessary to produce quality information systems. Following this idea, we have presented a set of objective and automatically computed metrics for evaluating the complexity of E/R diagrams and relational schemas.

The proposed metrics can be used for guiding the designer in the database design process. Also the metrics can be used to improve database maintainability. Through the metrics the designer can select the best design option. As a result of the metrics usage, quality databases will be obtained.

In our research group we are defining more metrics for both conceptual and logical models. We have already performed some research regarding OO conceptual modelling (Genero et al., 1999; Genero et al., 2000b). In Calero et al (1999) metrics for object-relational databases can be found and in Díaz et al (2001) metrics for active databases are presented.

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