



ISO 26000: Adding value to organizations and their habits



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"ISO 26000 moves from what is a really nice idea to providing something that is pragmatic and which people can actually implement." That is how Rob Steele, ISO Secretary-General, describes the added value of ISO 26000. After six years of worldwide consultation and heavy debates, the main strength of the new Guidance on Social Responsibility (SR) is probably its affirmative answers to recurrent questions that have kept

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organizations awake for decades: How can we speak the same language when talking about values, principles, and ethics as well as contributions to society while avoiding inflicting any harm? How can we imbed SR inside our organizations and be sure we cover all the crucial topics?

Many already say there is nothing really new in the Guidelines and that these are issues they have been dealing with. Probably. But agreeing on common definitions and practices when talking about SR is a real achievement when you deal with touchy issues like human rights, discrimination, complicity, and governance.

Briefly, what is in there?

ISO 26000 sets seven principles as the incontrovertible foundation of SR: Only after you have understood the real impact that they can have on your corporate behavior and finally agree with them can you start thinking about how to be socially responsible. Quite logically, stakeholders hold a central place. They are the fundamental partners of quality SR.

The Guidelines then list seven core subjects pertaining to SR, affirming that they are relevant for all organizations. The Guidelines are, in a way, not "negotiable," and luckily, they do not include subjects that anyone would find objection-

able. Each core subject contains a list of issues pertaining to that topic and related, specific principles. Not all issues are deemed to be relevant and significant to all organizations, and useful criteria are suggested to guide organizations in determining which are relevant to them. From a management perspective, this eases the work in finding which issues to focus upon.

In practice... not a management standard!

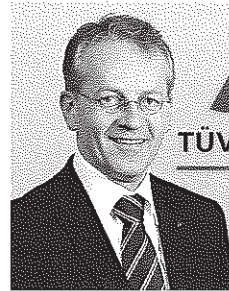
ISO has clearly stated this boundary: ISO will not provide a management system that is certifiable through third-party certification. This subject is too sensitive. ISO will (only) offer guidance, practical examples, best practices, and even links to useful tools and initiatives. Still, the chapter on integrating SR throughout an organization can seem misleading following ISO's declarative approach in the previous clauses. Indeed, one senses the difficulties involved in writing practical guidance on "implementation" while at the same time avoiding making it appear like management systems ISO 14001 or ISO 9001. No "shall," no "must," no declarations this time. Just suggestions. Still, there are helpful, detailed explanations about determining the sphere of influence of an organization, setting up an effective due diligence processes, and adapting one's organizational governance, to name just a few fundamental practices.

Future evolution

But how can a non-restrictive standard have an impact on organizations? It looks like a very soft tool for achieving its ambition: making organizations more responsible regarding society and sustainable development. The existence of an international reference document from a recognized institution with such a strong multistakeholder consensus seems to launch a self-regulating mechanism that enables critical stakeholders to promote those who progress toward more SR and to sanction those going against the current. Social networks can play a role, like LinkedIn and Twitter already do. Will social pressure really function? There will probably be abuses — some have already happened. Regarding some points, the Guidelines can be very difficult to objectivize.

Besides setting a norm for behavior, ISO 26000 could become a reference to improve what already exists. The Guidelines are there to serve as an inspiration to improve existing organizations, policies, projects, etc. They enable people — inside their organizations — to go through the questions that have inspired the document, read about actual SR issues, find new ideas, be aware of conflicts that can occur, know how to deal with ethical dilemmas, etc. Instead of judging if things are good or bad, responsible or not, it will add value to organizations and challenge habits. And we need that fresh approach to induce real change. ■

ISO 26000: How About a Bit of Recognition?



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Finally it came to light. After nearly six years of intensive debate and discussion, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has adopted and published the ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility. A guidance paper for all types of organizations — companies, governments, foundations, business associations, and NGOs alike. The global reception of the new norm has been all but enthusiastic. Many consider it as too complex, too detailed, too much of a management norm which even could become certifiable after all. Others feel that something is missing: Okay, we now have a guidance document, but once I apply it, who will recognize my efforts, my successes, or my hard work? The answer currently is: no one can. Or at least: no one should. But is this what the market — in particular companies — really want? Well, the answer is yes and no.

Certifying social responsibility — a concept that acknowledges the commitment of companies going beyond legal requirements to give back to society, their local communities, and their staff — is indeed difficult. Historically, there are not many comparable developments in different countries, cultures, and societal evolutions. Being socially responsible in continental Europe versus the United States, for example, are two very different cups of tea. And who can define a "right" or "minimum expected" way of pursuing social responsibility?

Against this background, a performance certification with global reach seems impossible. The current solution is to define certifiable norms nationally, such as the 26001 series. Looking into these norms, one is very much puzzled: There are little or no performance indicators and mainly managerial and system elements are addressed. The overarching question is: Does the organization have one or more managerial tools to address the different chapters and topical issues of ISO 26000? This question, however, is akin to asking what can indeed be