

The impact of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 on standardisation of social responsibility—an inside perspective

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Abstract

Following a growing interest in corporate social responsibility, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) announced plans for development of the ISO 26000—guidance standard for social responsibility. Despite initial signals that ISO 26000 will be built on the intellectual and practical infrastructure of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000, the Advisory Group on Social Responsibility set a different direction: a guidance standard and not a specification standard against which conformity can be assessed. This paper aims to investigate what views ISO member body delegations and invited participants in international standardisation of social responsibility had about the divergence from the meta-standard approach towards a guidance standard. To answer the research question, the discussions at the ISO International Conference on Social Responsibility, where ISO member body delegations and approximately 40 invited organisations commented on this matter, have been analysed. As a result of this understanding, not only will insight into the first steps of standardisation of social responsibility be provided, but it will also shed light on the perception of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 that are held by standard developers.

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1. Introduction

In the past, companies were facing growing demands from customers, who hugely impacted on the way they operated, whereas today's demands have shifted toward addressing a wider spectrum of stakeholders (Rosam and Peddle, 2004). This evolution of business and societal environment is bringing quality management closer with other

fields, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate governance and business ethics. Many scholars have started to point towards this evolutionary trend and some of them argue that for quality to remain “a viable concept in the 21st century, it must embed more deeply and firmly the issues of virtue” (Ahmed and Machold, 2004). As CSR is gaining its momentum, other scholars point to obvious parallels in quality and CSR evolution (Peddle and Rosam, 2004; Waddock and Bodwell, 2004; Castka et al., 2004a, b) as well as assert the convergence of these two fields of study.

Indeed, this convergence is happening at many levels—one of which is the arena of international

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standardisation. In the 1980s, following on from British Standard BS 5750, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) developed ISO 9000—a generic quality management systems standard (MSS), which became accepted globally. Followed by the ISO 14000 environmental management system in 1996, a similar scenario has been happening with the social responsibility field. In 2004, ISO announced a new work item: ISO 26000—guidance standard for social responsibility to be introduced by 2008. The pre-standardisation preparatory work suggested that the impact of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 on the standardisation of social responsibility is likely to be substantial. *ISO/Bulletin (2002)* informed that ISO standard for social responsibility would evolve from quality and environmental standards (ISO 9000 and ISO 14000). Specifically, the ISO Committee on Consumer Policy (*ISO COPOLCO, 2002*) recommended a meta-standard approach to the social responsibility standard against which firms could self-declare compliance or could seek certificates from authorised third parties. However, the Advisory Group on Social Responsibility, which was established as a result of Resolution 78/2002 and given the purpose of determining whether ISO should proceed with the development of ISO deliverables in the field of corporate social responsibility, recommended that “a guidance document, and therefore not a specification document against which conformity can be assessed” should be developed (*ISO/AG/SR, 2004a, b*). As the next step in this pre-standardisation work, ISO held the ISO International Conference on Social Responsibility and invited ISO member body delegations and other international organisations to debate recommendations made by the Advisory Group on Social Responsibility.

We conducted our research at this stage of the process of the social responsibility standardisation, i.e. before the process of the development of ISO 26000 started. Our aim was to investigate the question “what impact has ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 had on the direction of the development of ISO 26000 guidance standard for social responsibility?” In particular, we aimed to investigate what views ISO member body delegations and invited participants had on the proposal to move from the meta-standard approach towards a guidance standard. To answer our research question, we analysed the discussions at the ISO International Conference on Social Responsibility,

where ISO member body delegations and approximately 40 invited organisations commented on this matter.

The paper has the following structure. Firstly, we look at ISO MSS and discuss the situation in this area. Secondly, we shift the focus towards social responsibility standardisation and present recent developments within the ISO related to social responsibility standardisation. Thirdly, we describe in detail our research engagement. Fourthly, the results are presented, analysed and concluded with a discussion of social responsibility standardisation, limitations of our research and implication for future developments in the arena of social responsibility standardisation.

2. ISO management systems standards: state-of-the-art

Uzumeri (1987) explains that in the late 1980s standards bodies made major breakthroughs in management standardisation by developing MSS. These standards emerged in fields as diverse as product quality, financial controls (the COSO Framework), white-collar crime prevention and environmental management. The most prominent are ISO MSS, namely ISO 9000 and ISO 14000. By developing this voluntary set of standards, ISO aimed to facilitate international exchange of goods and services as well as simplify business-to-business operations. In order to be certified, organisations have to comply with the requirements described in these standards. This compliance is verified by a third-party audit carried out by an accredited certification agency.

ISO 9000 is designed as an MSS, i.e. a system to establish policy and objectives as well as a way to achieve these objectives. *Uzumeri (1987)* refers to ISO 9000 as a *meta-standard*—a standard based on a list of “design rules to guide the creation of entire classes of management systems”. Since its introduction in 1987, ISO 9000 has been revised in 1994 and 2000 (*Kartha, 2002; Laszlo, 2000; Struebing, 1997*). Of paramount importance is the 2000 revision that further strengthened the focus on a “systems approach to management”, which was less emphasised in previous versions. The revised ISO 9000:2000 family of standards includes a “model of a process-based quality management system” and a much stronger emphasis on systems nature of the standard. Furthermore, ISO 9000:2000 promotes a

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