



ISO and social responsibility

Scale, not detail, is the aim

By Lisa Roner

Developers of the ISO 26000 social responsibility standard say it will embrace existing local standards rather than supersede them

The International Organization for Standardization, the global network of standards bodies known also as ISO, formally decided in January 2005 to develop an international standard on social responsibility. The standard, as conceived and announced by ISO, is intended to be a practical guidance that emphasises performance results and improvements but does not include third-party certification.

ISO's strategic advisory group on social responsibility, through 18 months of research and debate, identified more than 200 existing initiatives, standards and guidance documents. More than 300 experts from 54 countries and 33 liaison organisations have signed up to develop ISO 26000. ISO says they will work together to create an overarching document that can assist a wide variety of organisations – including governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, corporations and more – to address their social responsibilities.

ISO says the standard will provide practical guidance for operationalising social responsibility, identifying and engaging with stakeholders and enhancing the credibility of reports and claims made about social responsibility. The group has pledged that the standard will promote common social responsibility terminology and be consistent, and not in conflict with, existing documents,

treaties, conventions and other ISO standards.

Easier said than done

That is a gargantuan undertaking. But ISO, its supporters say, is up to the task because of the wide use of existing ISO standards around the world and its ability to bring together business, governmental and non-governmental organisations to develop international standards.

"ISO occupies a unique role that none of the other existing instruments or organisations can really fill on their own," says Kernaghan Webb, senior legal policy adviser and chief of research in the Office of Consumer Affairs at Industry Canada and a Canadian representative in the ISO process.

Webb says ISO's longstanding and respected international profile and experience developing technical standards has created a development and distribution system around the world that tends to ensure that "when ISO puts out a standard, it will be widely recognised and used".

Webb also believes that ISO's close ties to national standard bodies allow it to "straddle" the world of governmental and non-governmental organisations in a way no other group can rival. "When ISO does approve something, it is considered legitimate with a broader cross section of society than you could ever get through a 'coalition of the willing' type effort," he says.

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International Organization for Standardization

The ISO began operating in 1947. It has a membership of 156 national standards bodies from countries large and small, industrialised and developing, in all regions of the world. The ISO says it develops voluntary standards that add value to all types of business operations and that its standards represent an international consensus on the state of the art in the technology concerned.

Standard among standards

Steve Rochlin, director of research and policy development at the centre for corporate citizenship at Boston College, says the ISO process is an important one in which people are working to create a “healthy” set of principles that support and reinforce existing standards – including reporting standards like the Global Reporting Initiative and performance standards such as the UN Global Compact, SA 8000 and the ILO Convention on Human Rights – without becoming overly prescriptive.

“I think the people driving this hope that, with the strong brand and reputation of the ISO, a number of institutions with influence and resources at the important nodes in marketplaces and political systems will adopt the standard and encourage those they deal with to employ it as well,” Rochlin says.

Webb believes that some private standards organisations unaffiliated with ISO initially took a defensive posture to the ISO process to “ensure their turf was not interfered with”. But he believes they are “coming around” to understanding that the aim is to create an agreed international platform that allows for layering of other approaches on top of it; a platform that links to other initiatives, rather than pretends they do not exist.

Dorothy Bowers, a retired vice-president of environmental policy at Merck and chair of the US technical advisory group to the ISO, says groups with their own standards “are going to have to be willing to let the ISO document be the mother of all documents”. She believes private standards groups will have to allow ISO 26000 to be “more powerful than what they brought to the table”.

But Bowers is quick to acknowledge that the ISO standard will not replace others. Dave Knight, director of consultancy Sd3, agrees, saying ISO will be an umbrella standard and a lot less prescriptive than the detailed standards that can exist “quite happily beneath it”.

“If the momentum continues, the ISO standard will be a commonly agreed upon international platform or framework for social responsibility that acknowledges the authoritative and legitimate rule of intergovernmental bodies and of governments,” Webb says. “It will create a space for them, and for other initiatives that meet the criteria of usefulness and value, to speak directly with non-governmental users in the private sector or otherwise.”

Knight says there will be a role for a variety of standards and predicts that there may even be additional requirements for national standards. Standards like ISO 26000, he says, provide a framework and suggest approaches, but leave space for more prescriptive standards below them.

“There is definitely still room for context- or industry-specific and culturally specific and



ISO 26000: bringing together a lot of earlier initiatives

national standards,” Knight says. “They’re not going away any time soon. In fact, I think there will be a fair amount of growth in these types of standards, at least in the near future.”

Paul Hohnen, an independent consultant on sustainability issues, says the ISO process provides a framework that allows participants to sort out how best to use and build on existing social responsibility initiatives and to fill any gaps that user organisations perceive.

One for all

But many critics of the ISO effort say the standard will be so general and vague, in order to cover a broad range of organisations and topics, that it will be useful to no-one.

Rochlin, however, contends that simply engaging in a multi-stakeholder democratic process to define a set of social responsibility guidelines, “even if they may be broad”, sends an important message. It allows people to focus energy and raise attention, he says, while providing support and capacity-building for organisations as they advance the conversation on social responsibility.

Bowers agrees. She acknowledges that to write a document that has relevance to every organisation without making it so general that it doesn’t have any use will take some doing. But, she says, if the group can take the best of the existing practices and put them down on paper so that people can use them – and get everyone talking – she would consider the process a success.

The value for institutions based in emerging economies cannot be overestimated, Rochlin stresses. “The power and presence of an ISO standard can really help create momentum where there’s been little,” Rochlin says. And he believes it can empower many institutions to start paying attention to fundamental principles of human rights, environmental practices and responsible governance and create a vehicle to help institutions participate more effectively on the global stage.

Rochlin is quick to point out, however, that the



Can ISO complete the picture?

ISO standard is unlikely, in his opinion, to “exceed the most sophisticated approaches to social responsibility”. Instead, he says, it will become a resource to direct institutions to some of those more specific approaches.

Tom Rotherham, convenor of an ISO working group on social responsibility, says: “We’re moving toward sector-specific standards and in some cases they are being further defined at the national and regional level.”

The ISO standard, Rotherham says, will be the “starter course”. It will help organisations begin to pay attention to and analyse issues, but when companies identify a business case to do something concrete, he says, “they will use a more specific standard”.

As Webb points out, the ISO standard aims to provide enough flexibility so that organisations can tailor their social responsibility approach and operations to their own specific and unique situations.

When it comes to the ultimate role and impact of the ISO 26000 standard, Rochlin says two outcomes are possible. “One scenario is that it gives institutions a way to manage to ‘the lowest common denominator’ and is used to insulate them against more demanding standards and systems,” he says. “A more optimistic scenario is that the ISO standard actually energises institutions to come together and work collaboratively and create an energy and momentum to further develop the existing options that organisations can choose from.”

Rotherham and Hohnen say the ISO 26000 standard will create a social responsibility “dummies” guide, although not in a derogatory sense, for companies new to the issues of social responsibility. In the long term, they say, the ISO standard will help clarify where social responsibility can achieve positive change and where it cannot.

Deadline doomed?

But many question whether the group will be able to hit its new target of mid-2009 for completion of the standard.

Adam Greene, vice-president labour affairs and corporate responsibility at the US Council for International Business and the developed country industry representative to the ISO Strategic Advisory Group on corporate responsibility, says the “degree of consensus is still fairly shallow” and that reaching the design specification stage has “masked a lot of ongoing areas of disagreement”. He says stakeholder groups are not as representative as they should be and that achieving consensus in such a diverse group is like “herding cats”.

“I put less than even money on anything coming out the other end, especially anything useful,” Greene says. “A more realistic deadline is 2010 and in that time entire generations of supply chain initiatives have come and gone. It makes you wonder if what we come up with will even still be relevant once we have it.”

Greene says he was optimistic in the beginning, but is “losing hope for doing something meaningful”.

But Webb says some of the fundamental tensions, discomforts and lack of trust that existed early on seem to be diminishing and he believes that might “expedite the process”.

“The refreshing thing at our recent meeting in Lisbon is the attitude by just about everybody that it’s time to just buckle down and do it,” Webb says. “It’s a very constructive atmosphere of solution-finding and taking an incremental approach.”

And Webb says that, even if it takes longer than the mid-2009 goal for completion, there are “incremental rewards”, like a definition for social responsibility. “Even a rough definition agreed to by this set of stakeholders is a hell of a lot better than what we have now,” he says.

Webb believes the recognition by intergovernmental bodies that they can use the ISO process as a way of communicating directly with user organisations is “a huge institutional precipice that has been surmounted here that can change the direction for a lot of organisations and institutions”.

Rochlin says other ISO standards have worked as a “major tipping point” around quality management and environmental practices and he believes ISO 26000 may be able to “capture that magic again”.

Although the details of how prescriptive the ISO standard will be remains to be worked, even as a “lowest common denominator”, Hohnen says the prospect of scaling up social responsibility “not to hundreds but to hundreds of thousands of organisations is worth a bit of everyone’s time and energy”. ■

In the US

An American Society for Quality poll reveals that while 96% of US business leaders think their company’s corporate social responsibility behaviour will greatly impact the nation’s economic future, more than 40% still don’t have any policy in place to guide their company’s actions.

Simply engaging in a multi-stakeholder democratic process to define a set of social responsibility guidelines sends an important message

Useful links:

www.iso.org/sr
www.asq.org/social-responsibility
www.uscib.org
<http://strategis.ic.gc.ca>