

## Guidelines Briefing Part 5: ISO 26000 - Can one size fit all?

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After nearly a decade of wrangling, the ISO 26000 standard should be approved this year. It has been a long process, but the first ISO standard on social responsibility – ISO 26000 – appears set to be launched by the end of this year.

Nine years of worldwide consultations by the International Organisation for Standardisation, the non-profit body that sets ISO standards, have failed to produce a consensus on ISO 26000. But a crucial vote in February produced enough support to move the draft guidance standard to the next stage where the final draft of the standard will be prepared. The draft standard, which needed at least 66% of members' approval, managed to get 79% of the votes cast.

During the voting period, ISO received more than 2,600 comments from ISO members and other interest groups. Following consultation, a final draft of ISO 26000 standards will be produced and circulated for another vote by members. If approved, the ISO 26000 standards will be published by the end of the year.

A number of countries and business groups have been, and continue to be, opposed to the content, wording and scope of the ISO 26000 draft standards. Countries such as China are worried about the potential interpretations of human rights and environment issues.

As well as companies, ISO 26000 would apply to non-profit organisations, which would include government-run companies and departments. Autocratic governments fear the standard will be used by activists to demand accountability from such governments.

A stringent ISO 26000 standard would create pressure for conformance with higher standards and wider accountability than many such countries currently achieve. India, for example, fears that a global social responsibility standard could be used as a non-tariff barrier by developed countries, imposing new requirements on suppliers.

China, India, Russia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Turkey were among the 18 countries that voted against the draft standard in February. The UK, New Zealand, Germany, Israel and Iceland were among the eight countries that abstained. The US voted in favour of the draft even though it had lobbied against it earlier.

ISO 26000, however, is a voluntary guidance standard and not certifiable. ISO bars the use of the standard for compliance audits and certifications. This means organisations can use ISO 26000 standards as a benchmark to establish their own policies and practices on social responsibility and not claim or seek compliance with it.

The current 99-page ISO 26000 draft guidance standard document begins by explaining what social responsibility means for all organisations. It lays out six sets of principles of social responsibility that include accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, respect for stakeholder interests, respect for the rule of law, respect for international norms of behaviour and respect for human rights.

### Addressing impact

The document spells out guidance standards on human rights, labour practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and community involvement and development. Each of these

areas has a subset of standards.

The concluding section includes guidance on integrating social responsibility throughout an organisation including guidance for social responsibility communication.

A key aspect of the ISO 26000 guidance standards is that they emphasise that organisations should seek out and address impacts of their decisions and identify stakeholders and engage in dialogue with them.

“ISO 26000 is the most comprehensive guide on social responsibility,” says Thomas Thomas, executive director of Singapore Compact for CSR and a member of the chairman’s advisory group for ISO 26000.

He says the ISO 26000 development process took into account all other major corporate social responsibility standards. “In a way, ISO 26000 is a consolidation of all standards.”

Thomas points out that a large number of varied stakeholders participated in developing the ISO 26000 guidance standard and have agreed to the draft. “This brings huge credibility to the standard,” he says.

But a number of industry organisations that participated in the consultations – though without voting rights – do not fully agree with the current draft.

The International Organisation of Employers (IOE) represents 148 national employer organisations from 141 countries. It says the draft standard is “too long, too dense, too complicated and too difficult to read” and “difficult to use especially for smaller organisations”.

IOE says that “the draft is directed primarily at industry organisations, specifically multinational companies, and is particularly unsuitable for small organisations”. ISO claims, of course, that the standard is intended to apply to all types of organisations. IOE also says that the tone of the draft standard is negative as it “too often states what organisations should not do rather than what they should do”.

In a joint letter to ISO secretariat, several industry organisations have said a widespread misuse of ISO 26000 for certification purposes is a potential problem even though ISO has made it clear that the standard is not meant for certification. But their fears are not unfounded. A simple Google search throws up thousands of results that show consultants are already offering ISO 26000 certification and audit services.

Industry groups want the standard in a simplified form that companies can use without the need to hire consultants. And they want the standard to be made available for free, a suggestion that the ISO council has rejected.

**Links:**

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