

International Standard Organisation TC207 SC4

Environmental Performance Evaluation

Im Technical Committee 207 der International Standard Organisation wurden sechs Subkomitees zu den Themen Umweltmanagementsysteme, Auditing, Kennzeichnung, Life-Cycle-Analysis sowie Definitionen eingerichtet. Der folgende Bericht gibt einen Einblick in die Arbeit des Subkomitees Vier „Environmental Performance Evaluation“.

Von Tron Kleivane

Organisations of all kinds are increasingly seeking ways to understand, improve and demonstrate sound environmental performance by controlling the impact of their activities, products and services on the environment. They do so in the context of a general growth of concern from internal and external stakeholders about environmental matters and the need to promote sustainable development.

The work of ISO TC 207 (International Standards Organisations Technical Committee nr 207), initiated in 1990 by the European Green Table and the Business Council for Sustainable Development, aims at meeting these concerns by establishing standards for sound environmental management in business and industry. The development of standardized tools and guidelines for self improvement is seen as fundamental in order to foster proactivity in business and avoid unnecessary or counterproductive stop-go regulations. An ever increasing environmental awareness both in industry and in society at large will put more demands for meaningful information on management. Either management develops tools to be on top of and master the environmental agenda, or the various stakeholders will set their agendas imposing reactive measures from a management in loss of control.

The establishment of standards for environmental performance evaluation, which is the scope of work in SC4 (subcommittee 4) in TC 207, is probably the most challenging task within the TC. How to describe, analyze, measure and evaluate the significant environmental aspects of an organisations activities? The establishment of such standards will have far reaching consequences. In many ways it can be compared with the development of financial accounting systems in the previous century. It

took more than fifty years to translate the economic realities in companies into a standardized, consistent and comprehensive accounting system. The challenge for SC4 is to contribute to substantially shorten the time needed to translate environmental impacts and concerns into meaningful and consistent information to be used by the management both for internal and external purposes.

► Standardwriting is political

The standard on performance evaluation, which will be a guideline standard classified ISO 14031, is now on the point of becoming a Draft Standard and will probably be published in 1997. SC4s task is difficult not only because of the scientific challenges in the approach, but merely because there has been very little empirical experience to start off the standard writing process. All standardwriting is political and as such subject to a lot of give and take before consensus is reached. Without experience the job is made even harder. Two areas of discussion have been particularly difficult throughout the process – the choice between systems performance and environmental performance, and the format and purpose of the standard.

Some countries have been very preoccupied in limiting the scope of work within SC4 to reflect and submit to the content of SC1s standards on environmental management systems (EMS). According to these standards „environmental performance“ should describe the quality of the management system as such and not the performance of the organisation in relation to the environment. Others within SC4 has fought hard to keep a more independent line, arguing that what is really demanded and asked for both within the company and from the outside is information on performance related to the environment.

Either the company produces such information or the stakeholders will do it. The countries divide in a quite identical manner on the format and purpose of the standard.

The countries being „loyal“ to SC1s limitations are eager to emphasise that 14031 is a guideline standard, and that it should be as open ended as possible to give room for the users own interpretations. These countries want to include several approaches on methodology and a variety of examples and comments to ensure that the user is not misled to believe there is only one way of evaluating environmental performance.

The countries preoccupied with the linkage to the environmental impacts of the companies have a different approach. They want a short and instructive document that can be of practical help even for the small and medium sized companies wanting to evaluate and get control of their environmental performance whether or not they have a formal EMS in place. They want to give priority to clarity and consistency of the conceptual approach arguing that the document is only a guideline to spur organisations development of their own tools.

► The outcome of the battle

Some of these differences are certainly due to different cultural backgrounds and differences in the legal systems. However, there should be no doubt as to what is needed in business and industry. Government, financial stakeholders, NGOs and customers are increasingly asking for relevant information on the companies environmental performance. By choosing to support the companies working on evaluating the environmental impacts of their activities, ISO 14031 will also strengthen the linkage to EMAS requiring the publication of environmental statements.

The outcome of the battle going on in SC4 will to a large extent decide whether or not the individual company gets practical help in their own quest and if business and industry will get the agenda power when confronted with the future environmental challenges.

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