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Trying to position ISO 26000

In November 2010, the International standards organisation ISO published the guidance standard ISO 26000 "Guidance on Social Responsibility". Guido Gürtler, talking with Dr Christine Vondenhoff, VDMA, presents some ideas on how to use the guidance standard.

"ISO 26000 is not a management system standard. Social responsibility is not manageable, it needs to be lived."

The German Institute for standardisation, DIN, calls ISO 26000 a "Leitfadennorm", i.e. a "guidance norm". Mr Gürtler, what do you think about this terminology, as observer of the ICC International Chamber of Commerce and expert of NORMAPME, the 'European office of crafts, trades, and small and medium-sized enterprises for standardisation'?

Gürtler: In Germany a *norm* is understood as a document, which contains requirements, which one should meet or fulfil. A *guidance* or *Leitfaden* offers advice, recommendations and orientation. The content of ISO 26000 describes recommendations, is only formally published as *norm* (or *standard* in English). In German-speaking countries we should only speak about the *ISO 26000 guidance document*.

What is the content of the guidance? What is its relation to the ISO standards 9001 and 14001, in part addressing similar topics?

Gürtler: The guidance document, comprising 100 pages, first describes the "core subjects" organisational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, and involvement and development of the community. For each of these core subjects the guidance document recommends a number of "issues", presupposing that all core subjects are relevant to all organisations. However, the relevance will have to be judged on how far an enterprise may offer reasonable contributions to societal development. As regards the relation to ISO 9001 or ISO 14001: there is no relation! ISO 26000 is not a management system standard. Social responsibility is in no way "manageable", it must be "lived".

Who addresses this guidance document?

Gürtler: It addresses all kinds of organisations, not only enterprises, organisations of whatever size, wherever in the world. The claim of such a broad applicability is one of the key problems of the guidance document. Therefore, ISO has taken a very wise decision to develop "only" a guidance document.

How can the guidance document be applied meaningfully?

Gürtler: Primarily it is important to look at the recommendations in regard of their relevance and feasibility. German users may quickly discover that for example the core subject *human rights* is relevant in regard of social responsibility, and that the given recommendations can be considered useful only outside Europe in

countries, where human rights are not covered by law. As quickly one may notice that the one or the other core subject is not relevant for an enterprise: What has an engineering company to do with the core subject *consumer issues*? Here, the all-comprising claim of the guidance document will need to be modified.

There is a very easy-to-use tool available on the Internet (www.26k-estimation.com) to identify the relevance of core subjects and their eventually reasonable issues. The engagement of external consultancy services or in expensive training courses is not necessary.

Are there different application possibilities for smaller and larger enterprises?

Gürtler: Sure. For small enterprises this guidance document is a good orientation. To larger enterprises it offers hardly new aspects, in comparison with practised codes on ethics and social behaviour. By the way, in Europe we have very different cultural and law-related prerequisites, other traditions and societal value propositions than in many other parts of the world. There are differentiations indicated: NORMAPME currently develops an ISO 26000 user guide, of some 11 pages, for European small and medium-sized enterprises, which simply does not mention those ISO 26000 recommendations, which are not relevant in Europe. It will soon be available, for free.

Does certification of social responsibility make sense?

Gürtler: Certificates are an instrument to create revenues, particularly in regard of repetitive audits and certificates. However, certification organisations do not take any co-liability in cases of lawsuits or product liability.

Signals I receive can be interpreted in a way that interested parties may shortly start a new ISO standardisation project, e.g. a certifiable standard ISO 26001. Denmark has published a national certifiable standard. That's why I'm grateful for your question. I remain convinced that certification is counter-productive to the development of social responsibility. Certification relates to a special point of time, while societies change dynamically and thereby also the real need for contributions to their development. Creativity and initiatives are needed, instead of checklists to tick on.

Where can an enterprise get more information on the application of ISO 26000?

Gürtler: First of all at trade associations. We can also expect the emergence of various fora on the Internet. Good and bad cases (abusive ones), which I get hold of, can be found on the above-mentioned website.

For 2013 first revision of the guidance document is scheduled. How can users contribute with their experience?

Gürtler: The formal route is via the standards organisations, in Germany via DIN. I think, the trade associations could organise some exchange of experience in order to feed bundled results into the formal channels.

Summarised, what would you recommend our member companies?

Gürtler: Stay cool-headed. Occupy yourself constructively with the ideas contained in ISO 26000. Judge the relevance of its recommendations in your sole responsibility. Compare the ISO 26000 with other standards, guidance documents or guidelines, particularly with business sector codes. Use your business report to inform on your own contributions to societal development. Oppose any certification. Refuse any use of the guidance document in contracts or governmental regulations.

Many thanks for the interview.