Transitioning to the ISO 14001:2015 Standard

If you are currently certified, time is running out!

A summary of the key changes implemented in the ISO 14001:2015 Standard.
The changes to ISO 14001 firmly place it center stage as the instrument to manage the environmental pillar of sustainability. It is now more strategic, outward looking, and places greater emphasis on products and services rather than just on-site activities. Consequently, the new standard can act as a stepping stone to developing a holistic sustainability and corporate social responsibility strategy, or supporting the implementation of an existing one. Organizations that are transitioning should consider how their environmental management system (EMS) can support their wider sustainability aspirations and business strategy.

It is important to note that ISO 9001 Quality Management System (QMS) and Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series (OHSAS) 18001 are also changing. The ISO 9001:2015 version and the ISO 45001:2018 (the ISO Health and Safety Management System standard replacement of OHSAS 18001) are now available to organizations seeking triple certifications. The good news is all ISO management system standards will now follow an ISO high-level standard structure, which means that the majority of requirements will be common or at least comparable among the standards and more readily allow for organizations to integrate business operations and systems that are at the core. Organizations certified to ISO 9001, and/or OHSAS 18001 (and transitioning toward ISO 45001), could integrate these systems to allow for a more robust management system focusing on your overall business strategy.

**ISO 14001:2015 Update: Five Key Changes**

EMSs certified to ISO 14001 can be insular, peripheral, and ultimately a tick-the-box exercise. The 2015 version is an improvement on its predecessor, bringing it up to date and strengthening its role in sustainable development and its integration with business operations. Overall, ISO 14001:2015 is intended to drive greater business value by helping organizations to appreciate and respond to the risks and the opportunities presented from a changing environment.

While the entire ISO 14001:2015 looks very different, many of the requirements from its 2004 predecessor have been incorporated with little content change; however, there are five primary changes that are critical to understand.

**Strategic Leadership**

Senior management will need to promote and be accountable for the EMS, which is now expected to be integrated with business processes and compatible with the organization’s business strategy. Before, senior management could get away with minimal involvement (e.g., sign policy, appoint a management representative, attend management reviews, etc.). Now senior management must promote and direct others to consider the environment in their day-to-day responsibilities and business processes. There is also an expectation for senior management to be fully engaged in defining several of the new requirements, in particular, context and needs of interested parties, as well as intended outcomes.

**Context**

Organizations now need to demonstrate a broader understanding of the context in which their business operates. Your EMS will need to consider internal and external issues that could help or hinder your organization in achieving the intended outcomes of the EMS. Leadership will need to examine influences within their industry, the community, the region, and the world. In the previous versions of ISO 14001, the question was: “how does an organizations’ activities, products, and services impact the environment?”; now there is a second, equally important question: “how does the environment impact your organization?”

**Interested Parties**

Your EMS must become more outward-looking by understanding the needs and expectations of interested parties, such as customers, shareholders, regulators, community, employees, contractors, and trade groups. You must define relevant internal and external interested parties, their needs

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and expectations, and determine whether you must comply with their needs (i.e., through regulations and permits) or whether you want to comply with those needs and expectations (i.e., voluntarily adopt them). Organizations will also need to plan communications relevant to these compliance obligations.

Risks and Opportunities
You will need to consider the impact of a changing environment on your organization and manage risks and opportunities to build resilience into your EMS and organization. Previously, the standard addressed only impacts. The revised standard now requires an organization to also examine overall risks and opportunities. Risks and opportunities arise from several sources, including impacts, but context, needs and expectations of interested parties, compliance obligations, and the scope of your EMS must also be considered.

Lifecycle Perspective
Organizations should determine environmental aspects at each stage of its product or service (i.e., supply chain, design, production, transportation/delivery, use, maintenance, end of life treatment, and final disposal) and not just those relating to on-site production activities. Where appropriate, environmental requirements should be included at the design/development stage and during procurement. Information about potential significant environmental impacts can be provided during the delivery, use and end-of-life treatment of the product or service. The revised standard also requires outsourced processes to be controlled or influenced.

Next Steps
With less than two months remaining to transition existing ISO 14001 certificates, time is of the essence. The most efficient method for tackling some of these key changes is to facilitate a cross-functional team workshop. Bringing representatives from key functions together to brainstorm context, interested parties, integration, risks, and opportunities will also help foster engagement and bring a life cycle perspective to your internal discussions.

Of course you should also brief senior management on the changes and ask what they expect to achieve from the management system: Reduce costs? Better control risks? Reduce or eliminate impacts on the environment? Stay in compliance? Improve relations with stakeholders? Move the company toward sustainability? These intended outcomes should be the foundation of your EMS and add value to your business.