

## Setting the Standard or Missing the Mark?

An international guidance standard on **corporate responsibility** has now been published. **ISO 26000 (“Guidance on Social Responsibility”)** is intended to set the agenda for organisations on how to address corporate (or social) responsibility. In doing this organisations will be responding to growing stakeholder expectations in the wake of recent financial and political scandals. However the standard has already been criticised for being too focussed on the issues of large corporations and not sufficiently on how smaller organisations can address corporate responsibility (*“How Material is ISO 26000 Social Responsibility to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises?” - International Institute for Sustainable Development, Sept. 2008*).

Whilst these specific concerns about the standard have validity, they are to a large degree inevitable and reflect concerns similar to those that were raised about other management standards in their early days, eg. ISO 9001 & ISO 14001. **Any standard that is trying to provide a broad organisational framework will inevitably lack focus when considered from a narrower viewpoint.** This focus will need to, and should, come from within the organisations themselves and their advisors.

There is a key difference between ISO 26000 and ‘established’ management system standards in that it is (at this time anyway) only presented as a **guidance document** and not a standard against which organisations would be externally certified. However the use of the term “standard” establishes a preconception with many that the content will be suitable for certification and a level of confusion is expected to arise from this. Organisations will be able to make statements about their activities in relation to “following the principles of” the standard but any statements claiming “compliance with” the standard will be worthless as the standard contains no mandatory requirements to comply with.

The document is substantial (140 pages) as it seeks to cover as many aspects of the topic as possible. This broadness of approach may well act as a deterrent to potential users who, when faced with the full range of information might consider it to be onerous to address. However it should be remembered that **where elements of the standard clearly don’t apply to your business then you need take no action and where elements apply only peripherally then your response should be in proportion to their relevance.**

The standard covers a wide range of topics under its core subjects:



**ISO 26000 CORE SUBJECTS**

What is important to any organisation in adopting a management standard is to ensure that the interpretation of the standard is suitable to their operations. To this purpose there is plenty of scope within ISO 26000 for any business to apply the principles of the standard in a manner that is **“appropriate to its purpose and activities”**.

Elements of corporate responsibility continue to a focus for media attention and businesses can expect clients, employees and the public to have stronger views on how they expect businesses to behave. The publication of ISO 26000 will provide another period of increased attention on this topic. Whether the standard by itself can provide an adequate road map for businesses seeking to understand how they meet up to the corporate responsibility agenda is still questionable.

For more information on the benefits to be gained from understanding corporate responsibility and how to address the issues raised by ISO 26000, contact **Dr. Graham Ward** at [graham.ward@triposconsulting.com](mailto:graham.ward@triposconsulting.com).