ISO and conformity assessment

- Conformity assessment means checking whether products, services, materials, processes, systems and personnel measure up to the requirements of standards, regulations or other specifications.

- Conformity assessment benefits manufacturers, service providers, users, consumers and regulators and supports sustainable development.

- Conformity to, and assessment based on, International Standards give confidence and facilitate access to world markets.

Confidence comes from knowing that requirements will be fulfilled. Standards give the state-of-the-art requirements. ISO/IEC standards and guides relating to conformity assessment define the processes and good practice for checking that the requirements are met. Conformity assessment provides confidence.

Why conformity assessment matters

Products and services are like promises. Business customers, consumers, users and public officials have expectations about products and services relating to features like quality, ecology, safety, economy, reliability, compatibility, interoperability, efficiency and effectiveness. Conformity assessment means evaluating and confirming such features as defined in standards, regulations and other specifications. In this way, conformity assessment makes sure that products and services deliver on their promises.

Who benefits from conformity assessment ?

ISO/IEC* standards and guides on conformity assessment provide benefits for manufacturers and service providers, consumers and government regulators, as well as for international trade.

For conscientious manufacturers and service
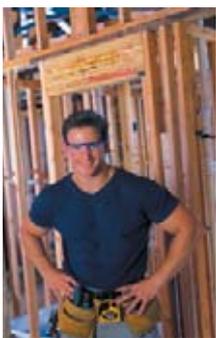
providers, having their products and services assessed in accordance with ISO and IEC International Standards allows them to distinguish themselves from less reputable suppliers. When public health, safety or the environment may be at stake, conformity assessment is often made obligatory by government regulations. Without appropriate assessment and approval, goods may be barred from sale, or suppliers disqualified from bidding for government procurement contracts. ISO/IEC International Standards and guides also provide requirements and guidance for good practice and recognition of such assessments.

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* IEC : International Electrotechnical Commission

ISO and conformity assessment, 2005

Consumers benefit from conformity assessment because it provides them with a basis for selecting products or services. They may have more confidence in products or services that are supported by a formal supplier's declaration, or bearing a mark or certificate of conformity, that attest to quality, safety or other desirable characteristics.

Regulators too benefit from conformity assessment that gives them a means to enforce national health, safety and environmental legislation and achieve public policy goals.

Harmonizing conformity assessment procedures around the world also has far-reaching benefits for **international trade** in general.

How ISO's work overcomes trade barriers

One of the main hurdles to cross-border trade that exporters face is costly multiple testing and/or certification of products. Non-transparent or discriminatory conformity assessment procedures can become effective protectionist tools, or "technical barriers to trade".

The World Trade Organisation Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (WTO/TBT Agreement) was established to ensure that technical regulations and standards, and the procedures for assessing conformity with them, do not create unnecessary obstacles to international trade.

Successive reviews of the TBT Agreement have noted the usefulness of ISO/IEC conformity assessment standards and guides in harmonizing conformity assessment practice and as benchmarks for the technical competence of assessment bodies so that credibility and confidence in their results can be obtained. ISO/IEC's conformity assessment work therefore helps to overcome trade barriers.

What conformity assessment activities cover

Conformity assessment may consist of any one of, some of, or all of the following : sample testing, inspection, process evaluation, supplier's declaration of conformity, management system certification/registration, personnel certification, product certification, mutual recognition of results and the accreditation and peer assessment of the competence of the organizations conducting these activities – collectively known as "conformity assessment bodies". ISO and IEC jointly develop standards and guides for all those activities. (ISO does not carry out certification to ISO 9001:2000, ISO 14001:2004, or any other of its standards, nor does it control the certification business sector.)

What ISO does to encourage good conformity assessment practice

ISO promotes the international harmonization of conformity assessment activities and the worldwide acceptance of the results through ISO/CASCO, its general policy committee on conformity assessment.

ISO/CASCO works both on the principles and the practice of conformity assessment. It develops documents that are published as ISO/IEC International Standards or Guides. The voluntary criteria contained in these documents represent an international consensus on good practice and therefore facilitates the mutual recognition of conformity assessment results.

ISO/CASCO's objectives are to :
• study means of assessing the conformity of products, processes, services and management systems to appropriate standards or other technical specifications ;
• prepare standards and guides relating to the practice of testing, inspection and certification of products, processes and services, and to the assessment of management systems, testing laboratories, inspection, certification and accreditation bodies, and their operation and acceptance, and
• promote mutual recognition and acceptance of national and regional conformity assessment systems, and the appropriate use of International Standards for testing, inspection, certification, assessment and related purposes.

ISO/CASCO's network

ISO/CASCO comprises representatives from ISO members (national standards bodies), from the technical committees that develop ISO standards, and from other international organizations. ISO/CASCO develops its documents jointly with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and the European Committee for Standardization (CEN).

Nine international organizations are liaison members of ISO/CASCO : the Bureau International des Poids et Mesures (BIPM), the International Accreditation Forum (IAF), the International Federation of Standards Users (IFAN), the International Federation of Inspection Agencies (IFIA), the International Certification Network (IQNet), the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC), the International Personnel Certification Association (IPC), the Organisation Internationale de Métrologie Légale (OIML), and the International Union of Independent Laboratories (UILI).

Conformity assessment and sustainability

Assuring that products, services, materials, processes, systems,and personnel measure up to state-of-the-art requirements such as those provided by ISO and IEC International Standards is essential for the efficient functioning of economies, international trade and the sustainable use of the world's resources. ISO/IEC standards and guides for conformity assessment are the tools for providing this assurance. They also contribute to building and maintaining national quality infrastructures and services that support economic and social progress, as well as access to world markets.

*ISO's conformity assessment work supports a sustainable world.*

Two URLs to remember :

ISO Online : www.iso.org
ISO Café : www.iso.org/isocafe

Two magazines to read :
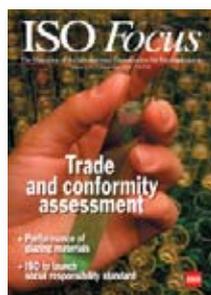
ISO Focus, a panoramic view of standards and related issues : what is being done, why it is being done, what will be done and how it affects you. Published in English.

www.iso.org/isofocus

ISO Management Systems, Worldwide coverage of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 developments. *Plus* new standards initiatives for important business and societal issues such as social responsibility, sustainability, occupational health and safety and conformity assessment. *Plus* sector developments and national initiatives. Published in English, French and Spanish.

www.iso.org/ims

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