

The Human-Centred Organization

There is growing international recognition that corporate (and indeed national) success should be measured in terms which go beyond profit and productivity. Organisations are being assessed not just on their return on the investment of their owners but also on much broader issues, such as how well they fulfil their responsibility to society, and the impact they have on the environment in both the short and long term. In those areas, organisations often turn to high level standards, such as ISO 26000 *Guidance on social responsibility*, published by the International Organization for Standardization (www.iso.org/). One area that has recently received particular attention from the G8 (the world's biggest economies) is human well-being as an economic measure in addition to traditional measures of national output. Human well-being is the focus of the scientific discipline of *ergonomics* but most ergonomics standards are aimed at experts.

This article describes a new International Standard on *The Human-Centred Organisation*, which is being developed to provide guidance on maximising wellbeing and minimising human-based risks for the organisation. This high level standard explains to executive board members the values and beliefs that make an organisation human-centred, the significant business benefits and what policies they need to put in place to achieve this.

The purpose of this article is to seek feedback from executives and other stakeholders to help us ensure that the final document builds on what has already been done and has maximum impact.

Background

ISO/TC159 the ISO technical committee that deals with ergonomics defines it as “the scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of the interactions among human and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data and methods to design in order to optimize human well-being and overall system performance”. Another name for ergonomics is human factors. There are a number of detailed ergonomics and human factors standards, which can be used by managers and engineers in selecting and designing products, systems and services. ISO 9241-210, for example specifies the human-centred design process, which project managers should follow in order to ensure that interactive systems are effective, efficient and satisfying for their users. This standard has been influential in the digital world but the human-centred approach can reach much further into the organisation, for the benefit of all.

The Human-Centred Organisation standard sets out high-level principles and approaches to human-based risk and wellbeing, which executive board members should endorse and implement in their organisations. The standard identifies the key criteria which demonstrate that each principle has been met, the implications for the organisation of failing to meet the criteria and what steps can be taken to minimise the risks of such failure.

Principles of the human-centred approach

The human-centred approach works at every level in the organisation, starting at the top, with the executive board. Some of the following principles are already well established and addressed by standards and accepted best practice, for example social responsibility, but others need far more work to elaborate fully. We welcome input, not just from the standards community, especially examples and case studies of good practice.

Turn individual differences into an organisational strength

The organisation acknowledges that people differ in their capabilities and needs, uses ergonomics data on the nature and extent of these differences, recognises this as a strength rather than a problem and takes this into account in all areas of its business.

Make usability and accessibility strategic business objectives

The organisation uses international standards and best practices to ensure that products, systems and services are accessible and usable (effective, efficient and satisfying to use) both by employees and by customers.

Adopt a systems approach

The organisation recognises that people are part of a wider system which includes the equipment, workspace, physical, social and organisational environment in which they work and live. It follows a socio-technical approach to the design and implementation of new systems.

Ensure health, safety and wellbeing are business priorities

The organisation takes the necessary steps to protect individuals (both inside and outside the organisation) from health, safety and wellbeing risks. It is proactive in its approach to workplace health and goes beyond the minimum required by legislation.

Value employees

The organisation provides individuals with meaningful work and with opportunities to use and develop their skills in a stable employment environment.

Create a meaningful work environment

The organisation values and acknowledges the contribution that employees make both financially and through other forms of recognition. It works to ensure that employees at all levels share the vision of the organisation and are encouraged to contribute at an appropriate level.

Openness

The organisation communicates openly and effectively to staff and to the outside world. When difficult decisions are necessary, they are addressed in a timely and equitable way and communicated sympathetically.

Social Responsibility

The organisation behaves ethically and instils pride and confidence in its employees, customers and the local community.

Human-based risk

The Human-centred organization standard will provide guidance on human-based risks, their complexity and the need to measure and manage these risks effectively. It will also discuss the consequences of failing to address these needs both for the individual and for the organisation.

The main body of the standard will offer high level guidance on implementing these human-centred principles and minimising risk. Where possible, it will refer to existing International Standards and other international guidance, such as ISO 26000 (social responsibility).

How to get involved

International Standards are developed by ISO following a well-trying international consensus process. However, as Project Editors for this standard, we would also like to get input from people who are not normally interested in standards – board executives. We have therefore written this article to provide advance information on the standard, to seek feedback from the business community and to ensure that what is developed has maximum impact.

This article may be distributed widely, both electronically and in print.

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