Photo: Henry Voide

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Editorial

The right string, but the wrong yoyo

*Let's fly a kite! **

Having the right reasons for doing something does not necessarily produce the outcomes we want. We can develop an impressive reasoning, using impeccable logic, and persuade ourselves that the conclusion must therefore be unassailable. And then you try it in The Real World, i.e. the one inhabited by spouses, children, colleagues, neighbours, and so on…and they burst your nice, shiny conclusion like a balloon. It's perfect – but it sure as hell DOESN'T WORK!

In the context of standardization, "having the right reasons" can be interpreted as conforming to the standard. It can also be applied to the way in which standards are developed: for example, observing due process and achieving consensus among the stakeholders. After this impeccable process, the conclusion – the standard – should be pretty darn good. And in most cases, it is.

But there are different types of standard. Those that deal with easily measureable physical characteristics are built on solid foundations. Those that deal with good practice, i.e. which rely on people doing things in certain ways, have more potential for problems in implementation, or in verifying that they are being implemented. Which brings me to conformity assessment.

ENORMOUSLY IMPORTANT!

You may learn on the ISO Web site that "joint ISO/IEC standards and guides for 'conformity assessment' encourage best practice and consistency when products, services, systems, processes and materials need to be evaluated against standards, regulations or other specifications. 'Conformity assessment' is the technical term given to the process of evaluation and approval."

I know this extract well, because it comes from an introduction to conformity assessment which I wrote myself. While daring to believe that I finally succeeded in providing explanations that seem plausible, I am not so sure that I what I wrote is actually true.

The reason I say this is that conformity assessment is notoriously difficult to understand. In fact, when conformity assessment comes up, the non-initiated often say something like, "Well, I don't really understand what conformity assessment is all about, but I do know that IT'S ENORMOUSLY IMPORTANT FOR WORLD TRADE!"

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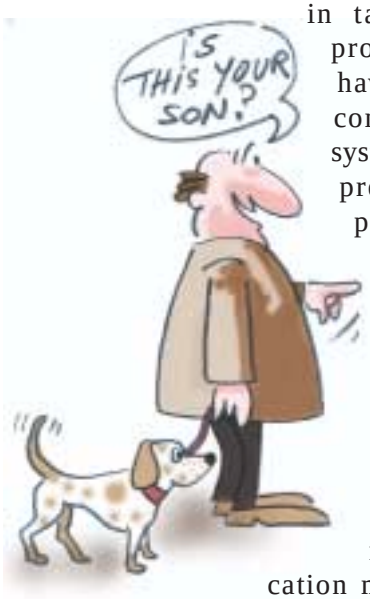
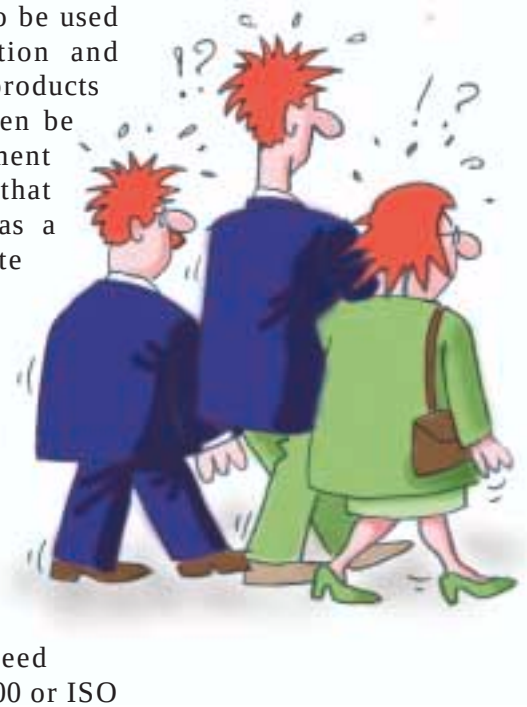
* *Fly a kite – "To make announcement or take step so as to test public opinion."* Concise Oxford Dictionary (Seventh Edition), reprinted 1988, Oxford University Press.

Conformity assessment experts are hardly going to disagree that what they do is enormously important for world trade. In fact, some of them take it a stage further and act as if they themselves are ENORMOUSLY IMPORTANT! Which might explain why they can sometimes arrive, by impeccable logic and for the right reasons, at conclusions that just do not translate into useful outcomes away from the committee room and out on the street.

An illustration can be extrapolated from the draft standard ISO/IEC 17030, *Third-party marks of conformity and their use*, in which subclause 5.5 states: "Marks of conformity may be used on documents, products, product packaging, promotional material etc. However, when a mark of conformity relates to management systems (e.g. quality or environmental management systems) and accreditation systems, the mark shall not be displayed on a product, product packaging, or in any other way that may be interpreted as denoting product conformity."

Agreed. Product standards give requirements specific to the product concerned, while the requirements of ISO management system standards are generic (and aimed, among other targets, at ensuring that organizations can consistently turn out product that conforms to relevant specifications like ISO product standards and government regulations). In other words, management system standards and product standards are meant to be used in tandem and management system certification and product certification are complementary. When products have health and safety implications, it may even be compulsory to have both product and management system certification. Therefore, it is quite clear that presenting management system certification as a product certification or a guarantee is quite wrong and should be stamped on.





Logic and outcomes

However, one school of thought among the experts would like to go even further and interpret the above-quoted requirement from ISO/IEC 17030 as meaning that management system certification marks should not appear on products or on product packaging at all. The reasoning is that people might indeed take references, however carefully worded, on products to ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 certification as product guarantees. So ban them! The logic cannot really be faulted, but what about the outcomes?

For a start, if an organization which exists to produce products has invested time, money and effort on an ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 implementation and certification programme, then it seems illogical, if not crazy, to rule that it cannot announce this achievement on its products. After all, the products, and the customers they are destined for, are the reason for being of the management system and if the existence of the system does not confer some added value on the products, then the exercise of establishing and certifying the system is pointless.

Secondly, don't customers have a right to expect that products manufactured with the support of a quality or environmental management system actually turn out to have something to do with quality, or with due care for the environment? A management system may conform to the standardized requirements for an ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 management system, but it is still useless unless it produces successful outcomes in the shape of products that satisfy customers' quality requirements, or have reduced negative impacts on the environment. What is the point, for example, of having a

certified quality management system if you produce tyres that produce road accidents?

Surely, the important objectives are that consumers and users are satisfied with the products produced by ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 certified organizations, that as a result they perceive ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 certification as "a good thing", and that an ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 certification mark on a product therefore inspires confidence. After all, inspiring confidence is what the whole business of conformity assessment is all about.

What if?

Let's play "what if?". What if it became a requirement of accredited certification that products produced by ISO 9000 or ISO 14000-certified organizations carried the logos of the certification body and of the latter's accreditation body? This would have at least three advantages:

– make life difficult for companies which claim to be certified but which, when they receive complaints from dissatisfied customers, refuse to reveal the name of the certification body (which casts doubt as to whether or not they have actually been certified);

– end the harm done to ISO and its reputation by malpractice or incompetence in certification and related activities which people mistakenly assume are controlled by ISO, and

– make the responsibility of accreditation and certification bodies transparent to consumers and users of products from certified organizations. If you are not satisfied with the product and the certified supplier or manufacturer pretends to be deaf – then you would know who to complain to.

So, if your string of reasoning still ends up with a yoyo of a conclusion that doesn't work, then why not try my kite? My arguments may not be perfect – but does that matter if the kite flies?