

Towards an International Standard on Occupational Health and Safety Management

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As a result of the need for companies to manage occupational health and safety, as well as the absence of a globally accepted international standard, numerous organisations have developed their own models in the shape of guides, standards, or guidelines. However, the resultant dispersion is creating confusion among companies, rather than making life easier for them.

In this article, we look at the current situation as far as available European management systems are concerned, and the emergent trends in the development of an international standard. Moreover, we present the special case of Spain, whose broad legislation on occupational health and safety might hinder the adoption of an international model by Spanish companies.

management systems international standards OHSAS ILO

1. INTRODUCTION

In an ever increasingly competitive environment companies need to effectively manage their activities, and hence the demand for models of management systems that may be easily adopted and implemented.

In areas like quality and environment companies have these models in the shape of international standards, the well known ISO 9000 and ISO

14000 series, respectively, which have allowed management systems to be introduced from a set of requirements. The wide acceptance of such standards is mainly due to the consensus reached by the corresponding technical committees. Three important features, however, render these standards of particular interest for companies:

1. They incorporate the “continual improvement” principle as a basis for management;
2. They allow certification of conformity to standards by third parties;
3. They have been developed according to the same general management criteria, thus facilitating the integration of both systems.

Nevertheless, the situation in occupational health and safety is different. The absence of an ISO standard in this field—the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has ruled out participation in the standardisation of a management model for occupational health and safety on two occasions—has given rise to a proliferation of models, many of which only work on a nation-wide scale, created by standardisation entities and organisms of different countries as well as private initiatives. This dispersion is creating some confusion about the model to adopt, particularly in big companies, together with an increasing demand for one single international standard.

At present, two initiatives appear as future unifying models: the OHSAS 18001:1999 standard (British Standards Institution, 1999) and the guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems only recently published by the International Labour Office (ILO, 2001).

2. CURRENT INTERNATIONAL MODELS

2.1. The OHSAS 18001:1999 Standard (British Standards Institution, 1999)

The OHSAS 18001:1999 (British Standards Institution, 1999) standard was developed as specified in the prologue, in response to the urgent demand of the organisations’ clients who took part in its development for a recognised standard on occupational health and safety management systems for the assessment and certification of organisations. The following organisations cooperated in its development:

1. National Standards Authority of Ireland,
2. South African Bureau of Standards,
3. British Standards Institution,
4. Bureau Veritas Quality International,
5. Det Norske Veritas,
6. Lloyds Register Quality Assurance,
7. National Quality Assurance,
8. SFS Certification,
9. SGS Yarsley International Certification Services,
10. Asociación Española de Normalización y Certificación,
11. International Safety Management Organisation Ltd.,
12. Standards and Industry Research Institute of Malaysia (Quality Assurance Services),
13. International Certification Services.

They propose a five-stage management cycle based on continual improvement and applicable to any type of organisation (Figure 1).

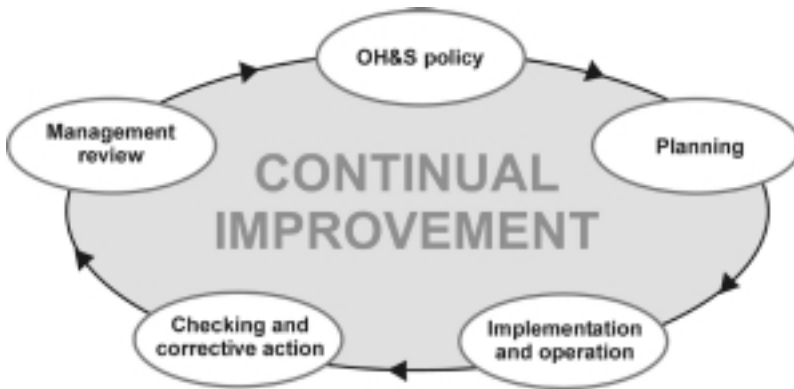


Figure 1. Management cycle proposed by the OHSAS 18001:1999 standard (British Standards Institution, 1999). Notes. OHSAS—Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Series, OH&S—occupational health and safety.

Two features make the standard particularly interesting:

1. It is compatible with the quality ISO 9001:1994 (ISO, 1994) and the environment ISO 14001:1996 (ISO, 1996) standards, thus allowing the easy integration of the three systems—a comparison of the indexes of both standards shows their high degree of compatibility;

2. It may be easily adapted to any present legislation: It establishes requirements for identification, access, and compliance of the organisation's legal obligations.

Finally, as is mentioned in the standard, it will be withdrawn should an equivalent international standard be published. This was interpreted as a way of pressing the ISO committee at the time of publication to reconsider the development of the ISO standard that was being requested. Regardless of this, its future continuity is doubtful.

2.2. Guidelines of the International Labour Office (ILO)

In January 1997 the ISO committee, after declining to develop a standard on occupational health and safety for the second time, suggested that the ILO was the right framework, among other reasons because of its tripartite structure (governments-employers-workers).

In 1998 the ISO commissioned the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA) to prepare a comparative study of the available standards on health and safety management systems and the key elements of such systems.

From the IOHA report, a guidelines draft was prepared and, at the 278th meeting, June 2000, the ILO governing body decided to convene an experts' meeting to analyse the resultant document: "Guidelines on Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems." At the 281st meeting, June 2001, its publication was passed, and accomplished in December 2001.

According to the ILO, these guidelines must be regarded as some practical recommendations for occupational health and safety managers. They have the following characteristics (International Labour Office, 2001):

1. They are voluntary;
2. They are no substitutes for national laws or regulations, or standards in force;
3. Their application need not be certified.

This last aspect is clearly reflected in the document by expressions like "should" instead of "shall," the latter being typical of certifiable standards.

A "continual improvement" based management cycle composed of five main elements, in turn subdivided into 16 elements constituting the proposed occupational safety and health management system is proposed:

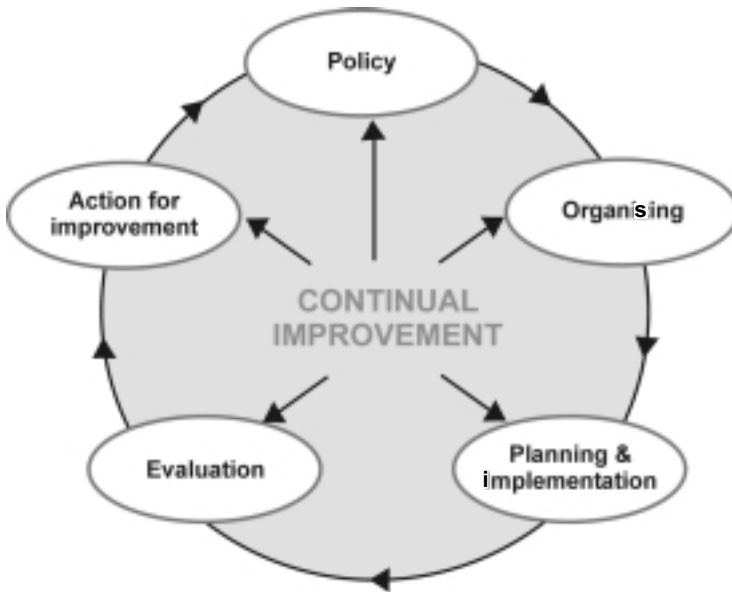


Figure 2. Management cycle proposed by the International Labour Office (ILO, 2001) guidelines.

Despite being an alternative to OHSAS 18001:1999 (British Standards Institution, 1999), we must bear in mind that they are guidelines, not a standard, the aim of which is to give guidance about the development of national guidelines that adequately fit the organisations' reality, namely their size and the nature of their activities. From this starting point, the organisations can create their own management system.

3. CURRENT DISPERSION OF STANDARDS IN EUROPE

As we have mentioned, the absence of a globally adopted international standard on occupational risk prevention has to date favoured the development of models, guides, or standards in different countries, including European countries.

Table 1 presents some of the available European documents.

These documents put forward very similar management models, with some slight differences such as:

1. Some are explicitly defined as not certifiable;

TABLE 1. European Models of Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems (International Occupational Hygiene Association, 1998)

Country	Reference	Description
Ireland	OH and S	Draft standard for code of practice for an occupational health and safety (OH and S) management system (National Standards Authority of Ireland)
Norway	96/402803	Norwegian proposal: Management principles for enhancing quality of products and services, occupational health & safety and the environment (Norges Standardisierungsforbning)
The Netherlands	NPR 5001	Dutch Technical Report: Guide to an occupational health and safety management system (Nederlands Normalisatie-Instituut)
Spain	UNE 81900	Prevention of occupational risks: General rules for implementation of an occupational safety and health management system (AENOR, Spain)
Poland	Worker Protection Programme PL 9407	Safety and health management in small and medium enterprises (SMEs): Best European Union practices regarding safety and health management in SMEs, how can labour inspection support labour prevention. (Phare Programme to the Polish State, Labour Inspector)
United Kingdom	BS 8800:1996	Guide to occupational health and safety management systems (British Standards Institution)

2. They all establish audit as an important element in their management systems, but only the Spanish standard presents a reference guide for certification auditing;
3. The Norwegian is the only model that sets requirements for integration into quality and environment management systems.

Moreover, these models have been adapted to some extent to the countries' own legislations. Their exportation to other countries is therefore rather difficult.

4. THE SPANISH CASE

Among European countries, Spain constitutes a special case due to a differentiating factor: in its legislation, apart from establishing organisational requirements and of safety and health management planning for companies based in its territory, it is specified that their management systems must be audited.

4.1. The Obligation of Audit in Spanish Law

All the European Union (EU) countries' legislations are harmonised in matters of occupational risk prevention. The reason for this is that one of the objectives stated in the Single European Act (1987), by which EEC's constitutive Treaty was modified, was the "harmonisation of conditions in this area, while maintaining the improvements made." The harmonisation instrument in EU Law is the Directive.

Directives establish general provisions, which member countries must incorporate into their legal systems in accordance with their own procedure. Of special importance is Directive 89/391, the so-called Framework Directive, because it describes the general standards related to occupational health and safety. Subsequently passed directives on specific matters and EU countries' internal legislations must adapt to this Directive.

In 1995 Spain transposed the Framework Directive through the promulgation of Act 31/1995, of November 8 on occupational risk prevention in which, from the explicit recognition of workers' right to protection of their health and integrity at work, obligations guaranteeing such right are established.

One of the obligations involves "referring the audit of the prevention system to a firm of external auditors." Thereby, Spain is the only EU member that regards risk prevention audits as mandatory in its legal system.

The vagueness of the Act—the word "audit" only appears twice in the text—gave rise to a number of questions that needed to be answered: Do all companies have to carry out audits? How, how often and by whom must they be performed?

We will briefly expose how these matters have been treated in the legal development subsequent to Act 31/1995:

1. The Spanish Legislation establishes four possible organisational modalities of occupational risk prevention. The choice will depend upon the number of workers and the organisation's nature of the activity:
 - (a) assumption by employer: The employer performs the prevention activity;
 - (b) appointment of workers: The company appoints its own workers to perform the prevention activity in combination with their habitual tasks;
 - (c) own prevention system: An occupational health and safety department formed by experts performing their activity exclusively is created in the company;

- (d) hiring of an external risk prevention system: The organisation hires the services of an external company which will be responsible for the protection of the workers' health and safety.

With some exceptions, only companies whose preventive activity is fully developed by an external prevention service are exempt from performing audits.

TABLE 2. Companies That Must Have Their Occupational Risk Prevention Management System Audited in Spain According to Their Way of Organization and Activity

Way of Organization	Activity	
	Not Dangerous	Dangerous
Assumption by employer	Compulsory	—
Appointment of workers	Compulsory	Compulsory
Own prevention system	Compulsory	Compulsory
Hiring of an external risk prevention system	Exempted	Exempted

2. The Royal Decree 39/1997, by which the Regulation of Prevention Services was passed, establishes in Article 30 that the audit "shall include a systematic, documented and objective assessment of the efficacy of the prevention system, and shall be conducted in accordance with the established or future technical rules." No such rules exist to date, and therefore auditing firms are applying their own performance criteria, hence the lack of unification.

Furthermore, the Decree determines that the audit should be carried out every 5 years, an interval considered as excessive by numerous sectors.

3. Only certain entities, which must be previously authorised by the competent labour authority, are allowed to carry out these compulsory audits. The authorisation conditions include issues on the human and material resources that auditing firms must possess, the geographical area to be covered, and a compliance commitment of no association with the audited company. The last aspect comes as an answer to the established regime of incompatibility, by which auditing firms shall neither establish links (commercial, financial, etc.) other than their own auditing activities with the companies that hire their services, nor provide external prevention services.

This framework makes Spain a special case should a future international standard be adopted. Such standard must put forward a sufficiently elastic model that allows the integration of the legal requirements that companies based in Spanish territory have to meet; otherwise the standard will be only too difficult to apply.

The fulfilment of this requirement does not prevent the emergence of questions that have to be answered: If companies adopt such standard and carry out an audit in accordance with it, will this audit be accepted as legally valid? Will only the entities authorised by the labour authority be permitted to audit the management system derived from this international standard, as is now the case? Spanish companies might be excluded from the application of this possible international standard if these issues are not solved.

4.2. The UNE 81900:1996 EX Standard (AENOR, 1996a)

At present Spain has its own standard on occupational health and safety management: the UNE 81900 standards series published by the Spanish Association of Standardisation and Certification (AENOR) in 1996. It is a set of standards that lays down requirements for the introduction of an occupational safety and health management system and the performance of the corresponding audit:

1. UNE 81900:1996 EX (AENOR, 1996a): Guidelines for the introduction of an occupational health and safety management system;
2. UNE 81901:1996 EX (AENOR, 1996b): Guidelines for the assessment of occupational health and safety management systems. Auditing process;
3. UNE 81902:1996 EX (AENOR, 1996c): Glossary;
4. PNE 81903 (AENOR, 1996d): Guidelines for the assessment of occupational health and safety management systems. Qualification criteria for prevention auditors;
5. PNE 81904 (AENOR, 1996e): Guidelines for the assessment of occupational health and safety management systems. Management of audit programmes;
6. UNE 81905:1996 EX (AENOR, 1996f): Guide for the introduction of an occupational health and safety management system.

The document that establishes the requirements of the management system is the UNE 81900:1996 EX (AENOR, 1996a), where a “continual improvement” based cycle composed of nine elements is proposed.

As has been said before, the Spanish standard allows its certification by a third party. That is why AENOR created the UNE 81901:1996 EX standard (AENOR, 1996b) which is a guide for certification audit.

The main advantage of this standard for companies based in Spain is that it adequately incorporates the legal demands of Spanish legislation in its set of requirements. However, it is in an experimental stage, and therefore still to be passed (even two of the series standards are still standard drafts). This is no impediment for any organisation to adopt it, but it must be aware that its system cannot be certified for the time being.

5. DISCUSSION

It is well known that there exist two trends in occupational risk prevention as far as standardisation of management models is concerned: that in favour of the development of a single certifiable international standard, and that against it.

The need to offer an occupational health and safety management system, mainly due to the demand of companies, has given rise to a proliferation of national models that cannot easily be exported to other countries. This situation justifies the latter trend, according to which the efficacy of an occupational health and safety management system depends upon the company's own characteristics and the environment in which the activity is performed. This is why a general model would be too difficult to apply.

Nevertheless, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of some new proposals for global management models, such as the ILO guidelines and the OHSAS 18001 standard (British Standards Institution, 1999), which might become generally accepted in the future. The main difference between the two is that OHSAS 18001 is certifiable, whereas the ILO guidelines are not. This will most probably be the decisive factor in the choice of companies for an international model, although the reaction of the ISO in the future is not clear.

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