

What is ISO?

So what's it all about? If we take a look at the ISO's website (www.iso.org) we are told: "ISO (International Organisation for Standardization) is the world's largest developer of International Standards which give state of the art specifications for products, services and good practice, covering almost all aspects of technology and business and helping to make industry more efficient and effective".

Sounds good doesn't it?

"ISO standards make a positive contribution to the world we live in. They ensure vital features such as quality, ecology, safety, economy, reliability, compatibility, interoperability, efficiency and effectiveness. They facilitate trade, spread knowledge, and share technological advances and good management practices".

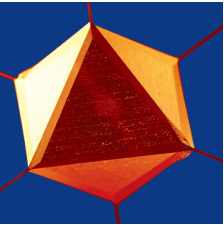
Well what a good start! If we are involved in any industry, or activity, of any kind we would surely want to be "**more efficient and effective**". In the recently brutal world of low-margin construction, that is not an aspiration it is a pre-requisite for survival.

Back to the website: "We are a network of national standards bodies. These national standards bodies make up the ISO membership and they represent ISO in their country". In the UK the application of ISO rules and standards is under the control of UKAS, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (www.ukas.com).

More background. Everyone talks of ISO rather than IOS, which would after all be the acronym for the 'International Organisation for Standardization'. Why? Because 'International Organisation for Standardization' would have different acronyms in different languages (IOS in English, OIN in French for Organisation internationale de normalisation). So the founders decided to give it the short form ISO. ISO is derived from the Greek isos, meaning equal. Whatever the country, whatever the language, the short form is always ISO.

What is a Standard?

"A standard is a document that provides requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics that can be used consistently to ensure that materials, products, processes and services are fit for their purpose". It's getting better don't you think? I'm sure you would agree that our customers want to know that our products, processes and services are fit for purpose. To have our offerings therefore assessed against a universally acknowledged appropriate "standard" is therefore one way of our customers being assured that we are a safe pair of hands to engage and do business with.



As we are concerned primarily with the needs of specialist subcontractors and suppliers, the most relevant standards for those businesses are ISO 9001 (Quality Management), ISO 14001 (Environmental Management) and OHSAS 18001 (Health & Safety Management).

In purely general terms, and we are back to our friendly website here, "ISO International Standards ensure that products and services are safe, reliable and of good quality". You can't argue with that can you? "For business, they are strategic tools that reduce costs by minimizing waste and errors and increasing productivity". Can't really argue with that either! "They help companies to access new markets". Anybody want to access new markets?

A bit more background and then we'll move on. "Standards are developed by the people that need them, through a consensus process. Experts from all over the world develop the standards that are required by their sector. This means they reflect a wealth of international experience and knowledge". You can rest assured that the best brains in the country have been involved in the development of our appropriate standards. Standards that are needed by society, by business sectors and indeed by the government will be identified and will be developed with relevant sector partners. Which means that expertise will be brought in by those who understand the needs for the standards and the desired ramifications of the effort in implementing them and putting them to use. It is this approach that makes ISO standards broadly respected and implemented domestically and internationally, and by both private and public sectors.

Dig in a bit longer because I would argue that there are other things you can't argue with - if you see what I mean. The quality management standard 9001 and other standards that have a quality management system as fundamental to their effective application are based on eight quality management principles which can be used as a guide for improving business performance.

Sounds too good to be true doesn't it? Applying ISO standards seems to be promising us more efficiency, more effectiveness, making us fit for purpose, safer and more reliable, minimising waste and errors and increasing productivity. Moreover these standards claim to be based on principles that we can use as a guide for improving overall business performance.

It looks like, therefore, that we need another download to talk about Quality Management Principles.