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Experts Move Communications Standard Ahead in Kuala Lumpur

Format, Structure Agreed Upon; Text to Come Later This Year

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia—More than 120 delegates and observers from 40 countries participated in the first-ever meetings of Working Group (WG) 4, the group tasked by the TC 207 leadership to create an international standard on environmental communications in the months ahead. WG 4 met July 4-5 to begin the development process of the new ISO 14063, Environmental Management—Environmental Communications—Guidelines and Examples, and accomplished several objectives, according to the group's leadership.

WG 4 achieved its goals in an unorthodox manner when compared to normal operating procedures of new work item proposals, attendees said. Rather than starting with a "seed" document as a framework to build on, WG 4 began with a relatively blank slate and an open forum, where delegates and observers spent several hours explaining ideas and their global experience on the issue.

But Gary Wilson of Harding ESE, the convenor of the newly formed working group on communications, was pleased with the format and the work accomplished to date, noting that everyone in the group was "anxious to get something done."

"Our approach during this first meeting took a long time, but we thought it was worth it," Wilson said. "Having a seed document is one way to start the process, but Sweden and the United States didn't feel that it was our position to do that, given the history of the situation. This issue is simply too controversial, and our goal was not to exclude anything at this point. The approach we took made things a little more difficult, but the leadership felt it was better to gather the ideas, and it worked very well."

Indeed, several countries detailed their concerns and "wish lists" regarding the new ISO 14063, which included many suggestions for incorporating best practices and new technologies, ensuring resources are available to small- and medium-sized enterprises as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and making sure that the document is flexible for all.

Dennis Durrant, a representative from Canada, told attendees that his country had studied the communications issue from internal and external

perspectives and discovered a number of key findings, particularly regarding sound communication channels with suppliers and other interested parties. He said adding such elements to ISO 14063 can make the standard more credible and user-friendly.

But Durrant also voiced concerns over the new standard, which was echoed from other experts as well. He wanted to ensure that the working group made the standard “market relevant,” and remained in communication with other committees around the world working on similar initiatives, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

“We shouldn’t duplicate these works or cause more confusion in the marketplace,” Durrant said.

But Wilson told IESU that WG 4 already is cognizant of the need for awareness on other initiatives, which also includes environmental communications work within TC 207 and Subcommittee 1. That group is revising ISO 14004 and has made “considerable changes,” Wilson said. He stressed that the working group wants to remain consistent on communications language within the ISO 14000 series.

“We’ll be looking at ISO 14001 and ISO 14004 primarily,” he said. “We’ll be asking informally for all of our [TC 207] colleagues to join our process if possible.”

Wilson added, however, that regarding specific liaison organizations within WG 4, no one was interested in forming a formal relationship with GRI or other initiatives. But the leadership would make sure that “everyone is talking” with one another regarding relevant communication discussions. Ira Feldman, one of the U.S. representatives to WG 4, agreed with Wilson, adding that interested parties should understand that while some of the interest in environmental communications is being driven by reporting initiatives like GRI, ISO 14063 is intended to address communications in a much broader sense. He said the challenges for developers will be to lay out for users the range of communication issues as well as the tools and techniques that are now available. But the concepts won’t be limited to external reporting protocols such as GRI.

“This is most definitely not an effort by ISO to duplicate work that is being done by GRI and others,” Feldman said. “People involved in or who support GRI need to appreciate that ISO isn’t just doing a ‘me too’ exercise on this issue. We’re certainly aware of those programs, and many of us are involved in them as well.

“This is environmental communications in a larger sense,” Feldman continued. “This document is going to come out in the ISO 14000 series,

will likely focus on the utility of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) approach to environmental management and will link voluntary standards to environmental communications. So there's no danger that we'll be stepping on anyone's toes. We've done a good job of incorporating those issues in the past, and we'll continue to do so."

Getting Down to Business

After a day of discussion on experience and new ideas, WG 4 got down to brass tacks, and following a suggestion by the United Kingdom delegation on format, the group agreed to the following structure for ISO 14063:

- Foreword
- Introduction
- 1. Scope
- 2. Terms and definitions
- 3. Rationale (why communicate?)
- 4. Principles of environmental communication (including transparency, traceability/accuracy/reliability of information, nature of communication as dialogue, etc.)
- 5. Environmental communication
 - 5.1 General (with reference to the principles of Clause 4)
 - 5.2 Plan (setting objectives, i.e., with whom to communicate, interested parties' needs and expectations, what communication is to achieve, etc.)
 - 5.3 Do (selecting information, collecting information, communicating information)
 - 5.4 Check (meeting internal and interested parties' needs)
 - 5.5 Act (review, revise, improve)
- 6. Communication approaches/options/opportunities (i.e., dialogues, focus groups, labels, product and other claims, compliance statements [with contract, supply chain, regulatory requirements], voluntary/negotiated agreements, Web sites, open days, annual reports, open houses)
 - Examples and annexes, as necessary

After agreeing to the structure, WG 4 broke into three task groups to address Clauses 4, 5 and the Examples section, and developed concepts that the WG 4 chairman and secretary will follow to develop a first working draft during the next few weeks.

Kristina Sandberg, the working group's secretary from Sweden, said that the task group breakout sessions were where the group really made progress.

“I was very satisfied with those sessions,” Sandberg said. “Because we were starting from scratch at this meeting, there had to be a lot of discussion. The Swedish delegation was fine with the results.”

But Sandberg foreshadowed that the bulk of the group’s work lies ahead, and several issues remain open for discussion and debate. She said the group had some debate on the principles and process they’re using, and the issue of information verification came up and “will most definitely come up again.”

“Those issues won’t go away,” Sandberg said.

Wilson agreed, and noted that other issues are likely to initiate further debate in the months ahead, including the definitions and examples sections.

“There was a strong feeling in the group to not even talk about the definitions yet because those discussions will likely be very long,” Wilson said. “Also, I don’t think people understand the Swedish and U.S. views on examples yet. The product that came out of the group didn’t really reflect the process that was intended. But it’s very early in the examples process. I think that once we fill out the PDCA, we can start seeing what we need to have as examples for the user community.”

Wilson also noted that the group would probably have debate on PDCA methodologies, because WG 4 has overwhelming agreement that ISO 14063 shouldn’t be prescriptive in any way. At the same time, however, it is difficult to define a methodology without prescribing some kind of path for users to take.

“I think it’s still too early to tell where this will go,” he said. “The leadership has some control over the first draft to help guide that issue so people will understand our thinking. But we’ve got a long way to go on this whole initiative.”

Still, delegates were pleased that the environmental communications work is underway.

“We’re excited about the possibility of this standard,” said Randy Kritkausky, president of Ecologia, an NGO involved in TC 207. “Our goal as an organization is to bridge the misunderstanding that often comes with environmental issues, and the voluntary nature of this standard—if done right—can enable that. This is about building trust, which requires patience and time. The benefits of this work could be enormous.”

Joe Cascio, chairman of the U.S. Technical Advisory Group and a U.S. representative to WG 4, said he couldn’t agree more.

“That’s absolutely true, and I’ve been trying to make that point on the standards being voluntary for 10 years,” Cascio said. “We got a good start on [ISO 14063] because everyone was open-minded and flexible. We

accepted better ideas into the process than what we had, and I think we're set for some real progress."

The leadership of TC 207 WG 4 will meet the week of Sept. 10 to complete the first working draft of ISO 14063, which will be circulated to all members for comment. Those comments will be discussed at the next full WG 4 meeting, slated for Dec. 2-3 in Denmark. The U.S. WG 4 will meet in Washington, D.C., during the U.S. TAG meeting Sept. 25 to discuss Working Draft 1 and prepare comments for submittal to WG 4, and to prepare U.S. experts for the December WG 4 meeting.

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