

# Credibility and process thinking in environmental communication

## New requirements of ISO 14001:2015

**ISO 14001:2015 has now been published. Management representatives and auditors, as well as supervisors and employees need to start thinking about how to interpret the changes for their own organization now. One subject that the revision focuses on is internal and external communication. Some consider this to be a Soft Fact, but depending on your business sector, risks, or levels and conflicts of interest this may become a very Hard Fact very quickly. Once the credibility of environmental communication has been compromised, it is extremely difficult to regain the trust of customers, partners and the public. There have been many examples of this in the past. ISO 14001:2015 now includes a stronger focus on this.**

The increased importance of environmental communication is being fed from many sources. On the one hand, interested parties have been given more emphasis. Once the relevant parties have been identified, we need to ask which information needs to be forwarded. Customers may also increasingly inquire after your environmental performance: they may need this for their own life cycle planning of products and within their supply chain. Environmental reporting, on the other hand, has become common practice. Many organizations already participate in the voluntary, European eco-audit directive EMAS, or the internationally recognized Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), among others. Starting 2016 in the European Union, 25,000 organizations with more than 500 employees will

have to publish a sustainability report with non-financial information (EU Directive 2014/95). There is a noticeable trend among ca. 2,500 large European companies to integrate their reporting about economic, social and ecological aspects and results. The International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC) is currently working on a framework for integrated reporting.



## What exactly does ISO 14001:2015 require?

### 7.4.1 General

In which the organization shall establish and implement a process for internal and external communications relevant to the environmental management system. This process shall include with whom to communicate, when, on what, and how. What is new here is that a process is now required, while previously it was just a method or procedure for communication. In planning the communication process, the organization is now also required to take into account its compliance obligations. Those may derive from reporting constraints for permits, or data deliveries to the supply chain or external presentations. One of the major changes is that the organization shall ensure that information communicated is correct and credible.

What has not changed is that the organization still has to react to communications regarding its environmental management system, but now this also includes relevant internal communication, such as reports issued by environmental assessors, whether voluntarily assigned or mandated by law. External communications still enjoy the privilege of being input for management review. This has not changed. The term “communications” generally includes relevant inquiries, suggestions for improvement, complaints or news. The organization shall retain documented information as evidence of its communications, as appropriate.

1. Which are your organization's environmental objectives?	Legal certainty	Risk mitigation	Conservative efficiency	Opportunity focus	External legitimation	External credibility	Competitive advantage	Comprehensive env. protection	Improved env. performance	...
2. Which strategies does your organization pursue?										
Fulfill legal and other external env. requirements, also for reporting if appl.	X	X			X	X		X	X	
Reduce env. cost			X							
Include interested parties in the improvement of env. performance		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Invest in env. friendly technologies and env. competence				X	X	X		X	X	
Invest in env. friendly product development				X	X	X	X	X	X	
Communicate env. self-declarations and env. reporting externally					X	X	X	X	X	
Promote corporate ecological sustainability in all areas				X	X	X	X	X	X	
...										

An organization's objectives and strategies

### 7.4.2 Internal communication

Communication between the various levels and functions of the organization continues to be a requirement. What is new is that this now includes changes to the environmental management system.

### 7.4.3. External communication

This is basically a repeat of the general requirements regarding the external communication of relevant information as established by the organization's communication process(es) and its compliance obligations.

### What is the purpose of environmental communication?

As a rule, all strategies and objectives are tied in with internal and/or external communication. This is what makes it so important to recognize why environmentally relevant information needs to be communicated. And that is why an organization's top management should agree on strategies and objectives and be aware of the values associated with them. That is the basis upon which to define the required environmental policies and objectives, and to align them with the strategic focus and context of the organization. This is where you need to determine the importance of environmental dialogue with interested parties, such as employees, suppliers or neighbors.



### Relevance matters

A stringent approach allows for an effective and credibly designed communication process. What is important here is to focus on relevant, environmental information. Avoid all types of formalism, perfectionism and aimless activism in order to keep the process slim. Also avoid green-washing. This happens whenever environmental subjects are pushed to the front even though interested parties consider them irrelevant to the organization's actual environmental impact. Credibility is also endangered whenever employees or supervisors only pay lip service to the communicated environmental standards and values. By the same token, correctness in environmental communication does not happen on its own. Errors may occur when environmental data is communicated without being reviewed for correctness and up-to-dateness first. The requirement to establish and implement a process that ensures credibility and correctness is therefore the perfect choice.

### What does process-driven environmental communication include?

According to clause 3.3.5, ISO 14001:2015 defines a process as a set of interrelated or interacting activities which transforms inputs into outputs. A process may, but is not required to be documented. That is the framework for the various requirements of ISO 14001:2015 as below.

### The communication process

Input	Activities	Result
Internal and external issues from the organization's context, especially env. relevant influences on the organization Relevant expectations and needs of interested parties Management objectives and strategies Significant env. aspects and performance, to include product life cycle Legal and other (self) env. commitments Relevant risks and opportunities relevante interne/externe Äußerungen Resources for env.-related communications (personnel, technology, media) ...	<p><b>WHO with WHOM</b> Internal/external Authorized and entitled</p> <p><b>ABOUT WHAT</b> Relevant Confidential Suitable</p> <p><b>WHEN</b> Regularly Case-by-case</p> <p><b>HOW</b> Understandable True Factual and reliable Consistent and complete Written/oral Formal/informal</p>	Scope of applicability of the EMS Environmental policy Management review Information and reports – documented (print, IT, video, etc.) or not Legally conformant reporting Documented communication evidence, if applicable ...

Opportunities for communication can be individual cases, project cases, regular cases or routine cases. This is subject to how complex the process steps are, how well they can be planned or structured, how similar they are and how repeatable. To an increasing degree, environmental communication is also integrated in existent processes, e.g. in purchasing, production, R&D, waste disposal, hazardous material handling, laboratories, claims processing, management or public relations. An environment-related emergency will usually be notified immediately. Instructions on how to handle hazardous materials is usually carried out verbally during a demonstration; during an Open

House, a presentation may be shown. Environmental information is varied and communications must be designed in accordance with their significance. By now you have probably realized that communications cannot be defined as one central process. However, the credibility, correctness and suitability of communicated environmental information must be ensured at all times.

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