Certification and Accreditation Performed by National Standards Organizations

Does It Reinforce or Damage the Traditional Work of NSOs?

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Many national standards organizations (NSOs) have become involved in metrology, product testing, certification and/or accreditation in addition to their core activities of standards development, setting standards, providing information on standards and standardization, and maintaining membership in ISO and IEC.

NSOs, for example, in Denmark, Finland, France, Kenya, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and the United Kingdom are involved in product testing and certification. They have their own product labels that demonstrate a product's conformity to standards. Most of these NSOs also carry out quality and environmental management certification activities. Accreditation bodies are generally outside a given country's NSO, although the latter often plays a leading role in setting up such a body. In the Czech Republic, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, and Thailand, however, the NSO performs accreditation.

While business theory, especially with regard to the service sector, looks favorably on diversification given certain conditions, the combination of certification and accreditation activities with standardization services represents a conflict of interest.

From theories on diversification strategies, we know that such portfolio extensions can be of benefit to customers, as we are expecting them to prefer one-stop shopping, provided that the services have an acceptable price-performance ratio and are not conflicting. NSOs in certification or accreditation can have synergy with core standardization services. Good internal communication within the NSO bureau is a prerequisite for this.

However, outside of general business theory, there are several concerns with regard to the expansion of services within NSOs.

Testing and Certification

In short, for the sake of assuring their independence in standards development, NSOs should not be involved in testing and certification. Testing and certification, in general, are based on standards, so the target groups for standardization and testing/certification may overlap. NSO offices involved in these activities experience the applicability of the standards concerned and can use this experience when revising the standards or preparing related ones. Furthermore, standardization as well as testing and certification are part of a country's institutional infrastructure. However, there is a danger of conflicting interests.

Charles de Souza, Baron de la Bédée and de Montesquieu (1689–1755), developed the famous trias politica: he stated there should be a strict separation of powers among the legislative, the executive, and the judicial branches. There should also be a separation of powers among standards development, standards implementation, and testing/certification. NSOs develop standards, companies and other organizations implement them, and test houses and certification bodies judge or do companies meet the requirements laid down in the standards. The intertwining of standards development on the one hand and testing/certification on the other may cause problems.

- NSOs might be accused of influencing standards in order to stimulate their businesses in testing/certification by making standards complex, giving preference to their own test methods, or promoting development of additional standards.

- NSOs might also be accused of creating standards that do not make sense, or not making them as clear as possible. It is possible that NSOs might take advantage of the complexities involved to shape and influence standards.

- New testing/certification would be required, and this could lead to the duplication and overlap of standards. The NSO itself is not responsible for ensuring the conformity of products with the standards.

- The presumption of the NSO in a particular area may be seen as a conflict of interest and result in the duplication or overlap of standards.

Accreditation

Accreditation has a long history, and it is a set of criteria or rules that govern the process of determining whether an organization holds the necessary assets, skills, and resources to perform its activities. Accreditation is a formal recognition of the competence of an organization to perform specific functions. It is a process that involves the evaluation of an organization's management systems, technical competence, and adherence to recognized standards or guidelines.

NSOs have a special role in the implementation of ISO/IEC standards, and they are often involved in the development of accreditation schemes. However, there are concerns about the conflict of interest between accreditation and the development of standards, as the NSO may have a vested interest in promoting its own standards and accreditation schemes. This can lead to the duplication of efforts, and it may be perceived as a conflict of interest.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the business theory of diversification is appealing, it may not always be appropriate in the context of standardization. The risk of conflicting interests and the duplication of efforts should be carefully considered. The NSO should be cautious in diversifying its activities and ensure that it maintains a clear separation between standardization and testing/certification activities. This will help to maintain the integrity and credibility of the NSO and promote the effective implementation of international standards.