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What's in an EMS?

There are several elements to an EMS.

Environmental policy

Central to the EMS is the environmental policy - the declaration of the organisation's overall aims and principles with respect to the environment, as defined by its senior management. It must include a commitment to the continual improvement of environmental performance and to compliance with environmental legal and other requirements. The policy must also be publicly available.

All organisations have, to some extent, an effect on the environment. The policy should recognise this and give emphasis to those effects that are the most significant. The policy should also be used to communicate aims and objectives to employees and other interested parties including shareholders, customers and suppliers. The organisation's environmental policy may be integrated with its other policies (e.g. health and safety, quality) or it can be a stand-alone document. In order to demonstrate the commitment of senior management to the environmental policy, it is often signed by the organisation's chairman or most senior officer.

Identification and evaluation of environmental impacts

A key element of an EMS is the process of identifying and evaluating the organisation's impacts (or commonly termed 'aspects') on the environment. These impacts may be positive or negative, beneficial or adverse, and they relate directly to the activities, products and services that cause them. This evaluation is often called an environmental review, and it's important as it ensures that the EMS is focussed on the environmental issues that really matter (those that are most significant) and that resources and management time are concentrated on controlling and improving them.

Examples of environmental impacts include:

- emissions to air;
- releases to water;
- disposal of waste and contamination of land;
- use of energy, raw materials and natural resources;
- land use and habitat loss;
- disposal of the organisation's products by customers; and
- Environmental performance of contractors and suppliers.

Assessment of significance

Assessing the significance of an environmental impact is one of the most difficult parts of environmental management. There are many different tools and techniques and, frequently, more than one approach can be used for a given situation. The significance of an environmental impact can be assessed through consideration of:

- size, nature, frequency, likelihood and duration of the environmental impact;
- the sensitivity of the receiving environment and the extent to which the impact is reversible;

- the extent to which the impact (or the activity, product or service which causes it) is covered by environmental laws and regulations
- The importance of the impact to interested parties – e.g. employees, neighbours, stakeholders.

Targets and objectives

The results of the environmental review and the evaluation of the significance of the environmental impacts are used to set objectives and targets for environmental improvement. Objectives are broad-based environmental goals that the organisation sets itself for environmental management and improvement. They may relate to a specific environmental issue, for example:

- to increase the amount of waste recycled over the next year by 25%; or
- To manage issues which will help to deliver the policy – eg to ensure that all employees receive appropriate environmental training by the end of the financial year.

A number of targets might be required to achieve a particular objective. Objectives and targets should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-related which will help to track progress and ensure that achievements are being realised.

Environmental programme

The environmental programme turns the environmental objectives and targets into practical actions that can be taken to improve the organisation's environmental performance. The programme should identify individual responsibilities and the means to achieve the defined objectives and targets within the specified time scales.

Structure and responsibilities

The organisation's management will need to assign tasks to people so that everyone knows what has to be done. It is vital, if the system is to operate effectively, to know who does what, how, when and with what authority. Whatever the size of the organisation, the activities of all employees will have an impact on the environment. Directly or indirectly, significant or small, everyone can contribute positively by innovating with new ideas, changing behaviour and involving other people. This will require information, training and the development of new skills. Different people in the organisation will need different types and levels of training: some will require general environmental awareness training; others training as auditors; the design team might need training on how to integrate environmental considerations into new product designs. The key is to make sure that people are given the knowledge and skills to fulfil their roles in the EMS and to be able to achieve the environmental targets and objectives they have been assigned responsibility for.

Communication

An EMS relies on good communications for it to be effective. Internal communication needs to ensure that people are kept up to date with how progress is being made against environmental objectives and targets, and that they are able to influence the development of the EMS and environmental improvement programmes. External communications help to ensure that stakeholders are kept informed of the organisation's progress and can be engaged in the improvement process.

Procedures and documentation

The EMS must be documented and procedures need to be established to ensure that everyone knows how the system operates and what is required. Flow diagrams are particularly effective in ensuring that tasks are carried out properly. Wherever possible, organisations should build on existing systems and integrate environmental issues into them, rather than developing them separately.

Monitoring, audit and periodic evaluation of legal compliance

Information on the environmental performance of the organisation is essential if it is to track progress against its environmental objectives and targets. Without reliable and robust data, it can not be sure that it is in control of its environmental performance, or that performance is improving as intended, therefore effective measuring and monitoring of activities needs to take place on a regular basis. The frequency with which the organisation carries out periodic evaluation should depend on the potential environmental impacts of the activity, with the most significant being checked more often than those of lesser importance.

Management review

The EMS operates as a cyclical process of identifying, improving and checking. Periodic reviews by management ensure that the EMS is achieving the desired outcomes and that the environmental policy is being implemented. It will also provide a means for management to review the organisation's environmental performance trends to ensure that performance is being improved and to instigate changes to the system as necessary.

EMS certification and accreditation

Organisations may decide to have an external body confirm that their EMS meets the requirements of certified standards such as BS8555 or ISO14001. Certification, however, is not mandatory but there are a number of benefits that can be gained by an organisation having its EMS externally certified, including:

- confidence that the EMS meets recognised requirements and standards;
- a means of maintaining momentum and helping to keep the EMS 'alive' and dynamic and driving forward the process of continual improvement;

A fresh pair of eyes to review the EMS and the way that it functions; and the potential for recognition for their achievements from third parties, such as customers and environmental regulators.