

Standardization for SMEs

Building on the benefits







Foreword: Building on the benefits

Standards offer a vital competitive edge to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They make life easier and safer, they create a level playing field on which to compete, they allow access to state-of-the-art technology – strengthening innovation capacity, and they help the most effective allocation of resources in the toughest of times. But despite all these benefits, it is clear that at the moment SMEs do not always benefit as much as they could from creating or using standards.

Standards organizations have pledged to change this. In June 2008, the European standards bodies, CEN and CENELEC, agreed to set up a project to identify the issues SMEs may face when getting involved in standardization. The project report, 'SME access to European standardization: Enabling small and medium-sized enterprises to achieve greater benefit from standards and from involvement in standardization', identified a toolbox of 58 solutions for standards bodies and trade associations to consider, in order to make life easier for smaller employers. CEN and CENELEC are introducing a mechanism to monitor progress on implementing the recommendations, and SMEs will participate in this monitoring process.

“ European standards provide SMEs with competitive means to excel in their specific markets. CENELEC is committed to invest in offering the relevant support to make this market opportunity a strength for SMEs. ”

Elena Santiago, director general of CENELEC

It found that one issue SMEs may face is insufficient strategic resources within the business. Leaders may be pressed for time, and therefore standards may drop down the to-do list. Standards bodies are considering solutions in three areas to address this. Firstly, they are exploring ways to enable business to take advantage of standards with fewer resources. Secondly, they are working towards making it simpler for more SMEs to get involved; and finally they are encouraging trade associations to play their part.

This guide outlines the changes European standards bodies, national bodies and trade associations are considering, in order to improve the value of standards to SMEs and ensure that every business can take advantage of all that standards have to offer.

Key points

Standards bodies are exploring ways to make it easier for SMEs to realize the benefits of standards.

There are five stages in the standardization process that companies can benefit from being involved in: understanding the benefits, accessing standards, using standards, feeding back in order to improve standards or establish new ones in the future, and influencing the development of standards. The study identified the key challenges of each stage of the process and the steps the industry is taking to overcome them.

The benefits of using standards

There are clear, tangible benefits for SMEs in using standards. They can use established standards in the development of new products in order to reduce the resources spent on research and development and improve their ability to innovate. They can also employ best-practice guidelines to increase efficiency, improve safety and measure performance. And by proving they adhere to standards, they can win new customers and retain existing ones by demonstrating the quality of products. The potential benefits for SMEs far exceed the cost of accessing and using standards.

Standards bodies are therefore working on ways to increase awareness of the benefits of standards. One issue they are exploring with

national governments is whether they can be built into the education system, so they are introduced to students at a secondary or technical level, to help individuals understand what standards have to offer in a host of sectors at the outset of their careers.

Standards bodies are also investigating the best ways to improve existing communications with SMEs. There is already a great deal being done to help companies understand what standards have to offer, but they are considering whether they could do more and whether there is a role for trade associations to play.

These communications are aimed not just at establishing a general appreciation of the value of standards. Standards bodies are also exploring how they can tailor them so that SMEs can further appreciate the direct benefits for the individual organization. One solution would be the publicizing of case studies, where smaller organizations have profited from their involvement with standards. Another approach would be to involve trade associations in these communications.



“ Standards are a way of opening markets to SMEs, enabling them to absorb the know-how that exists within standards, which in turn helps them to innovate. ”

Loucas Gourtsoyannis, director of NORMAPME, an organization devoted to the interests of SMEs in European standardization

Key points

Standards bodies are exploring improvements in education and communication to help smaller companies understand what standards have to offer them and their organizations.

Better access to standards

For SMEs to take full advantage of standards, they need to be able to get hold of the relevant standard easily. Standards bodies already make them readily available, but access could be improved if SMEs had a better understanding of where to start in their search, and if existing search processes were further simplified.

Most people prefer to look for things like standards online, so European and national standards bodies are addressing the question of whether current online search functions could be improved. One such facility will enable organizations to track down standards in their local language – without needing to know whether they are looking for a national or international standard.

In addition to search functionality, standards bodies are exploring other solutions to simplify the tracing of standards. This could include putting together sets of relevant standards for specific sectors, disciplines and types of organization. It could also include issuing press releases concerning new standards, targeted at particular groups. Bodies could even offer guidance for organizations on how to trace relevant standards. Trade associations could also be involved, informing members of standards relevant to their sector or discipline.

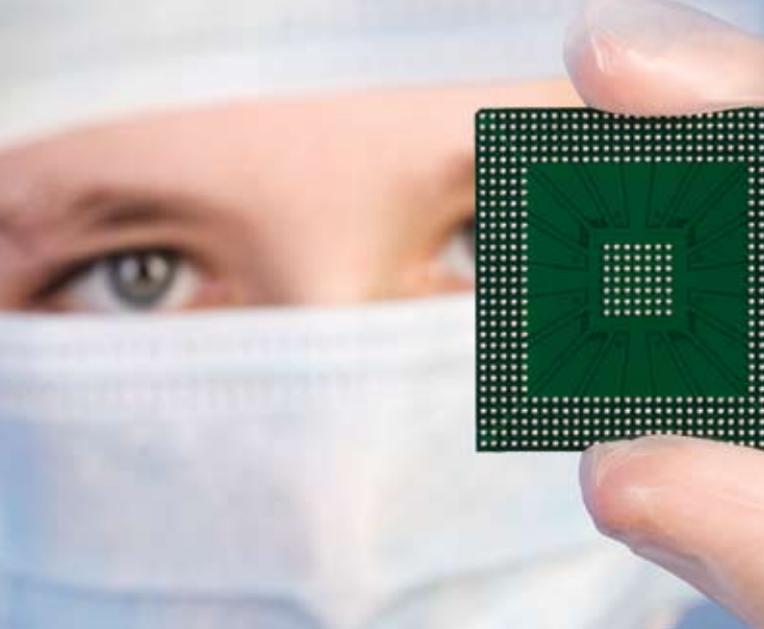


“ It should be straightforward for smaller organizations to easily trace the most suitable standards for their business, and access all the information they need to make the most appropriate buying decisions. ”

Mike Low, director of standards at the British Standards Institution

Key points

Standards bodies are looking into ways to make it easier to trace standards – from online searches to collections of standards for particular sectors – and offering guidance on how to look for a standard. They are also investigating ways of enabling smaller companies to make better buying decisions.



“ We were an early adopter of ISO 9001 for two reasons. Firstly, it makes us look at our own systems and how we handle manufacturing and client feedback. Secondly, to the outside world it shows we are a competent and professional company. ”

Dean James, sales and marketing director of CorinTech, an SME electronics company based in Hampshire, UK

Key points

Standards bodies are working to make standards easier to understand, including the technical content and language and the context. They are also looking into ways of improving expertise within SMEs.

Easier use of standards

Once SMEs have traced the right standards to benefit their business, they also need to be able to implement them effectively. There are a number of issues the standards bodies are addressing in order to make this easier.

They are focusing on the issue of making standards easier to understand. There are a number of areas where clarity is important, including the technical content and language, the local language, references to other standards and information on the context.

Technical content and language are questions for technical committees, which are exploring ways to ensure standards are written with the needs of SMEs in mind. CEN and CENELEC are working to ensure these levels of clarity are upheld.

These committees are also addressing the issue of the number of other standards that may be referenced within the standard. Possible solutions include a document for each set of interrelated standards, providing a clear picture of standards in each area. In addition, where a standard cannot be understood without reading another one, standards bodies may look into the possibility of bundling relevant standards together.

In terms of helping SMEs understand the context of a new standard, possible approaches would be listing any differences from earlier versions, or producing a document of background information. National bodies are also working to translate more standards into national languages.

There are also issues relating to the implementation of standards. SMEs need to be able to implement them as simply as possible, and they need the resources in place to do so effectively.

Part of this process may include an online user panel for each standard, so SMEs can visit the website and discuss how standards can be implemented and how best to use them.

Successful implementation also involves a review to ensure it has helped the business meet its objectives.

Improved feedback on standards

Once an SME has implemented a standard it will be encouraged to feed back to the standards bodies in order to improve the standard in the future. Trade associations have a key role to play in collating the feedback from SMEs. Standards bodies are also exploring ways to make this easier.

Possible options could include a questionnaire, which could be sent to all buyers to gather initial feedback. Alternatively, when they send out the standard, they could include a short text within it explaining how to give feedback, and more broadly how to get involved in the standardization process.

Standards bodies are also looking into ways to make it easier for smaller organizations to approach them. This could include allocated contact points to help SMEs make suggestions.



“ To take full advantage of standards, smaller organizations should be able to get involved in the process of standardization and help shape the standards of the future. ”

Henk de Vries, associate professor of standardization at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

Key points

It should be simple for SMEs to offer feedback on standards.



“ Participating in the development of standards enables us to network and gather information. We can learn what the standards will be for our customers and it gives us a commercial advantage in developing products to meet them. ”

Lennart Jansson, managing director of Firefly, a developer of commercial fire safety equipment, with 50 employees, based in Örebro, Sweden

Key points

Being involved in standardization gives a business a competitive edge. Standards bodies are exploring ways to facilitate involvement by making it simpler for SMEs to trace projects.

More influence on the development of standards

Being involved in the standardization process is vital, because it is an opportunity to influence the content of a standard so that it reflects the business needs. It is also a chance for SMEs to receive information on the issue from their peers, and to establish contacts with interested partners. Although surveys in some countries indicate that many participants in standardization are SMEs, standards bodies are exploring ways to make the process more accessible.

The first step is to focus on increasing awareness of the process of standardization. The solution here is more education and communication, through the methods outlined earlier, which can highlight the benefits of involvement.

Standards bodies are also working on ways to make it more straightforward for SMEs to trace projects. This may be through online search facilities, and providing an overview of ongoing work to develop new standards. It may also include press releases covering new projects, targeted at those who could most benefit from taking part.

They are also looking into ways of inviting SMEs directly to get involved, and exploring a method for systematically mapping relevant stakeholders for each project at inception and throughout the process.



For smaller companies to be involved in the process of standardization, there are also practical issues that can be improved to make life easier.

One approach would be to examine ways in which SMEs can participate remotely – through online solutions. They could, for example, enable SMEs to submit comments on draft standards and discuss those standards online. They may also be able to benefit from the use of technology such as electronic discussion forums and facilities for electronic meetings, which would make participation in committees simpler and cheaper.

There is also a role for trade associations, which may be able to get involved in the process on behalf of their SME members. This may have an additional benefit of adding extra weight to the SME argument, by bringing together the arguments of several SMEs. Standards bodies are also working to make SME involvement more effective, and are investigating the opportunities for training or support.

Once involved, SMEs can gain additional benefit from being able to evaluate whether their participation was worthwhile. Standards bodies are working on a method for evaluation. They are also considering impact assessments, and a methodology to evaluate standardization projects, including the level of involvement of stakeholders.

“ Innovative businesses can benefit from sitting on the committee responsible for creating particular standards. ”

John Mosesson, chief executive of Stramit International, which helps companies set up strawboard-manufacturing plants

Key points

Standards bodies are looking at practical solutions to make involvement easier, and identifying ways in which SMEs can evaluate the benefits of involvement in the process.

Ensuring quality within standardization bodies

There are steps being taken within every stage of the standardization process to make life easier for SMEs. To underline their commitment to the process, standards bodies are using relevant management systems including ISO 9001 to manage the quality of this process. They are also examining the extension of the use of business plans to manage all standards committees.

They are also considering solutions which go beyond improving the system, to include establishing new systems too. One option, for example, could be to offer an additional way for organizations to get involved in standardization. Smaller organizations may want to get involved in one standard, while the committee may be in charge of hundreds, so the system could be extended to allow SMEs to influence the process or obtain targeted information on the projects they are interested in.

Meanwhile, national standards bodies are exploring all the opportunities to work with trade bodies to ensure their input and provide them with the standardization knowledge to enable them to assist their members. Standards bodies are also reviewing the training they provide for their staff to better meet the needs of SMEs. Together, these steps will improve the operation of standards and standardization, to enable smaller companies to take better advantage of all that standards have to offer them.

They will work to assist with resourcing issues, simplify the process and make it more accessible, and make effective use of third parties – the trade associations – so standards can help give them a competitive edge.



“ SMEs have much to gain from being involved in standards, and we are committed to doing everything within our power to enable them to enjoy these benefits. ”

Gaston Michaud, secretary general of CEN

Key points

Standards bodies are examining every stage in the process to make it easier for SMEs to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by standards.

CEN and CENELEC National Members

Austria

ON – Österreichisches Normungsinstitut www.on-norm.at

ÖVE – Österreichischer Verband für Elektrotechnik www.ove.at

Belgium

NBN – Bureau de Normalisation/Bureau voor Normalisatie www.nbn.be

CEB/BEC – Comité Electrotechnique Belge/Belgisch Elektrotechnisch Comité www.ceb-bec.be

Bulgaria

BDS – Bulgarian Institute for Standardization www.bds-bg.org

Cyprus

CYS – Cyprus Organisation for Standardisation www.cys.org.cy

Czech Republic

UNMZ – Czech Office for Standards, Metrology and Testing www.unmz.cz

Denmark

DS – Danish Standards www.ds.dk

Estonia

EVS – Estonian Centre for Standardisation www.evs.ee

Finland

SFS – Finnish Standards Association www.sfs.fi

SESKO – Electrotechnical Standardization Association www.sesko.fi

France

AFNOR – Association Française de Normalisation www.afnor.org

UTE – Union Technique de l'Electricité www.ute.asso.fr

Germany

DIN – Deutsches Institut für Normung www.din.de

DKE – Deutsche Kommission Elektrotechnik Inormationstechnik im DIN und VDE www.dke.de

Greece

ELOT – Hellenic Organization for Standardization www.elot.gr

Hungary

MSZT – Hungarian Standards Institution www.mszt.hu

Iceland

IST – Icelandic Standards www.stadlar.is

Ireland

NSAI – National Standards Authority of Ireland www.nsai.ie

ETCI – ElectroTechnical Council of Ireland Limited www.etcil.ie

Italy

UNI – Ente Nazionale Italiano di Unificazione www.uni.com

CEI – Comitato Elettrotecnico Italiano www.ceiweb.it

Latvia

LVS – Latvian Standards www.lvs.lv

Lithuania

LST – Lithuanian Standards Board www.lsd.lt

Luxembourg

ILNAS – Institut luxembourgeois de la normalisation, de l'accréditation, de la sécurité et qualité des produits et services www.ilnas.lu

Malta

MSA – Malta Standards Authority www.msa.org.mt

The Netherlands

NEN – Nederlands Normalisatie-instituut www.nen.nl

NEC – Nederlands Electrotechnisch Comité www.nen.nl

Norway

SN – Standards Norway www.standard.no

NEK – Norsk Elektroteknisk Komite www.nek.no

Poland

PKN – Polish Committee for Standardization www.pkn.pl

Portugal

IPQ – Instituto Português da Qualidade www.ipq.pt

Romania

ASRO – Romanian Standards Association www.asro.ro

Slovakia

SUTN – Slovak Standards Institute www.sutn.gov.sk

SEV – Slovak Electrotechnical Committee www.sutn.gov.sk

Slovenia

SIST – Slovenian Institute for Standardization www.sist.si

Spain

AENOR – Asociación Española de Normalización y Certificación www.aenor.es

Sweden

SIS – Swedish Standards Institute www.sis.se

SEK – Svensk Elstandard www.elstandard.se

Switzerland

SNV – Schweizerische Normen-Vereinigung www.snv.ch
Electrosuisse www.electrosuisse.ch

United Kingdom

BSI – British Standards Institution www.bsigroup.com

BEC – British Electrotechnical Committee www.bsigroup.com



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