The new ISO Management System Standards, and the power of the High Level Structure they are based on

Since the "High Level Structure" (HLS) was published back in 2012 by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) there have been a number of ISO standards released which have been based on it. As of 2015 they now include two of the big ones, being ISO 9001 for Quality management systems and ISO 14001 for Environmental management systems. They will also soon include ISO 45001 for Occupational health and safety management systems.

The HLS is a very significant guidance document to come out of ISO. It promotes a standardised structure for management systems standards to be written to. There are two significant advantages in doing this. Firstly, and very significantly, standards written to the HLS are much more structured around how an organisation does, or perhaps should think and operate, i.e. they are more relevant to an organisation's dynamics. Secondly, such standards are significantly more standardised in their structure, clause numbers and content than ever before.

Structured to align and support an organisation's operations: In the past, ISO and other management system standards have had various structures and requirements but they were not always structured very well around the type of thinking that a well-run organisation might practice. The thinking in these standards did not always flow well and did not always relate well to corporate management from strategic direction and planning, through to tactical planning, through to operational planning, control and monitoring. A well-recognised casualty of this was that management did not see all of the requirements of these standards as relevant to the running of the organisation as a whole, or to their roles in running the organisation. So, the implementation of these standards and the maintenance of the resultant system were all too often left to staff of less senior roles, less influence and less exposure to the fullness of the management of an organisation. The net result was that all too often management continued to manage the same way they had in the past and certification was just a certificate on the wall (perhaps only to satisfy their customers who require them to have certification) with no real added benefit to the organisation's approach and or overall effectiveness.

With the offerings of the HLS, the requirements of these standards can be interpreted, implemented and monitored in ways that integrate much more effectively into the current (where current practices are adequate) management dynamics. The requirements align much better with a business way of thinking i.e. top down from the strategic level all the way through into operations. Gone is the term (and clause) Preventive Action and in its place, much earlier in the process, is risk management by way of requiring that risks and opportunities are considered and those that are most relevant are addressed and tracked through measurable objectives. Planning is then undertaken to implement actions required to achieve these objectives. With this generic approach, many if not all disciplines, be they quality, WH&S, environmental, information security, asset management or others can be embraced and managed more effectively.

Standardised in their structure and clause numbering: Where an organisation wishes to adopt two or more ISO standards for management, such as ISO 9001 and 14001, analysing, planning, coordinating and implementing the requirements of each is now much less confusing as fundamentally each standard has the same clause number structure, similar thinking, in many cases quite similar wording and requires a similar flow of information and thinking. For example, in both standards clause 4.1 relates to internal and external issues relevant to the organisation's purpose and strategic direction (with respect to quality or to environmental management). In both standards, 4.2 relates to understanding the needs and expectations of relevant interested parties. These two clauses then become inputs for 6.1 which relates to identifying risks and opportunities and planning actions to address them in concert with strategic direction. Clause 6.2 relates to measurable objectives and planning to achieve them in order to contain the identified risks and to embrace the selected and prioritised opportunities. Activities can then be undertaken to plan/implement/upgrade/change support activities (clause 7), operational activities (clause 8) and performance evaluation (clause 9) in order to track performance at all levels in the organisation. From the similarities of these clauses, mapping an organisation's activities back to all the clauses of the relevant standards is therefore easier.