

# An Introduction to British, European and International Standards

Business Information Factsheet  
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## Introduction

The British Standards Institution (BSI) defines standards as 'an agreed way of doing something'. Officially recognised standards bring benefits to all kinds of business, including manufacturers, retailers and service providers. Standards have an important and valuable role as they offer an assurance that products are safe and of a recognised quality, and that services conform to an accepted level of service delivery.

This factsheet explains why standards exist and describes the main types. It also introduces the organisations that administer standards. It includes sources of further information.

## Why do standards exist?

Standards can provide a wide range of advantages to business, including:

- Ensuring that products and services meet a certain level of quality and safety and are fit for purpose.
- Improving compatibility between products manufactured by different suppliers.
- Promoting the credibility of a business and its products and services with customers and suppliers.
- Providing added value in tendering and procurement processes.
- Providing information about a product - if a product meets a certain technical standard, it is easy for the customer to find out what its specifications are.
- Providing easier access to export markets, particularly if a business is using international standards.
- Saving time and resources when researching and detailing technical requirements for new specifications or contracts.
- Reducing unnecessary duplication of effort and basic design, while allowing for features that promote product differentiation in the marketplace.
- Ease of communicating to customers and suppliers that products satisfy legal requirements.

## Types of standards

Every year, around 2,000 new standards are published in the UK alone. Most of these are also international or European standards.

## British standards

- These start with the prefix BS, followed by the number of the standard. For example, BS 10012 is for data protection.
- Many standards cover product specifications (for example, dimensions and materials); however, standards increasingly cover other things, such as quality assurance, health and safety, and the environment.
- In some cases, manufacturers might choose to 'self-certify' that their product meets a certain standard by carrying out their own testing. The standard itself will usually describe the appropriate tests, or refer to other standards in which they are detailed.

However, it may be necessary to use specialised equipment or the skills of an independent testing body, and in this case it will usually be possible to obtain third-party certification. This is a statement from an independent body that a product meets the requirements of a standard, and is offered as a commercial service by many organisations. Third-party certification is often a regular requirement of larger buyers of electrical, telecommunications and building products.

For consumers, the Kitemark (administered by the BSI, [www.kitemark.com](http://www.kitemark.com)) is arguably the most famous symbol of standards. To obtain a Kitemark, both production facilities and quality systems are assessed, and a product is type-tested to ensure it complies with a relevant published standard. These checks are carried out on a regular basis to make sure the manufacturer is maintaining consistent manufacturing and quality processes.

## European standards

- These begin with the prefix EN, followed by the number of the standard. British adoptions of such standards are identified by the letters BS EN. For example, BS EN 71 applies to toys and their packaging.
- Some products may have to conform, by law, to one or more European Directives before they can be offered for sale in the UK or the EU. Standards known as 'harmonised standards' offer a means of demonstrating that a product meets the requirements of various Directives, and such compliance is shown by the use of the CE mark (CE stands for 'Conformité Européenne', or European Conformity). This allows goods to be traded freely and legally in EU member states.
- Products may have to be examined at a testing house before they can obtain the CE mark. This can be checked with the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy ([www.gov.uk/ce-marking](http://www.gov.uk/ce-marking)) and the BSI ([www.bsigroup.co.uk/en-GB/our-services/product-certification/ce-mark](http://www.bsigroup.co.uk/en-GB/our-services/product-certification/ce-mark)). This may also apply if components are supplied to another manufacturer.

See BIF 242, CE Marking, for further information.

## International standards

- International standards are often prefixed with the letters ISO (which stands for International Organization for Standardization, [www.iso.org](http://www.iso.org)) or IEC (which stands for International Electrotechnical Commission, [www.iec.ch](http://www.iec.ch)), followed by the number of the standard.

- The ISO 9000 series for quality management systems is one of the best-known international standards. Other examples are the ISO 14000 for environmental management and ISO 22000 for food safety.
- As BSI pioneered the development of international standards, many British standards have been absorbed within these - as in the case of BS 5750 for quality management, which has become ISO 9000.
- ISOs are recognised in most countries, but both importers and exporters should find out if any particular national standards also apply.

## Standards organisations

BSI is the UK National Standards Body and is responsible for developing and publishing British, European and international standards. It provides:

- Independent certification of management systems and products.
- Product-testing services.
- The development of private, national and international standards.
- Management systems training.
- Information on standards and international trade.

It is responsible for the production of British Standards, provides certification services for management standards such as ISO 9000 and CE marking, and is also responsible for the Kitemark.

Individual European countries have their own national standards bodies that are the equivalent to BSI. Across the EU, these bodies are represented by two organisations: the European Committee for Standardization ([www.cen.eu](http://www.cen.eu)) and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization ([www.cenelec.eu](http://www.cenelec.eu)).

Most countries - for example, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand - have their own standards organisations, although sometimes national standardisation is undertaken by a Government department. At a worldwide level, the representative body is ISO. This is made up of organisations in about 160 countries. Its area of responsibility covers all standards except electrical and electronic engineering, which are administered by the IEC.

## Where to get information about standards

- BSI's British Standards catalogue (<http://shop.bsigroup.com>) is continuously updated online. A subject index makes it easy to find the specific information needed.
- Trade associations may be another source of information about European and international standards that apply to their particular sectors or specialist areas. Some UK associations have links with their overseas counterparts, although the data they hold is likely to be restricted to members.
- The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy standardisation section of their website ([www.gov.uk/innovation-standardisation-4](http://www.gov.uk/innovation-standardisation-4)) includes information about CE marking, the EU's harmonised standards Directives and technical standards.

## Further information

BIF 29 A Guide to ISO 9000 Quality Standards

BIF 89 A Guide to the ISO 14001 Environmental Management Standard

BIF 242 CE Marking

BIF 436 A Guide to the General Product Safety Regulations 2005

## Useful contacts

The BSI Group develops standards and provides testing services, training and information.

Tel: (020) 8996 9000

Website: [www.bsigroup.co.uk](http://www.bsigroup.co.uk)

The United Kingdom Accreditation Service is a national accreditation body that assesses organisations that provide certification and inspection services. It publishes a list of accredited certification bodies.

Tel: (020) 8917 8400

Website: [www.ukas.com](http://www.ukas.com)

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