



SA 8000 standard and certificate

Among the most effective and applied tools used by businesses in Italy and world-wide, implemented in establishing a social responsibility system, is the SA8000 social standard, released by third parties accredited to S.A.I. It is a social responsibility system that was created in October 1997 by CEPAA - Council on Economic Priorities Accreditation Agency – a non-profit American Institution that in 2001 transformed into SAI -- Social Accountability International. The SA8000 system is voluntarily selected by businesses to inform their customers that their manufacturing is in conformity to the parameters concerning work conditions and respect of the fundamental rights of man. The standard addresses matters concerning behaviour, organization and management:

- Minors' Labour
- Forced Labour
- Health and Safety
- Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining
- Discrimination
- Disciplinary Procedures
- Work Schedules
- Salaries.

Another requisite involves compliance with the system.

The model, in its structure, offers some undeniable advantages:

- Universality of application
- The “measurability” of initiatives executed
- The opportunity of visibility and promotion for the business
- Business commitment in responsible behaviours towards the market

The adherence of certified businesses to standard requisites gives shape to two types of realities: **virtuous and opportunistic businesses.**

The first requisites focus on an increased level of sensitivity towards worker protection and the respect of labour conditions; territorial vocation and the subjects operating therein, and a focus on external communication. These realities interact in a continuous process of the sharing of business objectives, defined by the entrepreneur, in the interests of the workers' inside the business, and the development of a micro external system.

The opportunism expressing the second kind of businesses starts from the intention of using the certification as a tool of external promotion; moreover, they express their commitment of social responsibility in a more formal way than the first ones. This often happens when a managing group is convinced of the project's validity, but not appropriately supported by the rest of the organization or not able to apply efficient managing solutions (tools of planning, monitoring, communicating). Such a situation could be defined as “operating opportunism”, because it contains the premises to develop coherent actions in conjunction with undertaken commitments in time. It is very different from those

situations in which businesses risk introducing a public system economically enhancing the adoption of the standard and the certification of conformity without supporting, by means of appropriate actions of sensitivity, the knowledge of such implications as being more positive for the society intended as a local reality, a region or a whole country.

Both kinds of businesses as described above face some problems in applying the standard:

- Difficulties in interpreting the methods of planning activities coherent with the principles stated in the social responsibility policy (charity, support to problem target areas, sponsorship of any kind of initiative such as cultural and athletic events);
- Difficulties in actualizing and measuring the planned initiatives;
- Difficulties in identifying efficient tools of internal and external communication.
- Difficulties in applying and implementing some ambiguous requisites of the standard as well as accepting indications of an audit made by a third-party.

To make matters worse, these difficulties indicate the limitations of comprehension and belief still present in regard to social responsibility motivations; these limits contribute to shaping a fragmented reality, at least in Italy, which limits a long term vision with the need for seeing immediate results; moreover, such a commitment requires a focus on cultural evolution, more than a technical and managerial transformation.

Advantages of certification

Those businesses which are fully aware of the concept of social responsibility are businesses that want to enhance their procedures and invest in their future, because they believe that making such a commitment can bring real market opportunities: that is why **CSR must not be considered a simple option but a factor of growth or at least of stability**. Socially responsible behaviour contributes not only to enhancing a reputation, and sustaining an image, but functions in improving business relationships with all social and economic interlocutors (personnel, clients, partners, suppliers, the local community and institutions, investors, etc.): all factors involved in determining favourable conditions for the management of the business and that may contribute to producing commercial advantages.

It is worth taking the time to state the real advantages that adopting such a system can in fact offer a business:

Internally, the transparency of relational and contractual dynamics with personnel, the improvement of guarantees of health and safety in the work place and the involvement of the entire organization in training courses continually addressing socio-environmental themes, contribute to an overall improvement in the work environment, the sharing of developmental programs of the business (quality and productivity) with a consequential reduction of costs connected to injury, absenteeism and non-effective production;

Externally, attention paid to the legality and legitimization on behalf of civil society should be translated into an increased awareness in terms of private and public market competition, the improvement of commercial relations and productivity with the supplier chain, of a business' reputation with regard to investors, in the control of costs generated by environmental infractions, in the greater capability of attracting qualified resources.

We could, naturally, continue to list the benefits, but as already seen by those represented, the situation raises a series of perplexities regarding motivating a business' commitment to social responsibility. The intangibility of many advantages and the fact that they may only be perceived in the long term are elements that favour short-term, economically based decision-making, the results of which, tangible, are seen as being more easily assessed.

The key to the situation requires, therefore, a trade-off between a short-term versus a long-term vision, a method of viewing business management not only in terms of continuity and permanence in the

economic system, but in terms of the survival and growth of the entire planet.

Weak Points of the SA8000 Certification

- Maintenance Costs
- Market Awareness
- Organized Large-Scale Distribution
- Public Contracts
- Bureaucratic and Administrative Implementation