case study
#1 – International SOS

(ISO/TS 13131, *Telehealth services*)

ISO Strategy
for Services
C a s e   s t u d y
 # 1

Introduction

The ISO strategy for service standardization

Trade in services is expanding at a faster rate than trade in goods. Based on this observation, ISO anticipates that market demand for service standards will steadily increase and we want to make sure that the organization and its members will have the necessary tools and knowledge to respond to this demand, and to the challenges and opportunities it brings. This is why ISO adopted, in February 2016, the *ISO strategy for service standardization*. Our mission? Raising ISO's profile as a provider of service standards while continuing to respond to market expectations and helping our members to do the same.

For those not familiar with ISO, we are a membership-based network of national standards bodies that come together to develop International Standards ensuring products, processes and services are fit for purpose. ISO standards provide practical tools for tackling many of today's global challenges, bringing tangible benefits to business, society and the environment. ISO has already published more than 700 standards related to services in various sectors, including finance, business, brand valuation, customer contact centres, outsourcing, assessment services, IT services, marketing, network billing and many more.

ISO defines a "service" as the "result of at least one activity, necessarily performed at the interface between the supplier and customer, that is generally intangible"[1]. However, the concepts of "services" and "service standards" are broad, and many different definitions and classifications exist. Some standards purely support the provision of a service. Others may support the infrastructure (e.g. IT or financial) necessary for the provision of a service. And then we have horizontal standards such as management system standards that can be applied to the provision of a service, but also much more broadly.

Rather than concentrate on questions of definition or classification, ISO has chosen to develop case studies to illustrate the use of these different kinds of service standards and to give real-life examples of how standards are being implemented in different industries, citing tangible results in terms of service delivery and consumer satisfaction. By looking at success stories of how standards are opening up new areas of business and improving quality and consumer trust, this case study will try to understand where standards are being implemented, how they work, and why the benefits more than outweigh the investment.

Note: This case study is part of a series, which includes ISO/TS 13131, *Telehealth services*, ISO 24510, *Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services*, ISO 17680, *Thalassotherapy*, ISO 20121, *Event sustainability management systems*, and ISO 20022, *Universal financial industry message scheme*.

More information on ISO's strategy for service standardization and ongoing work can be found at **www.iso.org**.

---

1) Definition from ISO/IEC Guide 76:2008, *Development of service standards – Recommendations for addressing consumer issues*.

Analysis

Presenting ISO/TS 13131, *Telehealth services*

Debates on the need to reform the healthcare system are progressively spreading to all parts of the developed world and even starting to reach developing countries. In China, Europe and North America, the extension of life expectancy has yielded a growing ageing population, which in turn has led to a surge in healthcare costs.

The trade-off between affordable, quality health services and the heavy financial burden to government and society's health budget has never been more acute. In this context, proposals abound for innovative ways to resolve this dilemma for the benefit of the patient.

Among the solutions advocated is the diffusion of telehealth services. Telehealth – also called telemedicine – can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver healthcare services and transmit medical data over long and short distances. It encompasses a broad variety of technologies including video conferencing, Internet, store-and-forward devices, streaming media, and terrestrial and wireless communication.

The objectives are multiple : not only does it decrease the demand for hospital beds and reduce costs through out-patient treatment, it also extends the reach of medical services to remote communities living far away from the facilities of big cities. Hence, telehealth is able to meet today's new health challenges and opens endless opportunities for the future of health services.

Underpinning the sector is ISO/TS 13131, *Telehealth services*, which comes out of technical committee ISO/TC 215 for health informatics. It provides quality planning guidelines for telehealth service providers who want to follow a risk management process. Supplying remote healthcare services carries its own set of risks, and the standard provides advice and recommendations on how best to manage these hazards.

A quality plan is drawn up for risk assessment purposes, defining the quality characteristics desirable for telehealth delivery, the quality objectives that support them, and the ensuing quality procedures. Among the key requirements considered are the management of healthcare quality processes and financial resources, the management of ICT resources needed for remote healthcare delivery, as well as the processes related to people (such as workforce planning) and the provision of infrastructure and facilities.

Published in 2014, ISO/TS 13131 is the perfect example of how ICTs can improve society by facilitating the distribution of services, while keeping human beings in control. Rather than replacing human service, it complements and enhances it. That said, security is paramount in this sensitive sector where patient safety can often mean the difference between life and death. This is where ISO can deploy its full competence, by codifying and formalizing best practice in pursuit of both these objectives : quality healthcare and patient safety.

Case study : **International SOS**

Founded in 1985 in Singapore by two Frenchmen, physician Pascal Rey-Herme and his childhood friend Arnaud Vaissié, International SOS is a worldwide registered trademark for a diverse group of companies operating under this name. The parent holding company – the first to be established – is Asia Emergency Assistance Pte Ltd, which is still operating in Singapore. The initial concept was to provide international standards of healthcare throughout Asia by linking emerging countries with the services available in advanced ones such as Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the special administration region of Hong Kong.

The target audience was the wider expatriate community working on behalf of western multinationals, who had difficulty getting medical assistance in the region. Addressing this gap, International SOS set up a 24-hour emergency service that is still at the core of its activities today.

Worldwide reach

With headquarters in London and Singapore and 250 affiliated companies around the globe, International SOS employs a workforce of more than 11 000 people across 92 countries. The backbone of its network consists of 27 Assistance Centres offering local expertise in real time 24/7 and taking 12 000 calls a day. Overall, the business comprises over 5 600 medical professionals with a thorough knowledge of the local environment and healthcare system. Together, they form an integrated structure of 44 clinics and 795 remote medical service sites spread across developed and developing countries, both onshore and offshore, and practising a supervised international standard of medicine.

International SOS supplies a suite of services to a mixed portfolio of clients, from individuals to large companies holding membership packages for their employees. But the group's customer profile is slowly evolving from mostly foreign visitors to the rising middle classes in emerging countries.

What's more, the scope of services offered is also being extended to non-emergency calls ranging from basic medical advice about which medication to take, to more practical help on how to replace a lost passport. Assistance is also open to calls from non-members and, naturally, takes on more extreme cases such as emergency medical transportation. Aside from personalized medical care to individuals and their families, International SOS covers a number of private-sector industries, including oil and gas, aviation and infrastructure, as well as lending its expertise to government agencies.

Travelling safe

The focus of this case study is the company's telehealth division, which provides remote medical assistance to the far corners of the globe. International SOS, it must be noted, was the first company in the world to be awarded an ISO/TS 13131 certification for its telehealth services. Before embarking on an analysis of the certification process, it is worth looking at what telehealth services actually do.

People today are travelling more often and more widely than ever before. This means they are often faced with environments they are unfamiliar with and this level of uncertainty puts them at risk. The simple fact of being able to contact by phone a medical expert for advice or information can be extremely reassuring, both for the person in the field and the family or company back home. Moreover, modern communication technologies enable the transfer of key documents, like ECG results, a photo of a patient's lesion, X-rays and radiological images, assisting doctors and patients abroad who seek a second opinion from an expert located elsewhere. Live video transmission also means doctors are able to give long-distance consultations to patients in particularly remote areas, such as on board a vessel without having to disembark the person, thus avoiding costly medical transport.

For International SOS, implementing ISO/TS 13131 means facilitating the cooperation and interoperability of its different health systems for quality telehealth services. It also ensures a reliably high standard of service no matter where a person is in the world. The
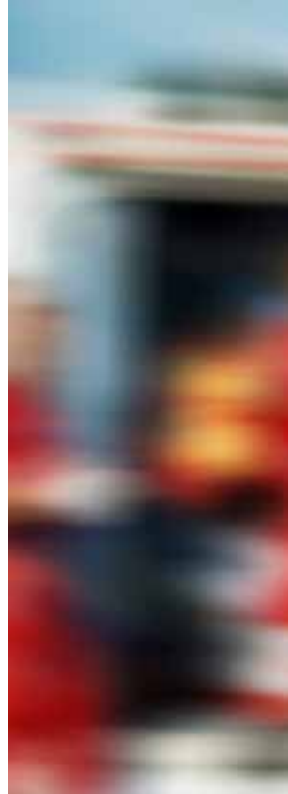
standard provides guidelines for developing quality plans and managing company resources, while putting the right policies in place to safeguard clients' private data. Understanding the potential synergies it could exploit, International SOS's senior management had already earned certifications to ISO 9001 for quality management and ISO 27001 for information security management. Getting certified to ISO/TS 13131 for telehealth services was just the logical next step on the company's journey towards excellence.

Prior to this, International SOS had commissioned the British Standards Institution (BSI), ISO member for the UK, to develop a certification specification scheme for ISO/TS 13131 to assist companies wanting to get certified. Completed in August 2015, the scheme cites conformance to ISO 9001 as a prerequisite for undergoing an ISO/TS 13131 audit, on the premise that it supports the integration and interoperability of the different standards developed by ISO.

Setting the tone

One motivation stands particularly strong in International SOS's decision to get certified : the determination to set a benchmark for the whole telehealth sector. A leading market player faced with rising competition, the company needed reassurance that its high-quality standards would provide a stamp of recognition and help distinguish it from its competitors. As a pioneer in the field, it was important to set the conditions of competition to prevent the potentially harmful practices of others from compromising the reputation of all. Moreover, considering the high risks involved in securing patients' data privacy, it was crucial for the organization to be sure its IT systems and processes were resilient, fulfilled the highest expectations in this sensitive sector and conformed to required security legislation.

A closer look at the implementation process shows that little effort was needed to comply with the requirements of the standard. A preliminary gap analysis was conducted and where ISO/TS 13131 provided more specific criteria than the ones actually in place, these were earmarked for improvement at International SOS's next annual standard review. In preparation of the audit, all applicable staff attended a two-hour workshop. The audit, which took place in September 2015, revealed no non-conformances, and hence no recommendations were made. The facts speak for themselves. In the case of International SOS, the certification process was not conducted to improve internal processes, which already met the highest of standards; rather, it served to inspire confidence to consumers and endorsed the company's excellent credentials.

Feedback received after the certification revealed that many consumers considered the implementation of ISO/TS 13131 to be " extremely beneficial " and fully recognized the magnitude of the undertaking. Moreover, in the constantly evolving healthcare market where competition is increasingly intense, being certified for their telehealth services has become a must for all companies, especially when tendering for contracts from industries and other big corporations. Indeed, during bidding processes for procurement, large companies now routinely request a status of certification, which can help clinch the deal and win a new market. ISO standards are slowly becoming indispensable, not just from a company standpoint but from a consumer's perspective, who draws confidence from the stringent certification process.

Future prospects

So what does the future hold for ISO/TS 13131? The truth is, ICTs are already present in everyday healthcare through SMSs, e-mails and other high-tech devices. Nonetheless, we can expect an extension and intensification of their use in general practice and hospitals to manage patient health. Current technological trends will also have a lasting impact on the way we practise medicine, as evidenced by the rapid adoption of smartphones and video for mobile communication, broadband Internet access, and the diffusion of better diagnostic tools. These new developments will likely inspire tighter regulations and restrictions in their application to health.

ISO standards will be instrumental in helping companies comply with these new regulatory requirements, while enhancing the efficiency of their internal processes and the quality of the health services they provide. ISO will continue to work to provide the right balance between companies, consumers and regulation in pursuit of a world with more accessible healthcare.

Our sincere thanks for their support:

- ► **Katrin Mäurich**, *Revalidation Manager, International SOS*
- ► **Toni Allen**, *UK Head of Client Propositions, Marketing, British Standards Institution (BSI)*

ISO standards used everywhere

Conclusion

ISO service standards and the 2016-2020 strategy

As this case study demonstrates, service standards not only set a much needed framework for the supply of services, they also provide an opportunity to drastically improve the quality of the services offered, contributing a growing share to the added value of a product. The more diverse and competitive a market, the more guidance consumers need to be sure they are purchasing the service they want at the best price. International Standards will help to maintain a healthy competition in the marketplace by ensuring that those companies which have already invested considerable amounts of money in order to offer better quality at affordable prices are rewarded accordingly.

As mentioned in the introduction, these case studies are part of ISO's strategy on services, which was adopted in 2016 with the aim of further developing the field of service standardization. They belong to the first pillar of this strategy on " communication and outreach " that looks at ways ISO can help its members engage with their stakeholders in the services sector and in particular with small businesses. The objective is to make a clear business case for service standardization and to position it as a natural extension of product standardization.

This will help identify the market interests of the business community, which, in turn, will help determine where (in which sectors) services are being traded, and which sectors and stakeholders could benefit most from the development of International Standards. Moreover, while preparing these case studies, we were able to consult the various committees that developed the standards, to learn from their experiences with different economic actors and to get their market feedback.

Of course, the *ISO strategy for service standardization* does not stand alone and it is worth recalling the bigger picture surrounding ISO's efforts in this area. ISO recently adopted its *ISO Strategy 2016-2020*, which will guide the organization's decisions over the next five years. Among its strategic directions is a communication pillar that aims to build recognition among the public and private sector of the value and impact of International Standards. This will help us to achieve our ultimate objective of " ISO standards used everywhere ". For although you may not yet see it, ISO is already working hard to make your life easier and the world a better place.

About **ISO**

ISO (International Organization for Standardization) is an independent, non-governmental international organization with a membership of 161* national stand-ards bodies. Through its members, it brings together experts to share knowledge and develop voluntary, consensus-based, market-relevant International Stand-ards that support innovation and provide solutions to global challenges.

ISO has published more than 21 000* International Standards and related documents covering almost every industry, from technology to food safety, to agriculture and healthcare.

For more information, please visit **www.iso.org**.

*May 2016

**International Organization
for Standardization**

ISO Central Secretariat
Ch. de Blandonnet 8
Case Postale 401
CH − 1214 Vernier, Geneva
Switzerland

iso.org