How environmental management can deliver value to organisations



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Contents

1 Introduction 3

2 Environmental management 6
Why environmental management? 6
Planning for the future 7

3 The value of environmental management 9
How do you define opportunity and the level of risk associated with it? 10
How do you define risk in an environmental management setting? 10
What is value and how do you define it for your organisation? 14
Materiality 15

4 Maturity 17
Evaluating cultural maturity 18

5 Conclusion 20

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

Higher temperatures, increased rainfall with associated flooding and a rise in droughts are being experienced globally. Ecosystems and biodiversity continue to be negatively impacted. There are global targets to mitigate and adapt to climate change and halt the decline of nature by 2030 and bring about a reversal by 2050, through net zero and the UN Global Biodiversity Framework, with different countries developing their own internal targets to deliver improvement.

This paper sets out the case for environmental management as the bedrock of sustainability and a core asset of high value in effective organisation administration. An environmental management system can be used to manage environmental risks effectively and maximise opportunities to achieve long-term prosperity.

This guide is for non-environmental/sustainability senior executives and managers to support their understanding of the value and benefit of a good environmental management system. This paper provides an overview of what an environmental management system is, how it can benefit organisations, how it fits into other management systems across organisations, and the value that environmental management can bring to operations.

Of the 'Top 10' long-term (10 years) risks to organisations, as outlined by the World Economic Forum[1], five (including the top four) relate to the environment:

1. Extreme weather events
2. Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse
3. Critical change to earth systems
4. Natural resource shortages
10. Pollution



1 World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2025*.
See https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2025.pdf

World Economic Forum Global Risks 2025 ranked by severity

In June 2025, the World Economic Forum published *The Global Risks Report 2025*. Key findings stated the following:

Risks over two years in order of severity:

1. Misinformation and disinformation
2. Extreme weather events
3. State-based armed conflict
4. Societal polarisation
5. Cyber espionage and warfare
6. Pollution
7. Inequality
8. Involuntary migration or displacement
9. Geoeconomic confrontation
10. Erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms

Risks over 10 years in order of severity:

1. Extreme weather events
2. Biodiversity loss and ecosystems collapse
3. Critical change to earth systems
4. Natural resource shortages
5. Misinformation and disinformation
6. Adverse outcomes of AI technologies
7. Inequality
8. Societal polarisation
9. Cyber espionage and warfare
10. Pollution

In this rapidly changing landscape, organisations can demonstrate their commitment to regulatory compliance and continuous environmental improvement through embedding good environmental management processes within their operations. This can lead to benefits such as reduced waste, energy savings, pollution avoidance and cost reductions.

Effective environmental management can also help organisations go beyond compliance to deliver wider value to nature and society. Environmentally responsible organisations attract and retain higher calibre staff who want to be associated with organisations that act ethically, which generates further environmental improvement.

Good environmental management can boost an organisation's reputation and build stakeholder trust, and it is critical for participating in global trade and supply chains. Furthermore, good environmental management practices can demonstrate the organisation's dedication to understanding strategic risk and growth management.

Delivering environmental value is becoming more intrinsic to organisational decisions and the outcomes demanded by stakeholders. Although historically environmental management may have been seen as a bolt-on to an organisation's existing risk management systems, it is now becoming a key consideration, and sometimes the driving factor, for overall value creation.

'Value' can be defined in several ways: as a noun it can be classified as the regard that something is held to deserve, i.e. its importance, worth or usefulness. Whereas as a verb, 'to value' is to consider (someone or something) to be important or beneficial; to have a high opinion of.

Summary of benefits of good environmental management

Embracing environmental management can bring a whole host of opportunities, such as:

- Cost savings
- Increased access to financing, investment and grants
- Improved supply chain security upstream and downstream, with reduced vulnerability to environmental change or regulation
- Enhanced reputation, and attracting environmentally conscious consumers/customers/partners/talent
- Improved employee engagement
- Enabling innovation, potentially creating innovative new products, services or cutting-edge new processes that keep the organisation ahead of competitors
- Fostering long-term profitability and sustainable growth



2. Environmental management

Environmental management is defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)[2] as a 'set of coordinated activities within an organisation related to its environmental aspects', where 'environmental aspects' refers to 'elements of an organisation's activities or products that interact or can interact with the environment'. This means that environmental management refers to understanding and managing the activities, products and services of an organisation that impact on the environment and may be impacted by the environment. It should be noted that not all environmental management systems are covered by a system that is compliant with BSI ISO 14001[3]. Many organisations develop their own systems.

Environmental management is critical to supporting the sustainability of organisations, people and the planet. Organisations that extract, use and dispose of resources can identify, manage and mitigate risk at each stage of the process, while taking the opportunity to deliver value and security for stakeholders and wider sustainability.

Why environmental management?

Environmental management is a well-established tool, enabling organisations to systematically eliminate or reduce environmental organisational risks, as well as deliver process and resource efficiency, innovation, legal and regulatory compliance, and contribute positively to sustainable development. In particular, environmental compliance is the foundation for an organisation's success, upon which continual improvement and performance are built. Environmental compliance is the minimum standard to which an organisation should aspire.

As the climate and nature of the planet changes, so do risks, public expectations and the levels of scrutiny that organisations face regarding their environmental performance. As an organisation matures in the way in which it manages its environmental performance and as it moves beyond simple basic compliance, it can benefit from opportunities for increased market share and improved social value, and it could be more prepared for regulatory change, and so on.

Using an auditable framework such as an environmental management system (EMS) to help implement, measure and monitor how an organisation is helping the environment is a tried and tested way to demonstrate continual improvement – showing employees, customers, partners and regulators how the organisation does what it has committed to do from an environmental perspective, in a responsible manner. An EMS means that an organisation can demonstrate commitment to compliance and good practice in managing a multitude of elements, including:

- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Water use
- Energy use
- Waste
- Resources
- Lifecycle impacts
- Biodiversity

2 ISO 14050:2020 Environmental management — Vocabulary. See https://www.iso.org/standard/75300.html
3 ISO 14001 – Environmental Management System (EMS) standard. See https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/products-and-services/standards/ems-iso-14001-environmental-management-system/

Environmental management provides

- A systematic way for organisations to become more resilient by anticipating and addressing emerging risks
- A tool for determining, measuring and recording environmental outcomes
- An underpinning of the 'E' in ESG (environmental, social, governance) reporting
- Robust evidence of environmental performance that demonstrates how risk is being reduced across an organisation's operations
- Help to create greater rigour, transparency and confidence in an organisation's environmental reporting, supporting any green claims or credentials
- Engagement for everyone, not only large, highly regulated companies, but all organisations that may impact the environment
- A dynamic process, responding to an ever-changing world

Environmental management is not

- Solely about regulatory compliance: although this aspect of environmental management is important, it forms only one part of a comprehensive approach
- A one-size-fits-all solution: strategies must be tailored to the specific challenges and contexts faced by each unique organisation
- Only about addressing current issues: it involves planning and action to prevent future environmental harm, while simultaneously identifying and managing legacy issues
- A short-term fix: it requires long-term commitment to integrate into the organisation, with ongoing efforts to monitor and adapt to changing environmental conditions
- A standalone discipline: it draws on expertise from various fields (including ecology, law, engineering, learning and development, and others)

Planning for the future

While environmental management has traditionally been perceived as a process focused on mitigating immediate environmental impacts and complying with regulations, organisations must take a forward-looking approach and consider the longer-term implications and risks.

Planning for the future entails recognising various environmental factors that can pose significant risks to an organisation's operations, including, but not limited to:

- Climate change – organisations need to plan for a future where limits from climate change scenarios are exceeded (externality), while carrying out their own operations to meet the stringent global requirements to deliver against that threat
- Regulatory changes – organisations must be prepared for more stringent environmental regulations enforced via penalties for non-compliance
- Reputational damage – organisations that are not prepared could fall behind their competitors and lose out on contracts, markets and customers
- Availability of diminishing natural resources such as water, timber and rare earth minerals

Forward-thinking organisations must view environmental management not simply as a regulatory obligation, but as an integral part of strategic planning and risk management to ensure resilience and success in the future.

Future opportunities

As the field of environmental management continues to evolve, opportunities may include:

- **Machine learning/AI/digital twins** Such transformative tools give managers a far more detailed view of environmental management risks.
- **Data monitoring and visualisation** integrate data from various sources and monitoring systems to create a comprehensive real-time view of environmental parameters (e.g. energy, waste, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions).
- **Streamlining of compliance monitoring and reporting** by collating accurate and up-to-date information.
- **Predictive analytics and simulation**, including water resource management and simulations of water flows (to help predict and mitigate flood risk and manage resources).
- **Site management**, including oversight of storage of hazardous materials and predictions of end-of-life of plant and other equipment.
- **Real-time decision support**, deploying tools that continuously analyse environmental data, identifying potential issues or opportunities, and recommending appropriate actions to improve environmental performance.
- **Anticipating/adapting/horizon scanning**, allowing for faster response times, more informed decision-making, and proactive management of environmental risks. This should shift organisations towards the 'Proactive' or 'Progressive' maturity levels (see IEMA maturity indicator, Figure 6, and Evaluating cultural maturity, page 18).
- **Optimisation of resource efficiency** using each and all of the above. This will also enable optimisation of resource efficiency by monitoring and analysing the performance of organisational processes, supply chains and infrastructure systems. By identifying inefficiencies, reducing waste and optimising resource use, these tools can help organisations minimise environmental footprints and achieve cost savings.
- **Identification of environmental stewardship opportunities** for environmental enhancement. (These would be site-specific and dependent on the nature of the organisation and its premises.)

3. The value of environmental management

Value as merit or worth are useful descriptions because when this is applied to an environmental management setting, one can quickly appreciate the importance, benefit and usefulness of protecting and improving the environment, whether it be a woodland, chalk stream or providing green space in an urban environment, each of which may have an intrinsic value, but can be expanded to consider the worth of a raw material to an organisation. This value may be one which is appreciated by society, though not previously considered by the organisation.

The critical element for environmental value comes into play when it is considered alongside the economic drivers of the business world.

John Elkington coined the phrase 'triple bottom line', which was to provide a concept to business that there is more value associated with profit and loss by considering the elements of environment and society alongside traditional economic principles of capitalism.

For environmental management, this could mean understanding the impacts, risks and opportunities associated with the organisation's (or project's) scope, products and services. This includes both the organisation's impact on the environment and the environmental impact on the organisation.

The principles for environmental management are no different from the traditional economic tools used for financial success and can be applied in much the same way. In order to generate value (money, market share, reputation, etc.) an organisation must understand and balance its risks against opportunities:

Risk ± Opportunity = Value

It is the balance of risk and opportunity that ultimately ensures an organisation's success or demise and is a process that has been honed in an ever-changing global economic landscape. The world is changing rapidly, with the threat of climate and biodiversity boundary failure[4] presenting a more challenging economic climate where environmental management will increasingly take centre stage. The challenges posed by additional boundary overshoots, as described by Kate Raworth[5], mean that organisations will face a more uncertain future for which careful planning is required. An EMS can help to identify the pinch points.

4 Stockholm Resilience Centre, Planetary boundaries. See https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html
5 Kate Raworth, Exploring doughnut economics. See https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut

How do you define opportunity and the level of risk associated with it?

Opportunity can be defined as a combination of circumstances favourable for the purpose – a choice that could deliver advantageous outcomes.

An organisation can minimise risk to what it deems to be an acceptable level, but for it to continue to grow, expand or ensure its survival, it must identify and take advantage of opportunities. Balancing the value equation above, opportunity is the antithesis of risk, but also includes inherent risk itself.

Whether an organisation chooses to roll out a new product, invest in new markets, change manufacturing techniques/materials, etc they must have good management systems in place to identify, assess and mitigate risk, to take opportunities and deliver value.

Opportunities will take different forms for different organisations, depending on the industry and markets in which they operate. For example, regulated industries within the UK (water, gas, electricity, etc) will have their monopoly markets tightly controlled by a government regulator. As such, prices and deliverables may be set centrally, but the opportunity lies within the efficiency of the process and the innovation around the delivery of the service. Costs are typically set at the start of a regulatory period (for example, a five-year cycle), so choosing to implement a higher environmental standard for a product or service will need to be balanced with what would drive the highest value for customers.

Another example would be a supermarket that operates in a less financially regulated market and has more flexibility to seek opportunities. They must still balance the value equation associated with their new products, services or offerings. For example, if the supermarket were to pursue an environmentally superior product that costs more, the balance of risk vs opportunity comes down to whether customers would value the opportunity and pay more for the product.

The differences and similarities here are in how organisations conduct risk assessment associated with whether the opportunity will deliver value.

How do you define risk in an environmental management setting?

Human beings have become very adept at managing risk and possess the best risk evaluation engine of the whole animal kingdom – the human brain. Whether it be crossing a busy road, successfully navigating a business deal, or mitigating climate change, humans are able to do so because of inbuilt instincts and learned systems.

The latter point is crucial, because without systems to unify and codify a collective approach, then each individual's approach to risk will be slightly different, with varying degrees of success.

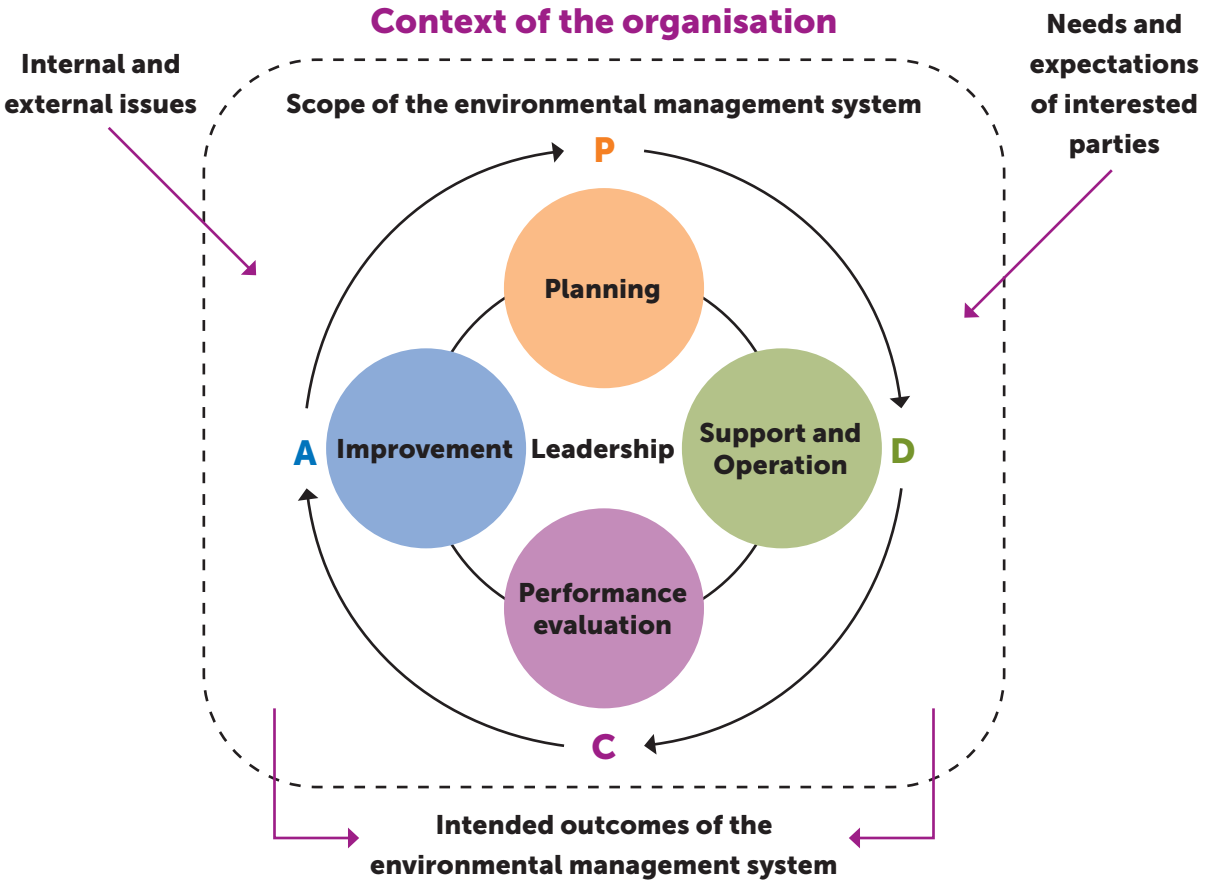
Tools and frameworks have been developed to help individuals and organisations identify and quantify risk in ways that are both consistent and repeatable. They range from the simple to the

complex and need to be tailored to help understand the materiality of an activity or externality on an organisation (see below on materiality and maturity).

Present in all risk assessments is the hazard (something that could happen), the severity or impact (of the hazard occurring), and the likelihood (of the hazard occurring). It should be remembered that the risk of not doing something also exists here: failure to take advantage of an opportunity, or failure to invest, may mean that a competitor takes advantage of that opportunity, leading to loss of business for those failing to engage.

Tools may vary from the simple, such as the underpinning 'plan, do, check, act' model (see below) found in most ISO 14000 series standards[6] (environmental management standards) and others, such as the ISO 9000 series[7] (quality) etc.

Figure 1: 'Plan, do, check, act' model

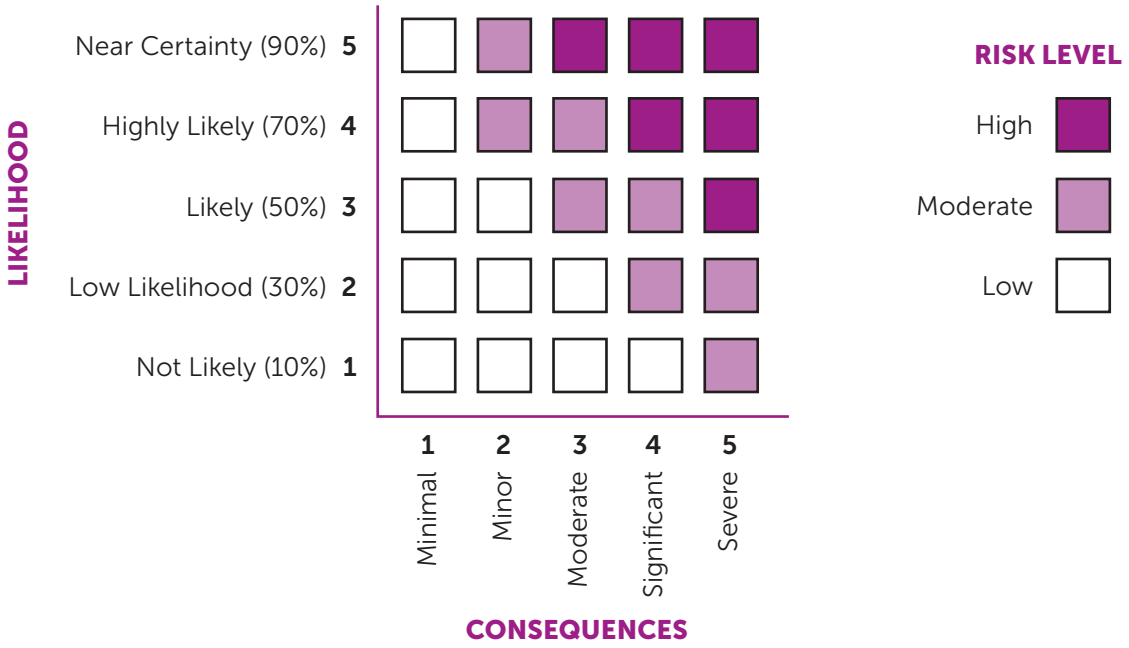


Source: ISO 14001:2015[8] Permission to reproduce extracts from British Standards is granted by BSI Standards Limited (BSI). No other use of this material is permitted. British Standards can be obtained from BSI Knowledge, knowledge.bsigroup.com

6 ISO 14000 family Environmental management. See https://www.iso.org/standards/popular/iso-14000-family
7 ISO 9000 family Quality management. See https://www.iso.org/standards/popular/iso-9000-family
8 ISO 14001:2015 Environmental management systems. See https://www.iso.org/standard/60857.html

The application of a risk matrix, with its associated descriptors (tailored to the organisation's needs) is a tried and tested method of evaluating risk. A typical example is shown below:

Figure 2: Evaluation of risk – simple matrix



Source: IEMA

The type of risk matrix in Figure 3, below, can be applied to any element of environmental management: introduction of a potential new process; investment in a new piece of land for development, etc. Descriptors can be changed to meet the organisation's needs.

Figure 3: Suggested descriptors within a simple risk matrix

High	Not currently controlled In breach of legislation or policy Sensitive environment (groundwater proximity, conservation area, residential area) Repeated complaints
Medium	Not fully controlled under normal or abnormal conditions Above average probability of occurrence and/or low probability of detection Financial threat Rising concern of shareholders Complaint received
Low	Controlled under normal and abnormal conditions Low probability of occurrence and/or high probability of detection Minimal impact

Source: IEMA

A more complex system may record decisions using a numerical score:

Figure 4: Evaluating significance across the identified risks

Aspect	Legal (x3)	Environmental Impact (x3)	Policy	Community	Business	Staff	Total	Significant >20?
Spillage of oils and chemicals outside building	3 (9)	3 (9)	1	3	3	3	28	Yes
Fuel use – onsite transportation	2 (6)	1 (3)	1	3	1	1	15	No
Packaging use	1 (3)	3 (9)	2	3	2	2	21	Yes

Source: IEMA

Quantifying risk by using a scoring matrix (a quantitative risk assessment approach) has benefits and pitfalls. Benefits can include the provision of a replicable approach; pitfalls can be a lack of agreement on the application of that approach. It is possible to become too obsessed with the numbers and miss the objective of the activity – identification and prioritisation of risk.

A quantitative risk assessment approach enables an organisation to prioritise its most significant risk based on a total score – most likely or most severe. This can be great for system-based environmental management where limiting risk could be directly linked to profit and loss, such as risk of failure to comply with the law, or fines and reputational damage associated with loss of operational control.

However, these can fail to capture elements of change or transitional risks. For example, a scored risk assessment such as the one above would be useful for charting the impact of a waste compliance issue, but would be less useful for mapping whether to change from a virgin or renewable source of printing paper in an office.

To plot transitional risks, different forms of risk assessment are needed. Models can include:

- SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats)
- PESTLE (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental)
- NOISE (Needs, Opportunities, Improvements, Strengths, Exceptions)
- Other business models that can be used to provide a qualitative assessment of a change or transitional risk

Change itself brings its own risks: failure to communicate the reason for change, failure to engage staff and interested parties, failure to identify the timeframe adequately, failure to have identified the correct change needed.

What is value and how do you define it for your organisation?

Value has been defined above as something that is 'important and/or beneficial' and there couldn't be a truer representation for environmental management than driving the value of the environment.

Whereas value has often been broadly defined as something that generates revenue, shareholder dividends, reputation, market share etc, this has historically been to the detriment of holistic thinking or positive action where the environment is concerned. Although the emergence, proliferation and ubiquity of fossil fuels and derivatives and their use in the 20th century brought many technological and economic advancements, we are now well aware of their negative effects on the planet and climate.

This illustrates the necessity of evaluating the environmental impact at the early stages of a process. Not doing so renders the environmental issues to be externalities – the cost is borne by society. The cost to society may be unbearable, for example loss of life from global heating driving unbearable temperatures in India; hurricanes destroying entire communities in the United States; flooding causing drowning in Europe. No single organisation causes all of these catastrophes. It is a collective outcome. However, society is now less tolerant of these events, and organisations that are considered to be environmentally irresponsible are losing the investment of shareholders.

Value can change with time and perspective: for example, refinement of oil products was seen as a major economic breakthrough at the beginning of the 20th century, with little understanding and regard for the environment – the value (and risk) of benefit outweighed potential impacts, whether they were understood at the time or not.

With further data and irrefutable scientific commentary, we know that fossil fuels are the leading cause of anthropogenic global warming. Some will argue that the risks outweigh the benefits at this stage and with this knowledge. Others will defend the use of fossil fuels because of the lens through which they view the problem, but also the information and data they use to support the necessity for its use.

This is a good lesson for organisations that are making decisions about risk and opportunities, with the various value drivers or levers they can use to mitigate or realise respectively. Building effective risk assessment and management processes through strong environmental management systems will help to ensure that maximum value is derived from decisions made.

The guiding principle is to build the systems necessary to not only assess the risk from the outset, but to continue to revisit the assessments at intervals to assure the environmental outcomes from the decisions made. Organisations can use predefined systems already available to do this, such as ISO 14001, B Corp, Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) or ESG-style instruments used by financial institutions that have specific requirements to continually assess risk and opportunities to drive value. (There are also aspect-specific frameworks, such as the GHG Protocol and the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures.)

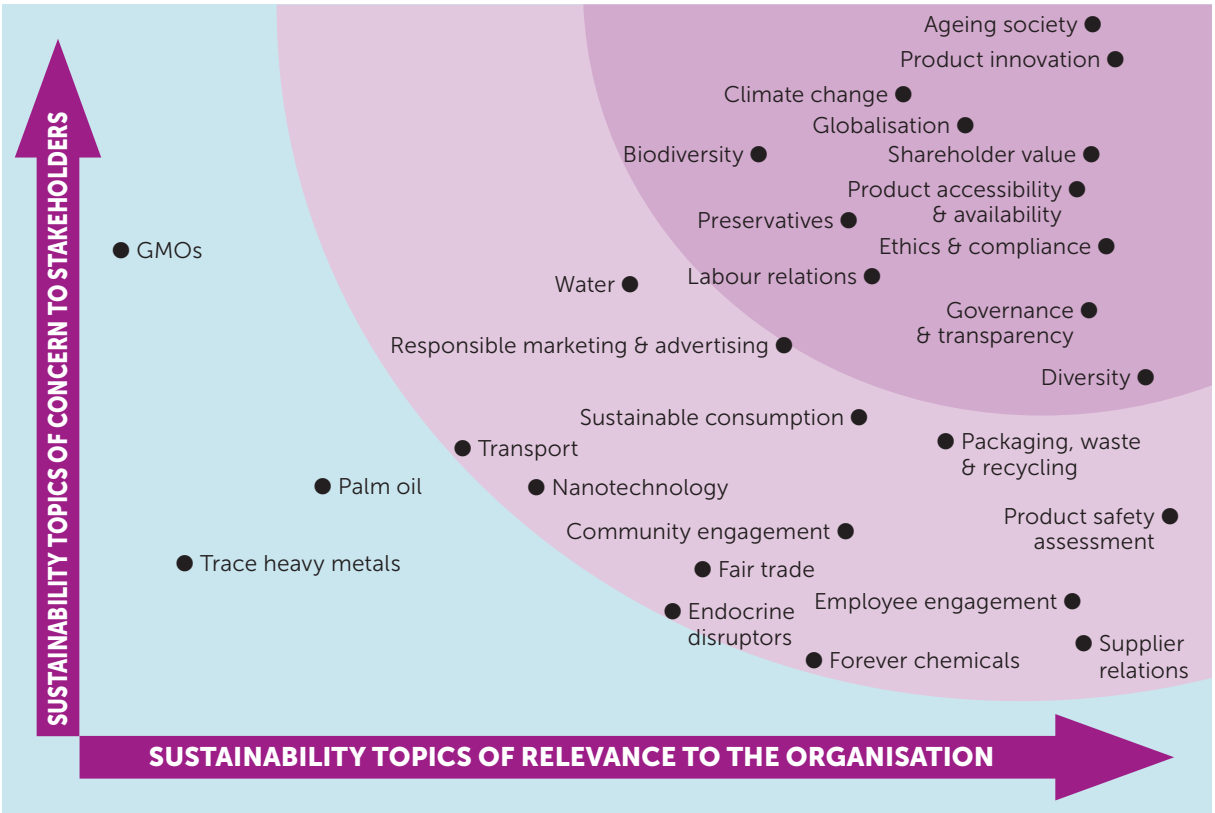
Materiality

What is material to an organisation?

Determining materiality for an organisation is an iterative process to evaluate which environmental issues are most significant to them. This will include understanding impacts or potential impacts on the environment and the needs of stakeholders, and prioritising issues for action.

Understanding what is material can drive the addition of value in the environmental management system.

Figure 5: Determining material aspects



Source: IEMA

Determining materiality across an organisation's activities requires input from many interested parties. Evaluating issues from a purely internal perspective may miss pertinent points from a public perspective. The example above places issues such as biodiversity and climate change high up the list for stakeholders, in a somewhat higher position than the organisation itself has placed them. This becomes important if customers perceive the products to be adversely impacting each of these externalities. However, it is notable that despite placing biodiversity at a high level, palm oil is of much less concern, and endocrine disruptors barely register for the interested parties!

Identification of the issues that are (environmentally) material for an organisation is essential. They will vary from one organisation to another. For example, a supermarket chain should have water high up its list of concerns, in order to grow food. Water would be of much less concern to a large electrical company, where the availability of raw materials to supply copper wire would be critical.



4. Maturity

As an organisation's maturity grows around environmental management, the lens it uses to identify and assess value will change and grow too. The materiality of the risks and opportunities previously identified will also shift with time; this is often the benefit of increased maturity.

Figure 6: Example of a maturity indicator



The organisation has no systematic way of managing environmental impact.

Senior managers have little understanding of the risks associated with poor environmental performance.

Concerns over fines are common place.

The organisation has a functioning environmental management system.

The organisation adopts a risk-based approach to minimising pollution incidents on all sites.

Adequate procedures are in place to minimise emissions to air, land and water.

All relevant environmental legislation is understood and fines mitigated.

Senior managers understand their responsibilities to the environment and all risks and potential prosecutions and fines are mitigated.

Environmental sustainability is embedded across all functions and along the supply chain as a core business objective.

The organisation's business model addresses both the organisation's impact on the environment and the environment's impact on the organisation.

The organisation's sense of value and overall business model is driven by an understanding of how value can be created by understanding the environment's impact on the organisation in the long-term.

Environmentally sustainable products and services are delivered as the norm.

The organisation has established competitive advantage through its work on environmental sustainability and is recognised by stakeholders for its approach.

Source: IEMA

Evaluating cultural maturity

Culture can be defined as a way of life, general customs and beliefs of a group of people. By extension, a 'value culture' can be seen as a product of numerous individual 'indicators' with respect to environmental risk management, enhancement and value creation.

A mature value culture does not happen overnight – organisations progress through different stages of maturity. This can range from compliance organisations (those concerned about getting caught breaking the law), through to those that are progressive (those that set very high standards and attempt to exceed them).

In progressive organisations, environmental conscientiousness becomes second nature to everyone and there is opportunity for everyone to influence decision-making processes.

It may very well be the case that organisations have varying levels of maturity in different facets of the organisation. Such a subculture scenario needs to be duly considered in evaluating organisation-wide culture status as oversight can lead to weakness and not truly reflect departmental or regional variances.

Maturity evaluation allows flexibility to assess maturity from an organisation-wide level down to a functional or geographic level, depending on the assessor's requirements.

Below is an example of steps to be taken as part of a journey to maturity, to be used as both an assessment and improvement tool. The tool provides an objective means of assessing and measuring maturity. It is a starting point for organisations looking to thoroughly understand their current status, associated factors and, ultimately, further steps necessary to progressively develop cultural maturity.

Compliance: People don't really care about environmental management; they are only driven by regulatory compliance, not getting caught or facing financial penalty.

Reactive: Environmental management is taken seriously, but it only gets sufficient attention after things have already gone wrong. People say things like 'you have to understand it's different here'.

Calculative: An organisation is comfortable with systems and figures; a management system has been implemented successfully. Environmental management is taken very seriously and there is major concentration on the statistics. Organisational leader performance is tied to environmental statistics. Bad news is tolerated but still unwelcome. In calculative organisations, lots of data is collected and analysed. Incidents occur and can surprise the organisation; management systems are often, but not always, reviewed following such incidents.

Proactive: Moving away from managing the environment based on what happened in the past, to really looking forward and being proactive in the prevention of potentially harmful events. Proactive organisations assess leading indicators and consider what might go wrong in the future, implementing preventive measures in advance rather than reactively. In proactive organisations, the workforce becomes involved in practice not just in theory. They analyse the causes of the incidents in depth, identifying root causes and systematically rectifying them to reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence.

Progressive: Progressive organisations set very high standards and attempt to exceed them, rather than being satisfied with minimum compliance. They are brutally honest about failure, but use it to improve, not to blame anyone.

Organisations should not expect to get it right all the time as long as they continue to get better in their environmental management. It should also result in the management team knowing more about what is going on because the workforce is willing to tell them and trusts them not to overreact by hearing unwelcome news.



5. Conclusion

The value of an environmental management system is that it provides a way to:

- Maintain regulation compliance
- Understand the environmental context of your organisation
- Improve reputation
- Be more attractive in tendering or as part of a supply chain
- Manage and measure improvements in environmental management consistently and in a replicable way
- Identify opportunities to:
    - create better processes
    - create better design
    - save money

Organisations are at different stages in their environmental management lifecycle, but a maturity matrix can help them improve their performance over time from various starting points and understand their progress on the journey.

IEMA has an advisory paper on ISO 14001, which you may find useful: *The case for applying ISO 14001 in the fast-moving landscape of corporate sustainability*[9].

9 IEMA (2024), *The case for applying ISO 14001 in the fast-moving landscape of corporate sustainability.* Available at: https://www.iema.net/media/5bvlom0r/the-case-for-applying-iso-14001-in-the-fast-moving-landscape-of-corporate-sustainability.pdf

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