

ISO 9001 vs 14001 vs 45001

A plain-English comparison of the three most commonly requested ISO standards, and which one is likely to matter for your business.

At a glance

Standard	Focus area	What it covers	Who typically needs it
ISO 9001	Quality management	Consistent processes, customer satisfaction, and continuous improvement of how work gets delivered.	Any business wanting standardised operations, or bidding for contracts that require quality assurance evidence.
ISO 14001	Environmental management	Environmental impact, waste handling, resource use, and legal compliance around the environment.	Businesses in construction, manufacturing, or facilities management, especially where tenders ask for environmental evidence.
ISO 45001	Occupational health and safety	Workplace risk management, employee safety systems, and incident prevention.	Site-based or physical-work businesses, particularly construction and trades, where PQQs routinely ask for this.

How they fit together

These three standards are often talked about as a set because they share the same underlying structure (known as Annex SL), which means they can be run as one "integrated management system" rather than three separate ones. Many SMEs start with whichever standard their biggest client or tender is asking for, then add the others as the business grows.

- ISO 9001 is usually the starting point; it underpins good record-keeping and consistency, which the other two standards build on.
- ISO 14001 tends to matter most if your work has a physical environmental footprint: waste, emissions, materials, or site works.
- ISO 45001 tends to matter most if you, your staff, or your subcontractors are working on-site, on the road, or with equipment.

Certification vs self-assessment

Full third-party certification (an external audit against the standard) carries the most weight with larger clients and public sector buyers. Some smaller contracts orSSIP schemes will accept a self-assessed policy and procedures that follow the same principles without formal certification; it's worth checking what a specific tender or client actually requires before committing to the cost and time of full certification.

Which one should you start with?

If you only have capacity to do one thing well, look at what your current or target clients are actually asking for in their PQQs and tender documents; that's usually a clearer signal than trying to cover all three standards at once.

Not sure which standard applies to you, or need help preparing the policies and evidence behind it?

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