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Toolkit Zone 2 Navigating EU Sustainability Frameworks

Certification vs not certified use

Green and Circular Economy in Business by
Digital Solutions

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Lowering risks and improving monitoring

ISO 14001 is built around **risk-based thinking and monitoring**. It asks organisations to:

- identify **environmental risks and opportunities**.
- plan actions to address them.
- monitor **key indicators** (e.g. energy use, fuel, waste, incidents).
- correct and improve where needed (ISO, 2015).

For SMEs this has several concrete effects:

a. Fewer surprises, fewer incidents

By mapping environmental aspects and putting controls in place, SMEs reduce the likelihood of:

- spills and pollution incidents,
- non-compliance with permits,
- complaints from neighbours or authorities.

External ISO 14001 audits act as a “**fresh pair of eyes**”, often picking up unsafe storage, undocumented practices or hidden inefficiencies and pushing the company to fix them before they turn into bigger problems (Johnstone, 2022).

b. Better data for decisions and for clients

Because the EMS requires regular **monitoring, internal audits and management reviews**, SMEs start to

accumulate **structured environmental data**. That data can then be reused:

- to answer **ESG questionnaires** from large customers or banks,
- to document improvements in **tenders and marketing**, and
- to identify **cost-saving opportunities** (e.g. high-consumption equipment, avoidable waste).

SME case studies show that ISO 14001 projects often surface **quick wins**: reducing waste collection costs, cutting energy through behaviour and maintenance, optimising routes to save fuel, and so on (ISO, 2015; Compliant Ltd., n.d.).

c. Blending formal controls and everyday behaviour

Research also highlights that in SMEs, environmental control is both **formal and informal**. ISO 14001 introduces the formal elements—targets, audits, procedures—but SMEs make it work by adding (Johnstone, 2022):

- simple **stories and visuals** to explain why changes matter,
- small **rewards or gamification** (e.g. team challenges, bonuses, social events when goals are met), and
- regular, informal **conversations** about performance.

Together, these elements build a culture where environmental risks are **noticed**

earlier, and monitoring is not just a formality but part of how the business is run.

What does this means for SMEs

In the context of CSRD, the EU Taxonomy and growing ESG expectations, ISO 14001 can be framed to SME managers as:

- a **voluntary, process-based system** they can scale to their size;
- a **practical way to structure environmental responsibilities** and move from ad hoc actions to a coherent approach;
- a **stepping stone** towards meeting client requirements, regulations and market expectations; and
- a tool that **reduces risk and improves monitoring**, while often uncovering very tangible cost and efficiency gains.

It is not mandatory, and it won't solve every sustainability issue. But for many SMEs, ISO 14001 is a **realistic and proven route** to put environmental management on a solid, professional footing without starting from zero.



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