

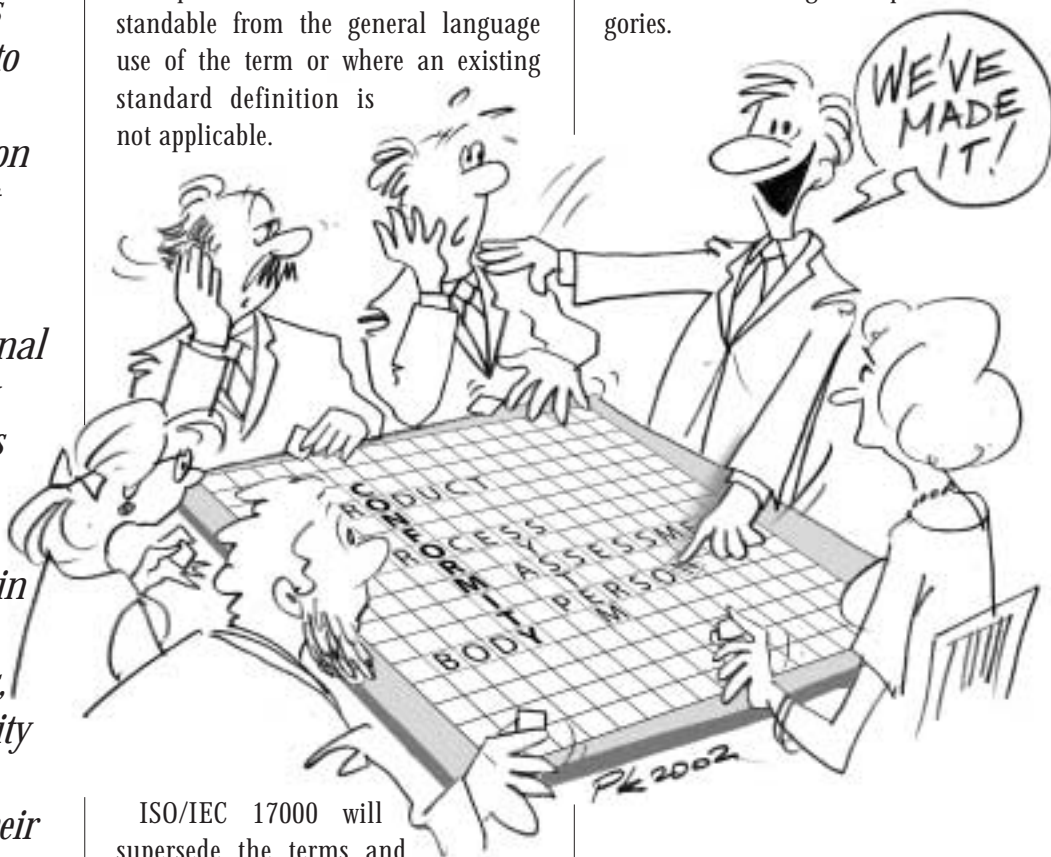
## What is conformity assessment?

By Geoff Strawbridge, Convenor, ISO/CASCO WG 5, Terminology

*In July 2002 a second Committee Draft (CD) of ISO/IEC 17000 was issued for consultation under the title Conformity assessment – General vocabulary and functional description. This International Standard will specify general terms and definitions relating to conformity assessment, including the accreditation of conformity assessment bodies, and to the use of conformity assessment to facilitate trade. A functional description of conformity assessment is included as an informative annex, as a further aid to mutual understanding, in both voluntary and regulatory environments, among users of conformity assessment, conformity assessment bodies and their accreditation bodies.*

As a common basis for the preparation and maintenance of any standards and guides relating to conformity assessment activities, ISO/IEC 17000 is intended to offer a consistent framework within which more specific concepts may be defined appropriately and denoted by the most appropriate terms. It does not set out to provide a vocabulary for all of the concepts that may need to be used in describing particular conformity assessment activities. Terms and definitions are given only where the concept defined would not be understandable from the general language use of the term or where an existing standard definition is not applicable.

The expression “object of conformity assessment” is used in ISO/IEC CD2 17000 to encompass the product, process, system, person or body to which the specified requirements apply, in place of “product, process or service”, the wording adopted in Guide 2 to cover the subject of standardization in a broad sense. Supporting terms with definitions borrowed or adapted from ISO 9000:2000, *Quality management systems – Fundamentals and vocabulary* include “product”, indicating services as one of four generic product categories.



ISO/IEC 17000 will supersede the terms and definitions in clauses 12 to 17 of ISO/IEC 2: 1996, *Standardization and related activities – General vocabulary*. Conformity assessment is defined as “activity that provides demonstration that specified requirements relating to a product, process, system, person or body are fulfilled”. It covers such activities as calibration, testing, inspection and certification, as well as the accreditation of conformity assessment bodies.

ISO/CASCO Working Group 5 was reconvened to begin work on ISO/IEC 17000 when work on ISO 9000 had been completed. Also nearing completion at that time was the report of the Joint ISO/CASCO and CEN/CENELEC (European Committee for Standardization/European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization) TC 1 Working Group established in 1997 to investigate a possible improvement of the EN 45000

standards and relevant ISO/IEC Guides (now also including the relevant ISO International Standards), taking into account proposals to reflect the functions of the conformity assessment process rather than the structure of the bodies involved.

The functional approach advocated in that report has since been adopted by ISO/CASCO and developed by Working Group 5 in describing conformity assessment and structuring its vocabulary. Conformity assessment is explained as a series of three functions: *selection*, *determination*, and *review and attestation* – focused sets of activities that satisfy a need, or demand, for demonstration that specified requirements are fulfilled. It may involve surveillance, defined as systematic iteration of conformity assessment activities as a basis for maintaining the validity of the statement resulting from attestation.

Definitions are provided for first-party, second-party and third-party conformity assessment, based on supporting definitions for “supplier” and “user” in this context. Supplier’s declaration, as “first-party attestation”, is distinguished from certification, “third-party attestation related to products, processes, systems or persons”. Accreditation (of conformity

assessment bodies) is then distinguished as “third-party attestation related to conformity assessment bodies”, supported by a note indicating the recognition that accreditation conveys.

At its meeting in March 2002, Working Group 5 resolved that ISO/IEC 17000 should be relevant, to satisfy the conformity assessment community, correct in the application of terminological principles and credible in reflecting common language usage. It concluded that the first CD 17000, issued in October 2001, had been too complicated. Internal inconsistencies and a lack of clarity had been the main concerns of negative voters including five countries whose experts were active members of WG 5!

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The Working Group meets again on 5 November 2002 to review the outcome of the second round of consultation, and it is hoped this time, with the help of comments received, to be able to prepare the draft International Standard (DIS). □

### About the Author

**Geoff Strawbridge** was associated with standards policy work at BSI for more than 25 years before taking a career break in 1998. He has been involved with ISO/IEC Guide 2 *Standardization and related activities – General vocabulary*, since 1980 and chaired the ad hoc working group meeting in 1992 that led to Guide 59, *Code of good practice for standardization*. He currently balances advice and debate on conformity assessment terminology with an administration and testing job for a small company and active service in the Campaign for Real Ale.

