

Environmental impacts – getting started

If in your organisation you have not ever formally thought through what environmental impacts there might be, then this exercise is for you. It will help you think about things that you need to consider, and provide an approach you can use to do a more thorough assessment.

All you will need is a piece of paper, the bigger the better, a pen and perhaps a colleague or two.

Step 1: Draw a box in the centre of the paper.

Step 2: Products and Services - Think about one area of your business – either a product you supply or a service you deliver and write it in the box.

Step 3: Activities - Define the activities that go into this product or service and write them down around the box. So, if your example was ‘servicing heating systems’ activities will include: driving out to see clients; running computers for internet, email, booking system etc.; heating an office; buying tools etc.

Step 4: Impacts - For each activity you noted, think about the environmental impact it might have. These impacts could relate to issues on the ground, in water, or in the air. Think about the ultimate impact. So in the example above, driving to meet the client could contribute to *climate change* and to *local air pollution*. Put these ultimate impacts around the outer edge of the paper and draw lines to link them to the activity.

Step 5: Causes - You now have a number of activities and impacts. The next step is to think about the links between activities and impact, namely the specific cause of the impact. Taking the example of driving to a client, the ultimate impacts were climate change and local air pollution and these are caused by the burning fossil fuels (petrol or diesel) which release carbon dioxide and other pollutants contributing.

Step 6: Don’t forget the positives - You have most likely concentrated on the negative impacts but there could be positive ones too. Add these to the paper, in a different colour perhaps. For servicing a client’s heating system, there is a reduced impact on climate change and demand on non renewable fuel because the client should use less energy as a result.

Take a look at the example below to give you an idea of how your assessment might look and some of the things to consider.



What do you have?

You should now have a better idea of what environmental impacts the part of your business you considered might have. You will know the activities that are leading to the impacts, along with the actual mechanism by which the impact happens (this is called the *aspect* in environmental management speak). A key requirement of ISO14001 an Environmental Management System standard is to define your aspects and impacts and prioritise them using risk assessment and other criteria you define yourself.

What next?

Depending on your business there may a number of other activities that you could repeat this for to give yourself a more comprehensive picture. Thinking about your environmental impacts is the first stage of doing something to address them. Some may be relatively small, others bigger and next is to look at what is the most important. By looking at things in this way you will also begin to identify where you might be able to intervene and reduce –ve impacts (and enhance +ve ones). Action can happen at different points in the picture that you have produced. You can address the *aspect*: if the van used to drive to the client was electric and fuelled by renewable energy then it wouldn't be using fossil fuels; you could purchase products/services that were themselves lower impact. You can address the *activity*: is it possible sometimes to not drive to the client? Finally, and most fundamentally, you might rethink the *product or service*: could you be doing something differently that would have lower impact, or would perhaps have greater positive impacts on the clients? This is a big step as it involves making fundamental changes to what you do and may not always be possible – we can't think how to do this for our example.

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EXAMPLE

