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## First interview of ISO Secretary-General Rob Steele January 2009

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*It's only a few days since 1 January 2009 when you became ISO Secretary-General. What are your first impressions?*

**Rob Steele:** My very first impression is of the contrast between the warm welcome by the ISO Central Secretariat team and the sub-zero temperatures here in Geneva. In fact, moving from my home country of New Zealand in the southern hemisphere to Europe in the north means that I'm experiencing my second winter in less than a year!

This is a good reminder of the fact that we live in a diverse world. Depending on where we are, it can be winter or summer and our perspectives can be as different as the climate. Keeping this in mind is useful for making the best of international standardization and ensuring that ISO International Standards are globally relevant.

Sometimes, international consensus is reached rapidly because the state of advancement of technology dictates what is clearly the best solution at a given moment. At other times, the diversity of our world and the differing perspectives it engenders means that there may be widely diverging interests and views to reconcile before consensus can be reached to produce an International Standard.

Instead of seeing this as a drawback, we can choose to recognize it as a resource. The outcome of issues for which there is no one obvious or right answer is enhanced if it is exposed to multiple perspectives, and diminished when only one solution is considered. As ISO standards are voluntary, the process of confronting viewpoints and negotiating until consensus is reached is important to ensure buy-in of the parties that will implement them.

So, my second winter in a short period is a reminder of one of the added values of the ISO system: its ability to produce practical tools based on

broad consensus both among countries and across industry – wherever on the globe they are located.

*What are your priorities?*

**Rob Steele:** My first job is getting up to speed as rapidly as possible so I can operate effectively as ISO Secretary-General. Taking over from Alan Bryden is a challenge – he has left me big boots to fill!

As you might expect, one of the first jobs is engaging with the members of my senior management team who are briefing me on the main facets of ISO and the issues we currently face. In addition, they are setting up a series of meetings with the different departments of the ISO Central Secretariat so I can explain my management style and the approach I intend to take. I will also be visiting a number of ISO members as soon as possible and this will give me a great opportunity to realize the diversity and extent of the work that is underway.

Perhaps the most important upcoming job is to launch the consultation on the *ISO Strategic Plan 2011 – 2015*, a document that will shape ISO and its members' efforts during a period marked by the following characteristics:

- when the current global economic turmoil may continue
- when global concerns about the environment will certainly continue
- when the global technological revolution that affects the way we live will also continue and raise social and ethical issues which require global responses.

An ongoing priority will be ensuring that we reach out to an even broader base of stakeholders than we are doing now. The establishment of the World Standards Cooperation with IEC and ITU was a crucially important move, while initiatives to broaden stakeholder representation in standards development are vital to ISO's continuous quest to make its standards globally relevant.

*As CEO of Standards New Zealand, during which period you served on the ISO Technical Management Board, you're no newcomer to the ISO system, but isn't it a bit overwhelming to find yourself in key role of ISO Secretary-General?*

**Rob Steele:** It would be if I were alone! However, I'm privileged to take up this role within a winning team. ISO's achievements are the result of much more than any individual, or any group. It is a network of member bodies from 158 countries providing 50 000 experts for 201 technical committees, 542 sub-committees, 2 287 working groups and 63 ad hoc study groups, supported by a Central Secretariat staff of 153. Their combined efforts contribute to the GDP of countries, reduce suffering and provide practical tools to address the major challenges facing the global

community. I feel privileged and honoured to join this ISO team and I look forward to working with its members in the coming years.

*You referred to your management style – could you give us a clue?*

You've no doubt heard of bungy jumping, but you may not know that it is a very popular sport in New Zealand, to such an extent that Standards New Zealand and Standards Australia jointly developed a code of good practice for this activity. As CEO of Standards New Zealand, I encouraged my managers and guests to take part in a bungy jump as part of a regional standards meeting. Now, I'm not saying that it is necessary for senior managers of either ISO Central Secretariat or the ISO system at large to "take the leap", but I do believe that managers need to be bold – so we'll see!

[Rob Steele's biography](#)

[New ISO Secretary-General as of 1 January 2009](#)