Fidelis International Institute

By Valentina Facciponte & Elisa Giraldi
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As part of a course organized by Fidelis in 2012, professor Auretta Benedetti, spoke about ethical certifications. Benedetti is Associate Professor of Administrative Law at the University of Milan Bicocca, where she teaches Administrative Law, Public Law, Public Law of the Economy.

Consumers pay increasing attention to the products and services they acquire, as well as to the production processes of the organizations behind them. This is one of the reasons why companies should make their own ethical choices visible, clear and recognizable from the outside. One effective way to make this possible is through an ethical certification. These certifications allow the company to establish a relationship of trust, credibility and transparency with its stakeholders.

Benedetti explained that after examining the subject in detail, they have found that among the different ethical certifications available, maybe the SA-8000 Social Accountability Certification is the only truly international standard. This evaluation is prepared by CEPAA (Council of Economical Priorities Accreditation Agency) that recognizes to the company a responsible behavior in the field of social ethics. This certification aims to recognize compliance with specific criteria in the enterprise management system. Some examples of the criteria used are: respect for human rights, respect for labor rights, protection against exploitation of children, the guarantees of safety and health at work.

Compared to the ISO certifications, with which it shares the formal structure, the SA-8000 standard, aims to involve the entire company, its impact and the depth to which it requires attention and participation by all stakeholders in the company from top management to front-line employees, from suppliers to clients, and so forth.

Some other issues typically covered by ethical certifications include: the promotion of health and workplace safety standards, the degree of freedom of association and collective bargaining rights of its employees, the avoidance of using (preventing the use of) child labor at their factories, the eradication (elimination) of discriminatory practices, and many others.

As of the third quarter of 2022 there were 4,769 companies in the world (from 55 different countries and 57 different industries) certified with SA-8000. This is a voluntary certification issued by an accredited external organization that recognizes the company a responsible behavior in the field of social ethics and this is a critical point of ethical certification. The process of certification itself and the controls related to the certification are important elements in assessing the thoughtfulness of the certification. Understanding to what extent the organization is free to deliver results is very important. True commitment to the principles that are the basis of an ethical certification is an imperative for its success. Avoiding that these certifications are used as a marketing tool or a PR instrument by the company is a must.