



Sustainable Office European Association aisbl - SOFEA

Sector: Office Supply Industry

Region: Based in Belgium and the Netherlands, operates European-wide

[SOFEA](#) "Sustainable Office European Association" aisbl is a not-for-profit European association for the office supply industry represented by manufacturers and resellers.

SOFEA's sustainability claim is its product rating system for [office products](#). The rating system will comprise 23 product categories and the categories already available are: writing instruments, notepads and books, and filing. The rating system is similar to mandatory EU energy labelling, in which products are rated on an [A to E scale](#).

The outcome is a transparent and uniform product rating for the entire spectrum of office supplies, where an A or B rating stands for an excellent product in relation to sustainability performance, C or D for a plus product (products with average overall sustainability performance), and an E for a standard product (products fulfilling at least all minimum legal requirements and sold by companies committed to the SOFEA rating system). The rating system is based on the [SOFEA Assessment Scheme \(SAS\)](#).

SOFEA measures the environmental performance on product, manufacturer, and company level. The aim with this rating system is to provide insights to the businesses for them to identify points of excellence and specific improvement areas.

Mindset

Life Cycle Thinking: Sustainability impacts are assessed for the following stages of products: raw material extraction, packaging, use and end of life. SOFEA plans to include the distribution stage in the future.

Hotspots Analysis: For every product category, a product Life Cycle Analysis screening study is conducted for a maximum of 5 representative products within a product category. With that information, the hotspots within the life cycle stages are identified and the main impacts are translated into the scoring results.

Mainstreaming sustainability: The completion of an online product assessment can help businesses to gain insights on the product performance, including manufacturing conditions. The summary provided by SOFEA shows the excellence and improvement areas. The producing companies can find out 'better' or alternative solutions for materials, packaging, usage and design or for the production environment to achieve a higher rating over time.



Principle 1: Reliability

The methodology was created in cooperation with resellers and manufacturers in the industry and reviewed by independent scientists with expertise in the field. The claim itself is not yet science-based (a final review will follow later in 2020), but scientists have already reviewed the methodology of the assessment. The distribution stage of products is not considered yet within the product



rating system, as there was no consensus about the measurement of transport within the product life cycle stages yet.

SOFEA works in partnership with a third-party service provider to ensure that all data included in the product rating system is verified and reviews all evidence-based materials.



Principle 2: Relevance

The claim provides information on the relevant aspects of products, which contribute significantly to the sustainability profile of the product. SOFEA works on identifying the relevant aspects of the products and ensuring these hotspots are addressed to receive the overall rating label. The online assessment is different per product group with a maximum of 38 indicators measuring the product on environmental, quality, health & safety and Corporate Social Responsibility related topics.



The assessment can be conducted at the materials level, packaging, usage and design of the product, and also by exposing the production environment such as pollutants, emissions, waste and energy. Minimum legal requirements are checked in the assessment phase that functions as a gatekeeper for compliance of products.

Principle 3: Clarity

The rating system is proposed to be self-explanatory since it is similar to the well-known energy labeling system. The communication of all visual materials including logos and labels is developed by SOFEA.



Only products that completed 100% of the assessment can receive a rating. If the company decides not to share the product rating with SOFEA, the product rating can't be used in communications and is for internal information only. If the rating is shared then the product rating is published on the SOFEA website and the rating can be used in communications as described by the SOFEA communications guidelines. Relevant and public data can be shared by and with members; for example, reports, certificates and confirmation of legal compliance.



This is an illustration of the SOFEA rating system, in which products are rated on an A to E scale.

Principle 4: Transparency

End-user consumers can access the ratings, explanation on the standard and by whom the rating system was created on the website. Manuals and templates explain how the methodology of the assessment was created and what steps were taken to the release of the product rating. In a later stage, the basic assessment 'scorecard' will be made available so that consumers can have access to the 38 aspects that are included.



A [product search](#) is available on the website, which includes an updated list of all assessed products and the respective rating. All information, manuals and templates will be published on the website soon. SOFEA has concrete plans to improve the transparency of the rating process over time.

Principle 5: Accessibility

It is possible for consumers to search for the rating and scores per product on the SOFEA website. End-user consumers are able to search for a product's rating by supplying one of the following attributes: product number, EAN code, Manufacturer Product Number (MPN), brand, company name, and product description.



SOFEA releases information on the rating system through regular newsletters. The SOFEA online platform currently makes available product information and product rating for a limited number of products, but it is progressing over time to include all the pre-defined 23 product groups, checked and verified by a third party. This will improve the accessibility of the rating information for consumers.

Principle 6: Three Dimensions of Sustainability



Environmental: Environmental impacts of the product are measured, such as pollutants, CO₂ emissions, waste and energy.

Social: This dimension is covered in the pre-assessment (based on the legal requirements) and in the product assessment at corporate level.

Economic: Economic indicators are not part of the current assessment but SOFEA plans to add those in a later version.



The environmental is the main dimension communicated in this claim, but social and health & safety elements are also considered.

Principle 7: Behaviour Change and Longer Term Impact



SOFEA aims to encourage sustainability in the European industry of office supplies by inspiring manufacturers to continuously improve their products and motivating resellers to communicate about the importance of sustainability to individual consumers. Individual and corporate consumers are therefore informed through the A-E rating on how the product performs in relation to sustainability impacts and can make informed choices when buying office supplies.

SOFEA works to make it simple to end-user consumers by promising *“an easy way to make the sustainable choice”*. Moving forward, SOFEA is planning to best address the end-user consumer. The organization is planning to work on examples to consumers to show the impact products have on the environment using simple comparisons (e.g. energy vs. number of flight trips).



Principle 8: Multi-Channel and Innovative Approach



The main communication channels used for sharing information with both companies and end-user consumers are the website and the [newsletters](#). Trade magazines and a members' virtual network are also used to communicate with clients and potential clients.

Companies (clients and potential clients) and end-user consumers are informed on the developments of the rating system, new members, and events organized by SOFEA via the website and newsletters. Information is shared to wider audience via business partners and trade magazines. Also, there is a [members network](#), in which members can benefit from a network to share expertise, work together and contribute to changes in their industry sector.

Principle 9: Collaboration



Industry representatives including manufacturers and resellers active in the office supply industry initiated the project in 2014. SOFEA has considered existing labels, methods and standards and embedded best practices into its methodology.

The organization is currently working to further collaboration with other partners, such as ISEAL Alliance and International Trade Centre.

Principle 10: Comparability



A rating system similar to energy labelling is used, and products are rated from A to E. All products that are assessed via the SOFEA standard have to be previously complying with a minimum standard set by the European Union regulation.

The products are rated as follows:

- A** A-rated product reflects the highest level of overall sustainability performance. This shows excellence in the three assessment levels: products features, manufacturing processes and company management.
- B** B-rated product reflects a high level of overall sustainability performance, often together with limited impacts in manufacturing and formal commitment from company management.
- C** C-rated product reflects a good level of overall sustainability performance, often combined with average practices in manufacturing and company management.
- D** D-rated product reflects a good level of overall sustainability performance, often lower than the market average. This usually indicates that improvements have to be made in product features, but also in manufacturing processes and/or company management.
- E** E-rated product reflects a basic level of overall sustainability performance often fulfils only minimum legal requirements.

The A – E benchmark aids comparison between similar products helping consumers in choosing their products.