

Bowing out – but the job's not finished

Dr Graeme Philp, Gambica's* outgoing chief executive, looks back on his seven years in office and ponders government's relationship with industry.

After a career spent entirely in the automation and instrumentation industry, the last seven years of which has been with Gambica, I will be retiring as chief executive on 23 January.

I took over Gambica in December 2010, having run a sizeable UK public company in the process control industry for 17 years. I was frustrated with the lack of support British companies received from government, especially when compared with the experience of companies in comparable countries.

I resolved to stop complaining and to try to do something about it. My aim was to ensure that the instrumentation and automation industries became as well represented in the UK as they are in the best industrial countries. Have we succeeded? It's still work in progress, but we have made some useful progress.

Gambica is now regarded by the UK government as one of the "good" trade associations. We work hard to give the various civil service teams the guidance, evidence and feedback that they need to understand the care-about of industry. We try to be a "critical

friend", not afraid to tell them where we think they have got it wrong, but also positive about good policies. They know that we are passionate about our industry and that, through us,

they can reach out efficiently, especially to SMEs where government finds it difficult to get its message across.

Unfortunately, the UK government remains uncomfortable about receiving the views of industry from trade associations alone. They prefer "real industrialists" to talk to them directly as only they can commit their company to deliver industry's part of a programme. This creates a risk that only a few larger companies get represented properly, leaving the rest of the industry feeling somewhat detached.

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We need to develop an understanding, similar to that in Germany, where government recognises trade associations as effective vehicles for "listening" to the many companies in an industry. I fear that this will take a major culture change in the UK and is not likely to happen quickly.

Four years ago, Gambica led a multi-organisation survey of a wide swathe of the automation and electronics industry, testing the awareness within industry of the government's various schemes and initiatives. This came up with an awareness figure of just 34%, showing just how hard it is for business people to keep up with the constant changes and new initiatives.

Our message to government is that they need to listen more closely to industry about its needs, then implement with fidelity what they have heard, rather than modify and devalue on the whims of ministers, very few of whom have any real experience in industry.

There also needs to be more stability and longevity in government initiatives. Industry just doesn't have the bandwidth to cope with constantly changing schemes (or name changes to existing schemes). We understand the need for new ministers to be seen to do things, but constant tinkering helps no-one

and reinforces scepticism within industry which, in turn, reduces engagement.

In the last decade, government has begun more sophisticated dialogues with a few favoured sectors, such as the car industry, aerospace and life sciences, but sadly the selection of these industries is not because together they represent the majority of the industrial economy – they don't – but because they consist of a few tier-one companies which ministers find easy to engage with.

What gets missed in this simplistic – and

frankly, lazy – approach to industrial engagement is the vital role of cross-cutting enabling technologies – such as sensors, automation, photonics, electronics and others – which have a far greater potential to benefit the wider industrial base (and are also vital for the government's chosen few), but whose communities are made up of literally thousands of UK companies.

The unfortunate result of this policy is that we become a nation that, at best, puts together the final products in the UK, but relies on importing vital components in which lie the bulk of the innovation. While we continue to concentrate, for example, without accepting that much of its value and innovation lies in the sensors and software that guide it, we will continue to suffer from a fragile industry and a hollowed-out UK supply chain.

There is much still to do then, and I haven't mentioned Brexit once in this whole article! Fortunately, Gambica has an excellent new chief executive in Steve Brambley, who will be well-known to many of the readers of this column.

I wish Steve well as our industry enters a period where sensing and control attains an unprecedented societal importance. ■