

GAMBICA

A storm is looming over the UK's role in global standards-making

The UK risks losing its traditionally strong position in the development of international standards – to the detriment of both manufacturers and consumers. As Victoria Montag*, Gambica's sector head for industrial automation, explains, a new cross-industry initiative is hoping to halt the decline.

In the electrotechnical industry there has historically been a preference towards the international route when approaching standardisation. And for good reason. A product manufactured to an international standard in one country, can be sold in any other country that has adopted the same international standard. Trade between these countries is free from technical barriers, which opens up opportunities in many markets and facilitates economic growth.

International standards also benefit consumers – for example, by encouraging interoperability between different manufacturers' products, thus driving competitiveness, they also give confidence that products purchased from a non-domestic manufacturer are safe and, increasingly, environmentally friendly.

Yay: international standards!

Perfect storm

However, in the UK, in the electrotechnical industry, we are facing a perfect storm over international standards.

First of all, there is the "B" word. From a trade stance, the only thing that we know about the next few years is that we do not know much at all. The British Government has set out its position for leaving the European Union, seemingly opting for a so-called "hard" Brexit – a complete withdrawal from the single market which will allow Britain to negotiate its own trade deals, giving greater control over the country's trade. But those deals still need to be negotiated.

You don't have to be a cynic to see that the status quo for British manufacturing will not be acceptable under this challenge.

In an age where international standards are used actively to prepare the market for

new technologies, rather than passively to enable existing technologies, they can be the theatre where rival technologies can compete for primacy. And so it follows that Britain, a nation of innovators, will need to lead the way in international standardisation if we want to retain our position as world leaders of innovation and encourage global adoption of British-developed technologies.

In fact, historically, UK companies, along

these future challenges we need a strategy.

That is why BSI, with Gambica and other trade associations, are issuing a call to arms. They are establishing a Electrotechnical Standardisation Strategic Advisory Council (Essac) to ensure that the UK remains a leader in international standardisation and through that helps to promote technological innovation and to protect UK IP generation.

With the inaugural meeting expected to

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with those from Germany and the US, have been the forces that have driven international standardisation. Their participation has been born out of a desire to ensure that their interests are reflected in the standards that they will adopt. However, in recent years it is the emerging economies, such as China and South Korea, that have dominated international standardisation.

If the UK is to have a resurgence of its strong position in international standards, we need to confront the increasing challenge of finding people to work on them. The UK's electrotechnical standards-making community is not introducing new technical experts into its ageing ranks. The pool of standards-makers from this country is steadily getting smaller.

Furthermore, as more of our processes become digitalised, and as interoperability becomes something that businesses need to consider more and more, future standards will need to consider "horizontal" systems and processes as much they have focused on "vertical" ones until now. This means that the expertise of our diminishing cohort of industry experts will not be broad enough for the standards of the future.

So, a storm is coming. At a time when we need more activity on international standards, we are losing the people to do it. The storm hasn't hit yet, but to approach

take place in June, the Essac is looking for current or recent board or senior executives from UK-based companies, who recognise the challenges ahead and want to make a make sure that the UK stays at the forefront of thought leadership by steering the UK's strategic involvement in international standards.

If you would like to find out more about the Essac, please contact Gambica. ■



Gambica is the trade association for the automation, control, instrumentation and laboratory technology sectors in the UK. For more information, please contact Victoria Montag on 020 7642 8094 or via victoria.montag@gambica.org.uk