



Strategic leadership in electrotechnical standards - A call to arms

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Standards are a tried and tested way to work more efficiently and effectively. They help organizations to improve their performance, reduce their risk and serve their customers more reliably. Standardization, at product, systems or process levels, is a vital tool for business in ensuring access to markets free of technical barriers, underpinning compatibility and interoperability, supply chain reliability and resilience, customer confidence and legal compliance. It is an essential component of a modern, open economy and has consistently been proved to be cost-effective.

In the UK we have a standardization infrastructure that is long established, well respected and commands high levels of public recognition and confidence. The UK standardization activities are part of a global infrastructure that offers standardization at international and European level, supporting free trade in an immense variety of products and services throughout the world.

In the electrotechnical industry, there has for many years been an expressed preference for international standards, and it is the UK's involvement at this level that is the main focus of this paper.



Why should UK industry take a strategic view on standards?

In the UK electrical and electronic industries we need a high level strategic group to ensure that the UK is at the forefront in exercising thought leadership, promoting its technological innovation and re-engineering the standards infrastructure to meet the challenges of a highly competitive environment.

We need to act fast

In the current climate it is all the more important that the UK protects and encourages its excellent innovation and IP generation base with real leadership in getting UK technologies adopted worldwide; leading and driving the international standardization activities is an essential element to deliver this goal.

International standards are becoming a vital part of the marketing of high technology products and services.

International Standards are increasingly becoming the innovation battleground on which early marketing and technology battles are fought out by companies.

This is particularly true in the high technology space where connectivity and interoperability are vital.

It is no longer sufficient to think of standards as a necessary enabler, but as a way to prepare markets for innovation in both products and services.

The strategic importance of standards is increasingly recognised by emerging economies

Many international companies work hard to ensure that their strategists lead the development of international standards work from the very top of standards bodies such as the IEC, ISO & ITU, and that their engineers sit on the relevant working groups and technical committees.

This process has traditionally been led by countries like Germany, the UK and the US, but in recent years we have seen activity by companies from these countries being overtaken by those from growth economies such as China and Korea.

The digitization of many aspects of life and business is driving a need for interoperability

With recent developments in the Internet of things and Industry 4.0, together with new standards driven by environmental and climate change considerations, it has become vital that all companies that rely on international trade, ensure that they are engaged at the international standards at the highest level.

"Horizontal" systems or process standards, as opposed to the more traditional "vertical" product standards are becoming more prevalent. These are no longer the domain of the traditional type of industry experts that companies have used for most of their standards work to date.

Developed nations such as the UK and the US tend to suffer from an ageing demographic in their engagement with standards.

In recent years, UK industries in the electrical and electronics technology area have tended to rely on a diminishing cohort of technical experts and have delegated most of its strategic leadership to trade associations and to BSI itself. More serious direct engagement has tended to be reserved for times when a company or industry has perceived itself to be “under attack” from standards activities by rivals. At that stage it is very often too late to make an effective intervention.

It is vital for UK businesses to take a strategic view on international standards

Industry needs to have a better understanding of the strategic value of standardization. In an economic climate focused on cost reduction, companies need compelling encouragement to invest for an uncertain future. Leadership from prominent members of the business community, together with access to their thinking and their decision-making, is likely to be a strong persuader.

Increasingly there is also emerging an alternative to the traditional international standards body approach to standardizing innovation – industrial consortia. Standards bodies are working to understand how to embrace consortia, and industry too needs a strategic approach to deciding when a consensus-based international standard is the best approach and when a more partisan consortium approach is more appropriate.



How are we going to maintain and build on UK companies' influence in international standards?

1. We will build a strategic council of senior executives from UK-based companies to steer the UK's strategic involvement in international standards.
2. This council will also include (and be managed by) senior representation from BSI, the UK national standards body, plus representation from societal and governmental bodies to reflect the wider public interest.
3. The purpose of the council will be to:
 - provide a forum for formulating strategic advice on priorities, policies and prospects for UK electrotechnical standardization in all forms and at all levels;
 - provide feedback to BSI on industry's views about its policies and performance;
 - encourage UK industry participation in international, European and national standardization by exercising influence, leadership and practical assistance;
 - fulfil the function of the UK's national committee of the IEC, acting as the focal point for all those in the UK who have an interest in the work and output of that organization.

The council will be called the Electrotechnical Standardization Strategic Advisory Council (ESSAC). In addition to the functions listed above, it will report to and be represented on BSI's Standards Policy and Strategy Committee in order to be fully engaged in the policy and strategy of the UK National Standards Body and ensure effective coordination and repartition of responsibilities between the electrotechnical and other sectors of BSI's standardization activities.

How will ESSAC be constituted?

One of the first jobs of the newly formed council will be to define its own formal constitution and working procedures.

Initial likely shape of the council:

10 senior executives from the UK's electrical and electronics industries

1 senior executive from BSI

4 representatives of government and the wider community

Typical frequency of meetings:

Cadence meetings twice per year

Ad hoc meetings as required (usually by teleconference or web meeting)

First meeting:

The inaugural meeting of ESSAC is expected to take place early in June 2017.

To get this started...

We have already identified Rodney Turtle of Schneider, who from January 2017 has been UK's member of the IEC's Council Board (CB), as a key member of ESSAC. The CEOs of GAMBICA and BEAMA will also directly participate and other major trade bodies, together with BSI, are currently reaching out to senior figures from large and small companies to identify suitable candidates to represent the insights and interests of industry. Appointments will be made on a personal basis, reflecting the skills and experience that each member can bring.

Over to you...

Do you have what it takes to be part of this high level strategic group and drive standardization thinking to meet the challenges of a highly competitive environment? We are looking for people who can demonstrate broadly the following background and qualities:

- current or recent board or senior executive experience in the electrotechnical industries;
- conversant with the role of standards as a tool for facilitating trade and encouraging innovation and economic growth;
- sympathetic to the principles of global trade and global standards;
- able to demonstrate thought leadership in relevant areas of commercial, strategic or technical activity;
- able and willing to bring original, perhaps challenging, insights to the discussions of the Council, and to take short term leadership roles as necessary;
- and, ideally, in a current position of influence or authority, formal or informal, such as to be able to make practical contributions to the objectives of the Council.

Relevant technical expertise would be welcome but is not essential.

If you would like to apply to be a member of the Council, or would like to know more about it please contact one of the following people:

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