

Help us to shape tomorrow's standards

One of the key roles of trade associations is to help draw up the technical standards that affect their sector. But, as Victoria Montag*, Gambica's sector head for industrial automation, reports, not enough companies and individuals are volunteering for standards-making duties. And some standards committee members are loath to accept younger, less experienced volunteers.

In my former life, working at the National Physical Laboratory – first as a research scientist and then as a project manager with a particular focus on European-funded projects – strong, active participation in standardisation at some level was, for me, so normal that I didn't really think about it.

If, as a scientist, you wanted to advance to higher echelons in your career, it was largely expected that you would join a relevant committee, signalling not only your standing as an expert in the field to the organisation, but also the organisation signalling to UK government of the value of their funding into the organisation. Furthermore, during my time at NPL, other funding sources, such as the European Commission, would increasingly use the expected impact of project outputs on (usually) European and international standards and/or European Directives as an assessment criterion when selecting which projects to fund.

With so many incentives for individuals to participate in standardisation activities, it was not uncommon for scientists to start taking steps to joining standardisation committees while in their 20s.

So, imagine my surprise when I joined Gambica, which has a fine history of shaping standards, and is second only to Beama in the number of standards committees on which members are represented. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I have yet to meet a member who is in

their 20s, or (I will have to be careful here) their 30s – let alone one who participates in standardisation activities. It is not the first time that I have talked about the "ageing population" in the standards-making community.

When I have expressed my surprise to Gambica members about the demographic of participants, it is generally acknowledged that large swathes of companies are not willing to commit resources to standards-making. They enjoy one of the benefits of being a member of a trade association – being able to comment on standards being

lessening of their expert status, I would encourage them to rethink it as an opportunity to mentor and share their knowledge with the next generation.

I think it would be ambitious to ask all companies to create the expectation that most of their engineers participate in standardisation at some point – as was the case at NPL. However, if all of the industrial automation sector is going to continue to enjoy the benefits of shaping the relevant technical standards, the entire sector needs to ensure that we have the experts available to develop them.

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developed, and having knowledge of upcoming changes – without having to participate actively. That's great, but we do need members participating as experts on those committees, otherwise the whole system falls down.

So, we need standards-makers, and they aren't getting any younger. But even more concerning is that they are starting to retire and aren't being replaced. This winter has heralded the retirement or notice of retirement of several members in the industrial automation sector, and while it is encouraging to see some companies put transition plans into place, others – most – have not.

There may also be reticence from some already in the standardisation world, to accept individuals with far less experience than they do, onto their committees. I can understand this perspective. You wouldn't, after all, want to let just anyone participate. But an individual's wealth of knowledge is a continuum, which is amplified as we learn from others. To those who see the addition of younger and less experienced individuals to standards committees as perhaps a

Gambica has several Technical Committees through which individuals are nominated to the BSI. If you are from a member organisation (see www.gambica.org.uk/membership/member-directory) and would like to get involved, please contact me – details below. ■

