

The groundhog day known as Brexit

With just weeks to go before the UK is scheduled to leave the European Union, Victoria Montag, Gambica's sector head* for industrial automation, bemoans the lack of clarity facing British businesses, and offers a them a source of advice.

Brexit. How tired am I of Brexit! In the October 2017 edition of *Drives and Controls*, I complained of "Brexit Fatigue"; 17 months later my mood on the subject has not improved. Not least because, to borrow a phrase from our Prime Minister, nothing has changed. OK, some things have changed – Ministers for Exiting the EU seem to have a pretty rapid turn-over and Theresa May has, contrary to expectation, managed to negotiate a withdrawal agreement that has united MPs of all flavours. After two and a half torturous years, some progress! Sadly, the MPs were united in their dislike of agreement, so here we are. Nothing has changed.



In preparing to write this column I read through everything I had written on the subject of Brexit before, and it is particularly disappointing that an op-ed I wrote in January 2017 on the threat posed to British businesses not by Brexit itself, but the uncertainty around the negotiation progress, is still applicable today.

I write this with 52 days to go before "Brexit Day" and there are still three possible outcomes for what will happen at 11pm on 29 March. We might leave with a withdrawal agreement and enter a period of transition, Article 50 could be extended so that further negotiations can take place, or we could leave without a deal. I sincerely hope that by the time this is published, we know what will happen.

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But none of these options will finally give businesses clarity that they need to plan for the future. Leaving under the withdrawal agreement, or extending Article 50 essentially maintain the status quo, as neither answer the practical questions around the future relationship with the EU, but only give more time to settle this point. And with little evidence that the Government knows what it is trying to achieve in these negotiations, I, in my moments of deepest cynicism, feel that both options only kick the can down the road and I'll be recycling this column again in December 2020.

A no-deal departure carries its own challenges. There have been debates whether the "certainty" of a no-deal Brexit might be better than the continued uncertainty of further negotiations. I'm not convinced that this is the case. All of the details that would have been negotiated in a trade agreement will still

change, there will just be no transition – CE marking, customs declarations, VAT processes, personal data collection and storage, licencing for export of controlled items to the EU, to name a very few. Is certain "unmanageable" change better than uncertain drip feeding? I don't know.

Fortunately, albeit very late in the day, the government has been producing resources to help companies prepare for a no-deal scenario. As one can imagine, there is quite a lot – more than 100 regularly updated technical notices alone. Sadly, these resources don't appear to be very well advertised by the government, particularly to SMEs who do not have the resources to dedicate to Brexit.

As of part of its service to its members,

Gambica scours these documents and chooses the most relevant technical notices and no-deal planning tools and circulates them to its members, including notifying them of any updates to the technical notices. These briefings are a valuable resource for me too: for every question I have received from a member on Brexit, if an answer exists, I have been able to find it in one.

Whatever happens on 29 March, Gambica will continue to help its members to navigate a post- or "almost-post" Brexit world with information sharing and signposting to all of the information available on forthcoming changes. And of course, via Gambica's membership of the Euris taskforce, we will continue to lobby for our future relationship with the EU to be as beneficial to our member industries as possible.

If you are a member and would like to subscribe to these updates, or if you are not currently a member and would like access to this service, please get in touch. ■