



The Fibreoptic Industry Association

www.fia-online.co.uk

Secretary: Jane Morrison

The Manor House
BUNTINGFORD
Hertfordshire SG9 9AB
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1763 273039 Fax: +44 (0) 1763 273255

e-mail: jane@fiasec.demon.co.uk

USING STANDARDS AS A SHIELD RATHER THAN A WEAPON

by

Mike Gilmore, Technical Director of the FIA

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In my role as Technical Director of the FIA, I frequently receive e-mails from both members and non-members alike asking for guidance. Increasingly these queries are seeking assistance in responding to tenders that contain a bewildering range of standards to which they are asked to conform. In my last article I touched on the problem of consultants who seemed to take no account of the contents of the standards that they included in the tenders - or whether they were relevant, current or conflicting. In this short review, I am going to focus on a similarly worrying trend - the overuse and careless use of US standards in UK tender documents.

This growing trend is exposing UK installers to potential litigation if they accept such clauses within their contracts. A good example is taken from an e-mail recently sent to me which simply required global conformance to the following US standards: ANSI/TIA/EIA-568-B series, ANSI/TIA/EIA-606-A, ANSI/TIA/EIA-569-B and ANSI J-STD-607-A.

Perhaps without realising it, the consultant in instituting these requirements was making the installer responsible not just for the cabling but the architecture of the comms rooms including the ambient light levels (and where the light switches were placed) and need for 120V power sockets - even the colour of the walls. In addition, the installer was being asked to undertake work potentially against the requirements of the IEE Wiring Regulations.

Any sensible installer, such as the one that contacted the FIA, cannot conform to these requirements but the unwary might be tempted so to do. As a result, the technical astute and professional installers could be placing themselves at a commercial disadvantage.

So why do more and more tenders contain such impossible, possibly illegal, and, in some cases, just plain stupid demands. It may have to do with the growth of the US-based BICSI RCDD qualification being viewed as a badge of merit in certain clients' eyes. There are an increasing number of customers that select those designing and specifying their telecommunications infrastructures on the basis of the Registered Communication Distribution Designer qualification. This has naturally forced companies to pursue that qualification for their employees. So what is the problem - what is wrong with having a qualification?

Nothing at all. Obviously, it is indeed a very good idea to obtain training and qualifications. However, the qualification has to be relevant and the training required to attain the qualification has to be relevant to the country in which the qualification is to be used - not simply a memory test of applicable standards from other countries. It would appear that we now have an increasing number of RCDDs who have not had basic grounding in UK practices before they obtain the RCDD badge. This not only undermines the value of the more competent RCDDs - of which there are many - but leaves the industry in a dangerous state where installers' commercial interests, and therefore those of their potential clients, may be being put at risk.

To be both accurate and blunt, it is impossible for any installation in the UK to conform to the global requirements of ANSI/TIA/EIA-568-B which, by the way, automatically demands the use of the other standards listed above. It is only possible to conform to certain parts of it. Knowing which elements can be met, and which cannot, provides installers with a powerful shield against the type of “scattergun” approach to specification outlined above.

By containing too many requirements with multiple responsibilities these US standards render themselves unusable in a contractual sense. That is why the UK has adopted installation standards that clearly define who is responsible for what. BS 6701:2004 is a good example of this work and should be primary reference in any installation tender in the UK. The cabling design can be in accordance with either the EN 50173 series or specific parts of ANSI/TIA/EIA-568-B-1 (but not globally) but BS 6701:2004 is the “one-stop-shop” for the installation planning and practice.

This leads on to a more general issue. The wise installer takes time out to understand the minimum requirements of the standard to which he is asked to work. Work being undertaken on the new FIA Approved Installers Scheme is targeted to minimise the risk to both installer and client and provides both parties with a “commercial shield”. This “shield” allows the installer to quote competitively and act professionally whilst clearly defining to the client exactly what will be provided. Best practice is a commercial add-on in such circumstances and should be treated as such by all concerned.

If you wish to access the resources provided by the FIA go to www.fia-online.co.uk. Enquiries can be e-mailed to jane@fiasec.demon.co.uk or, alternatively, you can contact the FIA Secretariat in 01763 273039.