



The Fibreoptic Industry Association

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TRADE ASSOCIATIONS WITHIN THE STANDARDS PROCESS

by

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for Networking+ (April 2007)

As usual, on every few years industry associations have an urge to gaze at their own navels and wonder what their role is. The question of "what are trade associations for?" rather depends not upon the trade association itself but on its environment. For example, in the United States the primary trade association for telecommunications industries, the TIA, has been a formal standards-making body for many years. By comparison, the United Kingdom is blessed with BSI that has the formal backing of government as the national standards making and management body. Therefore, in the UK, a trade association has little role to play in the independent production of standards. The exceptions to this implicit rule such as "learned bodies", including the IEE, only exist to prove the rule.

Trade associations can contribute a great deal to standardisation. For telecommunications infrastructure standards, BSI Technical Committee TCT/7 has representatives of all three major trade associations, the ECA (Electrical Contractors Association), the FIA and the UK TIA (recently renamed CITA - not to be confused with the US TIA). Nominated persons from each trade association direct the work of the Technical Committee. This does not automatically prevent trade associations from undertaking their own work in the area of standardisation. On the contrary, there are two activities in which trade associations do important work. The first is where a specific topic requires an "industry standard" and which standards bodies have not yet addressed (or where a topic is moving too quickly for a standard to be developed). The second is where a published standard requires interpretation (as many sadly do) or further explanation/guidance. However, there is a need for some control of such documents to prevent the work of one trade association conflicting with that of another. To that end the FIA are going to propose a review of the controls and processes within the BSI Technical Committees with which they are involved.

Membership of BSI committees provides benefits to trade associations and their members – primarily that they have access to, and influence on, early drafts of international, European and British standards. The FIA take maximum advantage by allowing all their members to review those drafts and generate comments via the Standards Forum which are then submitted to the national body. However, membership cannot be a one-way street. As the work of standards committees is open to review and comment by trade associations, so should the "standards" work of those associations (and other members of Technical Committees) be open to scrutiny by the relevant Technical Committee. Trade associations should advise the Technical Committee of any "standardisation" plans in order to minimise duplication. The FIA, ECA and the UK TIA did just this on the ground-breaking BIP0007 document which covered guidance to BS 6701:2004. All three groups published the resulting, identical, document made available free-of-charge to their members.

The FIA will propose a mechanism by which interpretations of, and guidance to, standards are “sanctioned” by the Technical Committee responsible for the base standard. In this way trade associations and their members can feel confident of the value of the interpretations that they produce. This would also prevent uncontrolled, inaccurate and conflicting interpretations. There is real danger of this at the moment not only from trade associations but also from training and competence organisations such as City & Guilds and BICSI who are not represented in the relevant BSI groups.

The concept of sanctioned interpretation of standards is very important to the FIA which has produced a great number of such documents over the past few years. 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.