

# The Fibreoptic Industry Association

## Leading Lights

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The Fibreoptic Industry Association (FIA) is pleased to contribute to this inaugural issue of NETCOMMS europe. This release of a new information source for the networking sector also coincides with a new initiative by the FIA. Building on its past successes, but more outward-looking, the FIA addresses the user community as much as it provides key services for its members. The current activities of the FIA are detailed below for the new readership of NETCOMMS europe, in order to provide the background to the new approach being implemented in Q4, 2010.

Since 1991, firstly under the chairmanship of Mike Phillips and more recently that of Paul Bateson, the FIA has concentrated on providing information to its membership in accordance with its stated mission “to promote high standards of service within the fibre optic industry by providing specialist information and support”. For almost twenty years, the FIA has developed mechanisms to enable the improvement of the quality of the work undertaken by its corporate members, including both an Approved Training and Approved Installer Scheme, and the personnel employed by them via a Qualifications Scheme. To support this endeavour, the 200 members of the FIA have access to Technical

Support Documents and White Papers prepared by experts in their chosen fields. Equally importantly, the FIA Audit and Arbitration Schemes provide an independent complaint resolution service for FIA members and their customers.

The FIA's commitment to “represent its members at a national and international level” has been met by its participation with, and chairmanship of, many of the leading European and international telecommunications/ IT infrastructure standards committees. This allows members interested in

specific technical areas access to standards development in the field of optical fibre components, cabling installation and testing.

The FIA website enables members to access almost all of the services provided by the FIA without additional cost, and acts as a ‘shop-window’ for our members, where non-members can access the lists of members and the products and services they offer, together with a wide range of white papers and other information.

More recently, the FIA has created strategic alliances with other groups including the co-hosting of the TIA-B, the Telecommunications Infrastructure Advisory Board alongside the Electrical Contractors Association ITEC group. This project, formed following the end of the UK TIA (entitled CITA for a short period), has enabled the FIA Technical Directorate to apply the knowledge obtained in the standardisation activities funded by the FIA to cabling technologies other than optical fibre. As members of the FIA are automatically members of the TIA-B, this provides them with free access to a much wider information base.

Against this backdrop of past and current success, the FIA is now going to restructure and add to its existing services. For almost twenty years, the focus of the FIA has been on the supply-side of installations of fibre optic cabling; ensuring that all the necessary standards are in place and, if they are not or if they require clarification, to prepare FIA Technical Support Documents to remedy this. However, there is a perception that such “top-down, standards-based” quality assurance of installations only applies to large infrastructure contracts. It is perhaps the common perception of telecommunications cabling as a “commodity” that encourages customers to purchase smaller service packages with a “bit of testing here, bit of termination there” approach. For this, it is not necessary to reference practices defined by standards such as BS 6701 and EN 50174. This is also reflected in the multi-level sub-contracts which are common in larger projects and leave the fibre optic cabling installer as the wagging tail of a very long dog.

These smaller scale installation and/or repair contracts have become subject to investigation by the FIA following numerous complaints by customers who have been dissatisfied by either the quality of the work undertaken or its perceived ‘value-for-money’. Unfortunately, the FIA Audit and Arbitration Schemes do not automatically apply to installers who are not FIA members and although the FIA can assist customers in advising what should have been done in a given circumstance, this may be too late.

In order to address this issue, those accessing FIA's website later this year will find that, although the emphasis on ‘top-down, standards-based’ quality assurance has not been diminished, a new focus is present - targeted at customers - with the objective of defining the ‘bare-bones’, minimum level of provision for a particular service.

For example, if a customer feels that an installed optical fibre cable needs testing, perhaps because a fault has been reported, the fact that the FIA has produced detailed documents explaining how to undertake the different relevant tests is of little help. What the customer needs to know is which tests should be applied, how to interpret the results and what the minimum requirements for the supply of that service actually are; for example, what questions to ask of the potential supplier, what equipment is required, in what format the test results will be provided and what should they look like.

This customer-centred approach will initially address basic tasks such as cable laying, termination, inspection and testing, all of which could easily be contracted separately, but will be extended as demand increases. Evidence of that demand will come from a new interface to the website which will record the type of information that the customers require and allow them to request additional information or services.

It is hoped that a partnership between the Fibreoptic Industry Association and NETCOMMS europe will assist in this activity. We look forward to a constructive relationship in the years to come.

