



The importance of drawing-up European Standards

A report from the front line

From Barbara Sorgato, secretary general, European Consortium of Anchor Producers

It is 11:00. Twenty-three of us have come to this European city to sit around a table and discuss technical issues. We are drawing up a European Standard, searching for shared solutions so European products may circulate freely around Europe, without market barriers. Sounds easy!

We have been discussing non-stop for more than two hours; the room is too warm; everybody is getting nervous. We discuss in English, of course.

A Belgian colleague articulates a technical concept in a sort of 'do-it-yourself' English. The face of a Danish colleague lights up; he has got it and he strongly supports it. The Dutch colleague makes a joke. We laugh, but the English people present don't quite get it. That's European English – often a little hard to understand. A colleague tries to explain, and I reflect: 'Here we are, we have created a European language constructed from faltering English, blended with continental expressions, and we haven't even realised that.' No fireworks, no celebrations.

Indeed, we Europeans make Europe in this way: Not entirely believing in it, declaring ourselves sceptical, unable even to agree on a common pronunciation of the word 'Eur'. We fly Irish, use German size paper (A4, A3...). Our children fill apartments with Swedish furniture, share cars via a French search engine, travel Europe with the Erasmus project... and we run behind them when they finally decide not to come back 'home'.

While a colleague shows the results of his work, the attendance sheet circulates, to be signed and filled. I fill, in order, box by box, my identikit as a European expert:

1. First name and surname.
2. European or national body I belong to, thanks to which I occupy my seat and have access to working papers, for example: CEN? BSI? DIN? Other national or European associations?
3. Position I hold inside my body/association, such as: Member? Observer?
4. Country.
5. Employer, that is who pays my salary.
6. Sponsor, that is who paid me for being just in this meeting.

I concentrate, so not to make mistakes. Before I pass on the sheet to my neighbour, I take a photo, so later I can try to decipher the map of economic interests that have joined us here.

As a matter of fact, while the European standardisation system classifies experts on a national basis, experts know very well that global economic interests follow other lineage. 'France', for instance, could mean a French company. It could mean a French company, bought by a German multinational, controlled by an American parent. How can one understand that?

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I have distracted myself – a technical presentation is over. A colleague asks for some explanations on some technical data, which have not convinced him. The speaker answers; a tiring debate ensues, culminating in a victory for the speaker and the interests he represents. He wins because he came prepared; he brought substantial documents based on tests results, and he has built his technical proposal on them.

The speaker's solution has surprised me. It is scientifically valid, but it presents a disadvantage for small enterprises. A counterargument is needed but I have no data with which to refute his argument. My enterprises have not yet done tests or research on this topic. And if industry does not finance research, where can we gather data? Nowhere. So we take those of the speaker who, incidentally, represents a multinational that tests its own products.



→ Once the meeting finishes I must write to my members, asking whether they will join into a small group and urgently finance some research on this topic. These days, members know that the costs for research are nothing compared to the damage caused by a Standard that excludes their products.

All being well, they will join forces and they will do research. All right, they won't do it because they have been open minded or forward looking. They will do it to save their own skin and their products – but they will invest in research, anyway. And, in doing so, they will protect themselves and they will remain competitive on the global market.

Coffee break. We need to talk quickly. 'No, I am not Italian', I explain to a colleague. Well, yes, I am, but not in here. Here I represent European small and medium enterprises united into a consortium to defend their interests.

'Why, then, did you push for the introduction of seismics on wood connectors?'

'Because members that are also Italian companies, wanted seismics to be considered in a European Standard.'

'...And those companies that are not Italian, did they also want seismics into the Standard?'

'Yes, they too. In return, Italian members will support other topics, important to other countries. What matters is not to think on a national level, as this would create market barriers in our sector.'

Ten minutes are soon gone and it starts over again. Now it is time for discussion on corrosion. The Austrian colleague is very careful on the topic of corrosion due to air pollution. However, he is less serious about corrosion caused by the marine environment. No wonder, whoever saw the sea from the Austrian Alps? So, it will finally be an improvised Anglo-Danish-Italian alliance, which will supply technical data in order to also standardise cases of marine corrosion.

The crux of the discussion has moved on. In this particular standardisation group, big companies buy from the Far East and they push for a lower corrosion protection level than that wanted by SMEs producing in Europe. If there were no representatives of small enterprises, the problem would not arise. The colleagues from multinational companies look at me with grim eyes... and I respond with a big smile.

Europe decided that 'safety' is to be dealt with at a national level, and here we see a practical consequence. Each of us brandishes our own concept of safety, as King Arthur must have wielded his sword during tournaments.



The debate goes on, hostility grows and it degenerates into a quarrel, but in the end we need to reach a compromise. If we go into overtime, the Standard will be cancelled and we throw away, not only the work done over the last three years, but also the competitiveness of European companies. If we do not have the European CE Marking soon, other certificates and markings, conceived in other parts of the world, will come first – making companies in the old continent less and less competitive.

The chairman calls for a break, which is useful to unblock the situation. Discussing one-to-one eliminates the concerns of saving face in front of a larger audience. Then solutions are found more easily.

Lunch break. While we go on discussing, we swallow indigestible sandwiches, but we do not have much time. Lunch break lasts thirty minutes and, who knows why, someone thinks that specialists are capable of digesting anything. After all, later they drink coffee. European coffee, that is.



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➔ After the first fifteen minutes of yawns, the discussion grows fervid again. Now we talk about safety on the job site. A German colleague explains that we cannot be one hundred percent sure that the worker on the site does not make a mistake and takes the wrong threaded rod. Therefore, the solution to ensure total control is that the chemical anchors producers sell the rod together with the chemical anchor. A kit, in short.

I try to figure it out – thousands of pieces of bars transported throughout Europe, warehouses of small enterprises which overflow, huge transport costs, sustainability equal to zero. On the market there exists only the kits of the multinationals, at very high prices, and...what happens to small enterprises? I send agitated text messages to my members and, from the north to the south of Europe, I receive a strong and clear answer – total opposition to this proposal.

I take the floor while I am still preparing my speech in my mind and, surprisingly, I find myself speaking about powdered milk and new borns. ‘How can you be sure that the obstetrician does not make a mistake with the water quantity or that she does not use sparkling water, old water, or too much water, or too little? Millions of babies in the hands of obstetricians out of control! Why did anyone not do anything ever to avoid such potential massacre, this tragedy of humanity? Maybe because total control is not necessarily achieved through the selling of kits. Can you imagine powdered milk sold in small suitcases complete with pre-dispensed water bottles? Or was it, perhaps, not necessary because of the training and education of the worker in the workplace?’

The discussion changes its tones and the German colleague goes pale. Maybe he feels the kit business is escaping.

I am not against him. He thinks like a multinational company. I try to think like my members. The colleague sitting near me, on the contrary, represents a Spanish laboratory – he sees things from its point of view. The Polish employee on my left reasons completely differently. So too does the French certification body and the Belgian university professor.

The problem is not the different interests or the fights. 62 years ago we killed each other with bombs – so quarrels around a table are a good step forward, after all.

The problem is those who are not sitting at the table. Those Member States not present to bring their own interests, to argue with us. Those representatives who come every once in a while – ‘We all have to work a

lot, why lose time for such things’ – or that come only to punch in and exchange business cards. Those that say ‘Oh, no, please, not another English-speaking dinner’.

Dinners are very important, in fact. To understand each other, to know each other, to meet and find a compromise, to communicate, have a dialogue, to calm down and make peace after the quarrels of the day.

The absentees, after some months or years will look at the Standards in their office, and eventually distribute them to companies in their countries. These last few companies, totally unaware of all the work and discussions done over three years, will find the ‘ready to publish’ draft on their desks and will realise that the Standard is not good for them. Only then, will they address the absentees, their national representatives, demanding they vote against, and they will get angry because, once again, ‘Europe is not listening to us’.

For those willing to deepen their knowledge on European Standards: www.cen.eu (English). If you yearn to confront standardisation from the point of view of small enterprises, then this is the website for you: www.sbs-sme.eu (English and French).

To get an interesting comparison on the different ways to face standardisation, innovation and research in Europe, first go on a tour in Germany: www.din.de (available both in German and English), then compare with the websites of other national standardisation bodies. Once you have got to grips with our small Europe, take flight and see what happens in the bigger world, surfing the website of ISO www.iso.org +

www.ecap-sme.org