



Every two months, SGS Baseefa Technical Manager Ron Sinclair MBE gives his perspective on the latest developments in the world of standards.

Coronavirus: the end, or a new beginning?

I am writing this on June 1, the day that the UK government set for the start of easing lockdown restrictions. Except that we are now not a totally United Kingdom, with England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland making their own slightly different rules on how to progress. So, even at the UK level we are seeing fragmentation, but it becomes more obvious the bigger the group you consider. How is this going to affect the standardisation process and certification worldwide?

Electronic meetings are now becoming the normal way of working. But internationally, this brings problems of timing. IECEx has decided on a 12:00 UTC (13:00 BST) start. This suits Europe and the east coast of America, but anyone in California has to get up very early, and anyone in Australia gets to bed very late. We are yet to have any participants from New Zealand!

The IECEx meetings in May ran very smoothly, in part because most participants had met each other at previous meetings and could recognise voices. The secretariat imposed good "mute" discipline on microphones and, apart from the secretary who was sharing his screen showing the documents, cameras were off, in order to minimise bandwidth problems. We were unaware of latency issues in the sound and, because video was off, we were not put off by lip-sync issues or other glitches in the video stream.

The quality of some of the links for the recent UK Downing Street press conferences demonstrated that, even for those prepared to pay a premium for their service, latency and lip-sync can still be a major problem.

So, will remote working replace our international face-to-face meetings after we have emerged from the current situation? There are clearly advantages in being able to hold short meetings for the discussion and resolution of particular matters, but I am concerned that we will miss out on many of the advantages of being in the same room. And it is not just being able to judge reactions in the actual meetings, it is the side meetings, during the coffee breaks, that can be just as important. Many a discussion point, where two people seem to hold opposing views during the meeting, can be resolved in a group of two or three in the break-out area. An interchange of emails, after the remote meeting has finished, is not really effective in the same way.

IECEx held the May meetings remotely and will do the same for those previously scheduled for Niagara in late September. This will certainly be a new innovation for me, as I have not yet sat through meetings with over 150 remote participants. These are the formal annual meetings for the organisation, also attracting many observers into the various national delegations. The rule book provides for just three delegates per country, with only the lead delegate allowed to vote. This is normally done by the lead delegate holding up the country identification card from the table. It will be interesting to see how we manage this process online. Provisionally, it has been decided that any observers beyond the official three delegates will have their microphones and cameras muted by the secretary of the meeting, so they will truly be just that, observers.

One of the major decisions, taken at the May meetings, was to finalise a version of the new Operational Document OD 060, which was drafted in response to the coronavirus

pandemic and deals with how the schemes can continue to operate during the crisis, but in a way that still provides adequate confidence in the system.

The current interim version of the document is available to view on the IECEx website and the final version should get formal approval in September. This includes the protocols for when surveillance visits can be delayed and how they can be conducted remotely. This is not just for the certification bodies and their manufacturing clients, but also for the IECEx System's supervision of certification bodies.

In contrast to IECEx, IEC TC31 postponed its March standards meetings until the end of October, in the hope that two weeks of meetings will still be able to take place. Over 100 people would normally gather in a series of separate one-, two- or three-day meetings, spread across the fortnight. A maximum of four meetings will be held simultaneously. There can be conflicts, with a few people trying to be in more than one meeting at a time, but as the meeting rooms are all co-located this usually works. That would be more difficult with remote meetings, unless they are spread out across a much longer period, with only one meeting being held at any one time. However, this then removes the ability to have short "corridor" meetings for those that are based in different meeting rooms.

Not all work is being postponed until October, with some of the smaller Maintenance Teams being able to work electronically, so although some revised standards will be delayed, others are keeping on target. ■

About the author

SGS Baseefa's Technical Manager Ron Sinclair MBE is a vice-chair of the European Notified Bodies Group for ATEX (ExNBG), as well as Chair of the IECEx Service Facility Certification Committee and a member of the IECEx Executive. He is chair of both the UK and European Standards Bodies operating in this area.