



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

We beat the pandemic

I am writing this at the start of October, having just completed a week-long series of online meetings of the IECEx Management Committee and related groups. We should have been meeting face to face in Niagara, but COVID-19 intervened.

All were apprehensive as to how successful meetings of about 150 people could be held remotely but, thanks to the excellent preparation by the IECEx Secretariat and the respective chairmen, all went extremely well. Two members of the secretariat hosted from different locations in Sydney, Australia and the chairmen of the main meetings were in China and South Africa, respectively.

In order to work to a time slot that was acceptable to most people, 12:00 to 16:00 UTC (13:00 BST to 17:00 BST) was chosen. Those in Australia were participating well into the start of the following day, while those in both North and South America had to set their alarms early. The Europeans were the lucky ones.

The secretariat had done the preliminary work by sending out clear instructions on how the meetings would be conducted, right down to the way that delegates should show their names on screen, so that they could be identified by name, country, or represented organisation. The Chairman would call all individuals to speak, either according to the agenda, or in response to an individual typing "Floor" into the chat feature, indicating they wished to contribute from the floor of the

meeting. The hosts and the chairman could see such requests in order, and everyone maintained discipline by waiting to be called and keeping microphones on mute until they were going to speak. It worked beautifully and, in many ways, more efficiently than the usual face to face meetings.

Normally, delegates from one country sit together, so they can quickly consult each other on how to deal with points as they arise. In the UK this was achieved by UK delegates running a simultaneous Microsoft Teams meeting alongside the main Go-to-Meeting application. From some of the comments made from other countries, I don't think the UK was unique in using such a system.

We learnt that the statistics show that the IECEx system is riding out the crisis, with very little drop in income. As expenses have been trimmed, it is possible that we might reach the end of the year with a better result than predicted in the budget. Generally, it seems, there has been little fall off in demand for certification, although some projects are taking longer to complete, with remote working affecting both manufacturers and certifiers.

The statistics on product certificates issued still show a steady rate of increase, with a prediction that by the end of this year we may have just breached the 45,000 mark. Absolute numbers are much smaller in the Service Facility Certification area, but continue to rise, with nearly 400 certificates issued to Service Facilities, mainly operating in the repair and refurbishment sector, confirming their capability to provide a reliable service to owners of plant and equipment.

In the ExTAG meeting (where the certification bodies and laboratories are the members) we had to select a new team of chair and deputy chair to take us forward from January. From five candidates, Dr. Frank Lienesch from PTB

in Germany was selected as the new chair, with Jasmin Omerovic from UL Demko in Denmark as deputy. Grateful thanks were expressed for the six years leadership from Prof. Xu Jianping from China, assisted by Julien Gautier from France.

In the later meeting of the IECEx Management Committee, Prof. Xu was elected the new treasurer of the IECEx System following on from the excellent work done by Thierry Houeix from France.

Since the end of February, we have had to get to grips with a new way of working to take account of travel restrictions. One of the planks on which the international IECEx System is built is the multi-national scrutiny provided by the way that assessments of the certification bodies and laboratories is conducted.

Since assessors have been unable to travel, continuity has mainly been maintained by a system of remote assessment, using video techniques, backed up by interchange of significant amounts of documentation. This has required planning but seems to be working well. The same derogation from compulsory visiting is also being applied to the assessment and audit visits of certification bodies to their clients. The whole "Exceptional Circumstances" remote assessment system is controlled by IECEx Operational document OD 060. This was first published in February, to be ahead of the game, and then refined with experience. Anyone interested, can download a copy from www.iecex.com. ■

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.